WALK IN THE LIGHT

1 John 1:5–2:2

Key Verse: 1:7

“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, purifies us from all sin.”

This letter of 1 John was written to clear up confusion that had started spreading among the early Christians, confusion about who Jesus is and about what kind of people really belong in Christian communities. So in the first four verses the author focuses on who Jesus is, and on the nature of the fellowship we have with him and with one another. It’s stunning: Jesus came in the flesh and was fully human; at the same time, Jesus is from the beginning. He’s the Word of life, who reveals God the Father to us in an intimate, personal way, and thus gives us eternal life. Our fellowship begins as we come to believe and know the truth about Jesus, and through obeying him, as we come to know the Father as well. In this intimate fellowship with Jesus the Son and God the Father, we have true fellowship with those who really know him. We also learned that our fellowship is centered not on ourselves but on Jesus and on proclaiming him, especially his grace of forgiveness. In our fellowship we share in the mission of Jesus, and we’re even willing to share in his sufferings. As others come to join in this kind of fellowship with us, we experience complete joy.

Now in today’s section the author develops further what it means to live in this fellowship. In it he makes one of the Bible’s most profound statements about God. He also helps us know clearly who we really are, and how we can have fellowship with God and with one another. He calls us to “walk in the light.” We want to think about what that means, and how to really do that. May God speak to us personally through his living word today.

Let’s read verse 5. This message was what John heard from Jesus himself. It’s in a sense a summary of all that Jesus taught. It’s one simple, deep statement: “God is light.” In John 4 Jesus said, “God is Spirit.” In 1 John 4 John says, “God is love” (4:8,16). But here John says that he heard from Jesus that “God is light.” He adds in verse 7 that God is also “in the light.” And he says here, “…in him there is no darkness at all.” What does it mean that, “God is light”? In the context of these verses, John seems to be talking about the absence of sin. God who is light is absolute purity and holiness. 1 Timothy 6:16 says that God “alone is immortal” and “lives in unapproachable light.” God’s light is so pure and so powerful that it’s blinding—we can hardly see in it. And yet we’re called into fellowship with this God who is light. What does that really mean?

It’s good to think about what these familiar metaphors of light and darkness mean. In 1 John we can see that light means knowledge and understanding and darkness means ignorance. Light means truth and darkness means lies. In the concepts of physics, light is something that reveals, and darkness is something that hides. God who is light is a God who reveals—he reveals himself, and in the light of who he is, we also begin to see who we really are. A good example of this is the prophet Isaiah in the Old Testament. Isaiah thought he was a good person, definitely better than all the corrupt people of his times. But when he encountered the holy God in the temple, he cried, “Woe to me! I am ruined!” In the light of God’s holiness he could see he was a man of unclean lips, who’d been complaining and speaking unbelieving words (Isa6:1–5).

Let’s read verse 5 again. Because God is light, we can’t have fellowship with him if we’re trying to stay in darkness. If we’re going to have fellowship with God who is light, we’ve got to let his light expose us; we’ve got to come clean about things we’ve been trying to hide; we’ve got to become completely transparent with him. Actually, trying to hide from God is silly of us, because God knows everything already. In the garden of Eden Adam and Eve were naked but they lived in perfect fellowship with the Lord God and with each other (Ge2:25). The Lord God used to come and walk in the garden in the cool of the day to be with them and share a real quality time of fellowship. But after they sinned against him, they couldn’t approach him anymore with that childlike innocence; they hid from him, though he knew all about what they’d done (Ge3:8).

We need to think more about this nature of his light. Once, David, who’d experienced intimate fellowship with God, wrote: “You have searched me, LORD, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely” (Ps139:1–4). Why does God scrutinize us so intensely with his light? It’s because he loves us. He wants to set us free from our secret sins, the things we’re too ashamed even to think of; he’s still calling us into fellowship with him in his light. His light is the light of love and the light of life that heals us of all our darkness. In this light we find his forgiving grace, and in this light we can begin to forgive and love ourselves the way God himself forgives and loves us. It’s a light we don’t need to be afraid of, unless we’re still trying to hide something we know we shouldn’t be doing.

We all need to come to God who is light. This is the starting point of walking in the light. But what does it mean to come into his light? Let’s read John 8:12. Here, to come to God who is light means to start following Jesus, the light of the world. It means to start listening to him and depending on him, not ourselves. As we come into his light, he says we “have the light of life.” This expression means we find who we are and what our spiritual direction should be.

There’s another meaning to coming into his light. Let’s read John 3:19–21. Basically, to come into the light means to be ready to confess our sins and repent of them, to really renounce any kind of darkness in our lives. The first few years I joined Bible study in college I was suffering from shame and guilt over the sins I’d committed. I grew up in a Christian family but didn’t really know God myself. I thought if people came to know all these things about me, they’d never accept or want to be with me. Fear and guilt really crippled me. But I realized through studying the Bible that God was calling me to himself, and that he wanted me to come clean with him. So I wrote out all the sins I’d ever committed, and unfortunately for those listening, I confessed them all at a church meeting. I felt so disgusted with myself and thought I’d be kicked out, but I found people were so gracious and loved and prayed for me even more. Gradually I began to know the light of God’s forgiving love, and I began to experience a real, personal relationship with him. Even if we’ve been Christians for a long time, we still need to be walking in the light. We all still need to be coming to God and renounce any secret, shameful ways that may have crept into our lives (2Co4:2a). In God’s light of love we become free to be transparent with him and with one another, because he already knows us fully and has fully forgiven us.

Look at verses 6–10. Here John builds all his teaching to believers on the basis that God is light. It’s interesting to note that he uses the word “we” here. And he talks about “our” sins in 2:2. Though John taught with apostolic authority and is nearly 90 years old now, he’s acknowledging that he’s still a sinner, too, just like anyone else. He’s still in need of the same light, the same cleansing and forgiving as any other believer.

Let’s read verse 6. John emphasizes that we can’t claim to have fellowship with God, who is light, but then insist on walking in the darkness. What did John mean by “walk in the darkness”? Generally in these verses it means to sin. But John has a specific sin in mind. Let’s read 2:9–11. Here, to walk in the darkness, to sin, means to hate a brother or sister. It’s the sin of holding grudges. It’s the sin of hating people, whatever reason we might have. If we’ve been hurt, we think we have the right to hate those who hurt us. But according to these verses, hating a brother or sister, even if they’ve sinned against us, is a sin. As we come into fellowship with God who is light, we need to learn to love and forgive the way he does. This is what it means to “live out the truth” (6b). Some read these verses about God’s light and having no darkness at all and no sin, and they begin to think that walking in God’s light means going around exposing others’ sins, and they make doing that their business. But walking in God’s light doesn’t mean we become self-righteous experts at exposing and judging others. Instead, walking in God’s light, living out the truth, means learning to love and forgive the way God who is light loves and forgives.

Now let’s read verse 7. The most important phrase here is to “walk in the light, as he is in the light.” It means, as we’ve said, to come to God, who is light, renouncing any and all darkness in our lives. It means letting his light shine on us to show us the things we couldn’t see before, the things we really should repent of. We see examples of this happening in Jesus’ life and ministry. Once he met Zacchaeus, a tax collector, who’d been living for money and was so selfish that nobody liked him or wanted to be with him. Jesus invited himself to Zacchaeus’ house. Many people started criticizing Jesus for going there. But for Jesus, going to be with Zacchaeus was walking in the light. And in the light of Jesus, without anybody telling him, Zacchaeus saw all the things in his life he needed to repent of. He renounced his materialistic and selfish ways and promised to stop cheating and start loving the needy (Lk19:1–10). He started walking in the light of Jesus, the light of grace and of loving others.

Let’s read verse 7 again. It says that when we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another. It’s surprising that it doesn’t say we have fellowship with God, but fellowship with one another. It means there’s no real fellowship with God if it’s not expressed in real fellowship with other believers. It’s fellowship in the light of Jesus. It’s fellowship in the light of his grace and truth. It’s a fellowship of light where we hide nothing from each other, where we’re transparent and totally honest—no deceit, no lies, repentance and forgiveness always welcomed.

As we heard last week, we all long for fellowship. We want to be close to people and feel really connected. But for many reasons, we can’t. Sometimes we blame others for a lack of real fellowship. But often the problem is in ourselves. What’s the problem? It’s our pride. It’s our fear of being vulnerable, of admitting our needs, of asking help, of admitting when we’ve been wrong. It’s often our fear of revealing things about ourselves that we’re ashamed of. But in the light of God, we have nothing to be ashamed of. In the light of God, we’re free to be totally transparent with others. And in the light of God, we’re free to love and forgive. Fellowship becomes real, and grows, as we mutually walk in the light.

John goes on to explain how it happens. He says in the last part of verse 7, “…and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.” It’s the blood of Jesus that enables us as sinful people to come into God’s light and know we’re accepted and forgiven. It’s the blood of Jesus that actually purifies us and enables us to live in the light of God who is holy. And it’s the blood of Jesus that allows us to experience a deeper, closer fellowship with other believers, a fellowship that we probably never thought really possible. It’s because we all have this same common ground: forgiveness in the blood of Jesus. In the grace of his shed blood, which we all need, none of us feel better than others or less than others—we really feel like dear brothers and sisters, all dearly loved by the one who shed his blood for us. In his shed blood, we’re no longer judging each other, because we know his blood purifies us from all sin. We should note that in this last part of verse 7, the word “purifies” is in the present tense, meaning it is an ongoing activity, just as walking in the light is an ongoing activity. It means we’re constantly in need of his blood to keep working in our lives, applying deeper and deeper to the sin rooted in us. So walking in the light is like therapy, where we start out really weak, but with constant practice, we get stronger and healthier.

Let’s read verses 8–10. According to these verses, a hindrance to walking in the light, again, is a denial of our own sin. It’s being self-righteous. Self-righteous people act like they’re pure and living in the light. But in fact, they don’t know themselves on a deeper level. They’re not really looking at all the ugly sins in their own hearts, the wrong motives for what they do. Jeremiah 17:9 reads: “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” We all need to know that we’re way more sinful than we realize.

But the way out of this darkness, John says, is to confess our sins. Let’s read verse 9 again. If we confess to people, we might get judged or made fun of. But if we confess to God, it says “he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” It’s one of the greatest promises in the whole Bible. It gives hope to us, even when we feel most dirty and useless.

How is it possible for God to forgive and purify us so that we can have fellowship with him and with one another? Let’s read 2:1–2. Here John strikes a healthy balance. God’s promise to forgive us doesn’t mean we should take sin lightly. At the same time, the directive not to sin doesn’t drive weak sinners out of the fellowship. It’s possible for us in Jesus. He’s our advocate with the Father. When we accept his grace through his blood shed on the cross, he’s ready to go with us all the way. He knows we’ll slip back in to sin many times, just like a mom knows her baby will fall many times before learning to walk. But he’s there always to help us and defend us; he really wants us to succeed. Let’s read verse 2 again. This explains how God who is light can forgive us. He made his Son the atoning sacrifice for our sins. When we put our faith in his blood, God forgives us (Ro3:25). John reminds us of Jesus, our advocate and atoning sacrifice, to encourage us to keep coming to God who is light and walking in his light.