

If Anyone Does Sin...

1 John 2:1-2

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We started a new teaching series in December from a book of the Bible called 1 John. It has been a couple weeks so let's remind ourselves of what we've already seen. What we call a book is actually a letter from the Apostle John to his church family. The feel of the letter is like a fireside chat in which John's love and concern for them comes through. The church was hurting. There had been a split in the church. False teachers had drawn followers to themselves teaching and saying things contrary to the Apostle concerning what real Christianity looks like and lives like. The main goal of the book is to give genuine evidences of authentic Christianity. How do we know if someone is a Christian or not?

Those that left the church made claims like, You can be in fellowship with God and live anyway you want, or the other extreme, It's possible to reach a point of spiritual perfection, to never sin anymore.

To these John writes that God is light (morally and spiritually pure) and cannot fellowship with sin. To claim to be a Christian but live willingly dominated by sin is absurd. To claim that we have not sinned is plain self-deception and won't do either.

Authentic Christianity doesn't celebrate sin or deny it, but rather confesses it. Confession cleanses us from all unrighteousness (verse 9) as the work and merits of Jesus are continually cleansing us from the stubborn presence of sin in our lives. By continually cleansing us and purifying us, God keeps us in the light and in fellowship with him.

John has great pastoral instincts. He knows how this truth is delicately balanced and easily abused. He knows how easy it is to see the promise of grace and forgiveness as permission to sin and presume upon the grace of God—like a man I spoke to on the phone once who was considering committing a very serious sin. I told him he should not do it. He told me he was going to do it and then simply ask God to forgive him. Is God's forgiveness of sin permission to sin?

It's kind of like the movie Groundhog Day. In the movie, the main character played by Bill Murray lives the same day over and over. No matter what he does during the day, in the morning when he wakes up, it is the same day again. It dawns on him that this means he faces no consequences whatsoever for his actions. So he begins to do whatever his heart desires. He eats a table full of desserts. He steals a car. Seduces a woman. Commits suicide in creative ways only to wake up again in the morning of the same day, free from the guilt of whatever he had done the previous Groundhog Day. If I can do what I want and then be absolved of guilt, then why not?

John pushes back on this in chapter 2; our text is today is verses 1-2.

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 2:1-2)

My little children. Is that condescending? What if I called you my little children? Half of you would walk out saying, "Who does he think he is?" I suppose it could be read that way, but it would be read wrongly.

This is affectionate language. The Apostle of Love shows some of that here. He writes to them out of the love of a spiritual father toward his spiritual children. Rather than demeaning them, this actually builds them up.

I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. The endgame of understanding that God is light and God is forgiveness is not to abuse God's grace but to live in light of it.

- What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? (Romans 6: 1-2)
- For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age. (Titus 2: 11-12)

We could stop here and leave very discouraged. Why? Because all of know the reality of our hearts and lives. Sin is an ongoing battle. NOT sinning doesn't seem like a realistic option. What do we do? John's answer is not what we do but what Christ did and still does for us.

Jesus, the Advocate for us

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ.

The Greek word here is one of those fairly well known ones, paraclete. It literally means, para – "come alongside." Clete – "help or encourage." One who comes alongside and helps. It is also used of one who intercedes on behalf of another.

The Holy Spirit is also called our paraclete (John 14:16) as he dwells within the Christian to comfort and encourage. So Jesus is our advocate and the Holy Spirit is our advocate?

A helpful way to look at this is spatially. Jesus advocates for us and the Spirit advocates in us. This passage is about Christ's advocacy. Where does he advocate for us and to whom? We have an advocate with the Father. God the Father is in heaven and Jesus is there at his right hand. Jesus "advocates" to the Father on our behalf. He intercedes for us. He entreats the Father on our behalf. What gives him this right?

Jesus, the Only Righteous One

But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

This is coming on the heels of two verses that quote the claims of these false teachers to being without sin. Verse 8, If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves. And verse 10, If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar. Their wild claims to spiritual perfection and righteousness were merely words and self-deceptions.

There is only one who has ever been without sin, a truly righteous one. His name is Jesus Christ. Remember who is writing this. This is not a mere observer from afar. John was in his inner circle. He lived with Jesus. Ate with Jesus. Saw him in the day-to-day of life; in the morning, when he was tired; and most notably, in times of distress. John was there in the Garden of Gethsemane, saw Jesus overwhelmed with emotion, arrested, and went to

Caiaphas' house during his interrogation. Peter snapped under the weight of it all at the words of a young girl. John saw Jesus beaten, flogged, and was even standing there as Jesus hung on the cross. If there ever was a place for a bad attitude or selfishness or anger to come out, it's when you are hanging naked in total exhaustion and pain.

Yet in spite of his close-up perspective, John describes Jesus as the Righteous One. Morally perfect. No doubt John came to realize more clearly after the resurrection the true nature of Jesus as the Son of God, which explained the righteous character of his life. He would write in his gospel, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29) Still, it is remarkable that a true insider would say, I never saw anything less than complete righteousness to the law and will of God. By theology and personal observation, He was the Righteous One.

Let's see the third description and we will see how Jesus' earthly righteousness and heavenly advocacy help Christians with our struggle with sin.

Jesus, the Propitiation of God's Wrath

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

I want us to sit on this verse and the word propitiation. Let's first of all practice saying it... (pr -p sh' - 'sh n).

The fact that this word is in the ESV translation is one reason we went to this translation some years ago. Other translations explain words like this but don't actually use the word, which is a singular word in the Greek. So they will translate it "the atoning sacrifice" (NIV) or "the sacrifice that atones" (NLT) because propitiation is a big hairy theological word.

I think it's better to use the actual Bible word, as the ESV does, and for God's people to grow in their understanding so they can appreciate the big hairy theological words. I want us to be a church that likes and uses the big hairy theological words.

He is the propitiation for our sins. What does it mean? Propitiation is a common religious word used over the centuries to describe something—an offering or religious duty or whatever—that turns away the wrath of a god toward me.

The gods of the ancient religions were capricious and unpredictable, so it was believed. The ancients would do all sorts of things trying to manipulate the emotions of the gods, to avoid their wrath and gain their favor so they would bring rain for the crops, keep their livestock healthy, and increase the number of children in their home. But how could you know one way or the other? Is Zeus angry or not? Do I have Athena's favor or not? Of course these gods were not true gods at all but this word propitiation was used for the offering that turned the anger of the gods into favor.

Here is where more liberal theologians get uncomfortable with the word because they say the God of the Bible is not a God of wrath, but of love. Propitiation cannot mean an offering that turns away the wrath of God because God doesn't have wrath toward us. So it must mean simply removing the offense in the sinner, not in the god. The RSV goes so far as to use the word expiation to cover for that. It is not God's wrath that is removed; rather it is our sin that is expiated.

Here is where the word and its definition are so important and why one commentator says, "If we are wrong here, nothing else is right." (Jackman) The love of God does not contradict the wrath of God. Paul begins his entire explanation of the gospel in Romans, not with the love of God but with his wrath of God. Romans 1: 18 says, The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.

God's wrath is less an emotion and more a holy opposition and hostility toward both the sin and the sinner. As evidence of this, he does not put sin in hell, he puts sinners in hell. God's love begins with his commitment to the glory of his own person and glorious character. His wrath is part of his love, like a husband who loves his wife so much as to be righteously jealous for her. God is jealous for his glory and angry at all who fall short of that glory (Romans 3:23).

To understand propitiation, we must have a biblical terror at the wrath of God against all sin and those who commit it. If God is angry, what do we obviously need? We need somehow for that wrath against us to be turned into favor. That it is even a possibility is wonderful, but how is it accomplished?

He is the propitiation for our sins. He is Christ. How does he turn God's anger into favor? Let's let Scripture explain it.

- For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God. (1 Peter 3:18)
- ...whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. (Romans 3:25)
- In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. (1 John 4:10)

Jesus' death in our place as our substitute was the satisfying offering to God that turned away his wrath toward us. Here is where the one true God is so different than the gods of man's own making. They were fickle and unpredictable and there was no way to know if man's offering was enough.

The truth is that we don't make the offering that turns away God's wrath. God himself makes the offering that turns away his own wrath. Here is the glory and wonder of the gospel and the cross. The one who is angry and offended personally pays the price to not simply satisfy his anger, but turn it into favor.

Jesus' death was atonement for sin; his death was in our place and covered over our guilt before God. It completely removed the offense of God toward us which frees God to view us with favor. How much favor? He even adopted us as his own children.

Did you catch it? God propitiates his own wrath. Know anybody else like that? Will China pay off the US debt? Will any of the victims of Bernie Madoff personally pay his financial debts? When does the offended personally provide the means to take away his own offense? Only God. This is why he is love. Not that his love contradicts his wrath; his love provides the means to satisfy his own wrath and Jesus was that propitiation for our sins.

How does this relate to me as a Christian and my perspective on sin?

The awful price paid for sin urges the Christian to flee from it

I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. (Verse 1)

The false teachers turned the grace of God and the price of Jesus' blood into a license to live as they wanted. The sin is paid for, why worry about it?

Imagine a son who goes to college with all expenses paid but that money was provided by his mother. Her whole adult life she saved everything she could to provide for his college. She worked the night shift. She went without new clothes and other nice things, saving and saving. She exhausted herself to provide for her son's college. What if her son thought, "My college is paid for, I don't have to keep a certain grade point average, I can party at night, sleep in, skip class, and pretty much do whatever I want"?

He could, but then it would show he didn't love her or begin to comprehend the sacrifice she made. The price God paid to atone for our sins and propitiate his own wrath against our sin motivates the Christian NOT to sin.

When we do sin, we rejoice that we have an Advocate

Christians sin. We do. We don't want to but we do. He's already said in verse 9 that confession brings cleansing from the daily sins we commit. Here is how Jesus' righteousness, propitiation, and heavenly advocacy for us. Verses 1-2 explain 1 John 1:9.

Let's do it in slow motion. The Christian sins. Our conscience or God's Word of the Spirit within us convicts us. We realize and repent. We turn to God in a prayer, Heavenly Father, forgive me! That prayer comes into the presence of God the Father. At his right hand is Jesus our Advocate. The one who died for this confessed sin. He quickly intercedes to the Father on our behalf.

Father, did you hear? Your child has confessed his sin. You have promised to forgive and to cleanse, to make that scarlet sin white as snow. You are rightly angry at this sin and so am I. But you sent me to earth to die for him and for his sin. Father, you know that I obeyed you and I lived my whole life in perfect obedience to your every will. I ask that you not look upon this sinner through this sin but that you see him through me and my righteousness. Let your love for me be your love for him. Father, turn your anger into favor for my sake. Don't treat him as his sins deserve for you treated me on the cross as his sins deserved. Restore him inwardly. Give him once again the joy of his salvation. Help him know how much you love him.

You want to talk about having the right person on the inside representing us! The Father, remembering his promises to forgive, brings to his glorious mind the righteous death of Jesus for that sin, applies Jesus' perfect life to us, which cleanses us from the guilt and appeases his holy anger and turns it into fatherly favor and love.

Jesus is our Advocate whose righteous life qualified him to be the offering that satisfies the wrath of God and causes him to turn toward us with full approval, acceptance, and restoration.

All glory to Christ our Advocate, our righteousness, our propitiation; all accomplished on the cross for our sins.

If you get this, you will walk out of here both not wanting to ever sin again and rejoicing that when we do, we have an Advocate, Jesus Christ the Righteous One.

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