

1 John 1:8-2:2 Living Right in a Wrong World

It's not hard to tell what John is talking about in these closing three verses of chapter one in his first epistle. He is addressing the whole subject of sin. In fact, he mentions the word in one form or another no fewer than four times.

And when you turn over the page and go into the opening two verses of chapter 2, he stays on the same track for, again, he focuses on sin and, again, he highlights it on four separate occasions.

So far as John is concerned, sin is of mega importance, it is something which has to be effectively dealt with. It's also true to say, if we leave it alone, it will not go away!

John doesn't let us off the hook for in verses 8 and 10 he informs us we are sinners by nature and sinners by practice. The punchline in this section is, even though sin may be inevitable in our lives, it is inexcusable when we do it.

That's our big problem, isn't it, we are caught between a rock and a hard place! When we fall into sin, it interferes in our times of communion with the Lord and it seriously impairs our happy fellowship with the people of God.

The tragedy is, we all know this from painful personal experience, we cannot stop ourselves from sinning! We are commanded in the Word of God to be sinless, but you know as well as I do that's impossible this side of heaven.

The question is: how do we deal with sin? It's about living right in a wrong world.

We read of the mindset of some in verse 8, 'If we claim to be without sin, we deceive

ourselves and the truth is not in us.' It's a simple fact that there's a lot of people out there who think that we are not born with a sinful nature. John could not be any clearer than he is - such folk are massively misguided and living in error. David makes it clear that we are born in sin, we know that from Psalm 51:5 ... in Romans 3 Paul says the same.

If that's what you believe, says John, the only one you're fooling is yourself; you're living in a spiritual fantasy world, guilty of self delusion. They have the blinkers on.

John says, we only deceive ourselves if we say we have no sin; the chances are, we deceive no-one else and we certainly don't pull the wool over God's eyes!

Let's skip over verse 9 and move into verse 10; don't worry, we'll come back to it in a minute or two. John says in the closing verse, 'If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.'

That is tough talking from the apostle! In a sense, this is the darkest of the three false claims that we read of in verses 6, 8, and 10. It is the ultimate for the other two have been leading up to this one.

The difference in wording between verse 8 and verse 10 is highly significant. Here in verse 10 we move from the inward principle of the sinful nature to the outward symptoms that confirm it is there in all of us. What I do on the outside shows what I'm like on the inside.

We can look at it like this: I am not a sinner because I do sinful things, I do sinful things because I am a sinner!

Our built-in tendency is for us to cover-up and brush it all under the carpet. We no longer call sin for what it is, sin. We give it a lick of paint and call it by a host of other names.

They don't call it lying, it's being economical with the truth. They don't call it deceit, it's getting along in your business relationships. They don't call it adultery, it's having an affair. They don't call it stealing, it's helping yourself to the perks of the job. They don't call it embezzlement, it's creative accounting or imaginative fund-raising. They don't call it selfishness, it's standing up for my rights.

What happens is this, we no longer call sin what the Bible calls it, we dress it up in a designer label, and when we do that, we put ourselves in the untenable position of making God out to be a liar.

When we go down that road, we have relegated his word to a place in our lives where it means little or nothing. We have sidelined God from his proper place in our hearts.

We have talked a lot about sin in our study today, but thank God, that's not the end of the story. Here's the good news, and you find it in 1 John 1:9 where John tells us: 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.'

That is tremendous! What an amazing verse and what a wonderful way forward! We can make all kinds of claims, but at the end of the

day, there is only one antidote for our terrible condition before a God who is light.

The only solution to the problem is found in confessing our sins before a holy God. The answer to denial is confession; if you have any doubts about that scenario, ask Peter, he knows all about it, he's been there, he's done that!

The word 'confess' in verse 9 is a fascinating word and it's also a word often misunderstood in today's spiritual climate where men are more inclined to treat God as some kind of a best pal.

Literally, it means: 'to say the same thing.' In other words, it is to agree with God against ourselves. We ought to name our sins before God in a quite specific sense. There is no place for a sweeping open-ended statement before God regarding our sin! No generalisation.

Let's say I have been dishonest and told a lie to someone, John says I need to be specific in my dealing with that incident before the Lord, it is not enough for me to get down on my knees and say, 'Lord, I'm sorry for all the wrong things I have done today, forgive me!'

According to verse 9, a true confession of sin asks for and anticipates forgiveness. It's good to remind ourselves, this benefit and blessing does not come to us on the grounds of the intensity of our repentance, but on the basis of what the Lord did when he died for our sins on the cross. It's not what I have done, it's what He has done, that's what makes the radical difference.

John handles this glorious truth in a wonderful way for he shows us how God responds to our request for forgiveness. There are two strands woven into verse 9 and when you put them side

by side you can't help but notice how they balance the false claims we have been examining in our study earlier today.

We read that our God is one who is faithful and just, that is a confirmation of the divine nature.

We read that he is one who will forgive us and purify us, that is a confirmation of the divine actions. He does what he does because he is who he is!

We are introduced here to a couple of divine attributes, God is faithful and God is just. He is faithful to his own nature and that means it is impossible for him to act in any other way than is consistent with his moral perfection. He never betrays himself!

This means he is faithful to his word. If he says it, he will perform it, he will do it, simple as that! It's taking God at face value, it's believing God will accomplish what he says he will do.

Actually, he can't do anything else, for that would be a slur on his integrity. So, when God promises to forgive us when we admit our sins before him, we can depend upon him to honour his word, we can rely on him to keep his word.

The good news is, he will not let us down!

The other attribute assigned to him is that he is just. It would be easy for us to water this down and dilute it of its meaning. It means so much more than someone who is kind and merciful. It has the idea of his inflexible righteousness enshrined in it. In God's great scheme of things, this also guarantees our forgiveness, for God's justice ensures that he will give to each of us what we deserve.

Were it not for the sacrificial death of Jesus, we would tremble at that thought, for the justice of God would rightly condemn us for our sin and banish us from the presence of God.

We will discover in chapter 2 that we have a Saviour who has turned away God's wrath, who has died in our place and whose blood goes on cleansing us from sin. Having lived the perfect life that we failed to live, he died the death that we deserve to die. The fact that the penalty for our sin was paid by Jesus means that God will not demand a second payment. In Jesus, the work is accomplished, once and for all, and we are forgiven.

The justice of God requires him to forgive because the debt has been paid. What we deserve is God's judgment, but this is just what he does not give us. Instead, we receive what we do not deserve, and that is his mercy and pardoning grace.

'Because the sinless Saviour died, My sinful soul is counted free; For God, the just, is satisfied To look on him and pardon me.' God forgives us, but he doesn't stop there, he also purifies us. Forgiveness absolves us from the punishment of sin which we deserve. Cleansing frees us from the pollution of sin.

We have seen how the mercy and justice of God join hands at the cross to produce a free and eternal forgiveness as the outcome. When God forgives us, he cancels the huge debt that we owe him. He wipes the slate clean, so that we come before him as acquitted people, we stand before him as if we had never sinned.

Then God cleanses us, he purifies us, he makes the sinner holy. Because God is faithful, it means he forgives us; because God is just and righteous, it means he cleanses us.

In the next chapter, he says: 'My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin.' John was against sin, he was a perfectionist! In the next breath, he says: 'But if anybody does sin.' That makes John a realist!

The first one should be the aspiration felt in all our hearts, the second is our fallback position when we know we haven't quite made it. We will never attain a state of sinless perfection this side of heaven, but that should not dampen our zeal from making it our goal and our aim.

There is a healthy tension between the two ideas put forward by John. He offers to you and me a remedy designed by God to meet the real needs of sinners like us in a fallen world.

I think of John Newton. 'I am not what I ought to be; but I am not what I once was. And it is by the grace of God that I am what I am.' He and John are on the same wavelength, for here are the distinctive marks of Christian reality.

A Christian is someone who knows who Christ is, verse 1; he is someone who trusts implicitly what Christ did, verse 2; he is someone who does what Christ commands, verses 3-6.

The lovely story is told of John Wesley that when he left home for the first time, his mother Susannah is said to have written some words in the flyleaf of his Bible. She penned: 'Sin will keep you from this book, but this book will keep you from sin!' Sound advice.

We come face to face with him here as 'Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.' The name 'Jesus' is the earthly name of our Saviour, it's a name which anchors him in history as a real man. It helps us focus on the reason for his coming into the world. He rescues us from sin.

John refers to him as 'Christ' and the thought is of one who is the messiah or the anointed one. He is the Son of God! He is God the Son!

The two natures of Jesus Christ, his humanity and his deity, are brought together when John describes him as 'the righteous one.'

He was faced with tough times of temptation but never once did he succumb to the pressure the enemy put on him. The devil threw every trick in the book at him but Jesus was resolute to the end, he never flinched or wavered. That is what enables him and equips him to 'speak to the Father in our defence.'

He was sinless on the first day, he was sinless on the last day, and he was sinless every day in between! In life and in eternity, he is perfection personified! He knows what makes us tick, he feels for us, he empathises with us, that's why he effectively pleads our case as our advocate.

The fact is, we haven't a leg to stand on, we are the guilty ones, we are unrighteous, we are in the wrong! That's the main reason why he acts on our behalf as our defence lawyer, he is the righteous one, he is in the right and he's in the know; and he hasn't lost a single case yet!

A real Christian is someone who trusts what Christ did on their behalf, and you find that spelt out very clearly in verse 2: 'He is the

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

The key words in the NIV are 'atoning sacrifice.' You will find many older translations say, 'he is the propitiation for our sins.'

It's a word that is rarely used these days, but it gets to the heart of what John is trying to communicate to the church in the first century. The Greek word is 'hilasmos,' used on only one other occasion in the NT and that's in 4:10.

It speaks of the sin offering. This helps us see what transpired at Calvary, it was there the Lord Jesus offered himself on the cross on our behalf. Punishment is diverted, it is changed to forgiveness, and wrath is changed to mercy.

That's the idea, it's turning away the wrath of God from the sinner to the substitute.

The word 'propitiation' in the OT is 'mercy seat.' That was the golden slab which sat on top of the ark of the covenant. That's where the blood of the sacrifice was applied as an atonement for the sin of the people.

The thought is: we have an advocate on the basis of the blood poured out on the cross. Because Jesus is the propitiation for our sins, we can be forgiven when we sin and God will send our sins away from us because they have been taken by another! The wonder of Calvary! Thank God, Calvary covers it all! Your sin is under the precious blood of Jesus, my sin has been washed away in his cleansing tide; that's not all, John says, 'not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.'

Tremendous words; but let me add that John is not signing up to the view that the entire world

is saved. If he doesn't mean that, what does he mean when he talks about the whole world?

John draws a line when he homes in on two different groups of people, he distinguishes between us and the 'world' which refers to all those outside the global family of God.

This is the world for which the Saviour died at Calvary. The glorious truth emerging from this phrase is that when Jesus died, his death is efficient for us who know him as Saviour, and his sacrifice is sufficient for all those who as yet do not know him in a personal way.

This ties in beautifully with 1:29 of his gospel where he says: 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.'

That's why we tell the world about Jesus, that's why we reach out into our community and share the gospel with friends and family, that's why we travel to the ends of the earth and into the regions beyond; that's why, because we believe no one need be left out from the vast company gathered at the throne of the Lamb.

This uncountable number have gathered there from 'every tribe and language and people and nation.' They owe their salvation to the Lamb with whose blood He purchased men for God. It harks back to what I said earlier, an authentic Christian is someone who knows who Christ is, he is someone who trusts what Christ did.

Charles Wesley picked up on this theme: 'Arise, my soul, arise, Shake off thy guilty fears; The bleeding sacrifice In my behalf appears: Before the throne my Surety stands, My name is written on his hands.'