

1 John 1:5-2:2 “No Darkness at All” April 24, 2005

**A Sermon by Pastor Brad Smith**

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**The Sermon in a sentence:** “God is light and in him is no darkness at all,” and God’s goal for us is that we become like him.

**Why I am preaching it:** So the congregation will understand what sin is, and will aim for godliness.

Last week we talked about the Apostle John and his two nicknames: the Apostle of Love, and the son of thunder. We looked at how passionate he was that his beloved church in Ephesus understand and live out the answers to two questions: “Who is Jesus?” and, “How should we respond to him?”

Well, who is Jesus? He is “that which was from the beginning”—that is, Jesus is the Lord God Almighty. He is also, “that which we have seen and heard and touched”—that is, Jesus became one of us. Because he is God, we can face with him even the toughest moments of our lives. Because he understands fully what it means to suffer and to be tempted as a human, we can trust him with our deepest needs and hurts.

And how are we to respond to him? We are pretty limited in how we can respond directly to Jesus. The main way we can show our love and commitment to Jesus is through his followers, or what John calls to “have fellowship with one another.” That is what John covered in the first four verses of his book. This week we’re looking at 1 John 1:5-2:2. John moves into his third and final question: Not, “Who is Jesus?” or “How are we to respond to him?” but “What do we do about sin?” Sometimes John uses “walking in darkness” instead of “sin,” but it is the same thing.

John has three things to tell us about sin, and here they are, so you can listen for them: first, we must always resist it; second, we must never fool ourselves into thinking we don’t have it; and third, we have a powerful ally to help us when we fall into sin.

Now sin is a messy subject that can cause a lot of confusion. When my eldest son was about three, he was walking with his Popo [Grandma], and I was following a few feet behind. I have no idea why this came into his head, but suddenly, out of the blue, he looked up at her and said, “Popo, you’re a sinner!” She looked so offended and said, “No I’m not!” Dan responded,

“Yes you are. My daddy said that everybody’s a sinner.” At least he didn’t say, “My daddy says you are!” We can all understand why she was offended. She feels she is a decent, law abiding woman. She has tried to do her best. Isn’t it a little harsh to call her a sinner?

One of the words that the original Greek New Testament uses for “sin” is a word that was also used in archery. The word means, “missing the target.” Well, of course you don’t know if you are missing the target unless you know what the target is. What exactly is the target that we as sinners are missing?

There was a study done a while back using high school students from all over the world. The test measured two things: first, their real knowledge of math; and second, it tested how much math the students thought they knew. South Korean high school students ranked at the top in terms of how much math they actually knew. American students ranked far below Korea and several other countries in their actual math knowledge, but they ranked at the top in how much math they thought they knew.

What happened? Perhaps American students compared themselves only with each other. Each one felt he or she was doing fine, because they were not aware of how much more math it is possible to know. They had no idea of the level of math knowledge in Korea and in other countries. To go back to the idea of the target, the American students were proud that every time they hit the eight foot diameter target. If they attempted to use the South Korean one foot diameter target, they would have missed again and again.

So if sin is missing the target we need to know what the target is, and John gives it to us in 1:5: “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.” Wow! We were created in the image of God. The Bible tells us that we were created to become like Jesus, God the Son. The target is that we, individually and as a congregation, be light with no darkness at all.

Think of some of the words that we connect with light and darkness, so we can fill out the picture of our target. Here is a partial description that I came up with of what being light and having no darkness is all about. I’m sure you could add to it:

“Our every thought and word is true; there is no hint of lies, even ‘little white lies’ in our lives. ”

“Everything about us is open and transparent; we are not ashamed of, nor do we need to hide, anything we say, think, or do.”

“Our only motivation is love; we never hurt or manipulate others in order to get our own way.”

“Everything about us leads people in the right way; nobody is ever led to do wrong because of something we say or do.”

“We never give in to selfishness in our spending habits.”

“Every word that we speak brings health to the hearer; we never say anything that we would not want someone else to overhear, or that later we wish we could take back.”

We could go on, but you get the idea. That’s the target. Can you imagine what a pleasure, what a relief it would be to live that way? Think of how much simpler and more joyful such a life would be. Can you imagine how it would affect our outlook on life? How it would change the atmosphere in our family, at work, at church? That is the target. The definition of sin that the Bible uses is simply to miss that target. To the extent that we are not hitting the target, that is sin.

Now that we know what the target is, we can go back to those three points that John makes in the passage:

1. Always aim for the target;
2. Don’t fool ourselves into thinking we can change the target or that we have already hit it; and
3. We have a powerful ally to help us when we miss the target.

Remember that John wrote this letter for a specific purpose. There were false teachers distorting the truth about the Christian faith, and he wanted to protect his flock from them. In this little section, every time he writes, “If we claim,” he is stating a false teaching. Then he counters it with the truth.

So let’s look at the first false teaching [Read 1:6-7]. Apparently, some of those teachers were saying something like this: “So long as you have your own spiritual connection with God, it really doesn’t matter how you live your life.” You will recognize that we have the same problem today. Any time there is a big disconnect between our “spiritual life” and our “real life,” we are claiming to have fellowship with God while walking in darkness.

Several years ago as part of NCI we did an evaluation of our church. We found some positive things, but we also found that we had a “win-lose”

pattern of making decisions that left some people angry and iced out. We were recognizing a contradiction in our life as a congregation. We were a Christian church, we worshiped God, who is light, but there was some darkness in the unresolved anger and backbiting that characterized the way we handled conflict. Conflict itself is not darkness, but we want to make sure that as a congregation, the way we handle conflict honors God just as much as our worship services and prayer meetings honor him.

Individuals as well as congregations need to walk in the light. Some people are pretty upfront about not mixing their supposed Christian faith with the rest of their lives. They will say things like, “Hey, church is church and business is business.”

But my guess is that most of us want to walk in the light. We want to aim for the target of becoming more and more like Jesus. But we get worn out. We get discouraged. If we have tried for so long and it is just not happening, eventually we will settle for less. If that is your situation, I encourage you not to give up. Jesus would never have commanded us to walk in the light if it were not possible. John offers a practical suggestion for us that I will touch on in a few minutes. But for now, just remember, “Never, never stop aiming for the target of becoming like Jesus.”

So John has urged his beloved congregation to keep going in the right direction, and not to settle for less. But he is realistic. He knows we will stumble along the way, but we have the promise of Jesus’ ongoing forgiveness; or as he puts it, “the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin.” More on that a little later on.

Then John moves onto a second false teaching. [Read 1:8-10.] “If we claim to be without sin” (v. 8) and “If we claim we have not sinned” (v. 10) are not exactly the same. The first one has to do with our inward character and the second one with our outward actions, but we can lump them together for now. The point is that we are out of touch with reality if we do not recognize that something has gone wrong in us; we have missed the target.

There are pathological criminals, people who do not have the capacity to distinguish good from evil. Babies who are born to mothers who were on crack cocaine during pregnancy typically grow up with poorly developed consciences. They are not able to distinguish right from wrong. But those cases are rare, and they are not the cases that John had in mind.

He probably had in mind those of us who have distorted the target so much that it no longer has much to do with becoming like Jesus. Remember what it means to be light? That's the target!

Jesus gave us another picture of the target in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5-7: Be pure in heart; no insulting or demeaning thoughts or actions towards others, even our enemies; give generously with no need for repayment, and no need for others to know about it; live joyfully free from any anxiety about our finances or any other area of our past, present, or future life; be far more concerned about correcting our own character flaws than in pointing out other people's flaws. That's the target. John warns us that we are deceiving ourselves if we really can't find any darkness in us or in our congregation that needs to be dealt with.

And what do we do with the darkness that we find? Confess it! Confessing simply means stating the facts out loud. We don't only confess bad things. When we confess or affirm our faith in the worship service, we say out loud what is true. To confess my sin is to stop hiding it, to say out loud what is true about me. God is more than happy to let go of or to release our sins. He paid the price of his own Son's death to do just that. But he can't release it until it is given to him. That is what we do when we confess our sins.

Of course we say it to God, but the early church practiced mutual confession as well, more than we do now. John probably had in mind admitting to each other where we are missing the target. There is something very powerful about acknowledging our failures to someone else.

I was battling unsuccessfully with some temptations in my own life a while back, and I knew that I could not handle it by myself; I needed to get it out in the open with someone else. I admit it was embarrassing at first, but I sat down with someone and explained what was going on in my life. After asking me a couple of questions he responded, "This has been one of the worst weeks of my life struggling with that very same temptation, but I didn't know that Christians could talk with each other about these things."

Both of us found that the temptation simply shriveled up, at least for a while, after our confession to each other and then to God. That is one reason that AA has been so successful. The very first step in recovery from alcoholism is to say, in front of others, "I am an alcoholic." That is where the

transformation begins. One of the BIH instructors put it this way: It cannot be healed if it has not been revealed. I still make it a practice to confess my sins to a few trustworthy people as well as to God.

Now for some people, much of what John had written up to this point must have sounded like bad news. There are people who are always resisting sin, just like they are supposed to—but they are painfully aware of their failures. They know what the target is, and they also know how consistently they miss it. Here are John's words to those of us who are caught in that struggle: [Read 2:1-2]. Notice how tenderly he calls them his dear children. It is quite right to acknowledge how far we are missing the target; it is quite wrong to believe that God has rejected us, his dear children, because of our failures.

Becky had a generous uncle who passed away a few years ago. One time my father-in-law and a few other family members went out to eat, and they happened to run into Uncle as he was finishing his meal. They greeted him before he left, and then sat down to order and to eat. When my father-in-law went to pay the bill the cashier said, "Oh, you don't owe anything, sir. The gentleman who left a little earlier already covered your check." That is a very simple example of what Jesus' atoning sacrifice for our sins was about.

As people consider how badly they have missed the target I have heard them say, "I know God loves me. The Bible says so. But I don't think he likes me." They feel that God is always disapproving of them, always disappointed with them because of their sins. But why should God be disappointed? When he sees what we owe him, what another part of the Bible calls the wages of sin, he sees the bill stamped "Paid in full." In fact, he paid it himself in the sacrifice of Jesus.

So if John were writing to us I think he would say, "My dear children at Makiki, Jesus has the most amazing life waiting for each of you, and for all of you as a church. Never aim for less than that. I know you will experience failure. Don't pretend you won't, and don't hide it when you do. Get it out into the open with God and with a few others. And if the thought ever comes to you that you are so bad that God himself doesn't want you, well, just burst out laughing. God paid top dollar for you, and he is not going to leave you now. Let us pray.