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HOW TO HAVE FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

1 John 1:5-10

By

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1 John Lesson 4

How to Have Fellowship With God 1 John 1:5-10

For many years, polls have shown that about one-third of Americans claim to be born again. So-called “seeker” churches are thriving, with thousands flocking into their huge auditoriums each week. You would think from the numbers that Christianity is alive and well in the United States.

But in his booklet, *The Bleeding of the Evangelical Church* [Banner of Truth], David Wells reports that in 1993, pollsters added a few questions to, “Are you born again?” They also asked, “Do you go to church with some regularity, do you pray with some regularity, and do you have some minimal structure of formal Christian belief?” The number claiming to be born again dropped from 32 percent to 8 percent. Wells goes on to speculate, based on research, that if you added a few more basic questions (such as, “Are you regenerate?”) the numbers would drop to one or two percent. (I highly recommend Wells’ books, *No Place for Truth; God in the Wasteland*; and, *Losing Our Virtue* [all Eerdmans].)

The apostle John opens his letter by asserting that one of the main aims of the Christian message is we may enter in to the apostolic fellowship, which is “with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ” (1:3). Such fellowship with God is at the very heart of what it means to be a Christian. Christianity is not, at its core, the observance of rituals or rules. Rather, it is a walk of personal fellowship with the living God.

But before we all sign up for the program, John makes it clear that fellowship with God is not a matter of being chummy with your good buddy in the sky! He asserts that God is absolutely holy (1:5). To have genuine fellowship with the holy God, we must walk in the light, as He Himself is in the light. It’s easy to *claim* to have fellowship with Him, but to be mistaken or deceived. The false teachers were claiming to have fellowship with God, but their claims were patently false. There was in John’s day, as there is today, the peril of profession, the danger of claiming to know God, but of being deceived. John’s message is:

To have fellowship with the holy God, we must not walk in the darkness, but walk in the light.

John begins with the apostolic message, that God is light (1:5). Then he develops the implications of that message as it relates to having fellowship with this holy God (1:6-2:2). He does this against the claims and consequences of the errors of the false teachers ("If we say..." 1:6, 8, 10). He then gives God's remedy (1:7, 9; 2:1-2).

1. To have fellowship with God, we must recognize that He is absolutely holy (1:5).

John writes (1:5), "This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all." Note two things:

- A. To have fellowship with God, we must begin with God and His authoritative revelation of Himself.

John is not sharing with us his speculations on what God may be like. He doesn't throw out an idea and suggest that his readers discuss what they think about it. Rather, John says, "We heard this straight from Jesus and we announce it to you." It wasn't a discussion point; it was an authoritative pronouncement from Jesus through the apostles to the readers. To have fellowship with God, we must start with His authoritative revelation in His Word.

Note, also, that John does not begin with his hearers felt needs. He doesn't discuss where they may be hurting, or bring up how this message will help them have a happy family life or a successful personal life. Rather, John begins with God and he brings us face to face, not with God's love, but with His holiness. Coming after verse 3, about having fellowship with God, you would expect John to say, "To have fellowship with God, you need to know that He loves you very much." But, rather, he bluntly says, "God is light." Then, so that we don't dodge the uncomfortable implications of that, he states the negative, "and in Him there is no darkness at all."

Martyn Lloyd-Jones makes this point (*Fellowship With God* [Crossway Books], p. 100), that we must *always start with God*. He argues that our main problem is our self-centeredness, and so we come to the Christian faith looking to have our needs met. I'm not happy; can God make me happy? I'm looking for something that I

don't have; can God give it to me? How can Christianity help me with my problems and needs? But to approach the Christian faith in that manner is to cater to our main problem, which is self! He says (p. 101), "The first answer of the gospel can always, in effect, be put in this way: 'Forget yourself and contemplate God.'" He adds (p. 102), "The way to be delivered from self-centeredness is to stand in the presence of God."

The entire church growth movement, including one of its most famous leaders, blatantly contradicts this. Robert Schuller, in his heretical book, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation* ([Word], p. 64), argues that classical theology "erred in its insistence that theology be 'God-centered,' not 'man-centered.'" So he calls for a new Reformation that puts man, not God, at the center!

Following his lead, other church growth leaders have started with the "religious consumer." They have gone to people with the question, "What would you like in a church? What would get you to come back and try the church again?"

People have responded, "We'd like a church that is a happy, upbeat place. We don't want to hear about sin or a holy God who threatens sinners with His wrath. We want help on how to have happy families, how to be successful in reaching our full potential, and how to recover from divorce, drug addiction, and sexual addictions. We don't want sermons that make us uncomfortable. Give us more drama and less preaching. In fact, don't preach at us; share with us. Tell more stories and jokes. Don't bring up controversial issues. Make it positive." So, the church marketers go back to the drawing board and re-design the church to meet the felt needs of the consumer. The result is amazing growth. But, have people come face to face with the living God?

John says, first, to have fellowship with God, we must begin with God and His authoritative revelation of Himself, not with ourselves.

B. To have fellowship with God, we must begin with His holiness.

The church marketers would say, "'God is holy' won't sell. That's just not popular. If you want to draw the crowds, begin with, 'God is love.' Everyone wants to hear that!"

But John begins with, "God is light." In Scripture, "light" may refer to God as the source of knowledge, illumination, or guidance. It may point to God's glory and that He is unapproachable, infinite, unchangeable, and omnipresent. But here, the main idea is that He is holy. This is indicated by the negative explanation, "and in Him there is no darkness at all." It is this moral connotation that Jesus brought out when He said (John 3:19), "This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil."

You may ask, "But why start with God's holiness? Why not start with His love, which is more inviting?" Dr. Lloyd-Jones answers these questions (pp. 108-109). I can only summarize his main points. First, if you don't begin with God's holiness, you will never understand God's plan of salvation through the cross of Christ. If God is only love, then the cross is unnecessary and meaningless. Second, if we start with God's holiness, it exposes all false claims of fellowship with God. In our day, as in John's, many claim to have fellowship with God, but often this is an empty claim based on their own imagination with a false god that they have made up. True fellowship is with the holy God, not with a good buddy god.

Third, starting with God's holiness saves us from the danger of blaming God in times of trouble. We're all prone to ask, "Why is God allowing this? I didn't deserve this!" But if we start with God's absolute holiness, we will see that we deserve nothing but His wrath, and we won't challenge and criticize God when trials come.

Lastly, Lloyd-Jones points out that starting with God's holiness is the only way to true joy. It's easy to have a false peace if you have a "user-friendly" god. If you bring God down to man's level, then you can enjoy peace with God without dealing with your sins. But, it's a false peace that will not hold up in the day of judgment. True peace and joy come from being truly reconciled to the holy God through the blood of His Son Jesus (1:7). So, John begins with God. He says that to have fellowship with God, we must recognize that He is absolutely holy.

2. To have fellowship with God, we must not walk in the darkness (1:6, 8, 10).

To understand this paragraph, we must see that John is writing against the false claims of the false teachers. Their claims are introduced by the phrase, "if we say..." (1:6, 8, 10). John here shifts the "we" from the apostles to a hypothetical group that may include anyone, but especially targets the false teachers. Their first claim was, "We have fellowship with God" (1:6), but John says that their lives did not back up their claim. They walked in darkness, they lied, and they did not practice the truth.

"To walk" points to the general tenor of one's life. Since to walk in the light involves confessing our sins (1:9), to walk in the darkness means ignoring or denying our sins. It is to block out the light of God's holiness, as revealed in His Word, and to live as the world lives, making up your own ideas about right and wrong apart from God (see Eph. 4:17-19; 5:7-12). It is to justify your own behavior either by redefining sin, by blaming it on other factors, or by doing away with the entire concept of sin. To walk in darkness is to try to hide from God, rather than to expose your life to Him.

Apparently these false teachers were doing this, because John's next hypothetical statement is (1:8), "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us." They may have been claiming that they had achieved a state of sinless perfection. Or, perhaps because they believed that the body could not touch the spirit, they were claiming not to have a sin nature. They said, "You're just seeing my body. My spirit is without sin." John says, "You're only deceiving yourselves!"

The heretic's third claim was (1:10), "We have not sinned." This is the most blatant of the three, as seen by John's consequence, "we make Him a liar and His word is not in us." It goes farther than the other claims by saying, "We have not sinned in the past and we are not now sinning." Perhaps they were claiming that their enlightenment had led them to see that they were basically good at the core, not evil sinners.

Robert Schuller redefines sin to mean something other than what Scripture declares. He says (p. 65) that to define sin as rebellion against God is "shallow and insulting to the human being." He redefines sin as a lack of trust, which "is another way of saying that we are all born with a negative self-image..." He says (p. 67), "By nature, we are fearful, not bad. Original sin is not a mean streak; it

is a nontrusting inclination." So he redefines being born again (p. 68): "To be born again means that we must be changed from a negative to a positive self-image—from inferiority to self-esteem, from fear to love, from doubt to trust." This, in turn, changes us from shame to self-esteem, so that we can now pray (p. 69, italics his), "Our Father in heaven, honorable is *our* name. So, the foundation is laid for us to feel good about ourselves!"

John would say, "That man is walking in the darkness, deceiving himself and anyone who believes him. Worse, he is calling God a liar and God's word is not in him!"

But we need to apply this personally. If as a way of life, I am not allowing God's Word to confront my sinful thoughts, attitudes, motives, words, and deeds, I am walking in darkness. If I dodge my sin by blaming others or making up excuses for why I sin, I am walking in darkness. And for John, to walk in darkness is not describing a "carnal" Christian. It is describing an unbeliever, no matter how much he may claim to have fellowship with God. To have fellowship with God, we must recognize that He is absolutely holy. And, we must not walk in the darkness.

3. To have fellowship with God, we must walk in the light, as He Himself is in the light (1:7, 9).

(First John 2:1-2 also describes what it means to walk in the light, but we will examine those verses next time.) Walking in the light is not a description of a class of spiritual believers, who have achieved perfection or some high state of sanctification. Rather, it describes all true believers. Believers walk in the light; unbelievers walk in the darkness. There are three aspects of walking in the light:

A. To walk in the light is to live openly before God, seeking to be holy and hating all sin.

To walk in the light is to walk "as He Himself is in the Light" (1:7). This is to say the same thing as 2:6, "the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked." Or, in the words of 1 Peter 1:15-16, "but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves in all your behavior; because it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'" Or, in Jesus' words of John 3:21, "But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought

in God.” This is in contrast with the evil person who loves darkness and hates the Light, who “does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed” (John 3:20).

This does not imply that the person walking in the light never sins. 1 John 1:7 indicates that the blood of Jesus is cleansing (present tense) from all sin the one who is walking in the light. So to walk in the light does not mean to be sinless, which no one can do. Rather, it points to a habitual pattern of living openly before God, who examines the heart. To walk in the light is to seek to be holy as God is holy. But, what about when we sin?

B. To walk in the light is to confess our sins, experiencing God’s forgiveness and cleansing.

A person walking in the light does not deny his sin or try to cover it up. He does not blame others for it or make excuses about it. Rather, he confesses it (1:9): “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” To confess means to agree with God that our sin is sin. It means to accept responsibility for it and to turn from it. God’s wonderful promise is that if we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive and cleanse us.

Forgiveness and cleansing are somewhat overlapping, except that forgiveness relates to the guilt of sin being pardoned, whereas cleansing points to the defilement of sin being removed. The forgiven person does not need to fear God’s judgment. The cleansed person is free to draw near to God in worship, because the defilement of sin has been taken away.

But this verse creates a difficulty, in that other Scriptures teach that we are forgiven totally at the point of salvation, including all future sins. For example, Romans 8:1 states, “Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Why, then, do we need to be forgiven again when we sin after salvation?

Some explain this as “family” forgiveness that is necessary for fellowship, not forensic forgiveness that is required to deliver us from God’s judgment. While that explanation may be okay, to me it does not take into account the terms “faithful and righteous to forgive....” God’s faithfulness relates to His new covenant promise to forgive all our sins through faith in Christ, which happens at

salvation (Heb. 8:12). His righteousness (or, justice) relates to His strict demand that the penalty for sin be paid. In the case of the believer, Jesus Christ paid this at the cross.

So I prefer to explain verse 9 differently. In verse 9, “confess” is in the present tense, but “forgive” and “cleanses” are the Greek aorist tense, focusing on an action as a totality or as complete. So confession points to an ongoing action, but the forgiveness and cleansing are completed actions in the past.

Let me use an analogy. John uses the word “believe” in the present tense to refer to the means of how we get saved (John 1:12; 3:16; *et al.*). When a person first believes, he receives all the benefits of salvation. Does he stop believing then? No, he goes on believing in what Jesus did for him on the cross. As he continues believing, he does not receive the benefits of salvation over and over, but he does experience them repeatedly. So the Christian is characterized by a lifestyle of believing in Christ. As he goes on believing, he repeatedly enjoys the benefits that he received at salvation.

In a similar way, the believer’s life is marked by continual confession of sins. It begins at salvation, when he acknowledges his sin to God and asks for forgiveness and cleansing. He experiences ongoing forgiveness and cleansing as he continues confessing his sins. Verse 7 (“cleanses” is in the present tense) indicates that there is an ongoing sense in which the effects of the cleansing of Jesus’ blood are applied to us. Thus when a believer sins, he does not lose the forgiveness and cleansing that took place at salvation. But he does not experience it in his walk until he confesses his sin. Ongoing confession of sin and the experience of forgiveness and cleansing characterize those who walk in the light.

C. To walk in the light results in fellowship with God and His people.

Does the reference to “one another” (1:7) refer to fellowship between God and the believer or between believers? In the immediate context, verse 6 refers to fellowship with God, and thus verse 7 would seem to point in that direction. But verse 3 also referred to fellowship with other believers. So I think that in 1:7 John’s primary emphasis is on fellowship with God. But fellowship with God and fellowship with other believers is always linked, as verse 3

makes clear. Since the heretics had withdrawn from the church (2:19), John wants us to know that true fellowship with God always brings us into fellowship with others that know Him. If someone can't get along with other believers, he may not be in true fellowship with God.

Conclusion

In the 18th century, an abbot was disciplining two monks for some infraction of the rules. He imposed on them the rule of silence. They could not talk to one another. They tried to figure out some way to fill the long hours.

Finally one of them gathered 28 flat stones from the courtyard. Putting different numbers on them, he devised a new game. By using gestures, the men agreed on certain rules, but the most difficult part was keeping silent when one of them scored a victory. Then they remembered that they were permitted to say aloud the prayer, "Dixit Dominus Domino Meo." By using the one word of this Latin expression meaning "Lord," the winner was able to signal his triumph by yelling, "Domino!" The monks gave the impression that they were *praying*, but really, they were *playing*. Thus the game of dominoes was born (From "Our Daily Bread" [8/77]).

It's easy to put on a religious veneer by claiming that you have fellowship with God, when really, you're walking in the darkness and deceiving yourself. John doesn't want us to play spiritual dominoes. He wants us to experience genuine fellowship with the holy God by walking in the light, as He Himself is in the light.

Application Questions

1. To have fellowship with God, we must begin with His holiness, not with His love. Why?
2. Can you find a single instance in the Bible where evangelism *begins* with God's love? (If so, please let me know. I can't.) Should we therefore modify our evangelistic approach?
3. How can we avoid the deception of thinking that we are walking in the light, while really we're walking in the darkness?
4. If we're forgiven at the cross, why do we still need to be forgiven?

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