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1 John 1:5-2:2

I think we sometimes forget people in the Bible are not just characters in a story, but real people with real lives, personalities, stories, and ministries. Jesus' disciple John is no different. John was one of the leaders of this new Christian movement that was spreading rapidly, but heavily persecuted wherever it went. John then became a pastor for a group of churches in and around the city of Ephesus- modern day western Turkey, and at that time there were false teachers going around undermining John and his teaching,, saying that you can't learn about God from the Bible, but by becoming enlightened with secret knowledge and become one with the divine- it was a very philosophical, erudite, lofty, sophisticated-sounding kind of teaching which made it very tempting for Christians who wanted to sound sophisticated and it gave people the freedom to make their own version of God the way they wanted him to be..

I would argue that we are dealing with something similar today. Americans are leaving Christianity- more people describe themselves as religious "nones"- up to 3 in 10 Americans would say they have no religious affiliation. But people are not becoming less religious. While 30% percent of Americans have no religious affiliation, more than 70% of those people still believe in a "higher power" or god of some sort, and more than half of them believe that this higher power is loving and will accept them if they try their best to be good. This is the fastest growing religion among our people, it sounds sophisticated and profound- "I don't believe in organized religion, man," "I'm spiritual, not religious," but it's the same basic thing- dealing with a god that I can create and shape. The problem is that if your god never challenges you, enrages you, contradicts your culture, or calls you to change the way you think and live, he's probably not real and you can't have a real relationship with a god like that. This is why John writes. John wants his readers to know the true God and to have a powerful, impactful, relationship, a friendship with a personal, all-knowing, holy, infinitely righteous and loving God who knows you and cherishes you- and you can't have that with a God that you make up. But this is what the Christian faith is all about: *Fellowship*- a loving personal relationship with an infinite God that saves you and changes you. What I'd like to do with you now is walk through John's letter and we are going to see how he answers this question: **"How do I know that I am in fellowship with that God?"**

5 This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.

What John does is entirely different than all the other competing teachers- he doesn't say, "Over my many years of teaching, studying, and thinking, this is my conclusion." He doesn't say, "I've studied in Athens, Rome, Corinth, and I've learned from the greatest philosophers and I'm so well read so listen to me." He could have- he had been a pastor for a long time, but that's not why they should listen to him- it's this: "Jesus told us." The Lord God of Heaven and Earth became a human being, taught us, and this is what he says. God is light, and in him there is not any darkness. "Light" and "darkness" are common ways that the Bible talks about good and evil, truth and deception, wisdom and foolishness, and what John is saying here is *not* that God is simply good, or tells the truth, or is wise. He's saying that God *is* light- He is the very definition of goodness, truth, and wisdom itself- he defines those very things. That means that if there's a discrepancy between what I think and what God says, I'm the one that needs to change. I'm the one that's wrong. I'm the one that needs to change, and I better do it fast because in him there is no darkness at all. That which is sinful cannot exist in the presence of a holy, perfect God- just like darkness ceases to be a thing when light is shed upon it, anything, and *anyone* that's wrong, evil, and false cannot be in God's

presence and live. Only those who are in the light can have fellowship with a God of light. And what John does next is he shows us the three lies that keep us from having this kind of fellowship, friendship with God.

6 If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. 7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

The first lie is this: "I'm a Christian, but I don't really care for Christian teaching or the Christian life.." What John is addressing is the fact that there were, and still are, people who claim to have fellowship with the God of the Bible, and yet knowingly and willingly reject what the God of the Bible says about himself and how they should live their lives. If that is the case, you are lying and you are not a Christian. Just because we enter the doors of a Christian church does not necessarily mean that we are truly in fellowship with God. If we claim to be Christian, but we ignore what God says about generosity with others, or if we ignore what God says about loving the foreigner and we look at immigrants as if they aren't quite as human as us, or if we conveniently gloss over the parts where talks about human sexuality, or we don't take it heart when God says study my word, prioritize my word, obey my word, share my word, we are not Christians because we aren't actually being shaped by God, but by our culture. That's not fellowship with God. Therefore, John says, "Do better." *Actually, no he doesn't.* If we walk in the Light, believe and live what God desires we have fellowship with each other as God's children, why? Because the blood of Jesus purifies us from all sin. On the Cross the God of light suffered darkness so that those who were filled with darkness could become children of light. Jesus the Son of God was slaughtered as a sacrifice. A God of light cannot leave darkness unpunished or else he isn't truly perfect- someone had to die, and it should have been us. But it was Jesus instead, and because he was punished, we can have perfect fellowship with a God of light, and now we walk in the light, believe what God says, obey what God commands not because we have to, but because we want to.

8 If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

The second lie is this: "I'm not that bad." I don't think anyone here would ever say "I'm not a sinner." I think most of us know better than that. But what happens is we start looking at other sins that other people commit and say, "well, they're the ones that are bad." "They're the problem." "I could never imagine doing that!" "I may not be perfect, but I would never do *that*." Maybe so, but if we are constantly downplaying our faults and never really coming to terms with the magnitude of our brokenness, we are deceiving ourselves and we are cheating ourselves of something beautiful. The lie that we believe is that if I really let myself be completely exposed by what God says in his word. If I really take the time to consider everything I do, say, and think that is wrong, selfish, depraved, and downright evil, I'll be worthless. I'll be nothing. I'll be in despair. I won't have any value or self esteem, so I need to create some for myself by focusing on the good parts about me. But that's not true. What happens when we confess our sins and we admit how screwed up we actually are? God proves even more faithful and just and forgives us of all. Because of what Jesus did on the cross, everything we've ever done has been punished already- it's gone. And the more you truly realize how sinful and evil you are, the more you realize how deeply, how freely, how beautifully, how faithfully God loves you and how infinitely valuable you are to him. Don't deceive yourselves. Confess your sins. Admit your guilt. Don't make excuses for

yourselves! And enjoy the fellowship that Christ earned for you as you realize just how deep and broad and free his love for you actually is.

10 If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.

Unfortunately, that's a hard thing to do, and John has to take it a step further. Not only do we deceive ourselves when we pretend to be better than we are, we spit in God's face and call him a liar. Because John emphasizes this, I think we can point to the willingness to repent and humility as something is central to the Christian life. If you are unable to apologize when you say hurtful things, you can't admit you were wrong, you can't repent to your spouse, your friends, your fellow Christians when you do something wrong, and I struggle with this too- this terrifies me too, we have to repent. If we are unable to look honestly at our sins, that means we don't quite understand what Jesus has done for we because we've tricked ourselves into thinking we're too good to need it.

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.

Friedrich Nietzsche, a highly influential German philosopher in the 1800's once commented on Christians of his country: "It is not their love for men, rather it is the impotence of their love that hinders Christians of today from burning us." Now Nietzsche was not a Christian, and he was commenting on the fact that in the Medieval era, the Catholic church would publicly burn those who they thought were teaching false doctrine; this happened to several followers of Martin Luther in the 1500's. The point that Nietzsche is making is that the "tolerant" Christians that are open to hearing and accepting all kinds of ideas, even ones that completely contradict Scripture, do not do so out of love, but out of a lack of love. If we take Jesus' words seriously and want people to partake in the glorious friendship with God, then we are going to come out and say, "stop" when people we love are walking in darkness. You can say that John is being intolerant, or that he's being harsh, or narrow-minded, but you cannot say he doesn't love his people. He's writing this because he wants them to walk in the light, not to sin, and that's where every religion stops. Every religion stops after, "don't sin." But John then says, "and even if you do, we have an advocate." The picture that goes with that Greek word, "Paracletos" is powerful. In ancient Greece, if you were in court and were about to receive a harsh sentence from the judge, the "paracletos" would come and plead your case for you and tell the judge, "Take it easy on this person, they aren't that bad." Jesus is our advocate to the Father- but he doesn't say, "Have mercy on them, they're pretty good." He says "have mercy on them, because I am good. Because I am perfect and equal to you, Father as one God, and because I was perfect for them and was punished instead of them, accept them, love them, cherish them, forgive them, delight in them like you delight in me."

2 He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

John could have stopped there. At this point it almost seems like he's saying the same thing over again, but he's not. Jesus was the sacrifice that reconciled a Holy God of Light not just to us, but to the entire world. All sins were forgiven. Why is that so important? Because that's ultimately how we know we have fellowship with God. Living the right way and believing the right thing about God, walking in the light is a crucial part of fellowship with God, but if your performance as a Christian is how you know you and God are good, what's going to happen when you fall? When you doubt? When you're weak? Believing and trusting and embracing Jesus as your savior is crucial, but if the fact that you believe is how you know that you and God are okay, what happens when you are angry with God and your faith gets weak? When you do something terrible, when all the evidence in your life tells you God doesn't care about you, when the

fellowship seems gone, lift your eyes away from yourself and look at the Son of God on the Cross and ask yourself, who was that for? The world. Sinners. Does that include you? That's how we know.