

BLESSED ASSURANCE

November 6, 2022 A.M.
West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
Nathan Guy

Scripture Reading

"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." (1 Jn 1:7 ESV)

INTRODUCTION

"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. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice 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 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" (1 John 1:5-9)

I was sitting in the audience on a Wednesday night. The church was engaged in a study of 1 John, and the Bible teacher was exploring the great topic of God's forgiveness. We know, he began, that if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins. After all, He is our Father. But suppose, he continued, that we are talking about a deacon who, on a whim, in a moment of weakness, on a business trip in New Orleans, finds himself in the backseat of his car with a prostitute. On the way home, while crossing a bridge at the end of a dangerous curve, he is side swiped by a semi, and loses his life. What will be the final state of that man? I will never forget the elder sitting two rows from the back who, without skipping a beat, yelled out, "he's a gonner for sure."

I once heard about a preacher who lay on his death bed, being comforted by his son who was also a preacher. As he lay dying, he cried out to his son, "I just worry that I haven't done enough."

I've heard stories like this all my life. I've felt this most of my life. And if you can relate, I have some wonderful news for you from the book of 1 John.

WALKING IN THE LIGHT

When I was growing up, I thought to "walk in the light" meant "always doing the right thing." To walk in darkness is to mess up. Couple that with a verse that follows offering the conditional "if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins" and you had all the ingredients one needed to create a spiritual neurotic. One definition of sin is "missing the mark," and I assumed that if I failed to hit the mark, I was not in the light, but in darkness. Once I realized I had fallen into darkness, I could ask for forgiveness, and God would put me in the light again. But every time an unkind thought would enter my head while driving behind someone driving too slowly, and every time I got angry, or impatient—those are sins, you know—I was right back in darkness—until such a time as I became aware of my need for confession and then God would make me right again. So, all day long I was *in* grace, then *out* of grace. *In* grace, then *out* of grace. *In* grace, then *out* of grace.

Let's make it worse. There are not only sins of *commission* (doing the wrong thing), but there are also sins of *omission* (failing to do the right thing). And the more I became aware of God's standard of righteousness (what it means to live like Christ), the more glaring my failings became! It didn't take long for me to change from asking "how often do I do wrong" to asking, "how often today have I actually done something right?" If the Lord came during the first 30 seconds after I went to God in prayer, then I was safe; but anything after that was questionable. I was praying that God would come back "during the streak between sins." I was, in every sense of the word, a spiritual neurotic.

I wonder if any of you can relate. If so, let this verse bring joy and comfort into your life. I'd like you to notice three things.

A Confessional Life

First, John seems to be referring not to "confessional moments," but a "confessional life." In the same breath, John can say "he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins" and also say "if we say we have no sin, we lie, and the truth is not in us." The "we" either refers to John and his 1st century readers, or the whole Christian church, or anyone who reads his letter. In any case, he means to include people who claim the name of Christ. That means there is no time of the day when a Christian can honestly say "me? Oh, I don't have anything going on in my life I need God to work on. I don't have anything less than the full character of Christ in my mind and heart. My sanctification is so complete I have no need to claim Christ's righteousness because I've got my own to stand on." Isaiah says that on our best day, our righteousness is like "filthy rags" (Isa 64:6). Even the Apostle Paul, after years of intimate association with God, years of prayer and Spirit-led preaching and living, years of inspired writing, years

of mission work, beatings, torture, imprisonment, said “not that I have already attained, but I press on to the goal.” And what’s the goal? A sinless, perfect life in which I can show my righteousness card and God will say “wow, you’ve got it all figured out”? No, friends. Paul said the goal is “to be found in Him, not having a righteousness that is my own, but that which comes through faith in Christ.”

This is why we lie when we say, “I have no sin.” I don’t have periods of safety during the day because I had enough confessional moments to absolve me in the periods between my sins. I am in constant need—constant need—of his divine presence, power and forgiveness. And as a Christian, you and I live a confessional *life*—one that in word and deed shows a recognition that I don’t have what it takes, but I trust in Jesus’s blood, the Father’s promise, and the Spirit’s work in my life.

The Circle of Light

The second thing I want you to notice is the phrase “walking in the light.” The term “walk” is borrowed from a Hebrew idiom that refers not specifically to where you step, but the way of life you lead. Think of Psalm 1: “blessed is the man who doesn’t walk in the council of the ungodly...but his delight is in the law of the Lord.” And for John, there are two “ways of life” to choose from. There is light, and there is darkness. Just look at John 11:9-10: “If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.” Can you see that this is not talking about how perfectly straight you walk, but the environment in which you walk? Repeatedly in his gospel, John says that Jesus is the light of the world and those who follow Jesus “do not walk in darkness” (Jn 8:12; cf. 12:35). Those who do not know Christ, those who have yet to name the name of Christ, those who are trusting in their own strength, walk in darkness. They are blind to their own faults and deceived as to their own abilities. You may have good days, and bad days, good moments and bad moments, but if your way of life is outside of Christ, then all your deeds are done in the dark. Those without Christ are in darkness, how great is that darkness, and their fate, if they persist in it, is to be cast out into utter darkness. Who, then, walks in the light? Those whose daily walk is in Jesus--whose chosen way of life is to follow Jesus the Master. So, think of two circles—two chosen paths. One without Christ, and one with Him. You may have good days, and bad days, good moments and bad moments, but if your way of life is inside of Christ, then God pronounces you in the light. That means my stumblings take place in the light. My failings take place in the light. My righteousness like filthy rags—as bad as it is—can be found in the light of Christ. And there is my hope. I don’t call in grace, then out of grace, in grace, then out of grace, 100 times a day. As long as I am living a confessional life in the Messiah, my daily walk—the good and bad—is in the light.

Continual Cleansing

The last thing I want you to notice in this verse is the word “cleanses.” That is a present active indicative. Now we have to be very careful in putting too much weight on Greek tenses. I remember my Greek teacher in undergrad saying that when you take 2 or 3 semesters of Greek, you know just enough to be dangerous. Sort of like when someone wants to learn a new language, so they memorize the dictionary. But just think of how many words, how many phrases, you use that wouldn’t fit the dictionary definition! Language doesn’t work like that. Well, tenses don’t either. If I tell you “I am running track”—that’s a present active indicative. It can mean “I am on the track team, and I run track from time to time”, or it can mean “I run track all the time”, or it can mean “I am running track at this very moment.” Tense alone won’t tell you which is true.

But context does. As long as we are living a confessional life, and as long as we are walking in the light, the blood of Jesus cleanses us from *all* sin. That means the blood of Jesus you and I contacted in our baptism *continually* flows, washing us clean, renewing our faith, and keeping our sins from being placed on our account. When you feel so bad about something you did today—something beneath you and not in keeping with the character of Christ—and you go to Him in prayer saying “dear Father I am not the man or woman I want to be, I need you to fix me and make me better. I am not worthy to be called your son,” the Father looks at you and says “my dear precious child, I have the book of life opened in my presence and I see no sin on your account. I see my Son, the spotless lamb, and you are in my Son, the Messiah, I count his righteousness as yours.

Listen to some leading lights from our own heritage.

James A. Harding.

“Let no man, therefore, comfort himself with the reflection that he who does right will be saved; for no man, in the church or out of it, does right.”¹

R. L. Whiteside.

“Grace does not demand perfect obedience. We are saved by *Christ*, not by perfect obedience.”²

Do you know the name David Lipscomb? He was good friends with James A. Harding. Lipscomb was the venerable preacher and editor of the *Gospel Advocate*, known far and

¹ James A. Harding, “Three Lessons from the Book of Romans,” in F. D. Srygley, *Biographies and Sermons* (1898; reprint, Nashville: Gospel Advocate Company, 1961), p. 247.

² R. L. Whiteside, “The Curse of the Law,” *Gospel Advocate* 82 (Jan 18, 1940), p. 59.

wide for taking firm stands on controversial issues, and the man with all the right answers. He even wrote two books called “Questions and Answers”! But in the pages of the *Gospel Advocate* he was asked about assurance of pardon, how we know God has forgiven us, and will welcome us home, and he wrote these beautiful words:

We must strive to walk in the steps of Jesus and so grow into the likeness of God. But with our best efforts to serve God, we will often fall short of doing his will. We are human. And never a day passes that a man can say: ‘This day I have done my whole duty.’ We fall short; we make wrong steps; we are frail and imperfect. When we have done the best we can, we must be saved by the mercy and love of God. His grace is sufficient for us, but we never reach the point that we do not need his grace to save us. It was a blessed thing for humanity that Jesus gave the example of the two men that ‘went up into the temple to pray,’ and the assurance that the publican, who stood afar off, and ‘would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote his breast, saying, God, be thou merciful to me a sinner,’ ‘went down to his house justified rather than the other’—the self-righteous, self-sufficient Pharisee, who felt that he possessed all the virtues. God’s grace is revealed to our faith as sufficient to have all who continually strive to serve God, to do his will despite the weaknesses and frailties of humanity that cause men to fall short of a perfect obedience. What God requires is to be like Jesus in having no will of our own, but a constant, earnest desire to do just what God requires.³

Sometimes at a funeral you might overhear someone say, “Joe was a good’n. If he doesn’t get into heaven, nobody will.” It’s a nice sentiment to speak of the good actions of a person who put Christ first. But it’s bad theology. No one—no one—NO ONE—will be with God because they were good enough. And God doesn’t grade on a curve (you are all bad, but Joe is pretty good, so Joe is the standard for you fellas). Joe will be with God because Jesus Christ paid the penalty for his sins. Putting so much emphasis on my ability to toe the line as the basis of my assurance is so misguided, since at the end of the day, whether the Lord comes back during my glorious 10-day sinless streak, or even in the middle of my confessional prayer, my only defense is being *found in Him*, not having a righteousness of my own, but one that is through faith in Christ!

KNOW THAT YOU ARE SAVED

John wrote to inspire joy. Joy about being in fellowship. Joy about a God who knows we are dust; knows we sin. Joy that in spite of the fact that we sin—confessing that we

³ David Lipscomb, “Assurance of Pardon,” *Gospel Advocate* 52 (Oct 27, 1910), pp. 1184. See also David Lipscomb, *A Commentary on the New Testament Epistles, Vol IV: Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians*, ed. J. W. Shepherd, Gospel Advocate Company (Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate Company, 1958), pp. 205-206.

have sin, rejoicing that Jesus Christ the righteous is our advocate when we do sin—John ends his book with these words:

"I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13).

Read that again. Slowly. Savor every word.

You want to know the most insecure people in the world? It's people who think heaven belongs to a small group of people who get everything right. Because it just takes a minute to begin to wonder if I've got everything right! So, when someone says "if you died tonight, do you know where you would spend eternity?" And you answer, "I don't know. I hope I do. But you can never tell. I might mess up between now and dinner time." We'd have to change our songs from "Blessed Assurance, Jesus is mine" to "Somewhat assurance, some of the time." Can you imagine knocking on a door with that nervous, worried look on our faces, and saying,

"How would you like to become a Christian?"

"Why should I do that?"

"So, you can have the peace and joy that I've got."

"But you don't look like you've got any of that!"

"Well, it's because I'm scared to death that I haven't done enough; excuse me, it's been 5 minutes since my last prayer, I'm probably out of grace so I need to go re-up just in case he comes back in the next 10 seconds."

John writes his letter to Christians like you and me. He writes to people who sin—like you and me. He writes to people who lie if they say they have no sin—like you and me. And he says, "I write these things to you—you who have put your trust in the name of the Son of God, so that you may KNOW that you have (not will have; not hope to have; not might have), that you possess as your own, the life of eternity—the blessed life in Jesus Christ that you are living now, and will continue to live in unto the ages." I'm giving you hope, says our brother John. Just like he said back in 2:12: "I am writing to you, dear children, because your sins have been forgiven on account of His name." He's drawing from the same assurance Paul has in Philippians 3—not my own righteousness, but the fact that I am found in Jesus Christ. We know that Jesus is righteous. We know that those in Him have passed from death to life. And I'm writing to remind you that you are in Him. You—with all your spiritual warts. You, the one praying every night "God I'm not who I want to be. But I trust in you." Even in your struggling. Even in your stumbling. Your confessional life, your way of life as one who trusts in Jesus, not in your own strength, is proof to the world that you have chosen Christ's life as the model for your own, and God sees you not in your sin, but in your Savior.

Just know that you have eternal life.

My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’s blood and righteousness. Faithful is HE.

Go back to the story with which I began. I wish what that good man had yelled out was something along this line: “I don’t know what the Lord will do. But I know this: There is no one who can be trusted more with this than Jesus Christ who stands, right now, at the right hand of the Father, interceding for him. The God who knows our struggles with sin. The one this deacon talks to every day. God will be faithful to what He promised, and he will make his judgment as one with a proven track record of grace and mercy. The God who loved me at my worst and called me when I offered the least. That God is the one in care of his soul.”