

1 John 1. 8-10, Bethesda Bible Teaching, 15 November 2009

Our passage for consideration consists of just three verses; namely, verses 8 to 10 of First John chapter 1. But for us to understand this short passage we shall need to set it in its immediate context. Our reading this morning therefore begins in verse 5 and will take us through to verse 2 of John's second chapter.

This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all.

If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practise the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.

My little children, these things I write to you that you sin not. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.

It hardly needs to be said that in this section the apostle adopts a carefully laid-out structure. Three times over he sets out an erroneous claim made by certain false teachers of his day (introduced in each case by the words, 'If we say'), he then exposes the claim for what it is (in relation to falsehood and deception), and finally he points his readers to the antidote – to the contrasting provision which God had made for the believer.

Although John uses similar expressions later¹, the exact formula 'if we say' is found only in this passage. We cannot be sure, but it may be that both here and later John quotes actual slogans used by the false teachers. Certainly, he is referring to *their* doctrines.

These men boasted of their so-called 'deep' knowledge and their intimate fellowship with God – while living inconsistent and immoral lives. As noted last week, they maintained that, on account of their supposedly 'spiritual' enlightenment, sin was – for them – a matter of indifference, and did not interfere in any way with their mystical communion with God.

John's immediate response was to accuse them of deception and to assert that the blood of Jesus God's Son avails only for those whose tenor and course of life was consistent with the holy character of God.

And so to verse 8.

'But it is no concern to us', they seem to say, 'if the blood of Jesus isn't available to cleanse us from sin. For "we have no sin"'.²

But here we must pause for a moment to ask what such men had in mind when they claimed to 'have no sin'.

As far as I can see, they may have meant one of two things. First, it may be that they were denying that they had sin in their nature. In other words, they claimed that they had no principle of sin within them – that, not only (..... as we learn from verse 10) did they claim to yield no *fruit* of sin, but that they were altogether free from any *root* of sin. May be!

But, in my view, it is far more likely they meant something rather different.

I begin by noting that the phrase 'to have sin' is unique to the writings of John – occurring not only here but four times in his gospel.² It seems to me that on each of those four occasions the phrase refers to the bearing of the guilt and the responsibility for one's actions.

At the close of John 9, for example, we read that, following the healing of the man born blind, Jesus said, 'For judgment I have come into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may be made blind'. Then some of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these words, and said to Him, 'Are we blind also?' Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would **have no sin**; but now that you say, "We see", your sin remains'.³

Had these Pharisees lived in darkness with no possibility of finding the light, their condition would have been sad but no blame or guilt could have been leveled at them. But, as Jesus made clear, blame certainly attached to those who, while living in darkness, claimed to be able to see – having shut their eyes to the light. And I note that the NIV interprets our Lord's word's 'you would have no sin' as meaning 'you would not be guilty of sin', with the ESV using an equivalent expression.

Similarly, towards the close of John 15, our Lord says of the unbelieving world around, 'If I had not come and spoken to them, they would **have no sin**, but now they have no excuse for their sin ... If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would **have no sin** ...'.⁴

On account of the many evidences with which our Lord provided them – both in word and in deed – the generation to which He had come bore much greater responsibility and guilt than previous generations. If He had not provided the evidences which He had, they could have rejected Him without incurring any guilt. But now, in His words, they 'had sin', which He explained as being the same as having 'no excuse ('no pretext', 'no disguise') for their sin'. Clearly, to our Lord, for someone to claim that they 'had no sin' was for them to plead some 'excuse' for their sin – in other words, to evade responsibility for it.

Again I note that both the NIV and the ESV interpret our Lord's words in just this way ... as does the NIV also in chapter 19 verse 11.

In the light then of John's consistent use of the identical expression elsewhere, I think it reasonable to assume that it means much the same in our passage.

And I suggest that the false teachers of whom John wrote maintained that the 'real them' – their 'spiritual' nature – was not responsible for the deeds done in the body ... that they held that the 'spirit' of such-enlightened-men-as-themselves would be uncontaminated by any actions of the body – no matter how sinful and vile such actions may be ... that, for them, 'sin' was a matter of the flesh alone and could not touch the 'spirit'.⁵ Let then, they would say, the flesh indulge its every lust and appetite, for that part of man which really mattered (the spirit) was in no way accountable for the actions of the body. Their spiritual nature – as they thought it – 'had no sin', in that it could plead 'not guilty' in every case.

Throughout the ages, men have sought, by one means or another, to evade responsibility for their actions. Biblically, we might think of our first parents in the Garden of Eden, of Aaron at the foot of Sinai, or of Saul in the incident of the Amalekites.⁶ In our day, we might think of those who blame everything on somebody's social environment, poor education and so on. Everyone and anything is responsible – except me!

And John's response? 'If we say that we have no guilt, no responsibility, for sinful actions we have committed, we deceive ourselves' – literally, 'we *are* deceiving ourselves', 'we are leading ourselves astray'. And, what is more, he says, 'the truth (the body of Christian doctrine which God has revealed) is not in us' – it has no place in our inner being to inform and to transform us – any more than, as our Lord once said, any truth is in the devil.⁷

Having exposed the heretical claim for what it was (falsehood and deception), John directs his readers to the provision which God has made for the believer. For the true Christian's attitude to a known sin is not to deny responsibility for it, nor even simply to acknowledge its presence, but to confess it openly to God and so to find forgiveness for it.

And please note that, over against those who denied their guilt, claiming that they 'had no sin', John does not say, 'if we admit *that we have sin*'; but rather, 'if we confess *our sins*'. For much more is involved than an acknowledgment of one's sinfulness in a vague and general kind of way.

It is not enough for me simply to say, 'I have sinned' – perhaps, as Pharaoh and Balaam, from fear of the consequences ... or, as King Saul, with no real conviction or resolve to change ... or, as Judas, out of despair.⁸

But rather, following in the spiritual footsteps of those who were baptized by John the Baptist,⁹ I must drag my own personal and specific sins *by name* into the light of God's presence and confront them there.

And I note that the word translated 'confess' here comprises two words which together carry the meaning 'to say or to speak the same thing ... to agree with'.¹⁰ I must be willing, frankly and sincerely, to say the same thing about the sins I know I have committed that God says about them – namely, that they are indeed just that – not errors or moments of weakness – but 'sins'.

Well did Augustine write, 'He who confesses and condemns his sins already acts with God. God condemns your sins: if you also condemn them, you are linked on to God'.¹¹

And, John assures us, such confession leads to forgiveness and cleansing – which is perfect accord with both the experience of David as recorded in Psalm 32 – 'I acknowledged my sin to you, and my iniquity I have not covered. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord", and you forgave the iniquity of my sin',¹² and also the teaching of Solomon in Proverbs 28, 'He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy'.¹³

But we can hardly miss the striking difference between Solomon's closing expression 'whoever confesses and forsakes [his sins] will have *mercy* (a Hebrew word signifying 'tender compassion'¹⁴) and the words of John, 'If we confess our sins, He is *faithful and righteous* to forgive us our sins'.

Knowing the God we do, we most certainly would not have expected John to have said that God would 'forgive us our sins' because He is indulgent and easy-going. But, if we are honest, I guess that most of us half-expected John to have said something along the lines, 'If we confess our sins, He is *loving and gracious* (or, perhaps, 'He is *merciful and kind*') to forgive us our sins'.

Instead of which, the apostle traces our forgiveness to God's faithfulness and righteousness. His faithfulness, in part at least,¹⁵ because, in forgiving the penitent believer, God is faithful to His promises and true to His word. For has not God on many occasions promised forgiveness to His people? What of Micah 7 – 'You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea'?¹⁶ And is not forgiveness one of the terms of the New Covenant; as it is written, 'I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more'?¹⁷

Yet our forgiveness is reckoned not only to God's faithfulness, but to His 'righteousness'. Nor, on reflection, is this difficult to understand. Indeed, in a context which attributes our cleansing to 'the blood of Jesus His Son' and which speaks of the same Lord Jesus as 'the propitiation for our sins', it is impossible to miss the point that, if I may say it reverently, because the Saviour has paid the penalty for all our sins in full, God cannot but forgive us. His very righteousness demands it.

A few minutes ago we sang one of the hymns of Augustus Toplady,¹⁸ the third verse of which says – as originally written –

*If thou hast my discharge procured,
And freely in my room endured
The whole of wrath divine,
Payment God cannot twice demand—
First at my bleeding Surety's hand,
And then again at mine.*

And that is the point: 'payment God cannot twice demand' ... and our Lord Jesus has fully met all God's demands for us! It would therefore be gross injustice for God to refuse to forgive the penitent believer – whether, as Abraham, that believer lived two thousand years before the Cross, or, as we, two thousand years after the Cross.

The apostle Paul spelt it out plainly in Romans 3, assuring us that we are 'justified freely by His (God's) grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation in His blood, to be received by faith, to show His righteousness in respect of His forbearance when God passed over the sins that had been committed previously (such as those by Abraham) – to show His righteousness at the present time, that He should be just ('righteous') and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus'.¹⁹

Upon the ground of the shed blood of the Lord Jesus, the righteousness of God is the very guarantee to the believer of his or her forgiveness and cleansing. Thank God that, although we are not righteous, He is! And, because of Calvary, the Righteous One cleanses the unrighteous from *all* their unrighteousness.²⁰

And, let us be clear, we each need continual forgiveness if we are to live in the conscious enjoyment of fellowship 'with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ'.²¹

As I understand it, viewing God as Judge, we were forgiven all our sins at the moment of our conversion – whether those sins were then past, present or future – and we need never fear that any of those sins will ever be remembered against us.

Well do we sing sometimes the words of Samuel Gandy:

*I hear the accuser roar
Of ills that I have done;
I know them well, and thousands more;
Jehovah findeth none.*²²

But John here has in view what we might call our family and continual forgiveness, necessary to maintain our enjoyment of unbroken fellowship with God.

And the full and frank confession of our sins, John insists, secures for us purification as well as pardon – a stain removed as well as a debt remitted – the word translated 'forgive' being used elsewhere for the remission and cancellation of debts.²³

In verse 10, John introduces a third claim made by the false teachers – not now, as in verse 6, that their sinful conduct failed to disturb their communion with God – nor, as in verse 8, that they (their spirits, that is) were in no way responsible for the sinful actions of the body – but that they had never committed any sins whatever ... which is the implication of the tense John uses here.²⁴

And this, the most blatant of all their claims, draws from the apostle what is probably the most pointed charge concerning deception which he leveled against them ... not, as in verse 6 that they lied ... nor as in verse 8 that they deceived themselves – that they effectively pulled the wool over their own eyes ... but that they had the effrontery to make out God Himself to be a liar.

And this they did, in effect, by denying that they had ever practiced or committed sin. As John observes, God's 'word' – His 'truth' in tangible form – His inspired revelation – had found no lodging-place in their inner beings. For had not that 'word' made it clear that everyone had sinned? Had not that 'word', for example, recorded the prayerful saying of Solomon that 'there is no one who does not sin',²⁵ and the equally plain statement of Isaiah that, 'all we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way'?²⁶

It is John, of course, who records the words of the Lord Jesus concerning the devil: 'When he speaks a lie, he speaks of his own, for he is a liar'.²⁷ And here John has good reason for accusing these false teachers of brazenly attributing the character of the overlord of darkness to the God who is light.²⁸

I said at the outset that John followed each of the erroneous claims made by the false teachers with a statement about the contrasting provision which God has made for the believer. And the way he handles this third claim is no exception. But *before* the apostle speaks of the wonderful provision which God has made for the sinning Christian – in the Lord Jesus as our righteous Advocate and propitiation – he breaks in to make it clear that nothing he has yet written, or is about to write, should be understood as suggesting that sin is natural or normal for the Christian – still less that his teaching gives anyone licence to sin. Perish the thought! 'My little children', he exclaims, 'these things I write to you that you sin not!'

But for the exposition of the opening of chapter 2, we must wait, God willing, until next week.

Footnotes

¹ Compare 1 John 2. 4, 6, 9; 4. 20.

² John 9. 41; 15. 22, 24; 19. 11.

³ John 9. 39-41.

⁴ John 15. 22, 24.

⁵ To them, 'salvation' consisted, not in a person being set free from sin, but in that person's soul being set free from his body.

⁶ Genesis 3. 12-13: The man said, 'The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate' ... the woman said, 'The serpent deceived me, and I ate'. Exodus 32. 22-23: Aaron said, 'Do not let the anger of my lord become hot. You know *the people*, that they are set on evil. For *they* said to me, "Make us gods that shall go before us ...". 1 Samuel 15. 15-21: And Saul said, 'They have brought them from the Amalekites; for *the people* spared the best of the sheep and the oxen ... I have obeyed the voice of the Lord ... but *the people* took of the plunder, sheep and oxen, the best of the things which should have been utterly destroyed'.

⁷ John 8. 44.

⁸ Exod. 9. 27; 10. 16; Num. 22. 34; 1 Sam. 15. 24; 26. 21; Matt. 27. 4.

⁹ Matt. 3. 5-6.

¹⁰ 'The literal meaning ... is "to say the same thing"'. (Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, volume V, page 200.) 'CONFESS (ὁμολογέω), literally, "to speak the same thing" ... "to assent, accord, agree with"'. (W. E. Vine, Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words.)

¹¹ Quoted by A. Ross, 'The Epistles of James and John' (New International Commentary), page 146.

¹² Psalm 32. 5.

¹³ Prov. 28. 13.

¹⁴ TWOT, number 2146; NIDDOT, number 8163.

¹⁵ He is also faithful to His own holy nature.

¹⁶ Micah 7. 19.

¹⁷ Jer. 31. 34.

¹⁸ See ... <http://209.85.229.132/search?q=cache:dY13QEKTP7kJ:philgons.com/2007/08/faith-reviving-augustus-toplady/+payment+God+will+not+twice+demand+first+at+surety%27s+hand&cd=58&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=uk>

¹⁹ Rom. 3. 24-26.

²⁰ I suspect that John chose the term 'unrighteousness', instead of 'sin', because it forms a contrast with 'righteous', used of God earlier in the sentence. The only other occurrence of the word in his letters is at chapter 5 verse 17, where 'unrighteousness' is identified as 'sin'.

²¹ 1 John 1. 3.

²² Hymns of Light and Love, number 297.

²³ For example, Matt. 6. 12; 18. 27, 32. See W E Vine, Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, 'Forgive'.

²⁴ The perfect tense verb refers to the past and includes all of past time up to the last minute. It claims that one is now in the state of never having committed sin. It is therefore a denial that one has ever sinned.

²⁵ 1 Kings 8. 46.

²⁶ Isa. 53. 6.

²⁷ 'You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks of his own, for he is a liar and the father of it', John 8. 44.

²⁸ Compare 1 John 5. 10.