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THE KEY TO HOLINESS

1 John 2:1-2

By

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1 John Lesson 5

The Key to Holiness 1 John 2:1-2

Every time I see the bumper sticker, "Christians are forgiven, not perfect;" I want to add another line, "But, they're striving for holiness." As it stands, the bumper sticker seems to say, "God accepts me, faults and all, so you need to accept me, too!" Okay, but please give me some assurance that you're working on things! As the author of Hebrews states (12:14, ESV), we are to "strive for ... the holiness without which no one will see the Lord."

Holiness is not an optional accessory that you may add to your Christian life at some point, if you so choose. Holiness is essential. If you are not striving to grow in holiness in the sight of God, you need to examine whether you know Christ as Savior at all. Every blood-bought child of God desires to please the Lord Jesus who gave Himself on the cross to save us from our sins.

Since holiness is such an important matter, it's not surprising that the enemy of our souls has infiltrated the church with confusion about how to attain it. One of his lies is that legalism leads to holiness. The legalist tries to be holy by keeping certain manmade rules: "Do this, don't do that, and you will please God." The legalist does not deal with matters of the heart, but rather with outward performance. He thinks that his relationship with God is just fine when he keeps the rules, even if his heart is far from God. Jesus hit the Pharisees with this problem when he said (Mark 7:6-8):

"Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.' Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men."

Concerning the rules of the legalists, Paul commented (Col. 2:23), "These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence." Legalism does not produce true holiness.

Another tactic that Satan uses, often with a person who has been under legalism, is to whisper, "You're too conscientious! You have been too concerned about keeping the rules and about all of your failures. But God is a God of grace. He forgets your sins, so you should forget them, too! Everyone sins; you're just normal. Accept yourself, faults and all. Stop worrying so much about your sins." And so the person swings from legalism into licentiousness.

Legalism and licentiousness are not opposites, but two sides of the same coin. Both are a fleshly approach to the sin problem. And, both are opposed to the true grace of God, which is the key to holiness (see Rom. 6:14).

John is combating the erroneous teaching and practice of some heretics. They said, "We have fellowship with God," but John says that they are walking in the darkness, lying, and not practicing the truth (1:6). Those who experience true fellowship with God walk in the light, as He Himself is in the light (1:7). The heretics were saying that they had no sin and that they had not sinned. John says that they are deceiving themselves and making God to be a liar (1:8, 10).

But John does not want his readers to conclude that Christians are characterized by sin. So before he says, "If anyone sins..." he clarifies his purpose (2:1), "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin." "These things" refers to the message that God is holy (1:5) and to the importance of walking in the light, not in the darkness (1:6-10). It also refers to what he writes in 2:1-2. By calling them, "my little children," John reflects both his pastoral heart for them and his longer experience as an old man. He cares for them as a father or grandfather does for his little ones. He has lived longer than they have and speaks with experience about how to live a holy life. So we should pay close attention to his message:

The key to holiness is to understand God's grace as seen in Christ's sacrifice for our sins.

Legalists always pounce on God's grace with the warning that it will lead to licentiousness. When Paul taught God's grace, he anticipated that response (Rom. 6:1), "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase?" His immediate

answer was (Rom. 6:2a), "May it never be!" (See, also, Rom. 3:8.) This means that if we teach God's grace with biblical clarity and balance, the thought of continuing in sin that grace may abound will pop into people's minds. If we hedge God's grace so carefully that that thought would never occur to anyone, we have not taught God's grace properly.

John's thought here (in line with Paul) is that you need to realize that God graciously has forgiven you completely in Jesus Christ. He is at the right hand of the Father, pleading your case, even when you sin. Your standing before God does not depend on your performance, but rather on Jesus' blood and righteousness. Properly understanding that truth will not lead you to sin more, but rather, to sin less. The key to holiness is to understand God's grace that was lavished upon you when Jesus Christ died for your sins. Let's begin with trying to grasp what that means and then we will see how it leads to holy living.

1. We must understand God's grace as seen in Christ's sacrifice for our sins.

John uses three terms to describe Christ's sacrifice for our sins: (1) He is our *Advocate* with the Father; (2) He is Jesus Christ the *righteous*, and, (3) He is the *propitiation* for our sins. Then John adds (2:2), "and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world."

A. Jesus Christ is our Advocate with the Father.

"Advocate" is from the Greek word that is transliterated, "Paraclete." It is used of Jesus Christ only in our text. Jesus uses it of the Holy Spirit (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7). It refers to one who is called alongside to help, especially in a court of law. If you have been accused of a crime, you need an attorney to come to your aid by pleading your case before the bench. The Holy Spirit comes to believers in Christ's stead to testify of Him and lead us into all truth. He assures us that we are children of God (Rom. 8:16).

But here John says that Jesus is our Advocate in heaven, "with the Father." "With" is the same word used in John 1:1, "the Word was with God." It means that Jesus is always before the Father. He never takes a vacation or a break. Whenever we need Him (which is always!), He is there, coming to our aid. When we sin, Satan, the

accuser of the brethren (Rev. 12:10; Zech. 3:1-5), charges us as guilty before God. Jesus Christ, our defense attorney, steps to the bench, but He does not enter a plea of "not guilty." That would not be true. We *have* sinned. Rather, He enters a plea of guilty, but then He argues for pardon because He paid the penalty for that sin by His substitutionary death. Therefore, His client is not liable for punishment.

And, although we should confess our sins (1:9), John does not say, "If we confess our sins, we have an Advocate." Rather, he says, "If anyone sins, we have an Advocate." Our forgiveness and our standing with God do not depend on anything we do, but rather on the finished work of Christ. If we are His children through the new birth, He is there before the Father on our behalf, pleading His blood, even before we confess our sins!

This is another way of stating the heavenly ministry of Christ's intercession for us. Hebrews 7:25 says: "Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them." John Calvin (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], on 1 John 2:1, p. 171) writes, "The intercession of Christ is a continual application of his death for our salvation." Because Jesus Christ is perpetually in heaven presenting His shed blood, every person that draws near to God through Christ can know that the accuser has no grounds for conviction. We are guilty as charged, but the penalty has already been paid by our Substitute, who pleads our case for us!

Note also that John does not say that our Advocate pleads our case before *the Judge*, but rather, with *the Father*. God is not a hostile Judge who has to be won over grudgingly. Rather, He is the loving Father who sent His own Son to pay the penalty that we deserved! The Father did not compromise His own righteousness or justice in any way, because His sinless Son fully met the demands of His holy law. Thus, as Paul puts it (Rom. 3:26), God is both "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." In other words, God's grace does not mean that He tolerantly sets aside His own righteous demand that the penalty of sin be paid. Rather, His righteous demand was fully satisfied by the death of His Son. If we have trusted in Him, our sins are paid in full!

B. Jesus Christ is the Righteous One.

John calls Him “Jesus Christ the righteous.” Each name points to an essential part of our forgiveness. In the first place, we needed a human Savior, *Jesus*. Only man could atone for the sins of people. Jesus was completely human, not just in appearance, as some of the heretics maintained, but in His nature. But, we also needed a divine Savior. Jesus is *the Christ*, God’s anointed one, sent to bear our sins (Isaiah 53). A mere man’s death would only pay for his own sins. But as God in human flesh, Jesus’ death had infinite merit to atone for the sins of all that the Father had given to Him.

But, also, He is Jesus Christ *the righteous*. Jesus had to be “a lamb unblemished and spotless” (1 Pet. 1:19). If He had sinned, He would have had to die for His own sins. But He fully kept God’s law, in dependence on the Father. His righteousness is freely imputed to the one who trusts in Him. As Paul wrote (2 Cor. 5:21), “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” This means that Jesus Christ alone is an adequate Savior. He is all that we need to stand before the holy God, not in a righteousness of our own, “derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith” (Phil. 3:9). We can add nothing to what Christ has done.

C. Jesus Christ Himself is the propitiation for our sins.

The word that John uses (also in 4:10; a similar word is used in Rom. 3:25 & Heb. 2:17) was used in ancient pagan writings to refer to the appeasing of an angry god, usually by a sacrifice or offering. If you had done something to make one of the gods mad, you had to do something to placate him and get in his good graces.

Because of the negative connotations of this idea, some scholars argue that the word does not focus on God’s wrath, but rather on man’s sins. Thus they translate the word “expiation,” which means to blot out the guilt of our sins by making atonement. While we should reject any idea of God being angry in a capricious human sense, we cannot do away with the biblical concept of His wrath, which is His settled hatred of and opposition to all sin.

The difference between the pagan and the biblical concepts is that in the Bible, it is never man that takes the initiative to placate God. Rather, God took the initiative to satisfy His own wrath so

that His love may now be shown to the guilty sinner. Rather than man piling up good works or sacrifices to placate God's wrath, the Bible says that God did what all our good works or efforts could never do. He sent His own Son as the righteous substitute to bear His wrath on the cross. John Stott (*The Epistles of John* [Eerdmans], p. 88) aptly defines propitiation as "an appeasement of the wrath of God by the love of God through the gift of God." All that we can do is trust Christ's sacrifice on our behalf. It is all of God's grace.

It is precisely at this point that legalists object. They fear that if you say that *all* of our sins are remitted *completely* by God's grace through Christ's sacrifice, people will take advantage of that grace by sinning. So, they add human works to hedge in God's grace, to protect it from licentiousness. This is the error of Roman Catholicism, and it is a main reason why we should not join together with the Catholic Church in any display of "Christian unity."

Rome teaches that if anyone says that after he has sinned, he may recover right standing with God by faith alone, without the sacrament of penance, he is anathema ("The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent," Session 6, canon 29, in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* [Baker], 2:116-117). John Calvin (*The Institutes of the Christian Religion* [Westminster Press], 3:4:26 & 27) exposed and countered the false teaching of penance.

He wrote (3:4:27), "What a vast difference there is between saying ... that Christ is the propitiation for our sins, and that God must be propitiated by works!" He pointed out that the Bible, rather than calling us to penance when we sin, "as often as we lapse we are recalled solely to the satisfaction of Christ." He went on to argue that the Catholic teaching denies anyone the peace of conscience of knowing that he has adequately satisfied God.

John is teaching that we must understand God's grace as seen in Christ's sacrifice for our sins if we want to grow in holiness. But, he adds another phrase at the end of verse 2 to impress us with the magnitude of God's grace:

D. God's grace through Christ's sacrifice extends to the whole world.

John says (2:2b), "and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world." I think that John intended to counter the here-

tics, who claimed that the knowledge of salvation was exclusive and secret. They restricted it to the enlightened few. Instead, John throws open the door to the entire world, as if to say, "God's grace is far more extensive than you imagine! Christ's sacrifice is not just for the enlightened few; it is not just for the Jews; it's for the entire world!" Anyone, anywhere who trusts in Christ's sacrifice for his sin will be saved.

But John's little phrase has sparked a lot of theological controversy! Those who oppose the Reformed (Calvinist) view of salvation say that this verse refutes the doctrine of "limited atonement," that Christ died only for the elect (the L of Calvinism's TULIP, also called "particular redemption").

Calvinists respond by pointing out that the verse cannot mean that Christ actually satisfied God's wrath on behalf of every person, or else everyone would be saved. Scripture is clear that the wrath of God abides on those who do not obey Jesus (John 3:36). Thus they argue that the word *whole* means the world in general, not necessarily every individual. It refers to God's elect from every nation, not to every person who has ever lived.

Revelation 5:9 states that Jesus purchased for God with His blood "men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation." It does not say that He purchased all people in every group, but some *from* every group. Jesus Himself specifically excluded the world from His priestly prayer, and prayed rather for those whom the Father had given Him (John 17:9).

Thus when we compare Scripture with Scripture, we must conclude that Christ's death actually satisfied God's wrath only for His elect. But because we do not know who the elect are until they believe, we are commanded to proclaim the free offer of the gospel to every person in every nation, knowing that it will save all that the Father gave to the Son. John's point here is to emphasize the magnitude of God's grace in Christ's sacrifice. It extends to the whole world. The application of this is:

2. Understanding God's grace in Christ's sacrifice will lead us to holiness.

John steers a careful course that does not shipwreck on the rock of sinless perfection, nor on that of licentiousness.

A. Holy living is a possibility.

John writes, "so that you may not sin." While we will never attain sinless perfection in this life, we can and must live with consistent victory over sin. As John states (3:7-8a), "Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil; ..." He adds (3:9), "No one who is born of God practices sin...." Christians can and must live holy lives.

B. Perfectly holy living is not a possibility.

John adds, "And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate" The "we" includes the apostle John. Although he was an old man who had walked with the Lord for many years, he knew that he was not beyond the possibility of sinning. While the general tenor of our lives should be growth in holiness, we will never in this life get to the point where we never sin. If someone claims to have achieved sinless perfection, just hang around him for a while and you will see that the "emperor" of sinless perfection is only deceiving himself (1:8). He really has no clothes!

C. Understanding God's gracious, sacrificial work through Christ will lead to consistent holiness.

This is John's point here. If you understand what Jesus Christ did for you on the cross, you will not take advantage of it by sinning more. Rather, as you think about God's amazing grace shown to you, who deserved His wrath and you think about His love that sent His Son to be the propitiation for your sins (1 John 4:7), it will make you hate sin and strive to live to please the Savior.

The apostle Peter urges us to add godly character qualities to our faith in Christ (2 Pet. 1:5-8). Then he adds (1:9), "For he who lacks these qualities is blind or short-sighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins." Remembering what Christ did for you on the cross will motivate you to cut sin out of your life and grow in holiness.

Conclusion

As a teenager, Robert Robinson lived in London and ran with a gang of hoodlums, living in debauchery. When he was 17, he went to hear the famous evangelist, George Whitefield, to scoff at

what he called “the poor, deluded Methodists.” But instead he got saved and subsequently became the pastor of a large Baptist church in Cambridge. At 23, he wrote the hymn, “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing.”

Later, however, Robinson went through a time of severe depression because of his sin. He was traveling when he struck up a conversation with a young Christian woman. She realized that he was well informed on spiritual matters, so she asked him what he thought of a hymn she had just been reading. To his astonishment, he found it to be the very hymn that he had written in his younger days. He tried to evade her question, but she kept pressing him. Finally, he began to weep and said, “I’m the man who wrote that hymn many years ago. I’d do anything to experience again the joy I knew then.” The lady was surprised, but she assured him that the same “streams of mercy” mentioned in the song still flowed.

Robinson had written in the third verse, “O to grace, how great a debtor, daily I’m constrained to be! Let Thy goodness, like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to Thee.” Robinson’s own hymn was used to turn his wandering heart back to the Lord. (Taken from “Our Daily Bread,” Summer, 1983, plus Kenneth Osbeck, *Amazing Grace* [Kregel], p. 343.)

That same grace of God flows freely to you, no matter how great your sins. Understanding God’s grace in Christ’s sacrifice is the key to holiness.

Application Questions

1. Why is it unwise and unnecessary to hedge in God’s grace with manmade rules? How does this apply to churches and families?
2. How can a person know when he is turning the grace of God into licentiousness? What warning signals are there?
3. What are the practical benefits of the doctrine of particular redemption? What are the cautions to avoid?
4. What is the problem with the teaching that we can be sinlessly perfect? What is the danger of teaching that we cannot attain sinless perfection?

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