

1 John 1:5-10 *This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. <sup>6</sup>If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. <sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. <sup>9</sup>If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. <sup>10</sup>If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.*

## Confidence – 02 Fellowship

A quick read through First John will remind you of some of those phrases that fill Christianity with such wonder. Walk in the light. Abide in him. We should be called Children of God; and so we are! God is love. These are phrases that are as unique among world religions, as Jesus is among people. John is writing to a group of Christians who have recently witnessed a small exodus from their ranks. They have seen respected people leave the faith and this has caused their faith to be shaken. As we move out of our series on the Kingdom of Heaven, a common question I've been hearing is "am I in it?" Am I in the Kingdom? First John is a letter written directly to this tepid heart. His letter is meant to inspire two things, that we'll see are deeply connected, a true confidence in Jesus, and a true fellowship among each other.

Before we get started in the text, here are a few warnings. Fellowship is not guaranteed in this life. Jesus died alone, without a friend in the world. Paul suffers for long stretches, isolated in prison. John the very writer we're reading pens his greatest hope for the final unity of the church, trapped alone on an island prison. For those of you hoping for deep Christian fellowship, or resentful that you aren't currently in it, you're in good company. Yours is a fellowship of hope. Hope that one day we will be united with Christ and one another.

Secondly, fellowship is not *everything*, it is a thing, a great thing, an almost unspeakable blessing, but not everything. It is a blessing not a desert, and likewise is to be met with incredible gratitude at its presence. It is not the sum total of Christianity and if it becomes the sum total of Christianity, then we have actually missed it altogether. Bonhoeffer quotes Luther,

"The kingdom is to be in the midst of your enemies. And he who will not suffer does not want to be of the Kingdom of Christ; he wants to be among friends, to sit among roses and lilies, not with the bad people but the devout people. O

you blasphemers and betrayers of Christ! If Christ had done what you are doing who would ever have been spared?"<sup>1</sup>

Finally, fellowship, like most great blessings and experiences of great happiness, is incredibly hard and frustrating and brutal. Like our sanctification it is full of pain and frustration. It is working when it is hard and gritty and involves phone calls that your conscience is plaguing you to make, so you close your eyes and dial and speak your peace and hope. Bonhoeffer quotes Bonhoeffer,

"Christian brotherhood is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate."<sup>2</sup>

It is not an ideal. There is this incredible threat to Christian community ready to pounce and destroy your hopes of ever experiencing it, and that is your own imagination of ideal community. That thing full of arguments, and miscommunications and apologies, that stand as obstacles in the way of the ideal community you're hoping for, that's it. That's fellowship. You already have it.

Last week John described the foundation of our fellowship being our mutual joy in Christ. This mutual discovery of a shared joy in Christ starts fellowship, this week John shows us what makes fellowship walk. First community stems from who God is, acknowledges who we are, and lasts because of what Christ has done.

## 1. God is Light

1 John 1:5 *This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.*

There are a couple of things that I'm obsessed with us seeing as we move through John's letter, and one of them is right here. It is that John is always reasoning directly from *who God is* to how we should live. This can appear like John is making baseless claims, but in fact it's just the opposite, John is reaching down to the deepest fact about existence and is saying, look at these qualities and characteristics, these are not accidental but essential. So if we want to know how to be, we need to see who God is.

If I were to write about community, I know I would begin by listing out the harms of isolation on the individual, and present suicide rates, and work backwards from this need in humanity to how that can be met in community and in God. John instead does precisely the opposite.

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<sup>1</sup> Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together*. (1954) Harper Collins. New York, NY. p 17.

<sup>2</sup> Bonhoeffer, 30.

Christian fellowship, is not an accounting for some sinful lack in humanity. It is not first and foremost a problem to be solved, but it is fundamentally an expression of the image of God in us. John connects us to the foundation of our fellowship, which is the word given to us by Christ, that John then shares with us. It is that Jesus has shared that God is light. John reiterates this point with the negative consequence that in God there is no darkness.

This foundational truth, that God is light, has implications for the very fellowship with God that John invites us into. To have fellowship with God, who is light, means that we must then walk in the light. This connects back to what we saw in John last week, in that our knowing God, is different from knowing some philosophical concept, but in fact is like knowing a person. Therefore, when we know him, when we have fellowship with him, it requires our living like him. John continues,

*1 John 1:6-7 If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. <sup>7</sup>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.*

John gives us two sides of how our living plays out. If we claim to have fellowship with God, but walk in darkness. We lie and don't practice the truth. (I haven't explained what walking in darkness is yet, but neither has John so hang in there). John is likely referring to those recently departed members of the community who did claim to have fellowship with God but showed themselves to be walking in darkness. In that we see a hypocrisy. This further clarifies what we implicitly know when we talk about knowing God. When someone claims to know God but we see no evidence of that in their life, we call them a hypocrite. In this we show that knowledge of God must be reflected in our very way of being. It must be like fellowship.

John then goes on to show the opposite implication, of what happens if we walk in the light as God is in the light. He says, we have fellowship with one another, and Jesus cleanses us from all sin. John should have caused you to lean in just then. Because he just said if we walk in the dark then we don't have fellowship with God, therefore we would expect him to say that if we walk in the light, then we *do* have fellowship with God. But instead he jumps straight past the fellowship with God part and says instead that we have fellowship with one another, and then that Jesus's blood cleanses us from all sin.

Here is the point of these verses, Fellowship is not just based upon mutual assent to something. But is in fact created as people walk in the light as God is light. Our Fellowship flows from who God is. So what is light and darkness?

## 2. Who We Are

*1 John 1:8-9 If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. <sup>9</sup> If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

John here gives us some equivalent statements that relate back to light and darkness but show them to us in a more clear way. He says if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves. This is just like if we say we have fellowship with God and continue to walk in darkness then we deceive ourselves. Likewise if we confess our sins, then Jesus is faithful and just to forgive us and cleanse us, just as if we walk in the light we will have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus will cleanse us.

From this we are able to see what exactly John means when he uses the terms light and darkness. By walking in the light, John is not referring to walking in a sinless manner, likewise by walking in the dark John does not mean merely that we are committing particular sins. But rather walking in the light means acknowledging the sin in our lives, and walking in the dark means concealing the sin in our lives.

Those who left the church that John is writing too, were claiming to be sinless and in fellowship with God. The former is a lie and therefore the latter is a lie. Here is what John is saying, God is light, therefore the way we move forward in Christian community is in light, that is in being truly who we are, as we are. Not claiming to be something other or better than we are, but merely having the reality of ourselves disclosed in light. God is light, therefore the way that we move forward in fellowship is constant confession and repentance.

It is in confession and repentance that we have union with Christ, and therefore it is in confession and repentance that we have union with each other. There are two ways for a church to be sinless. One is to deny the sin in ourselves. This is the issue that the church John is writing to was dealing with. This is the danger of piety. Bonhoeffer says this,

The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal his sin from himself and from the fellowship. We dare not be sinners. Many Christians are unthinkably horrified when a real sinner is suddenly discovered among the righteous. So we remain alone with our sin, living in lies and hypocrisy. The fact is we *are* sinners.

Fellowship vanishes as we are all forced to hide in order to remain included in the group. We are compelled to deceive ourselves, and as John says, practice deceit so that the façade of the group might be maintained. The other option for a church to be sinless and thus walk in the dark, is to deny the reality of sin as sin. Rather than seeing the bar as one we have measured up to, as the pious, instead it is to say that there is no bar, and therefore there is no real sin. While this option might seem liberating in fact, it causes the same sort of façade as the pious. With no opportunity to admit wrong, you must turn inward upon yourself and exert your own punishment and psychologize the guilt you feel allowing your conscience to become seared. Or become a slave to your own authenticity, trapped in whatever you happened to be born as, making the world your enemy railing against all the constraints reality imposes on you.

In both cases, either sinless by piety or sinless by lawlessness, you remain isolated, totally alone walking in darkness trapped by self-deceit. God is light. He calls us to walk in the light. Which means our lives together are to be marked by constant repentance.

### **3. The Promise of Repentance**

*1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

This is the promise that we have from Christ for our repentance. It is that Christ is both *faithful* to forgive and cleanse, as well as *just* to forgive and cleanse. We will have neither true confidence nor true fellowship if we do not see this promise transform our community. So first of all, what does it mean that Jesus is faithful to forgive us of our sins? It means that there is never a time when we come to Jesus in repentance that we will be cast out. There is not a sin we could confess to him that he would turn us away for, but by bringing it into the light he will always forgive. This is his promise and he is not a liar, he is light, and he will make good on his promise. To confess is to trust his faithfulness.

Secondly, He is just to forgive our sins. He is just because his forgiveness is not baseless but purchased on the cross. His forgiveness is not sentimental but sacrificial in the way that all forgiveness must be. Our sin is not winked at, and slid by, but punished deeply, awfully, horribly, a punishment born in Christ's person on the cross. If we see that the punishment we deserve has been born once for all time in Christ, then we will understand that we no longer need to deny or hide our sin, but can bring it out into the world with no fear of punishment or reprisal, but with a hope of grace. Because Christ is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us.

When we see the depth of the gospel, that Jesus died to save sinners like us. Then we will confess and repent to each other and then we will have freedom in community.

Confession is the means of true fellowship and true confidence. I'll return to Bonhoeffer who writes so well on this, that I don't know why I'm not just reading his book. Of confession breaking through to community he says,

In Confession the break-through to community takes place. Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes involved in it. In confession the light of the Gospel breaks into the darkness and seclusion of the heart.... The sinner surrenders; he gives up all his evil. He gives his heart to God, and he finds the forgiveness of all his sin in the fellowship of Jesus Christ and his brother.

If only you would see that on the other side of the humiliation which you so utterly fear, is a freedom and joy that is now unthinkable. It is a connection between your savior and your friends that now seems impossible. With regards to confidence, Bonhoeffer writes,

In confession a man breaks through to certainty. ... Why should we not find it easier to go to a brother than to the holy God? But if we do, we must ask ourselves whether we have not often been deceiving ourselves with our confession of sin to God, whether we have not rather been confessing our sins to ourselves and also granting ourselves absolution. ... Who can give us the certainty that, in the confession and the forgiveness of our sins, we are not dealing with ourselves but with the living God? God gives us this certainty through our brother.

Oh for so many of us, we live in fear and despair wandering around our own minds trying to pardon ourselves and hide our humiliation. Not realizing there is incredible freedom on the other side of our brief humiliation. We lack confidence because we don't confess, we try and experience the gospel as propositions in our mind removed from the context of relationship. What a mercy God offers to us in Christian fellowship, to bring your sin into the light with a brother, to experience the washing of regeneration in community. Rather than having our deceit exposed at the final judgement.

