

1 John 2:1-6
(Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 10:14-18)
“Proper Confidence”

Introduction

The biblical vision of salvation is vast and glorious. It depicts the one true God who created the heavens and the earth entering his creation through the person of his Son, joining himself to humanity, becoming one of us, in order that he might redeem us from sin and death, reconcile us to God and to one another, restore what our rebellion had broken, join us to himself by his Spirit, and make us a new humanity in whom the future is made visibly present, a picture of the coming age, heralding the good news that Jesus Christ has come to make all things new.

The American evangelical vision of salvation is reduced to a bumper sticker: I'm not perfect, but I'm forgiven. Most evangelicals think of the gospel as simply about forgiveness of sins. The message fills Christian books and media and is the topic of conferences, where attenders bask in the notion that, because Jesus paid it all, we actually owe him nothing in return, and can return to our broken, petty lives with this one assurance: I'm saved and need never worry my head on that matter again because I made a decision for Jesus and prayed a sinner's prayer.

But that is not the gospel as Jesus or Paul or Peter or James or John described it in the Scripture. Salvation in the Bible is a new life, a life lived in loving relationship with God through Jesus Christ in the power of his Spirit living in us. John is concerned in this letter that we not fall for counterfeit gospels, and he sets a series of tests by which, as he puts it, “you who believe in the Son of God ... may know that you have eternal life” (5:13).

He opened the letter by telling us that the living Word, who was with the Father in eternity, entered history so that we might be restored to fellowship with God and that our joy might be complete. The living Word, John wrote, entrusted this message to the first apostles: “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.” The implication for our fellowship with God is clear: “If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.” This basically contradicts the American version of the gospel, in which people think that they can have forgiveness of sin now and a future destiny with God in his kingdom without ever really having to spend much time with God here and now.

John balances his call to walk in the light with the reminder that sin is still present in the life a disciple of Jesus: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.” Look at how beautifully John balances these two crucial aspects of the gospel in the verses before us this morning.

Body

1. We must always keep in balance Christ's work *in us* and *for us* (2:1-2).

Christ's work in us: Walking in the light (2:1a).

"My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin." While we must grapple all our lives with the reality of the presence of sin, we are called as disciples of Jesus Christ to resist, to do battle, to realize that in Christ, we have been set free from the power and dominion of sin and are invited to know increasingly the joy of freedom in Christ from everything that once broke us down and brought us guilt and shame.

And our lives are increasingly to give reason for those who live and work with us to believe that the gospel is true. For this reason Jesus, who is the light of the world, said to those who would follow him, "You are the light of the world ... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:14-16).

This refers to the work that Christ does *in us* by his Spirit, regenerating and sanctifying us, bringing us even now a taste of the coming kingdom.

Christ's work for us: Our advocate and atoning sacrifice (2b-3).

But this is always balanced by what Christ has done and continues to do *for us*, in dealing with our sin, past present and future, so that – as the apostle Paul said – "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). Here, John reminds us that Jesus is our advocate, the one who defends us from the condemnation of the law, and the ground of his defense is that he has provided the atoning sacrifice that satisfies God's justice and turns away his wrath.

Christ has taken upon himself the consequences of our rebellion, and in paying our debt and setting us free has made it possible for us to confess our sin knowing that, if we are in Christ, God's justice demands that we *not* be punished, but forgiven. There is nothing against us, because Christ has taken our sin and given us his righteousness.

But the response of one who has received such grace cannot be to return gladly to sin and rebellion. To do so simply proves that one has not yet received the gift of grace, because God's grace not only does something for us, but in us, and what John develops in this letter are the marks of those who have been brought out of darkness and death into the light of life.

Now, he begins to develop more deeply the marks of those who have reason to claim the comforts of the gospel, those who are experiencing changes in their affections and behavior, and who thus have reason to believe that their sins are forgiven and they have, beginning here and now, eternal life. He points to three results of our new life in Christ.

2. Three aspects of Christ's work *in us* (2:3-6).

We know that we know him (2:3-4).

Jesus said in his high priestly prayer the night of his arrest, "This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3). Knowing God lies at the heart of the gospel. But how can we know that we know him? John's answer is, "by this we know that have come to know him, if we keep his commandments."

For John, as for Jesus and Paul (if we read the second half of his letters), the evidence of our faith is displayed in a life of growing, glad obedience to the word of God. Thus the crucial importance John places on our walking in the light, because "God is light and in him is no darkness at all." To say that we are in fellowship with a holy God while delighting in unholy thoughts, words and behaviors, is a contradiction in terms. It is an absurdity, but it is an absurdity celebrated in many American churches because of a defective understanding of the gospel.

We do not yet obey perfectly, and when we sin, "we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous," but the direction, the trajectory, of our life changes from one of self-rule and disobedience to Spirit-led, grateful obedience.

We know that we love him (2:5a).

The restoration to fellowship through Jesus Christ is restoration to the loving relationship with God and with one another for which we were created. But what does it mean to love God? Is it a matter of feelings and emotion? Hopefully, there are times of deep feeling and emotion appropriate to love, but in a loving family, love is expressed in words backed up by concrete loving actions. So too John writes, "but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected."

Why do we seek to understand our relationship with God or with God's family so differently than we naturally understand our friendships or marriages or families? If we merely talk about love but never express it in acts of self-sacrifice, after a while everyone realizes that the only one we truly love is our self. But when words and deeds line up, when mistakes and

offenses are quickly confessed and forgiveness requested, there is a natural flow of loving intimacy. The same is true in our relationship with God.

We know that we are in fellowship with him (2:5b-6).

Ultimately, we are saved through union with Christ. This is the divine mystery: God became human so that we might become children of God. God binds us to himself by binding us to his Son. Jesus prayed in that same high priestly prayer, “that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21). His Spirit lives in us and we, in the great mystery of this union, live in Christ as members of his body, through whom he still walks the earth, proclaims his gospel, seeks and saves the lost.

How do we know that we are in Christ, a new creation? John writes, “By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.” Again, salvation is shown to be a new life, a new walk on a new path in a new direction. John’s friend and fellow apostle, Peter, wrote that Jesus left us an example, so that we might follow in his steps (see 1 Peter 2:21).

Conclusion

What of you, today? Do you understand that the gospel is far more than forgiveness of sin? As David Powlison has written:

The cross is bigger than forgiveness of sin.
The gospel is bigger than the cross.
The Word of God is bigger than the gospel.

The living Word has come from the Father to make all things new. His aim is to make us more and more like Jesus, so that those who know us best begin to know the one whose Spirit is in us and in whom we live and move and have our being.

If you are God’s child, don’t be satisfied to live as if you were not. Cry out to him to fill you afresh with his Spirit and empower you to step out of the darkness and into the light. “By this we know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.”

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