

Fellowship With Him

"This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all"—1 John 1:5

THE FIRST EPISTLE OF JOHN, CHAPTER ONE

IN our readings we begin today the first epistle of John. We are told very little about John, either in the Gospels or in Acts and the Epistles. Peter, Paul and James, the Lord's brother, stand out prominently, but not John.

And yet there is something very special about John. He was the disciple Jesus loved.

Truly Jesus loved them all, but John particularly. This tells us volumes about John. There was a very special and unique relationship between John and Jesus, and it must have been because of John's special character. It was not favoritism. We can rule that out as unthinkable.

The depth and closeness of love depends upon mental and spiritual affinity. The depth and fullness of love is limited only by the comprehensions and capacities of the participants. John was especially beloved because of a deeper unity with the mind of Christ.

It is notable, and there is a certain amount of comfort for us in the fact, that on two occasions where John is prominent in the Gospels, it is not in a good light. He, with James, wanted to call down fire from heaven upon the Samaritans, and he, with James, wanted the two places of highest preeminence in Christ's Kingdom. He had to learn the way of wisdom--the true nature of the spirit he was called unto.

Both times Jesus had to gently rebuke them. When he had first selected James and John, he called them Boanerges—"Sons of Thunder"—doubtless for the ardent power of their dedication and zeal. By Jesus' love, John's thunder was purified.

John was the first to believe, after the resurrection when he saw the empty tomb. Though not prominent in the history, John wrote the deepest Gospel, the deepest Epistle (this one) and the deepest prophecy (Revelation).

Though deep, and spiritual, and laying all emphasis on love as the essential motive and power of holiness, this epistle is eminently practical and plain-spoken. There is no haziness, such as the mind of the flesh delights and takes refuge in. What could be plainer or blunter than this?—

"He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commands is a liar."

"Be not deceived: he that DOETH righteousness is righteous."

"He that committeth sin is of the devil."

The first five verses lay the eternal foundations in words we could meditate on forever without fully plumbing their depth, but the next five turn upon us and are plain, uncompromising and unsparing. They speak of sin, and liars, and self-deception.

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"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life;

"For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness; and show unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us."

Christ is the great reality—the key to everything—the visible, tangible, touchable manifestation to man of all God's everlasting purpose and goodness and holiness. He had to be perfect. He was the perfect God manifested. He was the perfect Word of Life—eternal life—made flesh. John says later—

"He that hath the Son hath life, and he that hath not the Son hath not life" (5:12).

That is unmistakable and cannot be evaded. We must have the Son to have life. See how John emphasizes this specific, factual reality as the vital foundation:

"We heard, we saw, we scrutinized, we handled—the Word of life."

Their message was not a hazy philosophy of indefinite goodness according to the mind and judgment of man. It was not groping, human philosophy. It was specific testimony to a specific person to be accepted, specific truths to be believed, specific commands to be obeyed.

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"That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ."

Fellowship with the apostles and with God and His Son, depends on learning and accepting and bringing ourselves into harmony with these things that John reveals and declares.

And what is fellowship? We must ever be on guard against letting technicalities take the place of realities. Fellowship is not an external agreement to associate, but communion, harmony, unity of mind and spirit.

We are in fellowship with God if—and only if—our entire lives and thoughts and desires and interests are centered on God—only if everything we do is done for and because of God; only if we think God's thoughts.

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"And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full."

Joy is God's great purpose of love for man. Is our joy full? Is joy the thankful atmosphere in which we constantly live?—an all-sustaining, all irradiating, all-protective joy?

It will be, if we really believe what we say we believe—If we really have a meaningful faith, and not just a form without power. John wrote to invite us up out of the flesh into the realm of all-enveloping spiritual joy, and if we are willing to follow all the rules, and cast off the encumbrances that hinder, we can enter this joy.

The whole purpose, says John, of his writing, is that our joy may be full.

It is John that records that Jesus said the same thing, on the night that he was betrayed (Jn. 15:11)—

"These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full."

Joy is the great identification and secret of the Truth. If we have the Truth in a real and living way, we have joy—deep, overwhelming, unassailable joy. This is the key to whether our faith is real or just an empty form.

It is not a joy that ignores the sorrows and troubles and difficulties of this life. It is not even a joy that is in spite of these things. Rather it is a joy because of these things—an intense thankfulness FOR these things. Jesus said (Matt. 5:11)— "When men persecute you, rejoice: be exceeding glad."

James said (1:2)—"My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into trials and afflictions."

Paul said (Rom. 5:3)—"I rejoice in tribulations."

And of the disciples it is recorded, when the authorities had beaten them for preaching Christ (Acts 5:40-41)— "They rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer for his Name."

This is really having the Truth, having God, in a living and saving way!

Do we have it in this burning robust way, or do we just have a pale, cold, powerless form of godliness?

HOW can we joy in tribulations and rejoice in sorrow? Can it be reasonably explained, or is it just a striking form of words? It CAN be explained. It IS real. It is reasonable. In fact, it is the only reasonable, sensible, intelligent course at all. Jesus continued by saying:

"For great is your reward in heaven."

James continues by saying—"The trying of your faith worketh patience. Let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing."

Paul continued by saying—"Tribulation worketh patience, and patience worketh assuredness, and assuredness worketh hope. And hope maketh us unashamed, because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts."

Is this reasonable? Is this sensible? Is this the path we want to follow, and the goal we want to achieve?

Present pleasure does us no good. It is nice while it lasts, like candy to a baby, but it really is not healthy. It is a cheat and a deception—it builds nothing lasting. Paul says present pleasure is a living death, because it has no promise for the future. It is just a brief dance of folly on the deck while the boat is sinking under us.

Joy is oneness with the mind of God, being in mental and spiritual harmony with God, seeing everything as God sees it—seeing the meaning and the purpose and the love and the beauty in all the works of God, in EVERYTHING that happens to us and around us; seeing—not just blindly believing—but actually seeing, realizing, understanding, rejoicing that—

"All things work together for good to them that love God."

Would it be nice to be never unhappy, never disappointed, never fearful, never lonely, never worried—always joyful, always content with what we have and what our position is? This is what the Truth freely offers us.

This is what the Truth really is. Do we have it? Have we found it?

The Truth is not just a little tidy packet of doctrines, but a living, transforming spirit-power. Paul said he was troubled on every side, yet not distressed; perplexed, yet never in despair; in sorrow, yet always rejoicing; having nothing, yet possessing all things. He said he took PLEASURE in weakness, hardship, contempt, persecution and distress; for when he was weak and poor naturally, then he was strong and rich spiritually. And he said—

"Be ye followers of me."

This is the mind of Christ, the mind of God, the spiritual mind—which is life and peace. Other than this is the mind of the flesh, which is sorrow and death.

"These things," says John, "we write unto you, that your joy may be full"—not just partially filled, but wholly FULL—complete, perfect, unassailable, unalloyed.

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"This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all."

The great, central message that John brings is that God is all Light, pure Light, perfect Light. There are two great definitions of God in this epistle—"God is light."

And—"God is love."

—the two great, eternal, divine realities: LIGHT—Truth, Holiness, Purity, Righteousness; and LOVE—Goodness, Mercy, Compassion, Benevolence, Kindness.

Wherein does the significance of this message lie for us, that "God is Light"? The message is that if we seek Life and joy we MUST come to the Light. We must leave all things of darkness behind. Jesus said—

"Men love darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil."

This is natural man—natural desires. We must desire light, and the light we must desire is the light of God's Word as applied to all our thoughts and feelings and actions.

By nature, we are evil. Our thoughts are evil and fleshly. The light of God's Word reveals this evil and tells us what God desires, and if we love God we shall be very anxious to search out and do everything He desires and give His Word the benefit of every doubt.

The natural way is to decide what we desire, and what our flesh desires, and then try to justify it. If we allow ourselves to be deceived by this tendency, we can always find self-justification, and God will let us be self-deceived; yea, help us to be self-deceived.

But if we sincerely want to learn, want to improve, want to change, want to please God rather than ourselves, then God will open our understanding.

Light is the great theme of the Scriptures throughout. The very first thing God said was—"Let there be light...And God saw that the light was good: and God separated the light from the darkness."

And in the last chapter of the Bible we are told of the redeemed—"God giveth them light."

The Spirit through Solomon says—"The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day."

John said of Jesus—"That was the true light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world."

And Paul says—"God, Who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

By nature, we are all darkness. It is our life's purpose and our life's work more and more to absorb and radiate the light, and cast out the darkness.

The Light is God's Word: every part of it, from beginning to end. ALL Scripture, we are told, is profitable that we may be made perfect. We must prayerfully and continually study it, ponder on it, agonize to understand every

word, as if it were a precious map leading us to great treasure, as it truly is.

All the time we can spare should be given to this. It is the only way to gain the life that only the few will ever find.

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"If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth."

"Walking in darkness" is doing anything according to the mind of the flesh. The Word of God sets before us a way of Life—a way of thinking about everything, a way of directing our interests and desires, a way of conduct toward, and thought about others.

It is usually very different from the natural way. It requires learning, practice, and effort, and continual seeking of guidance and help. If we are not consciously examining all we do, and consciously trying to conform it to God's Word, then we're automatically and inevitably "walking in darkness."

Fellowship with God is not just a technicality—not just a form—not just the accepting of certain beliefs or joining a certain group. It is a WAY OF LIFE—a thinking like God, a walking in harmony with His revealed will and commands.

John minces no words. The issue is too grave, and self-deception is too terribly easy. It is so easy to "say that we have fellowship with Him." Millions in the world say this. Wherein are WE different?

And let us not compare ourselves with the worst of them, or even with the average of them. Let us honestly face what the BEST of them are doing (supposedly for God, as they think), and ask ourselves, Wherein are we so different that we expect life while the best of these will get but death?

The primary difference must of course be the Truth itself. True belief, true doctrine, is important—vitaly important. It must be what God says and not what man says, for God is all Light, and man is all darkness.

But just having the Light is not enough. We must, says John, walk in it—all the way in, plunging into it joyfully and unhesitatingly, letting it fill us and surround us. Notice the expression in this verse—"We lie, and do not the Truth."

The Truth is not just something we have. It is something we must "DO."

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"But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin."

We here this morning are in what we call fellowship with one another. The validity and power of that fellowship depends upon each one of us sincerely determining and endeavoring to walk in God's Light in every aspect of our lives. Apart from that, it is meaningless, powerless and purposeless.

If we walk in light, John says, the blood of Christ cleanseth us from all sin. Two words here are deeply significant "cleanse" and "all." Sin is a dirtiness, an uncleanness, a defilement. Sin is the natural motions and thoughts of the flesh—

"In me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing."

Sin is catering to our own desires, seeking our own advantage and pleasure. Sin is wasting time that God has commanded us to devote to His service.

Sin is using God's goods for our own indulgence beyond the point of necessity or usefulness for His purpose. Sin is everything short of the perfect holiness of the character of Christ.

If we desire and seek God's light, the blood of Christ will cleanse us from all these fleshly things. Until it does, we are dirty and offensive in God's sight.

It is said of the true ecclesia of God, the true Bride of Christ, that Jesus sanctifies and cleanses it with the washing of the Word, that it might not have spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing, but should be holy and without blemish—a glorious Ecclesia, a pure Bride. "The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth us from all sin."

It is important that we realize this. The Truth—the Way of Life—is an all-or-nothing thing. Unless we are cleansed of ALL sin, we are lost. One seemingly small sin at the beginning plunged the world into 6000 years of sorrow and death.

If we fail through neglect of prayer and study of the Word to discern our sins, if we cling willfully to anything

we know to be sin, or even have reason to suspect might be sin, then we cannot be saved.

HOW does Christ's poured-out blood "cleans us from all sin?" Do we think that God was just establishing a technicality in Christ's death? Do we think God was just proving a point, so He could overlook sin? Do we think that God just waves a magic wand and says, "Abracadabra, you are clean"?

Is THAT our idea of how "the blood of Christ cleanseth us from sin?" It is the idea of many who think cleansing from sin is some sort of a superficial ritual that has all been taken care of for us. But John says (3:3-10)—
"Every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself."
"Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not."
"Let no man deceive you: he that DOETH righteousness is righteous."
"Whosoever DOETH not righteousness is not of God."

THIS is how God cleanses us from sins—in reality, not just in symbol. Where does Christ's work come in then? He laid the essential foundation of perfection on which we must build. He established the acceptable place of meeting—the Mercy-Seat—the Seat, or Place, of Mercy—the place and means of cleansing and forgiveness, where man could approach in safety unto God's terrible holiness and exalted purity.

Paul said God set him forth as a Mercy-Seat to manifest God's righteousness, that He (God) might be righteous and also the builder of righteousness within all who approach Him through Jesus. John says of Christ that to all who received him he gave power to become sons of God.

Shall we sit down and say that it is too much?—that it cannot be done? Or shall we thankfully and joyfully take up this power so graciously offered, and by it become the sons of God? Paul exhorted the Philippians—

"Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God that worketh in you both to will and to do His good pleasure."

Here in one phrase it seems like we ourselves must do it all, and in the very next it seems like it is all of God—not only the doing, but the very will or desire behind the doing.

Both are true, marvelously and inseparably true. It is all of us, AND all of God.

A very crude comparison is power steering. Tremendous power is there, waiting to do immediately all the work on our behalf as soon as we turn our lives toward the right direction, but it will never turn itself but go straight down the old natural course of death to the end, if we do not try, but just say it cannot be done.

"The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth us from all sin." That is what we are here to memorialize this morning, in infinite thankfulness and joy. It is clear why he had to die. We know sin had to be condemned, the body of sin had to be put to death—the devil, the diabolos, the motions of sin, had to be destroyed by the victory of perfect obedience right to the end—God's pure law vindicated, God's merciful way of reconciliation proclaimed in a foundation of justified holiness.

We know why he had to die. But why did he have to SUFFER? Why did it "please God to bruise him, and put him to grief"? What pleasure did this give God? What good is served, what point is proved, what law is established by inflicting apparently unnecessary suffering on a perfectly obedient, perfectly submissive Son?

Paul throws much light on this, and reveals a vital first principle of holiness when he says (Heb. 2:10)—

"It became Him—that is, it was fitting for Him (God)—for Whom are all things and by Whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the Captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings."

There is an answer to it all. The sufferings were to make him perfect.

Was Christ ever imperfect? He was imperfect in the sense that the seed is imperfect as compared to the ripened fruit. His character—always beautiful, always spotless—had to be developed and matured and strengthened and tested in the fierce furnace of affliction, that it might be meet for God's everlasting companionship.

And what was needed for his preparation for the eternal glory of divine sonship is needed for his brethren also. Therefore let us, like Paul, thank God for suffering, seeing in its every aspect and instance the all-wise hand of a loving Father shaping and beautifying us for a glorious destiny—

"Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment."

"There is no fear in love, but perfect love casteth out fear."

"And this is the love of God—that we keep his commandments."