

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN 1 JOHN 1:1-10

This Advent season I'm using four classic Christmas movies to underline or emphasize some wonderful, biblical truths about Christmas. The movie I want to feature today is entitled *Home Alone*. It's the story of eight year old Kevin at Christmastime. His large, extended family takes off a few days before Christmas for a vacation in Paris. Quite by accident, Kevin is left behind at home all by himself. At first, he's delighted by this turn of events. He and a few members of his family were really getting on each other's nerves. Suddenly he had the freedom to do anything he wanted to do, eat whatever he wanted to eat and go to bed whenever he wanted. It was fantastic – for awhile. But before too long, young Kevin starts to get lonely and miss his family. Now, the movie is a comedy and much of it has to do with Kevin's clever defense of his home from two bumbling crooks who want to rob the place. But there are a few poignant moments. One of them is when Kevin starts to feel lonely. He realizes he is terribly and utterly alone. I want to show you that scene right now. Kevin finds Santa Claus and asks that his family be returned to him as his Christmas gift. On Christmas Eve, he walks back to his house alone. From the sidewalk, he observes a family getting together for a meal and exchanging of gifts. The look on his face is one of sadness and longing. He's on the outside looking in.

Have you ever been on the outside looking in? Not literally, but spiritually or emotionally. The Bible makes it clear that God created you to be a relational being. You were never meant to do life completely alone. Now, because of sin, our relationship with God was broken. And also because of sin – either our sins against other people or their sins against us – we experience many broken relationships in life. The results are feelings of loneliness, separation and isolation. For many people, those feelings pick up in intensity during the Christmas season. I'm sure you've heard that many people struggle with feelings of depression this time of year. Part of the reason is this feeling of being on the outside looking in. People don't feel connected to God or to other people. They feel like Kevin in that scene – alone and isolated. Do you ever feel like you're on the outside looking in? You don't have to feel that way. I want you to think with me biblically about that today. Let's turn to one passage in the Bible that addresses the issue of being on the outside looking in and how to fix it. Here's the first biblical solution for being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #1: FIND GOD

That solution is offered to anyone here today who doesn't have a personal relationship with God yet. I know finding God sounds incredibly basic and obvious, but sometimes the most basic, obvious things get overlooked. One reason you feel like you're on the outside looking in is because you are on the outside looking in! Your feelings point to a very real spiritual problem. Again, the Bible says that you were created by God for a personal relationship with God. Sin messed it up. Every one of us is a sinner meaning that each of us has broken

God's laws and fallen short of God's standards. Everybody? Everybody. As a result, each of us is spiritually disconnected from God. One symptom of that lack of connection with God is this hard to define feeling that we're on the outside looking in about so much in life. You can feel deeply lonely even though you have lots of family and friends around you. Why? You're actually lonely for God. Your life lacks purpose because purpose comes from God. You might even have this kind of vague sense of anxiety all of the time – a sense that your life is missing something important. St. Augustine said centuries ago that every one of us has a God-shaped vacuum inside of us that only God can fill. Because you start out life lacking God, you must go out and find Him. Author Larry Crabb observes, "Feeling better has become more important to us than finding God." In other words, we dodge and evade and downplay this need for God, but there's just no substitute for finding Him. You will never feel better until you find God.

In the Bible passage we read, John tells us that God took the initiative to solve this most basic of human problems. "We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life." (1 John 1:1 NLT) Who's John talking about? Jesus, of course. He's pointing to what Christians call the Incarnation – God took upon Himself human flesh in the person of a man known as Jesus of Nazareth. John spent about three years following this Jesus around the land of Israel. He heard Jesus teach. He saw Jesus perform miracles. Then, he watched Him die on a cross. But three days, later this same Jesus got up again very much alive. John saw Jesus with his own eyes, touched Jesus' body with his own hands, and heard Him speak with John's own ears. Jesus was no ghost, no fantasy, no figment of John's imagination. And in Jesus, John found God. He found truth and reality. In Jesus, John found what his own soul could not define but what it craved.

Finding God. It's the single, most fundamental human need of all. It's not finding religion. Keeping rules and regulations or even following a strict moral code of conduct will not do it. It's not finding church. Singing songs, hearing a Bible message and hanging out with church folk will not do it in and of itself. It's not finding spirituality. Our culture will congratulate you for meditating, praying and thinking sentimentally about life, but that won't do it either. No, you must find God. You must somehow touch the Eternal. You must experience life – the life by which God Himself lives. And that life comes to you and me through this Jesus. How does John put it? "This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us." (1 John 1:2 NLT) The Bible and followers of Jesus call it by different names – being born again, getting saved, becoming a Christian, believing in Jesus, making a personal commitment to Christ – but it all points to the same basic, obvious reality: finding God! Has that ever happened to you?

Now, I realize that most everyone here today will say, “Rick, I’ve found God.” But there may be one, or two, or five or ten folk here today who haven’t yet. You might have religion, but you don’t have God. You might attend church regularly, but you don’t have God. You might be a spiritual person, but you don’t have God. If there’s anything that I pray that you will experience this Christmas, it’s that. Please find God. After all, that’s why God sent His Son into this world. You don’t have to be on the outside looking in at what God has done. It starts with finding God. Here’s a second solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling of being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #2: PRACTICE FORGIVENESS

Did you notice what a big place John gives to forgiveness in the verses we read? He talks about walking in the light, the blood of Jesus purifying us from all sin and God forgiving our sins when we sincerely confess those to Him. Why? One big reason for that uncomfortable feeling that you’re always somehow on the outside looking in is stuff going on in your life that needs forgiveness. We’ve said or done things – or failed to say or do things – that desperately need to be renounced by us and forgiven by God. John’s words here reveal some basic truths about forgiveness that each of us would do well to remember and practice.

First, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness. That happens initially when you find God. You admit you’re a sinner and you ask God to forgive all of your sins. You ask Jesus to be your Savior and Lord and you experience His forgiveness. That’s where it all starts. Second, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness continually. John says here, “But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.” (1 John 1:9 NLT) Here’s one reason why you can still feel like you’re on the outside looking in even after you’ve found God, or been born again, or gotten saved: you’ve got unconfessed sin in your life.

Sin that you hold onto, justify, excuse, tolerate, put up with – it separates you from God. I’m not saying you lose your salvation or forfeit Heaven. I am saying that a sense of spiritual life or a personal connection with God can be forfeited. The result is that you feel isolated from Him at a very deep level. That feeling of being on the outside looking in starts to creep into your soul again. I remember learning an important spiritual principle from a godly teacher in high school years ago now. He told me, “Rick, keep short accounts with God.” He meant that the moment the Holy Spirit speaks into my inner spirit about an ungodly act, a spiteful attitude, or an unkind word – at that very moment – I need to confess that sin and ask for God’s forgiveness immediately. That’s made a big impact on my daily walk with God. Don’t let the spiritual crud pile up. Keep short accounts. It’s one way to keeping that outside looking in feeling out of my life.

Third, ask forgiveness from and give forgiveness to other people. The major obstacle to great relationships – be it marriage, family, friends, people at church

– is sin. Sin just messes up everything and especially our relationships with other people. Until sin is dealt with in a biblical way, you'll experience a growing discomfort in your soul. Often, it's that old, familiar feeling of being on the outside looking in. You start to feel alone, cut off, disconnected from God and other people. What do I mean by asking forgiveness from other people? Quite simply, it means walking up to someone you've offended – looking him or her right in the eye – and saying, "I did such and such. I was wrong. I want to ask for your forgiveness." But that's so hard to do, isn't it? It's just hard on your pride which God is going to destroy completely one day anyway. I guarantee that not one of us will take one morsel of our sinful pride into Heaven with us, so why not allow God to kill it off here and now? Humility before God and others goes a long way to restoring a sense of connectedness with God and with others. John alludes to that spiritual reality when he says, "But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:7 NLT). Forgiveness is necessary to living in the light of God's grace and love.

The other part of this forgiveness equation is when we give or extend it to those who have hurt us. This can be much harder than going and asking someone to forgive us. The Bible has much to say about all of this and Christmas time is a great occasion to review what it teaches. Why give forgiveness to those who have hurt us? Let me suggest three biblical principles. One, forgive others because Jesus forgave you, not because they deserve it. What does one have to do with the other? Jesus was the One who tied them together. He said, "... 'You can't get forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your part, you cut yourself off from God's part.'" (Matt 6:14-15 MSG) When you extend forgiveness, you aren't admitting that what that person did to you was somehow OK. No, you're simply recognizing that if God could forgive you of your sins against Him, you can now be enabled by His Spirit to give forgiveness to those who offend you. Please recognize the force of what Jesus is saying. If you refuse forgiveness to someone, you give evidence that God's grace has not yet truly penetrated your own heart. The reality of your conversion is in doubt. When you refuse to forgive someone, one result will be the return of that feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

Two, forgive others even when the wrong is not acknowledged and forgiveness is not requested. Jesus did exactly that when, hanging from the cross, He said, "... 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing...'" (Luke 23:34 NIV) Some people will never acknowledge their offense or ask your forgiveness. Some people will never be at peace with you because at a deep, fundamental level they're not at peace with God. They have a far more serious issue than the fact they've offended you. They're out of touch with the God of the Universe. Of course, they're on the outside looking in spiritually, but they will not admit it. Their pride requires them to maintain until the day they die that everyone else is wrong and they're right. So, why extend forgiveness to people like that?

Three, forgive others because you must not allow resentment to build a stronghold in your life. There's nothing quite so dangerous to your personal spiritual life than holding on to bitterness, resentment or a stubborn unwillingness to forgive. Talk about that feeling of being on the outside looking in! Lack of forgiveness is a spiritual poison that will alienate you from God and others. Listen and obey God's Word when it says, "Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many." (Heb 2:15 NLT) It also says, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger.... Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you." (Eph 4:31-32 NLT)

There's a great scene about the importance of forgiveness in the movie *Home Alone*. Kevin is afraid of an older man who lives next door to him. He seems mean and gruff to say the least. Rumor has it that this older man has a criminal past. One evening, Kevin walks into a neighborhood church and who should be sitting in the pew across from him? The mean old man himself! They end up having a great conversation about forgiveness. Let's watch!

Are you afraid to ask someone to forgive you? Or, are you afraid to extend forgiveness to someone? I can't think of a better Christmas gift to give someone else or to give yourself this year than to forgive. No, lack of forgiveness isn't the only reason you can feel like you're on the outside looking in. But we sure do need to check our inner lives frequently to make sure those pesky seeds of bitterness and resentment haven't taken root somewhere and are growing again. When you ask for and give forgiveness God's way, you will feel connected spiritually – connected to God and to others. Here's a final solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #3: PURSUE JESUS

Several years ago, a book I read had a profound effect on me. The author said that the greatest desire that a follower of Jesus should have is simply to be with Jesus. Yes, we are called to be like Jesus. Our inner character should experience spiritual transformation as we follow Jesus. Yes, we are called to be for Jesus. We should serve Him with our time, talents and treasure. But above all, you and I should relentlessly pursue the sheer joy of being with Jesus. It reminds me of a verse in our text today. "We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us.

And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." (1 John 1:3 NLT) What a gift it is to pursue and experience the presence of Jesus – His love, His grace, His excellence, His perfection, His completeness, His power!

I've come to realize in my own life that when I start to feel as if I'm on the outside looking in at life – frustrated, disconnected, unfulfilled, stressed – it's often

because I've stopped pursuing Jesus and simply being with Him. I've gotten distracted by life. I've gotten preoccupied with myself. I've gotten ahead of Jesus. When Jesus first selected the twelve disciples, the Bible says, "He appointed twelve that they might be with him...." (Mark 3:14 NIV) Yes, they did other things as Jesus' disciples, to be sure, but, first and foremost, it was all about being with Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can become like Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can be for Jesus. Ironically, it's so much easier to become like Jesus and for Jesus when I focus, first and foremost, on being with Jesus.

In his book entitled "Good Morning, Merry Sunshine", author, Bob Greene, chronicles his infant daughter's first year of life. When little Amanda started to crawl, she started doing something that Bob found a little weird at first. He'd be lying in bed reading a book or watching TV when all of sudden he'd look down at the foot of the bed to find Amanda there just staring back at him. She'd pulled herself up to a standing position by the bed and she was just gazing at her daddy. Apparently, he'd become an object that fascinated her. Bob didn't quite know how to react at first. All he could figure out was that Amanda just liked coming in and looking at him. She didn't expect anything in return – conversation, interaction, getting picked up. So Bob simply began to return her gaze. He just stared back. After a few minutes, Amanda decided that was enough. She plopped back down and crawled back into the living room.

There is a simple pleasure in just looking at the one you love – what Bob and his daughter, Amanda, enjoyed. By faith, you and I can just stare at Jesus. You can just gaze upon His majesty and grace with the eyes of faith. Learn how to be with Jesus. Pursue Him. That matters? It matters more than you will ever know and it may be the single best solution to those times in life when you feel like you're on the outside looking in. Jesus loves you. Love Him.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN 1 JOHN 1:1-10

This Advent season I'm using four classic Christmas movies to underline or emphasize some wonderful, biblical truths about Christmas. The movie I want to feature today is entitled *Home Alone*. It's the story of eight year old Kevin at Christmastime. His large, extended family takes off a few days before Christmas for a vacation in Paris. Quite by accident, Kevin is left behind at home all by himself. At first, he's delighted by this turn of events. He and a few members of his family were really getting on each other's nerves. Suddenly he had the freedom to do anything he wanted to do, eat whatever he wanted to eat and go to bed whenever he wanted. It was fantastic – for awhile. But before too long, young Kevin starts to get lonely and miss his family. Now, the movie is a comedy and much of it has to do with Kevin's clever defense of his home from two bumbling crooks who want to rob the place. But there are a few poignant moments. One of them is when Kevin starts to feel lonely. He realizes he is terribly and utterly alone. I want to show you that scene right now. Kevin finds Santa Claus and asks that his family be returned to him as his Christmas gift. On Christmas Eve, he walks back to his house alone. From the sidewalk, he observes a family getting together for a meal and exchanging of gifts. The look on his face is one of sadness and longing. He's on the outside looking in.

Have you ever been on the outside looking in? Not literally, but spiritually or emotionally. The Bible makes it clear that God created you to be a relational being. You were never meant to do life completely alone. Now, because of sin, our relationship with God was broken. And also because of sin – either our sins against other people or their sins against us – we experience many broken relationships in life. The results are feelings of loneliness, separation and isolation. For many people, those feelings pick up in intensity during the Christmas season. I'm sure you've heard that many people struggle with feelings of depression this time of year. Part of the reason is this feeling of being on the outside looking in. People don't feel connected to God or to other people. They feel like Kevin in that scene – alone and isolated. Do you ever feel like you're on the outside looking in? You don't have to feel that way. I want you to think with me biblically about that today. Let's turn to one passage in the Bible that addresses the issue of being on the outside looking in and how to fix it. Here's the first biblical solution for being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #1: FIND GOD

That solution is offered to anyone here today who doesn't have a personal relationship with God yet. I know finding God sounds incredibly basic and obvious, but sometimes the most basic, obvious things get overlooked. One reason you feel like you're on the outside looking in is because you are on the outside looking in! Your feelings point to a very real spiritual problem. Again, the Bible says that you were created by God for a personal relationship with God. Sin messed it up. Every one of us is a sinner meaning that each of us has broken

God's laws and fallen short of God's standards. Everybody? Everybody. As a result, each of us is spiritually disconnected from God. One symptom of that lack of connection with God is this hard to define feeling that we're on the outside looking in about so much in life. You can feel deeply lonely even though you have lots of family and friends around you. Why? You're actually lonely for God. Your life lacks purpose because purpose comes from God. You might even have this kind of vague sense of anxiety all of the time – a sense that your life is missing something important. St. Augustine said centuries ago that every one of us has a God-shaped vacuum inside of us that only God can fill. Because you start out life lacking God, you must go out and find Him. Author Larry Crabb observes, "Feeling better has become more important to us than finding God." In other words, we dodge and evade and downplay this need for God, but there's just no substitute for finding Him. You will never feel better until you find God.

In the Bible passage we read, John tells us that God took the initiative to solve this most basic of human problems. "We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life." (1 John 1:1 NLT) Who's John talking about? Jesus, of course. He's pointing to what Christians call the Incarnation – God took upon Himself human flesh in the person of a man known as Jesus of Nazareth. John spent about three years following this Jesus around the land of Israel. He heard Jesus teach. He saw Jesus perform miracles. Then, he watched Him die on a cross. But three days, later this same Jesus got up again very much alive. John saw Jesus with his own eyes, touched Jesus' body with his own hands, and heard Him speak with John's own ears. Jesus was no ghost, no fantasy, no figment of John's imagination. And in Jesus, John found God. He found truth and reality. In Jesus, John found what his own soul could not define but what it craved.

Finding God. It's the single, most fundamental human need of all. It's not finding religion. Keeping rules and regulations or even following a strict moral code of conduct will not do it. It's not finding church. Singing songs, hearing a Bible message and hanging out with church folk will not do it in and of itself. It's not finding spirituality. Our culture will congratulate you for meditating, praying and thinking sentimentally about life, but that won't do it either. No, you must find God. You must somehow touch the Eternal. You must experience life – the life by which God Himself lives. And that life comes to you and me through this Jesus. How does John put it? "This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us." (1 John 1:2 NLT) The Bible and followers of Jesus call it by different names – being born again, getting saved, becoming a Christian, believing in Jesus, making a personal commitment to Christ – but it all points to the same basic, obvious reality: finding God! Has that ever happened to you?

Now, I realize that most everyone here today will say, “Rick, I’ve found God.” But there may be one, or two, or five or ten folk here today who haven’t yet. You might have religion, but you don’t have God. You might attend church regularly, but you don’t have God. You might be a spiritual person, but you don’t have God. If there’s anything that I pray that you will experience this Christmas, it’s that. Please find God. After all, that’s why God sent His Son into this world. You don’t have to be on the outside looking in at what God has done. It starts with finding God. Here’s a second solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling of being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #2: PRACTICE FORGIVENESS

Did you notice what a big place John gives to forgiveness in the verses we read? He talks about walking in the light, the blood of Jesus purifying us from all sin and God forgiving our sins when we sincerely confess those to Him. Why? One big reason for that uncomfortable feeling that you’re always somehow on the outside looking in is stuff going on in your life that needs forgiveness. We’ve said or done things – or failed to say or do things – that desperately need to be renounced by us and forgiven by God. John’s words here reveal some basic truths about forgiveness that each of us would do well to remember and practice.

First, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness. That happens initially when you find God. You admit you’re a sinner and you ask God to forgive all of your sins. You ask Jesus to be your Savior and Lord and you experience His forgiveness. That’s where it all starts. Second, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness continually. John says here, “But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.” (1 John 1:9 NLT) Here’s one reason why you can still feel like you’re on the outside looking in even after you’ve found God, or been born again, or gotten saved: you’ve got unconfessed sin in your life.

Sin that you hold onto, justify, excuse, tolerate, put up with – it separates you from God. I’m not saying you lose your salvation or forfeit Heaven. I am saying that a sense of spiritual life or a personal connection with God can be forfeited. The result is that you feel isolated from Him at a very deep level. That feeling of being on the outside looking in starts to creep into your soul again. I remember learning an important spiritual principle from a godly teacher in high school years ago now. He told me, “Rick, keep short accounts with God.” He meant that the moment the Holy Spirit speaks into my inner spirit about an ungodly act, a spiteful attitude, or an unkind word – at that very moment – I need to confess that sin and ask for God’s forgiveness immediately. That’s made a big impact on my daily walk with God. Don’t let the spiritual crud pile up. Keep short accounts. It’s one way to keeping that outside looking in feeling out of my life.

Third, ask forgiveness from and give forgiveness to other people. The major obstacle to great relationships – be it marriage, family, friends, people at church

– is sin. Sin just messes up everything and especially our relationships with other people. Until sin is dealt with in a biblical way, you'll experience a growing discomfort in your soul. Often, it's that old, familiar feeling of being on the outside looking in. You start to feel alone, cut off, disconnected from God and other people. What do I mean by asking forgiveness from other people? Quite simply, it means walking up to someone you've offended – looking him or her right in the eye – and saying, "I did such and such. I was wrong. I want to ask for your forgiveness." But that's so hard to do, isn't it? It's just hard on your pride which God is going to destroy completely one day anyway. I guarantee that not one of us will take one morsel of our sinful pride into Heaven with us, so why not allow God to kill it off here and now? Humility before God and others goes a long way to restoring a sense of connectedness with God and with others. John alludes to that spiritual reality when he says, "But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:7 NLT). Forgiveness is necessary to living in the light of God's grace and love.

The other part of this forgiveness equation is when we give or extend it to those who have hurt us. This can be much harder than going and asking someone to forgive us. The Bible has much to say about all of this and Christmas time is a great occasion to review what it teaches. Why give forgiveness to those who have hurt us? Let me suggest three biblical principles. One, forgive others because Jesus forgave you, not because they deserve it. What does one have to do with the other? Jesus was the One who tied them together. He said, "... 'You can't get forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your part, you cut yourself off from God's part.'" (Matt 6:14-15 MSG) When you extend forgiveness, you aren't admitting that what that person did to you was somehow OK. No, you're simply recognizing that if God could forgive you of your sins against Him, you can now be enabled by His Spirit to give forgiveness to those who offend you. Please recognize the force of what Jesus is saying. If you refuse forgiveness to someone, you give evidence that God's grace has not yet truly penetrated your own heart. The reality of your conversion is in doubt. When you refuse to forgive someone, one result will be the return of that feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

Two, forgive others even when the wrong is not acknowledged and forgiveness is not requested. Jesus did exactly that when, hanging from the cross, He said, "... 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing...'" (Luke 23:34 NIV) Some people will never acknowledge their offense or ask your forgiveness. Some people will never be at peace with you because at a deep, fundamental level they're not at peace with God. They have a far more serious issue than the fact they've offended you. They're out of touch with the God of the Universe. Of course, they're on the outside looking in spiritually, but they will not admit it. Their pride requires them to maintain until the day they die that everyone else is wrong and they're right. So, why extend forgiveness to people like that?

Three, forgive others because you must not allow resentment to build a stronghold in your life. There's nothing quite so dangerous to your personal spiritual life than holding on to bitterness, resentment or a stubborn unwillingness to forgive. Talk about that feeling of being on the outside looking in! Lack of forgiveness is a spiritual poison that will alienate you from God and others. Listen and obey God's Word when it says, "Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many." (Heb 2:15 NLT) It also says, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger.... Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you." (Eph 4:31-32 NLT)

There's a great scene about the importance of forgiveness in the movie *Home Alone*. Kevin is afraid of an older man who lives next door to him. He seems mean and gruff to say the least. Rumor has it that this older man has a criminal past. One evening, Kevin walks into a neighborhood church and who should be sitting in the pew across from him? The mean old man himself! They end up having a great conversation about forgiveness. Let's watch!

Are you afraid to ask someone to forgive you? Or, are you afraid to extend forgiveness to someone? I can't think of a better Christmas gift to give someone else or to give yourself this year than to forgive. No, lack of forgiveness isn't the only reason you can feel like you're on the outside looking in. But we sure do need to check our inner lives frequently to make sure those pesky seeds of bitterness and resentment haven't taken root somewhere and are growing again. When you ask for and give forgiveness God's way, you will feel connected spiritually – connected to God and to others. Here's a final solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #3: PURSUE JESUS

Several years ago, a book I read had a profound effect on me. The author said that the greatest desire that a follower of Jesus should have is simply to be with Jesus. Yes, we are called to be like Jesus. Our inner character should experience spiritual transformation as we follow Jesus. Yes, we are called to be for Jesus. We should serve Him with our time, talents and treasure. But above all, you and I should relentlessly pursue the sheer joy of being with Jesus. It reminds me of a verse in our text today. "We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us.

And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." (1 John 1:3 NLT) What a gift it is to pursue and experience the presence of Jesus – His love, His grace, His excellence, His perfection, His completeness, His power!

I've come to realize in my own life that when I start to feel as if I'm on the outside looking in at life – frustrated, disconnected, unfulfilled, stressed – it's often

because I've stopped pursuing Jesus and simply being with Him. I've gotten distracted by life. I've gotten preoccupied with myself. I've gotten ahead of Jesus. When Jesus first selected the twelve disciples, the Bible says, "He appointed twelve that they might be with him...." (Mark 3:14 NIV) Yes, they did other things as Jesus' disciples, to be sure, but, first and foremost, it was all about being with Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can become like Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can be for Jesus. Ironically, it's so much easier to become like Jesus and for Jesus when I focus, first and foremost, on being with Jesus.

In his book entitled "Good Morning, Merry Sunshine", author, Bob Greene, chronicles his infant daughter's first year of life. When little Amanda started to crawl, she started doing something that Bob found a little weird at first. He'd be lying in bed reading a book or watching TV when all of sudden he'd look down at the foot of the bed to find Amanda there just staring back at him. She'd pulled herself up to a standing position by the bed and she was just gazing at her daddy. Apparently, he'd become an object that fascinated her. Bob didn't quite know how to react at first. All he could figure out was that Amanda just liked coming in and looking at him. She didn't expect anything in return – conversation, interaction, getting picked up. So Bob simply began to return her gaze. He just stared back. After a few minutes, Amanda decided that was enough. She plopped back down and crawled back into the living room.

There is a simple pleasure in just looking at the one you love – what Bob and his daughter, Amanda, enjoyed. By faith, you and I can just stare at Jesus. You can just gaze upon His majesty and grace with the eyes of faith. Learn how to be with Jesus. Pursue Him. That matters? It matters more than you will ever know and it may be the single best solution to those times in life when you feel like you're on the outside looking in. Jesus loves you. Love Him.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN 1 JOHN 1:1-10

This Advent season I'm using four classic Christmas movies to underline or emphasize some wonderful, biblical truths about Christmas. The movie I want to feature today is entitled *Home Alone*. It's the story of eight year old Kevin at Christmastime. His large, extended family takes off a few days before Christmas for a vacation in Paris. Quite by accident, Kevin is left behind at home all by himself. At first, he's delighted by this turn of events. He and a few members of his family were really getting on each other's nerves. Suddenly he had the freedom to do anything he wanted to do, eat whatever he wanted to eat and go to bed whenever he wanted. It was fantastic – for awhile. But before too long, young Kevin starts to get lonely and miss his family. Now, the movie is a comedy and much of it has to do with Kevin's clever defense of his home from two bumbling crooks who want to rob the place. But there are a few poignant moments. One of them is when Kevin starts to feel lonely. He realizes he is terribly and utterly alone. I want to show you that scene right now. Kevin finds Santa Claus and asks that his family be returned to him as his Christmas gift. On Christmas Eve, he walks back to his house alone. From the sidewalk, he observes a family getting together for a meal and exchanging of gifts. The look on his face is one of sadness and longing. He's on the outside looking in.

Have you ever been on the outside looking in? Not literally, but spiritually or emotionally. The Bible makes it clear that God created you to be a relational being. You were never meant to do life completely alone. Now, because of sin, our relationship with God was broken. And also because of sin – either our sins against other people or their sins against us – we experience many broken relationships in life. The results are feelings of loneliness, separation and isolation. For many people, those feelings pick up in intensity during the Christmas season. I'm sure you've heard that many people struggle with feelings of depression this time of year. Part of the reason is this feeling of being on the outside looking in. People don't feel connected to God or to other people. They feel like Kevin in that scene – alone and isolated. Do you ever feel like you're on the outside looking in? You don't have to feel that way. I want you to think with me biblically about that today. Let's turn to one passage in the Bible that addresses the issue of being on the outside looking in and how to fix it. Here's the first biblical solution for being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #1: FIND GOD

That solution is offered to anyone here today who doesn't have a personal relationship with God yet. I know finding God sounds incredibly basic and obvious, but sometimes the most basic, obvious things get overlooked. One reason you feel like you're on the outside looking in is because you are on the outside looking in! Your feelings point to a very real spiritual problem. Again, the Bible says that you were created by God for a personal relationship with God. Sin messed it up. Every one of us is a sinner meaning that each of us has broken

God's laws and fallen short of God's standards. Everybody? Everybody. As a result, each of us is spiritually disconnected from God. One symptom of that lack of connection with God is this hard to define feeling that we're on the outside looking in about so much in life. You can feel deeply lonely even though you have lots of family and friends around you. Why? You're actually lonely for God. Your life lacks purpose because purpose comes from God. You might even have this kind of vague sense of anxiety all of the time – a sense that your life is missing something important. St. Augustine said centuries ago that every one of us has a God-shaped vacuum inside of us that only God can fill. Because you start out life lacking God, you must go out and find Him. Author Larry Crabb observes, "Feeling better has become more important to us than finding God." In other words, we dodge and evade and downplay this need for God, but there's just no substitute for finding Him. You will never feel better until you find God.

In the Bible passage we read, John tells us that God took the initiative to solve this most basic of human problems. "We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life." (1 John 1:1 NLT) Who's John talking about? Jesus, of course. He's pointing to what Christians call the Incarnation – God took upon Himself human flesh in the person of a man known as Jesus of Nazareth. John spent about three years following this Jesus around the land of Israel. He heard Jesus teach. He saw Jesus perform miracles. Then, he watched Him die on a cross. But three days, later this same Jesus got up again very much alive. John saw Jesus with his own eyes, touched Jesus' body with his own hands, and heard Him speak with John's own ears. Jesus was no ghost, no fantasy, no figment of John's imagination. And in Jesus, John found God. He found truth and reality. In Jesus, John found what his own soul could not define but what it craved.

Finding God. It's the single, most fundamental human need of all. It's not finding religion. Keeping rules and regulations or even following a strict moral code of conduct will not do it. It's not finding church. Singing songs, hearing a Bible message and hanging out with church folk will not do it in and of itself. It's not finding spirituality. Our culture will congratulate you for meditating, praying and thinking sentimentally about life, but that won't do it either. No, you must find God. You must somehow touch the Eternal. You must experience life – the life by which God Himself lives. And that life comes to you and me through this Jesus. How does John put it? "This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us." (1 John 1:2 NLT) The Bible and followers of Jesus call it by different names – being born again, getting saved, becoming a Christian, believing in Jesus, making a personal commitment to Christ – but it all points to the same basic, obvious reality: finding God! Has that ever happened to you?

Now, I realize that most everyone here today will say, “Rick, I’ve found God.” But there may be one, or two, or five or ten folk here today who haven’t yet. You might have religion, but you don’t have God. You might attend church regularly, but you don’t have God. You might be a spiritual person, but you don’t have God. If there’s anything that I pray that you will experience this Christmas, it’s that. Please find God. After all, that’s why God sent His Son into this world. You don’t have to be on the outside looking in at what God has done. It starts with finding God. Here’s a second solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling of being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #2: PRACTICE FORGIVENESS

Did you notice what a big place John gives to forgiveness in the verses we read? He talks about walking in the light, the blood of Jesus purifying us from all sin and God forgiving our sins when we sincerely confess those to Him. Why? One big reason for that uncomfortable feeling that you’re always somehow on the outside looking in is stuff going on in your life that needs forgiveness. We’ve said or done things – or failed to say or do things – that desperately need to be renounced by us and forgiven by God. John’s words here reveal some basic truths about forgiveness that each of us would do well to remember and practice.

First, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness. That happens initially when you find God. You admit you’re a sinner and you ask God to forgive all of your sins. You ask Jesus to be your Savior and Lord and you experience His forgiveness. That’s where it all starts. Second, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness continually. John says here, “But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.” (1 John 1:9 NLT) Here’s one reason why you can still feel like you’re on the outside looking in even after you’ve found God, or been born again, or gotten saved: you’ve got unconfessed sin in your life.

Sin that you hold onto, justify, excuse, tolerate, put up with – it separates you from God. I’m not saying you lose your salvation or forfeit Heaven. I am saying that a sense of spiritual life or a personal connection with God can be forfeited. The result is that you feel isolated from Him at a very deep level. That feeling of being on the outside looking in starts to creep into your soul again. I remember learning an important spiritual principle from a godly teacher in high school years ago now. He told me, “Rick, keep short accounts with God.” He meant that the moment the Holy Spirit speaks into my inner spirit about an ungodly act, a spiteful attitude, or an unkind word – at that very moment – I need to confess that sin and ask for God’s forgiveness immediately. That’s made a big impact on my daily walk with God. Don’t let the spiritual crud pile up. Keep short accounts. It’s one way to keeping that outside looking in feeling out of my life.

Third, ask forgiveness from and give forgiveness to other people. The major obstacle to great relationships – be it marriage, family, friends, people at church

– is sin. Sin just messes up everything and especially our relationships with other people. Until sin is dealt with in a biblical way, you'll experience a growing discomfort in your soul. Often, it's that old, familiar feeling of being on the outside looking in. You start to feel alone, cut off, disconnected from God and other people. What do I mean by asking forgiveness from other people? Quite simply, it means walking up to someone you've offended – looking him or her right in the eye – and saying, "I did such and such. I was wrong. I want to ask for your forgiveness." But that's so hard to do, isn't it? It's just hard on your pride which God is going to destroy completely one day anyway. I guarantee that not one of us will take one morsel of our sinful pride into Heaven with us, so why not allow God to kill it off here and now? Humility before God and others goes a long way to restoring a sense of connectedness with God and with others. John alludes to that spiritual reality when he says, "But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:7 NLT). Forgiveness is necessary to living in the light of God's grace and love.

The other part of this forgiveness equation is when we give or extend it to those who have hurt us. This can be much harder than going and asking someone to forgive us. The Bible has much to say about all of this and Christmas time is a great occasion to review what it teaches. Why give forgiveness to those who have hurt us? Let me suggest three biblical principles. One, forgive others because Jesus forgave you, not because they deserve it. What does one have to do with the other? Jesus was the One who tied them together. He said, "... 'You can't get forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your part, you cut yourself off from God's part.'" (Matt 6:14-15 MSG) When you extend forgiveness, you aren't admitting that what that person did to you was somehow OK. No, you're simply recognizing that if God could forgive you of your sins against Him, you can now be enabled by His Spirit to give forgiveness to those who offend you. Please recognize the force of what Jesus is saying. If you refuse forgiveness to someone, you give evidence that God's grace has not yet truly penetrated your own heart. The reality of your conversion is in doubt. When you refuse to forgive someone, one result will be the return of that feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

Two, forgive others even when the wrong is not acknowledged and forgiveness is not requested. Jesus did exactly that when, hanging from the cross, He said, "... 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing...'" (Luke 23:34 NIV) Some people will never acknowledge their offense or ask your forgiveness. Some people will never be at peace with you because at a deep, fundamental level they're not at peace with God. They have a far more serious issue than the fact they've offended you. They're out of touch with the God of the Universe. Of course, they're on the outside looking in spiritually, but they will not admit it. Their pride requires them to maintain until the day they die that everyone else is wrong and they're right. So, why extend forgiveness to people like that?

Three, forgive others because you must not allow resentment to build a stronghold in your life. There's nothing quite so dangerous to your personal spiritual life than holding on to bitterness, resentment or a stubborn unwillingness to forgive. Talk about that feeling of being on the outside looking in! Lack of forgiveness is a spiritual poison that will alienate you from God and others. Listen and obey God's Word when it says, "Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many." (Heb 2:15 NLT) It also says, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger.... Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you." (Eph 4:31-32 NLT)

There's a great scene about the importance of forgiveness in the movie *Home Alone*. Kevin is afraid of an older man who lives next door to him. He seems mean and gruff to say the least. Rumor has it that this older man has a criminal past. One evening, Kevin walks into a neighborhood church and who should be sitting in the pew across from him? The mean old man himself! They end up having a great conversation about forgiveness. Let's watch!

Are you afraid to ask someone to forgive you? Or, are you afraid to extend forgiveness to someone? I can't think of a better Christmas gift to give someone else or to give yourself this year than to forgive. No, lack of forgiveness isn't the only reason you can feel like you're on the outside looking in. But we sure do need to check our inner lives frequently to make sure those pesky seeds of bitterness and resentment haven't taken root somewhere and are growing again. When you ask for and give forgiveness God's way, you will feel connected spiritually – connected to God and to others. Here's a final solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #3: PURSUE JESUS

Several years ago, a book I read had a profound effect on me. The author said that the greatest desire that a follower of Jesus should have is simply to be with Jesus. Yes, we are called to be like Jesus. Our inner character should experience spiritual transformation as we follow Jesus. Yes, we are called to be for Jesus. We should serve Him with our time, talents and treasure. But above all, you and I should relentlessly pursue the sheer joy of being with Jesus. It reminds me of a verse in our text today. "We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us.

And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." (1 John 1:3 NLT) What a gift it is to pursue and experience the presence of Jesus – His love, His grace, His excellence, His perfection, His completeness, His power!

I've come to realize in my own life that when I start to feel as if I'm on the outside looking in at life – frustrated, disconnected, unfulfilled, stressed – it's often

because I've stopped pursuing Jesus and simply being with Him. I've gotten distracted by life. I've gotten preoccupied with myself. I've gotten ahead of Jesus. When Jesus first selected the twelve disciples, the Bible says, "He appointed twelve that they might be with him...." (Mark 3:14 NIV) Yes, they did other things as Jesus' disciples, to be sure, but, first and foremost, it was all about being with Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can become like Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can be for Jesus. Ironically, it's so much easier to become like Jesus and for Jesus when I focus, first and foremost, on being with Jesus.

In his book entitled "Good Morning, Merry Sunshine", author, Bob Greene, chronicles his infant daughter's first year of life. When little Amanda started to crawl, she started doing something that Bob found a little weird at first. He'd be lying in bed reading a book or watching TV when all of sudden he'd look down at the foot of the bed to find Amanda there just staring back at him. She'd pulled herself up to a standing position by the bed and she was just gazing at her daddy. Apparently, he'd become an object that fascinated her. Bob didn't quite know how to react at first. All he could figure out was that Amanda just liked coming in and looking at him. She didn't expect anything in return – conversation, interaction, getting picked up. So Bob simply began to return her gaze. He just stared back. After a few minutes, Amanda decided that was enough. She plopped back down and crawled back into the living room.

There is a simple pleasure in just looking at the one you love – what Bob and his daughter, Amanda, enjoyed. By faith, you and I can just stare at Jesus. You can just gaze upon His majesty and grace with the eyes of faith. Learn how to be with Jesus. Pursue Him. That matters? It matters more than you will ever know and it may be the single best solution to those times in life when you feel like you're on the outside looking in. Jesus loves you. Love Him.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN 1 JOHN 1:1-10

This Advent season I'm using four classic Christmas movies to underline or emphasize some wonderful, biblical truths about Christmas. The movie I want to feature today is entitled *Home Alone*. It's the story of eight year old Kevin at Christmastime. His large, extended family takes off a few days before Christmas for a vacation in Paris. Quite by accident, Kevin is left behind at home all by himself. At first, he's delighted by this turn of events. He and a few members of his family were really getting on each other's nerves. Suddenly he had the freedom to do anything he wanted to do, eat whatever he wanted to eat and go to bed whenever he wanted. It was fantastic – for awhile. But before too long, young Kevin starts to get lonely and miss his family. Now, the movie is a comedy and much of it has to do with Kevin's clever defense of his home from two bumbling crooks who want to rob the place. But there are a few poignant moments. One of them is when Kevin starts to feel lonely. He realizes he is terribly and utterly alone. I want to show you that scene right now. Kevin finds Santa Claus and asks that his family be returned to him as his Christmas gift. On Christmas Eve, he walks back to his house alone. From the sidewalk, he observes a family getting together for a meal and exchanging of gifts. The look on his face is one of sadness and longing. He's on the outside looking in.

Have you ever been on the outside looking in? Not literally, but spiritually or emotionally. The Bible makes it clear that God created you to be a relational being. You were never meant to do life completely alone. Now, because of sin, our relationship with God was broken. And also because of sin – either our sins against other people or their sins against us – we experience many broken relationships in life. The results are feelings of loneliness, separation and isolation. For many people, those feelings pick up in intensity during the Christmas season. I'm sure you've heard that many people struggle with feelings of depression this time of year. Part of the reason is this feeling of being on the outside looking in. People don't feel connected to God or to other people. They feel like Kevin in that scene – alone and isolated. Do you ever feel like you're on the outside looking in? You don't have to feel that way. I want you to think with me biblically about that today. Let's turn to one passage in the Bible that addresses the issue of being on the outside looking in and how to fix it. Here's the first biblical solution for being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #1: FIND GOD

That solution is offered to anyone here today who doesn't have a personal relationship with God yet. I know finding God sounds incredibly basic and obvious, but sometimes the most basic, obvious things get overlooked. One reason you feel like you're on the outside looking in is because you are on the outside looking in! Your feelings point to a very real spiritual problem. Again, the Bible says that you were created by God for a personal relationship with God. Sin messed it up. Every one of us is a sinner meaning that each of us has broken

God's laws and fallen short of God's standards. Everybody? Everybody. As a result, each of us is spiritually disconnected from God. One symptom of that lack of connection with God is this hard to define feeling that we're on the outside looking in about so much in life. You can feel deeply lonely even though you have lots of family and friends around you. Why? You're actually lonely for God. Your life lacks purpose because purpose comes from God. You might even have this kind of vague sense of anxiety all of the time – a sense that your life is missing something important. St. Augustine said centuries ago that every one of us has a God-shaped vacuum inside of us that only God can fill. Because you start out life lacking God, you must go out and find Him. Author Larry Crabb observes, "Feeling better has become more important to us than finding God." In other words, we dodge and evade and downplay this need for God, but there's just no substitute for finding Him. You will never feel better until you find God.

In the Bible passage we read, John tells us that God took the initiative to solve this most basic of human problems. "We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life." (1 John 1:1 NLT) Who's John talking about? Jesus, of course. He's pointing to what Christians call the Incarnation – God took upon Himself human flesh in the person of a man known as Jesus of Nazareth. John spent about three years following this Jesus around the land of Israel. He heard Jesus teach. He saw Jesus perform miracles. Then, he watched Him die on a cross. But three days, later this same Jesus got up again very much alive. John saw Jesus with his own eyes, touched Jesus' body with his own hands, and heard Him speak with John's own ears. Jesus was no ghost, no fantasy, no figment of John's imagination. And in Jesus, John found God. He found truth and reality. In Jesus, John found what his own soul could not define but what it craved.

Finding God. It's the single, most fundamental human need of all. It's not finding religion. Keeping rules and regulations or even following a strict moral code of conduct will not do it. It's not finding church. Singing songs, hearing a Bible message and hanging out with church folk will not do it in and of itself. It's not finding spirituality. Our culture will congratulate you for meditating, praying and thinking sentimentally about life, but that won't do it either. No, you must find God. You must somehow touch the Eternal. You must experience life – the life by which God Himself lives. And that life comes to you and me through this Jesus. How does John put it? "This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us." (1 John 1:2 NLT) The Bible and followers of Jesus call it by different names – being born again, getting saved, becoming a Christian, believing in Jesus, making a personal commitment to Christ – but it all points to the same basic, obvious reality: finding God! Has that ever happened to you?

Now, I realize that most everyone here today will say, “Rick, I’ve found God.” But there may be one, or two, or five or ten folk here today who haven’t yet. You might have religion, but you don’t have God. You might attend church regularly, but you don’t have God. You might be a spiritual person, but you don’t have God. If there’s anything that I pray that you will experience this Christmas, it’s that. Please find God. After all, that’s why God sent His Son into this world. You don’t have to be on the outside looking in at what God has done. It starts with finding God. Here’s a second solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling of being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #2: PRACTICE FORGIVENESS

Did you notice what a big place John gives to forgiveness in the verses we read? He talks about walking in the light, the blood of Jesus purifying us from all sin and God forgiving our sins when we sincerely confess those to Him. Why? One big reason for that uncomfortable feeling that you’re always somehow on the outside looking in is stuff going on in your life that needs forgiveness. We’ve said or done things – or failed to say or do things – that desperately need to be renounced by us and forgiven by God. John’s words here reveal some basic truths about forgiveness that each of us would do well to remember and practice.

First, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness. That happens initially when you find God. You admit you’re a sinner and you ask God to forgive all of your sins. You ask Jesus to be your Savior and Lord and you experience His forgiveness. That’s where it all starts. Second, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness continually. John says here, “But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.” (1 John 1:9 NLT) Here’s one reason why you can still feel like you’re on the outside looking in even after you’ve found God, or been born again, or gotten saved: you’ve got unconfessed sin in your life.

Sin that you hold onto, justify, excuse, tolerate, put up with – it separates you from God. I’m not saying you lose your salvation or forfeit Heaven. I am saying that a sense of spiritual life or a personal connection with God can be forfeited. The result is that you feel isolated from Him at a very deep level. That feeling of being on the outside looking in starts to creep into your soul again. I remember learning an important spiritual principle from a godly teacher in high school years ago now. He told me, “Rick, keep short accounts with God.” He meant that the moment the Holy Spirit speaks into my inner spirit about an ungodly act, a spiteful attitude, or an unkind word – at that very moment – I need to confess that sin and ask for God’s forgiveness immediately. That’s made a big impact on my daily walk with God. Don’t let the spiritual crud pile up. Keep short accounts. It’s one way to keeping that outside looking in feeling out of my life.

Third, ask forgiveness from and give forgiveness to other people. The major obstacle to great relationships – be it marriage, family, friends, people at church

– is sin. Sin just messes up everything and especially our relationships with other people. Until sin is dealt with in a biblical way, you'll experience a growing discomfort in your soul. Often, it's that old, familiar feeling of being on the outside looking in. You start to feel alone, cut off, disconnected from God and other people. What do I mean by asking forgiveness from other people? Quite simply, it means walking up to someone you've offended – looking him or her right in the eye – and saying, "I did such and such. I was wrong. I want to ask for your forgiveness." But that's so hard to do, isn't it? It's just hard on your pride which God is going to destroy completely one day anyway. I guarantee that not one of us will take one morsel of our sinful pride into Heaven with us, so why not allow God to kill it off here and now? Humility before God and others goes a long way to restoring a sense of connectedness with God and with others. John alludes to that spiritual reality when he says, "But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:7 NLT). Forgiveness is necessary to living in the light of God's grace and love.

The other part of this forgiveness equation is when we give or extend it to those who have hurt us. This can be much harder than going and asking someone to forgive us. The Bible has much to say about all of this and Christmas time is a great occasion to review what it teaches. Why give forgiveness to those who have hurt us? Let me suggest three biblical principles. One, forgive others because Jesus forgave you, not because they deserve it. What does one have to do with the other? Jesus was the One who tied them together. He said, "... 'You can't get forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your part, you cut yourself off from God's part.'" (Matt 6:14-15 MSG) When you extend forgiveness, you aren't admitting that what that person did to you was somehow OK. No, you're simply recognizing that if God could forgive you of your sins against Him, you can now be enabled by His Spirit to give forgiveness to those who offend you. Please recognize the force of what Jesus is saying. If you refuse forgiveness to someone, you give evidence that God's grace has not yet truly penetrated your own heart. The reality of your conversion is in doubt. When you refuse to forgive someone, one result will be the return of that feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

Two, forgive others even when the wrong is not acknowledged and forgiveness is not requested. Jesus did exactly that when, hanging from the cross, He said, "... 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing...'" (Luke 23:34 NIV) Some people will never acknowledge their offense or ask your forgiveness. Some people will never be at peace with you because at a deep, fundamental level they're not at peace with God. They have a far more serious issue than the fact they've offended you. They're out of touch with the God of the Universe. Of course, they're on the outside looking in spiritually, but they will not admit it. Their pride requires them to maintain until the day they die that everyone else is wrong and they're right. So, why extend forgiveness to people like that?

Three, forgive others because you must not allow resentment to build a stronghold in your life. There's nothing quite so dangerous to your personal spiritual life than holding on to bitterness, resentment or a stubborn unwillingness to forgive. Talk about that feeling of being on the outside looking in! Lack of forgiveness is a spiritual poison that will alienate you from God and others. Listen and obey God's Word when it says, "Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many." (Heb 2:15 NLT) It also says, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger.... Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you." (Eph 4:31-32 NLT)

There's a great scene about the importance of forgiveness in the movie *Home Alone*. Kevin is afraid of an older man who lives next door to him. He seems mean and gruff to say the least. Rumor has it that this older man has a criminal past. One evening, Kevin walks into a neighborhood church and who should be sitting in the pew across from him? The mean old man himself! They end up having a great conversation about forgiveness. Let's watch!

Are you afraid to ask someone to forgive you? Or, are you afraid to extend forgiveness to someone? I can't think of a better Christmas gift to give someone else or to give yourself this year than to forgive. No, lack of forgiveness isn't the only reason you can feel like you're on the outside looking in. But we sure do need to check our inner lives frequently to make sure those pesky seeds of bitterness and resentment haven't taken root somewhere and are growing again. When you ask for and give forgiveness God's way, you will feel connected spiritually – connected to God and to others. Here's a final solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #3: PURSUE JESUS

Several years ago, a book I read had a profound effect on me. The author said that the greatest desire that a follower of Jesus should have is simply to be with Jesus. Yes, we are called to be like Jesus. Our inner character should experience spiritual transformation as we follow Jesus. Yes, we are called to be for Jesus. We should serve Him with our time, talents and treasure. But above all, you and I should relentlessly pursue the sheer joy of being with Jesus. It reminds me of a verse in our text today. "We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us.

And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." (1 John 1:3 NLT) What a gift it is to pursue and experience the presence of Jesus – His love, His grace, His excellence, His perfection, His completeness, His power!

I've come to realize in my own life that when I start to feel as if I'm on the outside looking in at life – frustrated, disconnected, unfulfilled, stressed – it's often

because I've stopped pursuing Jesus and simply being with Him. I've gotten distracted by life. I've gotten preoccupied with myself. I've gotten ahead of Jesus. When Jesus first selected the twelve disciples, the Bible says, "He appointed twelve that they might be with him...." (Mark 3:14 NIV) Yes, they did other things as Jesus' disciples, to be sure, but, first and foremost, it was all about being with Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can become like Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can be for Jesus. Ironically, it's so much easier to become like Jesus and for Jesus when I focus, first and foremost, on being with Jesus.

In his book entitled "Good Morning, Merry Sunshine", author, Bob Greene, chronicles his infant daughter's first year of life. When little Amanda started to crawl, she started doing something that Bob found a little weird at first. He'd be lying in bed reading a book or watching TV when all of sudden he'd look down at the foot of the bed to find Amanda there just staring back at him. She'd pulled herself up to a standing position by the bed and she was just gazing at her daddy. Apparently, he'd become an object that fascinated her. Bob didn't quite know how to react at first. All he could figure out was that Amanda just liked coming in and looking at him. She didn't expect anything in return – conversation, interaction, getting picked up. So Bob simply began to return her gaze. He just stared back. After a few minutes, Amanda decided that was enough. She plopped back down and crawled back into the living room.

There is a simple pleasure in just looking at the one you love – what Bob and his daughter, Amanda, enjoyed. By faith, you and I can just stare at Jesus. You can just gaze upon His majesty and grace with the eyes of faith. Learn how to be with Jesus. Pursue Him. That matters? It matters more than you will ever know and it may be the single best solution to those times in life when you feel like you're on the outside looking in. Jesus loves you. Love Him.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN 1 JOHN 1:1-10

This Advent season I'm using four classic Christmas movies to underline or emphasize some wonderful, biblical truths about Christmas. The movie I want to feature today is entitled *Home Alone*. It's the story of eight year old Kevin at Christmastime. His large, extended family takes off a few days before Christmas for a vacation in Paris. Quite by accident, Kevin is left behind at home all by himself. At first, he's delighted by this turn of events. He and a few members of his family were really getting on each other's nerves. Suddenly he had the freedom to do anything he wanted to do, eat whatever he wanted to eat and go to bed whenever he wanted. It was fantastic – for awhile. But before too long, young Kevin starts to get lonely and miss his family. Now, the movie is a comedy and much of it has to do with Kevin's clever defense of his home from two bumbling crooks who want to rob the place. But there are a few poignant moments. One of them is when Kevin starts to feel lonely. He realizes he is terribly and utterly alone. I want to show you that scene right now. Kevin finds Santa Claus and asks that his family be returned to him as his Christmas gift. On Christmas Eve, he walks back to his house alone. From the sidewalk, he observes a family getting together for a meal and exchanging of gifts. The look on his face is one of sadness and longing. He's on the outside looking in.

Have you ever been on the outside looking in? Not literally, but spiritually or emotionally. The Bible makes it clear that God created you to be a relational being. You were never meant to do life completely alone. Now, because of sin, our relationship with God was broken. And also because of sin – either our sins against other people or their sins against us – we experience many broken relationships in life. The results are feelings of loneliness, separation and isolation. For many people, those feelings pick up in intensity during the Christmas season. I'm sure you've heard that many people struggle with feelings of depression this time of year. Part of the reason is this feeling of being on the outside looking in. People don't feel connected to God or to other people. They feel like Kevin in that scene – alone and isolated. Do you ever feel like you're on the outside looking in? You don't have to feel that way. I want you to think with me biblically about that today. Let's turn to one passage in the Bible that addresses the issue of being on the outside looking in and how to fix it. Here's the first biblical solution for being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #1: FIND GOD

That solution is offered to anyone here today who doesn't have a personal relationship with God yet. I know finding God sounds incredibly basic and obvious, but sometimes the most basic, obvious things get overlooked. One reason you feel like you're on the outside looking in is because you are on the outside looking in! Your feelings point to a very real spiritual problem. Again, the Bible says that you were created by God for a personal relationship with God. Sin messed it up. Every one of us is a sinner meaning that each of us has broken

God's laws and fallen short of God's standards. Everybody? Everybody. As a result, each of us is spiritually disconnected from God. One symptom of that lack of connection with God is this hard to define feeling that we're on the outside looking in about so much in life. You can feel deeply lonely even though you have lots of family and friends around you. Why? You're actually lonely for God. Your life lacks purpose because purpose comes from God. You might even have this kind of vague sense of anxiety all of the time – a sense that your life is missing something important. St. Augustine said centuries ago that every one of us has a God-shaped vacuum inside of us that only God can fill. Because you start out life lacking God, you must go out and find Him. Author Larry Crabb observes, "Feeling better has become more important to us than finding God." In other words, we dodge and evade and downplay this need for God, but there's just no substitute for finding Him. You will never feel better until you find God.

In the Bible passage we read, John tells us that God took the initiative to solve this most basic of human problems. "We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life." (1 John 1:1 NLT) Who's John talking about? Jesus, of course. He's pointing to what Christians call the Incarnation – God took upon Himself human flesh in the person of a man known as Jesus of Nazareth. John spent about three years following this Jesus around the land of Israel. He heard Jesus teach. He saw Jesus perform miracles. Then, he watched Him die on a cross. But three days, later this same Jesus got up again very much alive. John saw Jesus with his own eyes, touched Jesus' body with his own hands, and heard Him speak with John's own ears. Jesus was no ghost, no fantasy, no figment of John's imagination. And in Jesus, John found God. He found truth and reality. In Jesus, John found what his own soul could not define but what it craved.

Finding God. It's the single, most fundamental human need of all. It's not finding religion. Keeping rules and regulations or even following a strict moral code of conduct will not do it. It's not finding church. Singing songs, hearing a Bible message and hanging out with church folk will not do it in and of itself. It's not finding spirituality. Our culture will congratulate you for meditating, praying and thinking sentimentally about life, but that won't do it either. No, you must find God. You must somehow touch the Eternal. You must experience life – the life by which God Himself lives. And that life comes to you and me through this Jesus. How does John put it? "This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us." (1 John 1:2 NLT) The Bible and followers of Jesus call it by different names – being born again, getting saved, becoming a Christian, believing in Jesus, making a personal commitment to Christ – but it all points to the same basic, obvious reality: finding God! Has that ever happened to you?

Now, I realize that most everyone here today will say, “Rick, I’ve found God.” But there may be one, or two, or five or ten folk here today who haven’t yet. You might have religion, but you don’t have God. You might attend church regularly, but you don’t have God. You might be a spiritual person, but you don’t have God. If there’s anything that I pray that you will experience this Christmas, it’s that. Please find God. After all, that’s why God sent His Son into this world. You don’t have to be on the outside looking in at what God has done. It starts with finding God. Here’s a second solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling of being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #2: PRACTICE FORGIVENESS

Did you notice what a big place John gives to forgiveness in the verses we read? He talks about walking in the light, the blood of Jesus purifying us from all sin and God forgiving our sins when we sincerely confess those to Him. Why? One big reason for that uncomfortable feeling that you’re always somehow on the outside looking in is stuff going on in your life that needs forgiveness. We’ve said or done things – or failed to say or do things – that desperately need to be renounced by us and forgiven by God. John’s words here reveal some basic truths about forgiveness that each of us would do well to remember and practice.

First, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness. That happens initially when you find God. You admit you’re a sinner and you ask God to forgive all of your sins. You ask Jesus to be your Savior and Lord and you experience His forgiveness. That’s where it all starts. Second, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness continually. John says here, “But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.” (1 John 1:9 NLT) Here’s one reason why you can still feel like you’re on the outside looking in even after you’ve found God, or been born again, or gotten saved: you’ve got unconfessed sin in your life.

Sin that you hold onto, justify, excuse, tolerate, put up with – it separates you from God. I’m not saying you lose your salvation or forfeit Heaven. I am saying that a sense of spiritual life or a personal connection with God can be forfeited. The result is that you feel isolated from Him at a very deep level. That feeling of being on the outside looking in starts to creep into your soul again. I remember learning an important spiritual principle from a godly teacher in high school years ago now. He told me, “Rick, keep short accounts with God.” He meant that the moment the Holy Spirit speaks into my inner spirit about an ungodly act, a spiteful attitude, or an unkind word – at that very moment – I need to confess that sin and ask for God’s forgiveness immediately. That’s made a big impact on my daily walk with God. Don’t let the spiritual crud pile up. Keep short accounts. It’s one way to keeping that outside looking in feeling out of my life.

Third, ask forgiveness from and give forgiveness to other people. The major obstacle to great relationships – be it marriage, family, friends, people at church

– is sin. Sin just messes up everything and especially our relationships with other people. Until sin is dealt with in a biblical way, you'll experience a growing discomfort in your soul. Often, it's that old, familiar feeling of being on the outside looking in. You start to feel alone, cut off, disconnected from God and other people. What do I mean by asking forgiveness from other people? Quite simply, it means walking up to someone you've offended – looking him or her right in the eye – and saying, "I did such and such. I was wrong. I want to ask for your forgiveness." But that's so hard to do, isn't it? It's just hard on your pride which God is going to destroy completely one day anyway. I guarantee that not one of us will take one morsel of our sinful pride into Heaven with us, so why not allow God to kill it off here and now? Humility before God and others goes a long way to restoring a sense of connectedness with God and with others. John alludes to that spiritual reality when he says, "But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:7 NLT). Forgiveness is necessary to living in the light of God's grace and love.

The other part of this forgiveness equation is when we give or extend it to those who have hurt us. This can be much harder than going and asking someone to forgive us. The Bible has much to say about all of this and Christmas time is a great occasion to review what it teaches. Why give forgiveness to those who have hurt us? Let me suggest three biblical principles. One, forgive others because Jesus forgave you, not because they deserve it. What does one have to do with the other? Jesus was the One who tied them together. He said, "... 'You can't get forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your part, you cut yourself off from God's part.'" (Matt 6:14-15 MSG) When you extend forgiveness, you aren't admitting that what that person did to you was somehow OK. No, you're simply recognizing that if God could forgive you of your sins against Him, you can now be enabled by His Spirit to give forgiveness to those who offend you. Please recognize the force of what Jesus is saying. If you refuse forgiveness to someone, you give evidence that God's grace has not yet truly penetrated your own heart. The reality of your conversion is in doubt. When you refuse to forgive someone, one result will be the return of that feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

Two, forgive others even when the wrong is not acknowledged and forgiveness is not requested. Jesus did exactly that when, hanging from the cross, He said, "... 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing...'" (Luke 23:34 NIV) Some people will never acknowledge their offense or ask your forgiveness. Some people will never be at peace with you because at a deep, fundamental level they're not at peace with God. They have a far more serious issue than the fact they've offended you. They're out of touch with the God of the Universe. Of course, they're on the outside looking in spiritually, but they will not admit it. Their pride requires them to maintain until the day they die that everyone else is wrong and they're right. So, why extend forgiveness to people like that?

Three, forgive others because you must not allow resentment to build a stronghold in your life. There's nothing quite so dangerous to your personal spiritual life than holding on to bitterness, resentment or a stubborn unwillingness to forgive. Talk about that feeling of being on the outside looking in! Lack of forgiveness is a spiritual poison that will alienate you from God and others. Listen and obey God's Word when it says, "Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many." (Heb 2:15 NLT) It also says, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger.... Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you." (Eph 4:31-32 NLT)

There's a great scene about the importance of forgiveness in the movie *Home Alone*. Kevin is afraid of an older man who lives next door to him. He seems mean and gruff to say the least. Rumor has it that this older man has a criminal past. One evening, Kevin walks into a neighborhood church and who should be sitting in the pew across from him? The mean old man himself! They end up having a great conversation about forgiveness. Let's watch!

Are you afraid to ask someone to forgive you? Or, are you afraid to extend forgiveness to someone? I can't think of a better Christmas gift to give someone else or to give yourself this year than to forgive. No, lack of forgiveness isn't the only reason you can feel like you're on the outside looking in. But we sure do need to check our inner lives frequently to make sure those pesky seeds of bitterness and resentment haven't taken root somewhere and are growing again. When you ask for and give forgiveness God's way, you will feel connected spiritually – connected to God and to others. Here's a final solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #3: PURSUE JESUS

Several years ago, a book I read had a profound effect on me. The author said that the greatest desire that a follower of Jesus should have is simply to be with Jesus. Yes, we are called to be like Jesus. Our inner character should experience spiritual transformation as we follow Jesus. Yes, we are called to be for Jesus. We should serve Him with our time, talents and treasure. But above all, you and I should relentlessly pursue the sheer joy of being with Jesus. It reminds me of a verse in our text today. "We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us.

And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." (1 John 1:3 NLT) What a gift it is to pursue and experience the presence of Jesus – His love, His grace, His excellence, His perfection, His completeness, His power!

I've come to realize in my own life that when I start to feel as if I'm on the outside looking in at life – frustrated, disconnected, unfulfilled, stressed – it's often

because I've stopped pursuing Jesus and simply being with Him. I've gotten distracted by life. I've gotten preoccupied with myself. I've gotten ahead of Jesus. When Jesus first selected the twelve disciples, the Bible says, "He appointed twelve that they might be with him...." (Mark 3:14 NIV) Yes, they did other things as Jesus' disciples, to be sure, but, first and foremost, it was all about being with Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can become like Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can be for Jesus. Ironically, it's so much easier to become like Jesus and for Jesus when I focus, first and foremost, on being with Jesus.

In his book entitled "Good Morning, Merry Sunshine", author, Bob Greene, chronicles his infant daughter's first year of life. When little Amanda started to crawl, she started doing something that Bob found a little weird at first. He'd be lying in bed reading a book or watching TV when all of sudden he'd look down at the foot of the bed to find Amanda there just staring back at him. She'd pulled herself up to a standing position by the bed and she was just gazing at her daddy. Apparently, he'd become an object that fascinated her. Bob didn't quite know how to react at first. All he could figure out was that Amanda just liked coming in and looking at him. She didn't expect anything in return – conversation, interaction, getting picked up. So Bob simply began to return her gaze. He just stared back. After a few minutes, Amanda decided that was enough. She plopped back down and crawled back into the living room.

There is a simple pleasure in just looking at the one you love – what Bob and his daughter, Amanda, enjoyed. By faith, you and I can just stare at Jesus. You can just gaze upon His majesty and grace with the eyes of faith. Learn how to be with Jesus. Pursue Him. That matters? It matters more than you will ever know and it may be the single best solution to those times in life when you feel like you're on the outside looking in. Jesus loves you. Love Him.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN 1 JOHN 1:1-10

This Advent season I'm using four classic Christmas movies to underline or emphasize some wonderful, biblical truths about Christmas. The movie I want to feature today is entitled *Home Alone*. It's the story of eight year old Kevin at Christmastime. His large, extended family takes off a few days before Christmas for a vacation in Paris. Quite by accident, Kevin is left behind at home all by himself. At first, he's delighted by this turn of events. He and a few members of his family were really getting on each other's nerves. Suddenly he had the freedom to do anything he wanted to do, eat whatever he wanted to eat and go to bed whenever he wanted. It was fantastic – for awhile. But before too long, young Kevin starts to get lonely and miss his family. Now, the movie is a comedy and much of it has to do with Kevin's clever defense of his home from two bumbling crooks who want to rob the place. But there are a few poignant moments. One of them is when Kevin starts to feel lonely. He realizes he is terribly and utterly alone. I want to show you that scene right now. Kevin finds Santa Claus and asks that his family be returned to him as his Christmas gift. On Christmas Eve, he walks back to his house alone. From the sidewalk, he observes a family getting together for a meal and exchanging of gifts. The look on his face is one of sadness and longing. He's on the outside looking in.

Have you ever been on the outside looking in? Not literally, but spiritually or emotionally. The Bible makes it clear that God created you to be a relational being. You were never meant to do life completely alone. Now, because of sin, our relationship with God was broken. And also because of sin – either our sins against other people or their sins against us – we experience many broken relationships in life. The results are feelings of loneliness, separation and isolation. For many people, those feelings pick up in intensity during the Christmas season. I'm sure you've heard that many people struggle with feelings of depression this time of year. Part of the reason is this feeling of being on the outside looking in. People don't feel connected to God or to other people. They feel like Kevin in that scene – alone and isolated. Do you ever feel like you're on the outside looking in? You don't have to feel that way. I want you to think with me biblically about that today. Let's turn to one passage in the Bible that addresses the issue of being on the outside looking in and how to fix it. Here's the first biblical solution for being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #1: FIND GOD

That solution is offered to anyone here today who doesn't have a personal relationship with God yet. I know finding God sounds incredibly basic and obvious, but sometimes the most basic, obvious things get overlooked. One reason you feel like you're on the outside looking in is because you are on the outside looking in! Your feelings point to a very real spiritual problem. Again, the Bible says that you were created by God for a personal relationship with God. Sin messed it up. Every one of us is a sinner meaning that each of us has broken

God's laws and fallen short of God's standards. Everybody? Everybody. As a result, each of us is spiritually disconnected from God. One symptom of that lack of connection with God is this hard to define feeling that we're on the outside looking in about so much in life. You can feel deeply lonely even though you have lots of family and friends around you. Why? You're actually lonely for God. Your life lacks purpose because purpose comes from God. You might even have this kind of vague sense of anxiety all of the time – a sense that your life is missing something important. St. Augustine said centuries ago that every one of us has a God-shaped vacuum inside of us that only God can fill. Because you start out life lacking God, you must go out and find Him. Author Larry Crabb observes, "Feeling better has become more important to us than finding God." In other words, we dodge and evade and downplay this need for God, but there's just no substitute for finding Him. You will never feel better until you find God.

In the Bible passage we read, John tells us that God took the initiative to solve this most basic of human problems. "We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life." (1 John 1:1 NLT) Who's John talking about? Jesus, of course. He's pointing to what Christians call the Incarnation – God took upon Himself human flesh in the person of a man known as Jesus of Nazareth. John spent about three years following this Jesus around the land of Israel. He heard Jesus teach. He saw Jesus perform miracles. Then, he watched Him die on a cross. But three days, later this same Jesus got up again very much alive. John saw Jesus with his own eyes, touched Jesus' body with his own hands, and heard Him speak with John's own ears. Jesus was no ghost, no fantasy, no figment of John's imagination. And in Jesus, John found God. He found truth and reality. In Jesus, John found what his own soul could not define but what it craved.

Finding God. It's the single, most fundamental human need of all. It's not finding religion. Keeping rules and regulations or even following a strict moral code of conduct will not do it. It's not finding church. Singing songs, hearing a Bible message and hanging out with church folk will not do it in and of itself. It's not finding spirituality. Our culture will congratulate you for meditating, praying and thinking sentimentally about life, but that won't do it either. No, you must find God. You must somehow touch the Eternal. You must experience life – the life by which God Himself lives. And that life comes to you and me through this Jesus. How does John put it? "This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us." (1 John 1:2 NLT) The Bible and followers of Jesus call it by different names – being born again, getting saved, becoming a Christian, believing in Jesus, making a personal commitment to Christ – but it all points to the same basic, obvious reality: finding God! Has that ever happened to you?

Now, I realize that most everyone here today will say, “Rick, I’ve found God.” But there may be one, or two, or five or ten folk here today who haven’t yet. You might have religion, but you don’t have God. You might attend church regularly, but you don’t have God. You might be a spiritual person, but you don’t have God. If there’s anything that I pray that you will experience this Christmas, it’s that. Please find God. After all, that’s why God sent His Son into this world. You don’t have to be on the outside looking in at what God has done. It starts with finding God. Here’s a second solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling of being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #2: PRACTICE FORGIVENESS

Did you notice what a big place John gives to forgiveness in the verses we read? He talks about walking in the light, the blood of Jesus purifying us from all sin and God forgiving our sins when we sincerely confess those to Him. Why? One big reason for that uncomfortable feeling that you’re always somehow on the outside looking in is stuff going on in your life that needs forgiveness. We’ve said or done things – or failed to say or do things – that desperately need to be renounced by us and forgiven by God. John’s words here reveal some basic truths about forgiveness that each of us would do well to remember and practice.

First, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness. That happens initially when you find God. You admit you’re a sinner and you ask God to forgive all of your sins. You ask Jesus to be your Savior and Lord and you experience His forgiveness. That’s where it all starts. Second, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness continually. John says here, “But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.” (1 John 1:9 NLT) Here’s one reason why you can still feel like you’re on the outside looking in even after you’ve found God, or been born again, or gotten saved: you’ve got unconfessed sin in your life.

Sin that you hold onto, justify, excuse, tolerate, put up with – it separates you from God. I’m not saying you lose your salvation or forfeit Heaven. I am saying that a sense of spiritual life or a personal connection with God can be forfeited. The result is that you feel isolated from Him at a very deep level. That feeling of being on the outside looking in starts to creep into your soul again. I remember learning an important spiritual principle from a godly teacher in high school years ago now. He told me, “Rick, keep short accounts with God.” He meant that the moment the Holy Spirit speaks into my inner spirit about an ungodly act, a spiteful attitude, or an unkind word – at that very moment – I need to confess that sin and ask for God’s forgiveness immediately. That’s made a big impact on my daily walk with God. Don’t let the spiritual crud pile up. Keep short accounts. It’s one way to keeping that outside looking in feeling out of my life.

Third, ask forgiveness from and give forgiveness to other people. The major obstacle to great relationships – be it marriage, family, friends, people at church

– is sin. Sin just messes up everything and especially our relationships with other people. Until sin is dealt with in a biblical way, you'll experience a growing discomfort in your soul. Often, it's that old, familiar feeling of being on the outside looking in. You start to feel alone, cut off, disconnected from God and other people. What do I mean by asking forgiveness from other people? Quite simply, it means walking up to someone you've offended – looking him or her right in the eye – and saying, "I did such and such. I was wrong. I want to ask for your forgiveness." But that's so hard to do, isn't it? It's just hard on your pride which God is going to destroy completely one day anyway. I guarantee that not one of us will take one morsel of our sinful pride into Heaven with us, so why not allow God to kill it off here and now? Humility before God and others goes a long way to restoring a sense of connectedness with God and with others. John alludes to that spiritual reality when he says, "But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:7 NLT). Forgiveness is necessary to living in the light of God's grace and love.

The other part of this forgiveness equation is when we give or extend it to those who have hurt us. This can be much harder than going and asking someone to forgive us. The Bible has much to say about all of this and Christmas time is a great occasion to review what it teaches. Why give forgiveness to those who have hurt us? Let me suggest three biblical principles. One, forgive others because Jesus forgave you, not because they deserve it. What does one have to do with the other? Jesus was the One who tied them together. He said, "... 'You can't get forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your part, you cut yourself off from God's part.'" (Matt 6:14-15 MSG) When you extend forgiveness, you aren't admitting that what that person did to you was somehow OK. No, you're simply recognizing that if God could forgive you of your sins against Him, you can now be enabled by His Spirit to give forgiveness to those who offend you. Please recognize the force of what Jesus is saying. If you refuse forgiveness to someone, you give evidence that God's grace has not yet truly penetrated your own heart. The reality of your conversion is in doubt. When you refuse to forgive someone, one result will be the return of that feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

Two, forgive others even when the wrong is not acknowledged and forgiveness is not requested. Jesus did exactly that when, hanging from the cross, He said, "... 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing...'" (Luke 23:34 NIV) Some people will never acknowledge their offense or ask your forgiveness. Some people will never be at peace with you because at a deep, fundamental level they're not at peace with God. They have a far more serious issue than the fact they've offended you. They're out of touch with the God of the Universe. Of course, they're on the outside looking in spiritually, but they will not admit it. Their pride requires them to maintain until the day they die that everyone else is wrong and they're right. So, why extend forgiveness to people like that?

Three, forgive others because you must not allow resentment to build a stronghold in your life. There's nothing quite so dangerous to your personal spiritual life than holding on to bitterness, resentment or a stubborn unwillingness to forgive. Talk about that feeling of being on the outside looking in! Lack of forgiveness is a spiritual poison that will alienate you from God and others. Listen and obey God's Word when it says, "Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many." (Heb 2:15 NLT) It also says, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger.... Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you." (Eph 4:31-32 NLT)

There's a great scene about the importance of forgiveness in the movie *Home Alone*. Kevin is afraid of an older man who lives next door to him. He seems mean and gruff to say the least. Rumor has it that this older man has a criminal past. One evening, Kevin walks into a neighborhood church and who should be sitting in the pew across from him? The mean old man himself! They end up having a great conversation about forgiveness. Let's watch!

Are you afraid to ask someone to forgive you? Or, are you afraid to extend forgiveness to someone? I can't think of a better Christmas gift to give someone else or to give yourself this year than to forgive. No, lack of forgiveness isn't the only reason you can feel like you're on the outside looking in. But we sure do need to check our inner lives frequently to make sure those pesky seeds of bitterness and resentment haven't taken root somewhere and are growing again. When you ask for and give forgiveness God's way, you will feel connected spiritually – connected to God and to others. Here's a final solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #3: PURSUE JESUS

Several years ago, a book I read had a profound effect on me. The author said that the greatest desire that a follower of Jesus should have is simply to be with Jesus. Yes, we are called to be like Jesus. Our inner character should experience spiritual transformation as we follow Jesus. Yes, we are called to be for Jesus. We should serve Him with our time, talents and treasure. But above all, you and I should relentlessly pursue the sheer joy of being with Jesus. It reminds me of a verse in our text today. "We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us.

And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." (1 John 1:3 NLT) What a gift it is to pursue and experience the presence of Jesus – His love, His grace, His excellence, His perfection, His completeness, His power!

I've come to realize in my own life that when I start to feel as if I'm on the outside looking in at life – frustrated, disconnected, unfulfilled, stressed – it's often

because I've stopped pursuing Jesus and simply being with Him. I've gotten distracted by life. I've gotten preoccupied with myself. I've gotten ahead of Jesus. When Jesus first selected the twelve disciples, the Bible says, "He appointed twelve that they might be with him...." (Mark 3:14 NIV) Yes, they did other things as Jesus' disciples, to be sure, but, first and foremost, it was all about being with Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can become like Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can be for Jesus. Ironically, it's so much easier to become like Jesus and for Jesus when I focus, first and foremost, on being with Jesus.

In his book entitled "Good Morning, Merry Sunshine", author, Bob Greene, chronicles his infant daughter's first year of life. When little Amanda started to crawl, she started doing something that Bob found a little weird at first. He'd be lying in bed reading a book or watching TV when all of sudden he'd look down at the foot of the bed to find Amanda there just staring back at him. She'd pulled herself up to a standing position by the bed and she was just gazing at her daddy. Apparently, he'd become an object that fascinated her. Bob didn't quite know how to react at first. All he could figure out was that Amanda just liked coming in and looking at him. She didn't expect anything in return – conversation, interaction, getting picked up. So Bob simply began to return her gaze. He just stared back. After a few minutes, Amanda decided that was enough. She plopped back down and crawled back into the living room.

There is a simple pleasure in just looking at the one you love – what Bob and his daughter, Amanda, enjoyed. By faith, you and I can just stare at Jesus. You can just gaze upon His majesty and grace with the eyes of faith. Learn how to be with Jesus. Pursue Him. That matters? It matters more than you will ever know and it may be the single best solution to those times in life when you feel like you're on the outside looking in. Jesus loves you. Love Him.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN 1 JOHN 1:1-10

This Advent season I'm using four classic Christmas movies to underline or emphasize some wonderful, biblical truths about Christmas. The movie I want to feature today is entitled *Home Alone*. It's the story of eight year old Kevin at Christmastime. His large, extended family takes off a few days before Christmas for a vacation in Paris. Quite by accident, Kevin is left behind at home all by himself. At first, he's delighted by this turn of events. He and a few members of his family were really getting on each other's nerves. Suddenly he had the freedom to do anything he wanted to do, eat whatever he wanted to eat and go to bed whenever he wanted. It was fantastic – for awhile. But before too long, young Kevin starts to get lonely and miss his family. Now, the movie is a comedy and much of it has to do with Kevin's clever defense of his home from two bumbling crooks who want to rob the place. But there are a few poignant moments. One of them is when Kevin starts to feel lonely. He realizes he is terribly and utterly alone. I want to show you that scene right now. Kevin finds Santa Claus and asks that his family be returned to him as his Christmas gift. On Christmas Eve, he walks back to his house alone. From the sidewalk, he observes a family getting together for a meal and exchanging of gifts. The look on his face is one of sadness and longing. He's on the outside looking in.

Have you ever been on the outside looking in? Not literally, but spiritually or emotionally. The Bible makes it clear that God created you to be a relational being. You were never meant to do life completely alone. Now, because of sin, our relationship with God was broken. And also because of sin – either our sins against other people or their sins against us – we experience many broken relationships in life. The results are feelings of loneliness, separation and isolation. For many people, those feelings pick up in intensity during the Christmas season. I'm sure you've heard that many people struggle with feelings of depression this time of year. Part of the reason is this feeling of being on the outside looking in. People don't feel connected to God or to other people. They feel like Kevin in that scene – alone and isolated. Do you ever feel like you're on the outside looking in? You don't have to feel that way. I want you to think with me biblically about that today. Let's turn to one passage in the Bible that addresses the issue of being on the outside looking in and how to fix it. Here's the first biblical solution for being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #1: FIND GOD

That solution is offered to anyone here today who doesn't have a personal relationship with God yet. I know finding God sounds incredibly basic and obvious, but sometimes the most basic, obvious things get overlooked. One reason you feel like you're on the outside looking in is because you are on the outside looking in! Your feelings point to a very real spiritual problem. Again, the Bible says that you were created by God for a personal relationship with God. Sin messed it up. Every one of us is a sinner meaning that each of us has broken

God's laws and fallen short of God's standards. Everybody? Everybody. As a result, each of us is spiritually disconnected from God. One symptom of that lack of connection with God is this hard to define feeling that we're on the outside looking in about so much in life. You can feel deeply lonely even though you have lots of family and friends around you. Why? You're actually lonely for God. Your life lacks purpose because purpose comes from God. You might even have this kind of vague sense of anxiety all of the time – a sense that your life is missing something important. St. Augustine said centuries ago that every one of us has a God-shaped vacuum inside of us that only God can fill. Because you start out life lacking God, you must go out and find Him. Author Larry Crabb observes, "Feeling better has become more important to us than finding God." In other words, we dodge and evade and downplay this need for God, but there's just no substitute for finding Him. You will never feel better until you find God.

In the Bible passage we read, John tells us that God took the initiative to solve this most basic of human problems. "We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life." (1 John 1:1 NLT) Who's John talking about? Jesus, of course. He's pointing to what Christians call the Incarnation – God took upon Himself human flesh in the person of a man known as Jesus of Nazareth. John spent about three years following this Jesus around the land of Israel. He heard Jesus teach. He saw Jesus perform miracles. Then, he watched Him die on a cross. But three days, later this same Jesus got up again very much alive. John saw Jesus with his own eyes, touched Jesus' body with his own hands, and heard Him speak with John's own ears. Jesus was no ghost, no fantasy, no figment of John's imagination. And in Jesus, John found God. He found truth and reality. In Jesus, John found what his own soul could not define but what it craved.

Finding God. It's the single, most fundamental human need of all. It's not finding religion. Keeping rules and regulations or even following a strict moral code of conduct will not do it. It's not finding church. Singing songs, hearing a Bible message and hanging out with church folk will not do it in and of itself. It's not finding spirituality. Our culture will congratulate you for meditating, praying and thinking sentimentally about life, but that won't do it either. No, you must find God. You must somehow touch the Eternal. You must experience life – the life by which God Himself lives. And that life comes to you and me through this Jesus. How does John put it? "This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us." (1 John 1:2 NLT) The Bible and followers of Jesus call it by different names – being born again, getting saved, becoming a Christian, believing in Jesus, making a personal commitment to Christ – but it all points to the same basic, obvious reality: finding God! Has that ever happened to you?

Now, I realize that most everyone here today will say, “Rick, I’ve found God.” But there may be one, or two, or five or ten folk here today who haven’t yet. You might have religion, but you don’t have God. You might attend church regularly, but you don’t have God. You might be a spiritual person, but you don’t have God. If there’s anything that I pray that you will experience this Christmas, it’s that. Please find God. After all, that’s why God sent His Son into this world. You don’t have to be on the outside looking in at what God has done. It starts with finding God. Here’s a second solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling of being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #2: PRACTICE FORGIVENESS

Did you notice what a big place John gives to forgiveness in the verses we read? He talks about walking in the light, the blood of Jesus purifying us from all sin and God forgiving our sins when we sincerely confess those to Him. Why? One big reason for that uncomfortable feeling that you’re always somehow on the outside looking in is stuff going on in your life that needs forgiveness. We’ve said or done things – or failed to say or do things – that desperately need to be renounced by us and forgiven by God. John’s words here reveal some basic truths about forgiveness that each of us would do well to remember and practice.

First, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness. That happens initially when you find God. You admit you’re a sinner and you ask God to forgive all of your sins. You ask Jesus to be your Savior and Lord and you experience His forgiveness. That’s where it all starts. Second, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness continually. John says here, “But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.” (1 John 1:9 NLT) Here’s one reason why you can still feel like you’re on the outside looking in even after you’ve found God, or been born again, or gotten saved: you’ve got unconfessed sin in your life.

Sin that you hold onto, justify, excuse, tolerate, put up with – it separates you from God. I’m not saying you lose your salvation or forfeit Heaven. I am saying that a sense of spiritual life or a personal connection with God can be forfeited. The result is that you feel isolated from Him at a very deep level. That feeling of being on the outside looking in starts to creep into your soul again. I remember learning an important spiritual principle from a godly teacher in high school years ago now. He told me, “Rick, keep short accounts with God.” He meant that the moment the Holy Spirit speaks into my inner spirit about an ungodly act, a spiteful attitude, or an unkind word – at that very moment – I need to confess that sin and ask for God’s forgiveness immediately. That’s made a big impact on my daily walk with God. Don’t let the spiritual crud pile up. Keep short accounts. It’s one way to keeping that outside looking in feeling out of my life.

Third, ask forgiveness from and give forgiveness to other people. The major obstacle to great relationships – be it marriage, family, friends, people at church

– is sin. Sin just messes up everything and especially our relationships with other people. Until sin is dealt with in a biblical way, you'll experience a growing discomfort in your soul. Often, it's that old, familiar feeling of being on the outside looking in. You start to feel alone, cut off, disconnected from God and other people. What do I mean by asking forgiveness from other people? Quite simply, it means walking up to someone you've offended – looking him or her right in the eye – and saying, "I did such and such. I was wrong. I want to ask for your forgiveness." But that's so hard to do, isn't it? It's just hard on your pride which God is going to destroy completely one day anyway. I guarantee that not one of us will take one morsel of our sinful pride into Heaven with us, so why not allow God to kill it off here and now? Humility before God and others goes a long way to restoring a sense of connectedness with God and with others. John alludes to that spiritual reality when he says, "But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:7 NLT). Forgiveness is necessary to living in the light of God's grace and love.

The other part of this forgiveness equation is when we give or extend it to those who have hurt us. This can be much harder than going and asking someone to forgive us. The Bible has much to say about all of this and Christmas time is a great occasion to review what it teaches. Why give forgiveness to those who have hurt us? Let me suggest three biblical principles. One, forgive others because Jesus forgave you, not because they deserve it. What does one have to do with the other? Jesus was the One who tied them together. He said, "... 'You can't get forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your part, you cut yourself off from God's part.'" (Matt 6:14-15 MSG) When you extend forgiveness, you aren't admitting that what that person did to you was somehow OK. No, you're simply recognizing that if God could forgive you of your sins against Him, you can now be enabled by His Spirit to give forgiveness to those who offend you. Please recognize the force of what Jesus is saying. If you refuse forgiveness to someone, you give evidence that God's grace has not yet truly penetrated your own heart. The reality of your conversion is in doubt. When you refuse to forgive someone, one result will be the return of that feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

Two, forgive others even when the wrong is not acknowledged and forgiveness is not requested. Jesus did exactly that when, hanging from the cross, He said, "... 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing...'" (Luke 23:34 NIV) Some people will never acknowledge their offense or ask your forgiveness. Some people will never be at peace with you because at a deep, fundamental level they're not at peace with God. They have a far more serious issue than the fact they've offended you. They're out of touch with the God of the Universe. Of course, they're on the outside looking in spiritually, but they will not admit it. Their pride requires them to maintain until the day they die that everyone else is wrong and they're right. So, why extend forgiveness to people like that?

Three, forgive others because you must not allow resentment to build a stronghold in your life. There's nothing quite so dangerous to your personal spiritual life than holding on to bitterness, resentment or a stubborn unwillingness to forgive. Talk about that feeling of being on the outside looking in! Lack of forgiveness is a spiritual poison that will alienate you from God and others. Listen and obey God's Word when it says, "Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many." (Heb 2:15 NLT) It also says, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger.... Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you." (Eph 4:31-32 NLT)

There's a great scene about the importance of forgiveness in the movie *Home Alone*. Kevin is afraid of an older man who lives next door to him. He seems mean and gruff to say the least. Rumor has it that this older man has a criminal past. One evening, Kevin walks into a neighborhood church and who should be sitting in the pew across from him? The mean old man himself! They end up having a great conversation about forgiveness. Let's watch!

Are you afraid to ask someone to forgive you? Or, are you afraid to extend forgiveness to someone? I can't think of a better Christmas gift to give someone else or to give yourself this year than to forgive. No, lack of forgiveness isn't the only reason you can feel like you're on the outside looking in. But we sure do need to check our inner lives frequently to make sure those pesky seeds of bitterness and resentment haven't taken root somewhere and are growing again. When you ask for and give forgiveness God's way, you will feel connected spiritually – connected to God and to others. Here's a final solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #3: PURSUE JESUS

Several years ago, a book I read had a profound effect on me. The author said that the greatest desire that a follower of Jesus should have is simply to be with Jesus. Yes, we are called to be like Jesus. Our inner character should experience spiritual transformation as we follow Jesus. Yes, we are called to be for Jesus. We should serve Him with our time, talents and treasure. But above all, you and I should relentlessly pursue the sheer joy of being with Jesus. It reminds me of a verse in our text today. "We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us.

And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." (1 John 1:3 NLT) What a gift it is to pursue and experience the presence of Jesus – His love, His grace, His excellence, His perfection, His completeness, His power!

I've come to realize in my own life that when I start to feel as if I'm on the outside looking in at life – frustrated, disconnected, unfulfilled, stressed – it's often

because I've stopped pursuing Jesus and simply being with Him. I've gotten distracted by life. I've gotten preoccupied with myself. I've gotten ahead of Jesus. When Jesus first selected the twelve disciples, the Bible says, "He appointed twelve that they might be with him...." (Mark 3:14 NIV) Yes, they did other things as Jesus' disciples, to be sure, but, first and foremost, it was all about being with Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can become like Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can be for Jesus. Ironically, it's so much easier to become like Jesus and for Jesus when I focus, first and foremost, on being with Jesus.

In his book entitled "Good Morning, Merry Sunshine", author, Bob Greene, chronicles his infant daughter's first year of life. When little Amanda started to crawl, she started doing something that Bob found a little weird at first. He'd be lying in bed reading a book or watching TV when all of sudden he'd look down at the foot of the bed to find Amanda there just staring back at him. She'd pulled herself up to a standing position by the bed and she was just gazing at her daddy. Apparently, he'd become an object that fascinated her. Bob didn't quite know how to react at first. All he could figure out was that Amanda just liked coming in and looking at him. She didn't expect anything in return – conversation, interaction, getting picked up. So Bob simply began to return her gaze. He just stared back. After a few minutes, Amanda decided that was enough. She plopped back down and crawled back into the living room.

There is a simple pleasure in just looking at the one you love – what Bob and his daughter, Amanda, enjoyed. By faith, you and I can just stare at Jesus. You can just gaze upon His majesty and grace with the eyes of faith. Learn how to be with Jesus. Pursue Him. That matters? It matters more than you will ever know and it may be the single best solution to those times in life when you feel like you're on the outside looking in. Jesus loves you. Love Him.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN 1 JOHN 1:1-10

This Advent season I'm using four classic Christmas movies to underline or emphasize some wonderful, biblical truths about Christmas. The movie I want to feature today is entitled *Home Alone*. It's the story of eight year old Kevin at Christmastime. His large, extended family takes off a few days before Christmas for a vacation in Paris. Quite by accident, Kevin is left behind at home all by himself. At first, he's delighted by this turn of events. He and a few members of his family were really getting on each other's nerves. Suddenly he had the freedom to do anything he wanted to do, eat whatever he wanted to eat and go to bed whenever he wanted. It was fantastic – for awhile. But before too long, young Kevin starts to get lonely and miss his family. Now, the movie is a comedy and much of it has to do with Kevin's clever defense of his home from two bumbling crooks who want to rob the place. But there are a few poignant moments. One of them is when Kevin starts to feel lonely. He realizes he is terribly and utterly alone. I want to show you that scene right now. Kevin finds Santa Claus and asks that his family be returned to him as his Christmas gift. On Christmas Eve, he walks back to his house alone. From the sidewalk, he observes a family getting together for a meal and exchanging of gifts. The look on his face is one of sadness and longing. He's on the outside looking in.

Have you ever been on the outside looking in? Not literally, but spiritually or emotionally. The Bible makes it clear that God created you to be a relational being. You were never meant to do life completely alone. Now, because of sin, our relationship with God was broken. And also because of sin – either our sins against other people or their sins against us – we experience many broken relationships in life. The results are feelings of loneliness, separation and isolation. For many people, those feelings pick up in intensity during the Christmas season. I'm sure you've heard that many people struggle with feelings of depression this time of year. Part of the reason is this feeling of being on the outside looking in. People don't feel connected to God or to other people. They feel like Kevin in that scene – alone and isolated. Do you ever feel like you're on the outside looking in? You don't have to feel that way. I want you to think with me biblically about that today. Let's turn to one passage in the Bible that addresses the issue of being on the outside looking in and how to fix it. Here's the first biblical solution for being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #1: FIND GOD

That solution is offered to anyone here today who doesn't have a personal relationship with God yet. I know finding God sounds incredibly basic and obvious, but sometimes the most basic, obvious things get overlooked. One reason you feel like you're on the outside looking in is because you are on the outside looking in! Your feelings point to a very real spiritual problem. Again, the Bible says that you were created by God for a personal relationship with God. Sin messed it up. Every one of us is a sinner meaning that each of us has broken

God's laws and fallen short of God's standards. Everybody? Everybody. As a result, each of us is spiritually disconnected from God. One symptom of that lack of connection with God is this hard to define feeling that we're on the outside looking in about so much in life. You can feel deeply lonely even though you have lots of family and friends around you. Why? You're actually lonely for God. Your life lacks purpose because purpose comes from God. You might even have this kind of vague sense of anxiety all of the time – a sense that your life is missing something important. St. Augustine said centuries ago that every one of us has a God-shaped vacuum inside of us that only God can fill. Because you start out life lacking God, you must go out and find Him. Author Larry Crabb observes, "Feeling better has become more important to us than finding God." In other words, we dodge and evade and downplay this need for God, but there's just no substitute for finding Him. You will never feel better until you find God.

In the Bible passage we read, John tells us that God took the initiative to solve this most basic of human problems. "We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life." (1 John 1:1 NLT) Who's John talking about? Jesus, of course. He's pointing to what Christians call the Incarnation – God took upon Himself human flesh in the person of a man known as Jesus of Nazareth. John spent about three years following this Jesus around the land of Israel. He heard Jesus teach. He saw Jesus perform miracles. Then, he watched Him die on a cross. But three days, later this same Jesus got up again very much alive. John saw Jesus with his own eyes, touched Jesus' body with his own hands, and heard Him speak with John's own ears. Jesus was no ghost, no fantasy, no figment of John's imagination. And in Jesus, John found God. He found truth and reality. In Jesus, John found what his own soul could not define but what it craved.

Finding God. It's the single, most fundamental human need of all. It's not finding religion. Keeping rules and regulations or even following a strict moral code of conduct will not do it. It's not finding church. Singing songs, hearing a Bible message and hanging out with church folk will not do it in and of itself. It's not finding spirituality. Our culture will congratulate you for meditating, praying and thinking sentimentally about life, but that won't do it either. No, you must find God. You must somehow touch the Eternal. You must experience life – the life by which God Himself lives. And that life comes to you and me through this Jesus. How does John put it? "This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us." (1 John 1:2 NLT) The Bible and followers of Jesus call it by different names – being born again, getting saved, becoming a Christian, believing in Jesus, making a personal commitment to Christ – but it all points to the same basic, obvious reality: finding God! Has that ever happened to you?

Now, I realize that most everyone here today will say, “Rick, I’ve found God.” But there may be one, or two, or five or ten folk here today who haven’t yet. You might have religion, but you don’t have God. You might attend church regularly, but you don’t have God. You might be a spiritual person, but you don’t have God. If there’s anything that I pray that you will experience this Christmas, it’s that. Please find God. After all, that’s why God sent His Son into this world. You don’t have to be on the outside looking in at what God has done. It starts with finding God. Here’s a second solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling of being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #2: PRACTICE FORGIVENESS

Did you notice what a big place John gives to forgiveness in the verses we read? He talks about walking in the light, the blood of Jesus purifying us from all sin and God forgiving our sins when we sincerely confess those to Him. Why? One big reason for that uncomfortable feeling that you’re always somehow on the outside looking in is stuff going on in your life that needs forgiveness. We’ve said or done things – or failed to say or do things – that desperately need to be renounced by us and forgiven by God. John’s words here reveal some basic truths about forgiveness that each of us would do well to remember and practice.

First, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness. That happens initially when you find God. You admit you’re a sinner and you ask God to forgive all of your sins. You ask Jesus to be your Savior and Lord and you experience His forgiveness. That’s where it all starts. Second, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness continually. John says here, “But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.” (1 John 1:9 NLT) Here’s one reason why you can still feel like you’re on the outside looking in even after you’ve found God, or been born again, or gotten saved: you’ve got unconfessed sin in your life.

Sin that you hold onto, justify, excuse, tolerate, put up with – it separates you from God. I’m not saying you lose your salvation or forfeit Heaven. I am saying that a sense of spiritual life or a personal connection with God can be forfeited. The result is that you feel isolated from Him at a very deep level. That feeling of being on the outside looking in starts to creep into your soul again. I remember learning an important spiritual principle from a godly teacher in high school years ago now. He told me, “Rick, keep short accounts with God.” He meant that the moment the Holy Spirit speaks into my inner spirit about an ungodly act, a spiteful attitude, or an unkind word – at that very moment – I need to confess that sin and ask for God’s forgiveness immediately. That’s made a big impact on my daily walk with God. Don’t let the spiritual crud pile up. Keep short accounts. It’s one way to keeping that outside looking in feeling out of my life.

Third, ask forgiveness from and give forgiveness to other people. The major obstacle to great relationships – be it marriage, family, friends, people at church

– is sin. Sin just messes up everything and especially our relationships with other people. Until sin is dealt with in a biblical way, you'll experience a growing discomfort in your soul. Often, it's that old, familiar feeling of being on the outside looking in. You start to feel alone, cut off, disconnected from God and other people. What do I mean by asking forgiveness from other people? Quite simply, it means walking up to someone you've offended – looking him or her right in the eye – and saying, "I did such and such. I was wrong. I want to ask for your forgiveness." But that's so hard to do, isn't it? It's just hard on your pride which God is going to destroy completely one day anyway. I guarantee that not one of us will take one morsel of our sinful pride into Heaven with us, so why not allow God to kill it off here and now? Humility before God and others goes a long way to restoring a sense of connectedness with God and with others. John alludes to that spiritual reality when he says, "But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:7 NLT). Forgiveness is necessary to living in the light of God's grace and love.

The other part of this forgiveness equation is when we give or extend it to those who have hurt us. This can be much harder than going and asking someone to forgive us. The Bible has much to say about all of this and Christmas time is a great occasion to review what it teaches. Why give forgiveness to those who have hurt us? Let me suggest three biblical principles. One, forgive others because Jesus forgave you, not because they deserve it. What does one have to do with the other? Jesus was the One who tied them together. He said, "... 'You can't get forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your part, you cut yourself off from God's part.'" (Matt 6:14-15 MSG) When you extend forgiveness, you aren't admitting that what that person did to you was somehow OK. No, you're simply recognizing that if God could forgive you of your sins against Him, you can now be enabled by His Spirit to give forgiveness to those who offend you. Please recognize the force of what Jesus is saying. If you refuse forgiveness to someone, you give evidence that God's grace has not yet truly penetrated your own heart. The reality of your conversion is in doubt. When you refuse to forgive someone, one result will be the return of that feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

Two, forgive others even when the wrong is not acknowledged and forgiveness is not requested. Jesus did exactly that when, hanging from the cross, He said, "... 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing...'" (Luke 23:34 NIV) Some people will never acknowledge their offense or ask your forgiveness. Some people will never be at peace with you because at a deep, fundamental level they're not at peace with God. They have a far more serious issue than the fact they've offended you. They're out of touch with the God of the Universe. Of course, they're on the outside looking in spiritually, but they will not admit it. Their pride requires them to maintain until the day they die that everyone else is wrong and they're right. So, why extend forgiveness to people like that?

Three, forgive others because you must not allow resentment to build a stronghold in your life. There's nothing quite so dangerous to your personal spiritual life than holding on to bitterness, resentment or a stubborn unwillingness to forgive. Talk about that feeling of being on the outside looking in! Lack of forgiveness is a spiritual poison that will alienate you from God and others. Listen and obey God's Word when it says, "Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many." (Heb 2:15 NLT) It also says, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger.... Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you." (Eph 4:31-32 NLT)

There's a great scene about the importance of forgiveness in the movie *Home Alone*. Kevin is afraid of an older man who lives next door to him. He seems mean and gruff to say the least. Rumor has it that this older man has a criminal past. One evening, Kevin walks into a neighborhood church and who should be sitting in the pew across from him? The mean old man himself! They end up having a great conversation about forgiveness. Let's watch!

Are you afraid to ask someone to forgive you? Or, are you afraid to extend forgiveness to someone? I can't think of a better Christmas gift to give someone else or to give yourself this year than to forgive. No, lack of forgiveness isn't the only reason you can feel like you're on the outside looking in. But we sure do need to check our inner lives frequently to make sure those pesky seeds of bitterness and resentment haven't taken root somewhere and are growing again. When you ask for and give forgiveness God's way, you will feel connected spiritually – connected to God and to others. Here's a final solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #3: PURSUE JESUS

Several years ago, a book I read had a profound effect on me. The author said that the greatest desire that a follower of Jesus should have is simply to be with Jesus. Yes, we are called to be like Jesus. Our inner character should experience spiritual transformation as we follow Jesus. Yes, we are called to be for Jesus. We should serve Him with our time, talents and treasure. But above all, you and I should relentlessly pursue the sheer joy of being with Jesus. It reminds me of a verse in our text today. "We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us.

And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." (1 John 1:3 NLT) What a gift it is to pursue and experience the presence of Jesus – His love, His grace, His excellence, His perfection, His completeness, His power!

I've come to realize in my own life that when I start to feel as if I'm on the outside looking in at life – frustrated, disconnected, unfulfilled, stressed – it's often

because I've stopped pursuing Jesus and simply being with Him. I've gotten distracted by life. I've gotten preoccupied with myself. I've gotten ahead of Jesus. When Jesus first selected the twelve disciples, the Bible says, "He appointed twelve that they might be with him...." (Mark 3:14 NIV) Yes, they did other things as Jesus' disciples, to be sure, but, first and foremost, it was all about being with Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can become like Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can be for Jesus. Ironically, it's so much easier to become like Jesus and for Jesus when I focus, first and foremost, on being with Jesus.

In his book entitled "Good Morning, Merry Sunshine", author, Bob Greene, chronicles his infant daughter's first year of life. When little Amanda started to crawl, she started doing something that Bob found a little weird at first. He'd be lying in bed reading a book or watching TV when all of sudden he'd look down at the foot of the bed to find Amanda there just staring back at him. She'd pulled herself up to a standing position by the bed and she was just gazing at her daddy. Apparently, he'd become an object that fascinated her. Bob didn't quite know how to react at first. All he could figure out was that Amanda just liked coming in and looking at him. She didn't expect anything in return – conversation, interaction, getting picked up. So Bob simply began to return her gaze. He just stared back. After a few minutes, Amanda decided that was enough. She plopped back down and crawled back into the living room.

There is a simple pleasure in just looking at the one you love – what Bob and his daughter, Amanda, enjoyed. By faith, you and I can just stare at Jesus. You can just gaze upon His majesty and grace with the eyes of faith. Learn how to be with Jesus. Pursue Him. That matters? It matters more than you will ever know and it may be the single best solution to those times in life when you feel like you're on the outside looking in. Jesus loves you. Love Him.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN 1 JOHN 1:1-10

This Advent season I'm using four classic Christmas movies to underline or emphasize some wonderful, biblical truths about Christmas. The movie I want to feature today is entitled *Home Alone*. It's the story of eight year old Kevin at Christmastime. His large, extended family takes off a few days before Christmas for a vacation in Paris. Quite by accident, Kevin is left behind at home all by himself. At first, he's delighted by this turn of events. He and a few members of his family were really getting on each other's nerves. Suddenly he had the freedom to do anything he wanted to do, eat whatever he wanted to eat and go to bed whenever he wanted. It was fantastic – for awhile. But before too long, young Kevin starts to get lonely and miss his family. Now, the movie is a comedy and much of it has to do with Kevin's clever defense of his home from two bumbling crooks who want to rob the place. But there are a few poignant moments. One of them is when Kevin starts to feel lonely. He realizes he is terribly and utterly alone. I want to show you that scene right now. Kevin finds Santa Claus and asks that his family be returned to him as his Christmas gift. On Christmas Eve, he walks back to his house alone. From the sidewalk, he observes a family getting together for a meal and exchanging of gifts. The look on his face is one of sadness and longing. He's on the outside looking in.

Have you ever been on the outside looking in? Not literally, but spiritually or emotionally. The Bible makes it clear that God created you to be a relational being. You were never meant to do life completely alone. Now, because of sin, our relationship with God was broken. And also because of sin – either our sins against other people or their sins against us – we experience many broken relationships in life. The results are feelings of loneliness, separation and isolation. For many people, those feelings pick up in intensity during the Christmas season. I'm sure you've heard that many people struggle with feelings of depression this time of year. Part of the reason is this feeling of being on the outside looking in. People don't feel connected to God or to other people. They feel like Kevin in that scene – alone and isolated. Do you ever feel like you're on the outside looking in? You don't have to feel that way. I want you to think with me biblically about that today. Let's turn to one passage in the Bible that addresses the issue of being on the outside looking in and how to fix it. Here's the first biblical solution for being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #1: FIND GOD

That solution is offered to anyone here today who doesn't have a personal relationship with God yet. I know finding God sounds incredibly basic and obvious, but sometimes the most basic, obvious things get overlooked. One reason you feel like you're on the outside looking in is because you are on the outside looking in! Your feelings point to a very real spiritual problem. Again, the Bible says that you were created by God for a personal relationship with God. Sin messed it up. Every one of us is a sinner meaning that each of us has broken

God's laws and fallen short of God's standards. Everybody? Everybody. As a result, each of us is spiritually disconnected from God. One symptom of that lack of connection with God is this hard to define feeling that we're on the outside looking in about so much in life. You can feel deeply lonely even though you have lots of family and friends around you. Why? You're actually lonely for God. Your life lacks purpose because purpose comes from God. You might even have this kind of vague sense of anxiety all of the time – a sense that your life is missing something important. St. Augustine said centuries ago that every one of us has a God-shaped vacuum inside of us that only God can fill. Because you start out life lacking God, you must go out and find Him. Author Larry Crabb observes, "Feeling better has become more important to us than finding God." In other words, we dodge and evade and downplay this need for God, but there's just no substitute for finding Him. You will never feel better until you find God.

In the Bible passage we read, John tells us that God took the initiative to solve this most basic of human problems. "We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life." (1 John 1:1 NLT) Who's John talking about? Jesus, of course. He's pointing to what Christians call the Incarnation – God took upon Himself human flesh in the person of a man known as Jesus of Nazareth. John spent about three years following this Jesus around the land of Israel. He heard Jesus teach. He saw Jesus perform miracles. Then, he watched Him die on a cross. But three days, later this same Jesus got up again very much alive. John saw Jesus with his own eyes, touched Jesus' body with his own hands, and heard Him speak with John's own ears. Jesus was no ghost, no fantasy, no figment of John's imagination. And in Jesus, John found God. He found truth and reality. In Jesus, John found what his own soul could not define but what it craved.

Finding God. It's the single, most fundamental human need of all. It's not finding religion. Keeping rules and regulations or even following a strict moral code of conduct will not do it. It's not finding church. Singing songs, hearing a Bible message and hanging out with church folk will not do it in and of itself. It's not finding spirituality. Our culture will congratulate you for meditating, praying and thinking sentimentally about life, but that won't do it either. No, you must find God. You must somehow touch the Eternal. You must experience life – the life by which God Himself lives. And that life comes to you and me through this Jesus. How does John put it? "This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us." (1 John 1:2 NLT) The Bible and followers of Jesus call it by different names – being born again, getting saved, becoming a Christian, believing in Jesus, making a personal commitment to Christ – but it all points to the same basic, obvious reality: finding God! Has that ever happened to you?

Now, I realize that most everyone here today will say, “Rick, I’ve found God.” But there may be one, or two, or five or ten folk here today who haven’t yet. You might have religion, but you don’t have God. You might attend church regularly, but you don’t have God. You might be a spiritual person, but you don’t have God. If there’s anything that I pray that you will experience this Christmas, it’s that. Please find God. After all, that’s why God sent His Son into this world. You don’t have to be on the outside looking in at what God has done. It starts with finding God. Here’s a second solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling of being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #2: PRACTICE FORGIVENESS

Did you notice what a big place John gives to forgiveness in the verses we read? He talks about walking in the light, the blood of Jesus purifying us from all sin and God forgiving our sins when we sincerely confess those to Him. Why? One big reason for that uncomfortable feeling that you’re always somehow on the outside looking in is stuff going on in your life that needs forgiveness. We’ve said or done things – or failed to say or do things – that desperately need to be renounced by us and forgiven by God. John’s words here reveal some basic truths about forgiveness that each of us would do well to remember and practice.

First, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness. That happens initially when you find God. You admit you’re a sinner and you ask God to forgive all of your sins. You ask Jesus to be your Savior and Lord and you experience His forgiveness. That’s where it all starts. Second, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness continually. John says here, “But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.” (1 John 1:9 NLT) Here’s one reason why you can still feel like you’re on the outside looking in even after you’ve found God, or been born again, or gotten saved: you’ve got unconfessed sin in your life.

Sin that you hold onto, justify, excuse, tolerate, put up with – it separates you from God. I’m not saying you lose your salvation or forfeit Heaven. I am saying that a sense of spiritual life or a personal connection with God can be forfeited. The result is that you feel isolated from Him at a very deep level. That feeling of being on the outside looking in starts to creep into your soul again. I remember learning an important spiritual principle from a godly teacher in high school years ago now. He told me, “Rick, keep short accounts with God.” He meant that the moment the Holy Spirit speaks into my inner spirit about an ungodly act, a spiteful attitude, or an unkind word – at that very moment – I need to confess that sin and ask for God’s forgiveness immediately. That’s made a big impact on my daily walk with God. Don’t let the spiritual crud pile up. Keep short accounts. It’s one way to keeping that outside looking in feeling out of my life.

Third, ask forgiveness from and give forgiveness to other people. The major obstacle to great relationships – be it marriage, family, friends, people at church

– is sin. Sin just messes up everything and especially our relationships with other people. Until sin is dealt with in a biblical way, you'll experience a growing discomfort in your soul. Often, it's that old, familiar feeling of being on the outside looking in. You start to feel alone, cut off, disconnected from God and other people. What do I mean by asking forgiveness from other people? Quite simply, it means walking up to someone you've offended – looking him or her right in the eye – and saying, "I did such and such. I was wrong. I want to ask for your forgiveness." But that's so hard to do, isn't it? It's just hard on your pride which God is going to destroy completely one day anyway. I guarantee that not one of us will take one morsel of our sinful pride into Heaven with us, so why not allow God to kill it off here and now? Humility before God and others goes a long way to restoring a sense of connectedness with God and with others. John alludes to that spiritual reality when he says, "But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:7 NLT). Forgiveness is necessary to living in the light of God's grace and love.

The other part of this forgiveness equation is when we give or extend it to those who have hurt us. This can be much harder than going and asking someone to forgive us. The Bible has much to say about all of this and Christmas time is a great occasion to review what it teaches. Why give forgiveness to those who have hurt us? Let me suggest three biblical principles. One, forgive others because Jesus forgave you, not because they deserve it. What does one have to do with the other? Jesus was the One who tied them together. He said, "... 'You can't get forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your part, you cut yourself off from God's part.'" (Matt 6:14-15 MSG) When you extend forgiveness, you aren't admitting that what that person did to you was somehow OK. No, you're simply recognizing that if God could forgive you of your sins against Him, you can now be enabled by His Spirit to give forgiveness to those who offend you. Please recognize the force of what Jesus is saying. If you refuse forgiveness to someone, you give evidence that God's grace has not yet truly penetrated your own heart. The reality of your conversion is in doubt. When you refuse to forgive someone, one result will be the return of that feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

Two, forgive others even when the wrong is not acknowledged and forgiveness is not requested. Jesus did exactly that when, hanging from the cross, He said, "... 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing...'" (Luke 23:34 NIV) Some people will never acknowledge their offense or ask your forgiveness. Some people will never be at peace with you because at a deep, fundamental level they're not at peace with God. They have a far more serious issue than the fact they've offended you. They're out of touch with the God of the Universe. Of course, they're on the outside looking in spiritually, but they will not admit it. Their pride requires them to maintain until the day they die that everyone else is wrong and they're right. So, why extend forgiveness to people like that?

Three, forgive others because you must not allow resentment to build a stronghold in your life. There's nothing quite so dangerous to your personal spiritual life than holding on to bitterness, resentment or a stubborn unwillingness to forgive. Talk about that feeling of being on the outside looking in! Lack of forgiveness is a spiritual poison that will alienate you from God and others. Listen and obey God's Word when it says, "Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many." (Heb 2:15 NLT) It also says, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger.... Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you." (Eph 4:31-32 NLT)

There's a great scene about the importance of forgiveness in the movie *Home Alone*. Kevin is afraid of an older man who lives next door to him. He seems mean and gruff to say the least. Rumor has it that this older man has a criminal past. One evening, Kevin walks into a neighborhood church and who should be sitting in the pew across from him? The mean old man himself! They end up having a great conversation about forgiveness. Let's watch!

Are you afraid to ask someone to forgive you? Or, are you afraid to extend forgiveness to someone? I can't think of a better Christmas gift to give someone else or to give yourself this year than to forgive. No, lack of forgiveness isn't the only reason you can feel like you're on the outside looking in. But we sure do need to check our inner lives frequently to make sure those pesky seeds of bitterness and resentment haven't taken root somewhere and are growing again. When you ask for and give forgiveness God's way, you will feel connected spiritually – connected to God and to others. Here's a final solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #3: PURSUE JESUS

Several years ago, a book I read had a profound effect on me. The author said that the greatest desire that a follower of Jesus should have is simply to be with Jesus. Yes, we are called to be like Jesus. Our inner character should experience spiritual transformation as we follow Jesus. Yes, we are called to be for Jesus. We should serve Him with our time, talents and treasure. But above all, you and I should relentlessly pursue the sheer joy of being with Jesus. It reminds me of a verse in our text today. "We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us.

And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." (1 John 1:3 NLT) What a gift it is to pursue and experience the presence of Jesus – His love, His grace, His excellence, His perfection, His completeness, His power!

I've come to realize in my own life that when I start to feel as if I'm on the outside looking in at life – frustrated, disconnected, unfulfilled, stressed – it's often

because I've stopped pursuing Jesus and simply being with Him. I've gotten distracted by life. I've gotten preoccupied with myself. I've gotten ahead of Jesus. When Jesus first selected the twelve disciples, the Bible says, "He appointed twelve that they might be with him...." (Mark 3:14 NIV) Yes, they did other things as Jesus' disciples, to be sure, but, first and foremost, it was all about being with Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can become like Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can be for Jesus. Ironically, it's so much easier to become like Jesus and for Jesus when I focus, first and foremost, on being with Jesus.

In his book entitled "Good Morning, Merry Sunshine", author, Bob Greene, chronicles his infant daughter's first year of life. When little Amanda started to crawl, she started doing something that Bob found a little weird at first. He'd be lying in bed reading a book or watching TV when all of sudden he'd look down at the foot of the bed to find Amanda there just staring back at him. She'd pulled herself up to a standing position by the bed and she was just gazing at her daddy. Apparently, he'd become an object that fascinated her. Bob didn't quite know how to react at first. All he could figure out was that Amanda just liked coming in and looking at him. She didn't expect anything in return – conversation, interaction, getting picked up. So Bob simply began to return her gaze. He just stared back. After a few minutes, Amanda decided that was enough. She plopped back down and crawled back into the living room.

There is a simple pleasure in just looking at the one you love – what Bob and his daughter, Amanda, enjoyed. By faith, you and I can just stare at Jesus. You can just gaze upon His majesty and grace with the eyes of faith. Learn how to be with Jesus. Pursue Him. That matters? It matters more than you will ever know and it may be the single best solution to those times in life when you feel like you're on the outside looking in. Jesus loves you. Love Him.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN 1 JOHN 1:1-10

This Advent season I'm using four classic Christmas movies to underline or emphasize some wonderful, biblical truths about Christmas. The movie I want to feature today is entitled *Home Alone*. It's the story of eight year old Kevin at Christmastime. His large, extended family takes off a few days before Christmas for a vacation in Paris. Quite by accident, Kevin is left behind at home all by himself. At first, he's delighted by this turn of events. He and a few members of his family were really getting on each other's nerves. Suddenly he had the freedom to do anything he wanted to do, eat whatever he wanted to eat and go to bed whenever he wanted. It was fantastic – for awhile. But before too long, young Kevin starts to get lonely and miss his family. Now, the movie is a comedy and much of it has to do with Kevin's clever defense of his home from two bumbling crooks who want to rob the place. But there are a few poignant moments. One of them is when Kevin starts to feel lonely. He realizes he is terribly and utterly alone. I want to show you that scene right now. Kevin finds Santa Claus and asks that his family be returned to him as his Christmas gift. On Christmas Eve, he walks back to his house alone. From the sidewalk, he observes a family getting together for a meal and exchanging of gifts. The look on his face is one of sadness and longing. He's on the outside looking in.

Have you ever been on the outside looking in? Not literally, but spiritually or emotionally. The Bible makes it clear that God created you to be a relational being. You were never meant to do life completely alone. Now, because of sin, our relationship with God was broken. And also because of sin – either our sins against other people or their sins against us – we experience many broken relationships in life. The results are feelings of loneliness, separation and isolation. For many people, those feelings pick up in intensity during the Christmas season. I'm sure you've heard that many people struggle with feelings of depression this time of year. Part of the reason is this feeling of being on the outside looking in. People don't feel connected to God or to other people. They feel like Kevin in that scene – alone and isolated. Do you ever feel like you're on the outside looking in? You don't have to feel that way. I want you to think with me biblically about that today. Let's turn to one passage in the Bible that addresses the issue of being on the outside looking in and how to fix it. Here's the first biblical solution for being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #1: FIND GOD

That solution is offered to anyone here today who doesn't have a personal relationship with God yet. I know finding God sounds incredibly basic and obvious, but sometimes the most basic, obvious things get overlooked. One reason you feel like you're on the outside looking in is because you are on the outside looking in! Your feelings point to a very real spiritual problem. Again, the Bible says that you were created by God for a personal relationship with God. Sin messed it up. Every one of us is a sinner meaning that each of us has broken

God's laws and fallen short of God's standards. Everybody? Everybody. As a result, each of us is spiritually disconnected from God. One symptom of that lack of connection with God is this hard to define feeling that we're on the outside looking in about so much in life. You can feel deeply lonely even though you have lots of family and friends around you. Why? You're actually lonely for God. Your life lacks purpose because purpose comes from God. You might even have this kind of vague sense of anxiety all of the time – a sense that your life is missing something important. St. Augustine said centuries ago that every one of us has a God-shaped vacuum inside of us that only God can fill. Because you start out life lacking God, you must go out and find Him. Author Larry Crabb observes, "Feeling better has become more important to us than finding God." In other words, we dodge and evade and downplay this need for God, but there's just no substitute for finding Him. You will never feel better until you find God.

In the Bible passage we read, John tells us that God took the initiative to solve this most basic of human problems. "We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life." (1 John 1:1 NLT) Who's John talking about? Jesus, of course. He's pointing to what Christians call the Incarnation – God took upon Himself human flesh in the person of a man known as Jesus of Nazareth. John spent about three years following this Jesus around the land of Israel. He heard Jesus teach. He saw Jesus perform miracles. Then, he watched Him die on a cross. But three days, later this same Jesus got up again very much alive. John saw Jesus with his own eyes, touched Jesus' body with his own hands, and heard Him speak with John's own ears. Jesus was no ghost, no fantasy, no figment of John's imagination. And in Jesus, John found God. He found truth and reality. In Jesus, John found what his own soul could not define but what it craved.

Finding God. It's the single, most fundamental human need of all. It's not finding religion. Keeping rules and regulations or even following a strict moral code of conduct will not do it. It's not finding church. Singing songs, hearing a Bible message and hanging out with church folk will not do it in and of itself. It's not finding spirituality. Our culture will congratulate you for meditating, praying and thinking sentimentally about life, but that won't do it either. No, you must find God. You must somehow touch the Eternal. You must experience life – the life by which God Himself lives. And that life comes to you and me through this Jesus. How does John put it? "This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us." (1 John 1:2 NLT) The Bible and followers of Jesus call it by different names – being born again, getting saved, becoming a Christian, believing in Jesus, making a personal commitment to Christ – but it all points to the same basic, obvious reality: finding God! Has that ever happened to you?

Now, I realize that most everyone here today will say, “Rick, I’ve found God.” But there may be one, or two, or five or ten folk here today who haven’t yet. You might have religion, but you don’t have God. You might attend church regularly, but you don’t have God. You might be a spiritual person, but you don’t have God. If there’s anything that I pray that you will experience this Christmas, it’s that. Please find God. After all, that’s why God sent His Son into this world. You don’t have to be on the outside looking in at what God has done. It starts with finding God. Here’s a second solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling of being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #2: PRACTICE FORGIVENESS

Did you notice what a big place John gives to forgiveness in the verses we read? He talks about walking in the light, the blood of Jesus purifying us from all sin and God forgiving our sins when we sincerely confess those to Him. Why? One big reason for that uncomfortable feeling that you’re always somehow on the outside looking in is stuff going on in your life that needs forgiveness. We’ve said or done things – or failed to say or do things – that desperately need to be renounced by us and forgiven by God. John’s words here reveal some basic truths about forgiveness that each of us would do well to remember and practice.

First, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness. That happens initially when you find God. You admit you’re a sinner and you ask God to forgive all of your sins. You ask Jesus to be your Savior and Lord and you experience His forgiveness. That’s where it all starts. Second, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness continually. John says here, “But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.” (1 John 1:9 NLT) Here’s one reason why you can still feel like you’re on the outside looking in even after you’ve found God, or been born again, or gotten saved: you’ve got unconfessed sin in your life.

Sin that you hold onto, justify, excuse, tolerate, put up with – it separates you from God. I’m not saying you lose your salvation or forfeit Heaven. I am saying that a sense of spiritual life or a personal connection with God can be forfeited. The result is that you feel isolated from Him at a very deep level. That feeling of being on the outside looking in starts to creep into your soul again. I remember learning an important spiritual principle from a godly teacher in high school years ago now. He told me, “Rick, keep short accounts with God.” He meant that the moment the Holy Spirit speaks into my inner spirit about an ungodly act, a spiteful attitude, or an unkind word – at that very moment – I need to confess that sin and ask for God’s forgiveness immediately. That’s made a big impact on my daily walk with God. Don’t let the spiritual crud pile up. Keep short accounts. It’s one way to keeping that outside looking in feeling out of my life.

Third, ask forgiveness from and give forgiveness to other people. The major obstacle to great relationships – be it marriage, family, friends, people at church

– is sin. Sin just messes up everything and especially our relationships with other people. Until sin is dealt with in a biblical way, you'll experience a growing discomfort in your soul. Often, it's that old, familiar feeling of being on the outside looking in. You start to feel alone, cut off, disconnected from God and other people. What do I mean by asking forgiveness from other people? Quite simply, it means walking up to someone you've offended – looking him or her right in the eye – and saying, "I did such and such. I was wrong. I want to ask for your forgiveness." But that's so hard to do, isn't it? It's just hard on your pride which God is going to destroy completely one day anyway. I guarantee that not one of us will take one morsel of our sinful pride into Heaven with us, so why not allow God to kill it off here and now? Humility before God and others goes a long way to restoring a sense of connectedness with God and with others. John alludes to that spiritual reality when he says, "But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:7 NLT). Forgiveness is necessary to living in the light of God's grace and love.

The other part of this forgiveness equation is when we give or extend it to those who have hurt us. This can be much harder than going and asking someone to forgive us. The Bible has much to say about all of this and Christmas time is a great occasion to review what it teaches. Why give forgiveness to those who have hurt us? Let me suggest three biblical principles. One, forgive others because Jesus forgave you, not because they deserve it. What does one have to do with the other? Jesus was the One who tied them together. He said, "... 'You can't get forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your part, you cut yourself off from God's part.'" (Matt 6:14-15 MSG) When you extend forgiveness, you aren't admitting that what that person did to you was somehow OK. No, you're simply recognizing that if God could forgive you of your sins against Him, you can now be enabled by His Spirit to give forgiveness to those who offend you. Please recognize the force of what Jesus is saying. If you refuse forgiveness to someone, you give evidence that God's grace has not yet truly penetrated your own heart. The reality of your conversion is in doubt. When you refuse to forgive someone, one result will be the return of that feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

Two, forgive others even when the wrong is not acknowledged and forgiveness is not requested. Jesus did exactly that when, hanging from the cross, He said, "... 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing...'" (Luke 23:34 NIV) Some people will never acknowledge their offense or ask your forgiveness. Some people will never be at peace with you because at a deep, fundamental level they're not at peace with God. They have a far more serious issue than the fact they've offended you. They're out of touch with the God of the Universe. Of course, they're on the outside looking in spiritually, but they will not admit it. Their pride requires them to maintain until the day they die that everyone else is wrong and they're right. So, why extend forgiveness to people like that?

Three, forgive others because you must not allow resentment to build a stronghold in your life. There's nothing quite so dangerous to your personal spiritual life than holding on to bitterness, resentment or a stubborn unwillingness to forgive. Talk about that feeling of being on the outside looking in! Lack of forgiveness is a spiritual poison that will alienate you from God and others. Listen and obey God's Word when it says, "Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many." (Heb 2:15 NLT) It also says, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger.... Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you." (Eph 4:31-32 NLT)

There's a great scene about the importance of forgiveness in the movie *Home Alone*. Kevin is afraid of an older man who lives next door to him. He seems mean and gruff to say the least. Rumor has it that this older man has a criminal past. One evening, Kevin walks into a neighborhood church and who should be sitting in the pew across from him? The mean old man himself! They end up having a great conversation about forgiveness. Let's watch!

Are you afraid to ask someone to forgive you? Or, are you afraid to extend forgiveness to someone? I can't think of a better Christmas gift to give someone else or to give yourself this year than to forgive. No, lack of forgiveness isn't the only reason you can feel like you're on the outside looking in. But we sure do need to check our inner lives frequently to make sure those pesky seeds of bitterness and resentment haven't taken root somewhere and are growing again. When you ask for and give forgiveness God's way, you will feel connected spiritually – connected to God and to others. Here's a final solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #3: PURSUE JESUS

Several years ago, a book I read had a profound effect on me. The author said that the greatest desire that a follower of Jesus should have is simply to be with Jesus. Yes, we are called to be like Jesus. Our inner character should experience spiritual transformation as we follow Jesus. Yes, we are called to be for Jesus. We should serve Him with our time, talents and treasure. But above all, you and I should relentlessly pursue the sheer joy of being with Jesus. It reminds me of a verse in our text today. "We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us.

And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." (1 John 1:3 NLT) What a gift it is to pursue and experience the presence of Jesus – His love, His grace, His excellence, His perfection, His completeness, His power!

I've come to realize in my own life that when I start to feel as if I'm on the outside looking in at life – frustrated, disconnected, unfulfilled, stressed – it's often

because I've stopped pursuing Jesus and simply being with Him. I've gotten distracted by life. I've gotten preoccupied with myself. I've gotten ahead of Jesus. When Jesus first selected the twelve disciples, the Bible says, "He appointed twelve that they might be with him...." (Mark 3:14 NIV) Yes, they did other things as Jesus' disciples, to be sure, but, first and foremost, it was all about being with Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can become like Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can be for Jesus. Ironically, it's so much easier to become like Jesus and for Jesus when I focus, first and foremost, on being with Jesus.

In his book entitled "Good Morning, Merry Sunshine", author, Bob Greene, chronicles his infant daughter's first year of life. When little Amanda started to crawl, she started doing something that Bob found a little weird at first. He'd be lying in bed reading a book or watching TV when all of sudden he'd look down at the foot of the bed to find Amanda there just staring back at him. She'd pulled herself up to a standing position by the bed and she was just gazing at her daddy. Apparently, he'd become an object that fascinated her. Bob didn't quite know how to react at first. All he could figure out was that Amanda just liked coming in and looking at him. She didn't expect anything in return – conversation, interaction, getting picked up. So Bob simply began to return her gaze. He just stared back. After a few minutes, Amanda decided that was enough. She plopped back down and crawled back into the living room.

There is a simple pleasure in just looking at the one you love – what Bob and his daughter, Amanda, enjoyed. By faith, you and I can just stare at Jesus. You can just gaze upon His majesty and grace with the eyes of faith. Learn how to be with Jesus. Pursue Him. That matters? It matters more than you will ever know and it may be the single best solution to those times in life when you feel like you're on the outside looking in. Jesus loves you. Love Him.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN 1 JOHN 1:1-10

This Advent season I'm using four classic Christmas movies to underline or emphasize some wonderful, biblical truths about Christmas. The movie I want to feature today is entitled *Home Alone*. It's the story of eight year old Kevin at Christmastime. His large, extended family takes off a few days before Christmas for a vacation in Paris. Quite by accident, Kevin is left behind at home all by himself. At first, he's delighted by this turn of events. He and a few members of his family were really getting on each other's nerves. Suddenly he had the freedom to do anything he wanted to do, eat whatever he wanted to eat and go to bed whenever he wanted. It was fantastic – for awhile. But before too long, young Kevin starts to get lonely and miss his family. Now, the movie is a comedy and much of it has to do with Kevin's clever defense of his home from two bumbling crooks who want to rob the place. But there are a few poignant moments. One of them is when Kevin starts to feel lonely. He realizes he is terribly and utterly alone. I want to show you that scene right now. Kevin finds Santa Claus and asks that his family be returned to him as his Christmas gift. On Christmas Eve, he walks back to his house alone. From the sidewalk, he observes a family getting together for a meal and exchanging of gifts. The look on his face is one of sadness and longing. He's on the outside looking in.

Have you ever been on the outside looking in? Not literally, but spiritually or emotionally. The Bible makes it clear that God created you to be a relational being. You were never meant to do life completely alone. Now, because of sin, our relationship with God was broken. And also because of sin – either our sins against other people or their sins against us – we experience many broken relationships in life. The results are feelings of loneliness, separation and isolation. For many people, those feelings pick up in intensity during the Christmas season. I'm sure you've heard that many people struggle with feelings of depression this time of year. Part of the reason is this feeling of being on the outside looking in. People don't feel connected to God or to other people. They feel like Kevin in that scene – alone and isolated. Do you ever feel like you're on the outside looking in? You don't have to feel that way. I want you to think with me biblically about that today. Let's turn to one passage in the Bible that addresses the issue of being on the outside looking in and how to fix it. Here's the first biblical solution for being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #1: FIND GOD

That solution is offered to anyone here today who doesn't have a personal relationship with God yet. I know finding God sounds incredibly basic and obvious, but sometimes the most basic, obvious things get overlooked. One reason you feel like you're on the outside looking in is because you are on the outside looking in! Your feelings point to a very real spiritual problem. Again, the Bible says that you were created by God for a personal relationship with God. Sin messed it up. Every one of us is a sinner meaning that each of us has broken

God's laws and fallen short of God's standards. Everybody? Everybody. As a result, each of us is spiritually disconnected from God. One symptom of that lack of connection with God is this hard to define feeling that we're on the outside looking in about so much in life. You can feel deeply lonely even though you have lots of family and friends around you. Why? You're actually lonely for God. Your life lacks purpose because purpose comes from God. You might even have this kind of vague sense of anxiety all of the time – a sense that your life is missing something important. St. Augustine said centuries ago that every one of us has a God-shaped vacuum inside of us that only God can fill. Because you start out life lacking God, you must go out and find Him. Author Larry Crabb observes, "Feeling better has become more important to us than finding God." In other words, we dodge and evade and downplay this need for God, but there's just no substitute for finding Him. You will never feel better until you find God.

In the Bible passage we read, John tells us that God took the initiative to solve this most basic of human problems. "We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life." (1 John 1:1 NLT) Who's John talking about? Jesus, of course. He's pointing to what Christians call the Incarnation – God took upon Himself human flesh in the person of a man known as Jesus of Nazareth. John spent about three years following this Jesus around the land of Israel. He heard Jesus teach. He saw Jesus perform miracles. Then, he watched Him die on a cross. But three days, later this same Jesus got up again very much alive. John saw Jesus with his own eyes, touched Jesus' body with his own hands, and heard Him speak with John's own ears. Jesus was no ghost, no fantasy, no figment of John's imagination. And in Jesus, John found God. He found truth and reality. In Jesus, John found what his own soul could not define but what it craved.

Finding God. It's the single, most fundamental human need of all. It's not finding religion. Keeping rules and regulations or even following a strict moral code of conduct will not do it. It's not finding church. Singing songs, hearing a Bible message and hanging out with church folk will not do it in and of itself. It's not finding spirituality. Our culture will congratulate you for meditating, praying and thinking sentimentally about life, but that won't do it either. No, you must find God. You must somehow touch the Eternal. You must experience life – the life by which God Himself lives. And that life comes to you and me through this Jesus. How does John put it? "This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us." (1 John 1:2 NLT) The Bible and followers of Jesus call it by different names – being born again, getting saved, becoming a Christian, believing in Jesus, making a personal commitment to Christ – but it all points to the same basic, obvious reality: finding God! Has that ever happened to you?

Now, I realize that most everyone here today will say, “Rick, I’ve found God.” But there may be one, or two, or five or ten folk here today who haven’t yet. You might have religion, but you don’t have God. You might attend church regularly, but you don’t have God. You might be a spiritual person, but you don’t have God. If there’s anything that I pray that you will experience this Christmas, it’s that. Please find God. After all, that’s why God sent His Son into this world. You don’t have to be on the outside looking in at what God has done. It starts with finding God. Here’s a second solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling of being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #2: PRACTICE FORGIVENESS

Did you notice what a big place John gives to forgiveness in the verses we read? He talks about walking in the light, the blood of Jesus purifying us from all sin and God forgiving our sins when we sincerely confess those to Him. Why? One big reason for that uncomfortable feeling that you’re always somehow on the outside looking in is stuff going on in your life that needs forgiveness. We’ve said or done things – or failed to say or do things – that desperately need to be renounced by us and forgiven by God. John’s words here reveal some basic truths about forgiveness that each of us would do well to remember and practice.

First, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness. That happens initially when you find God. You admit you’re a sinner and you ask God to forgive all of your sins. You ask Jesus to be your Savior and Lord and you experience His forgiveness. That’s where it all starts. Second, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness continually. John says here, “But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.” (1 John 1:9 NLT) Here’s one reason why you can still feel like you’re on the outside looking in even after you’ve found God, or been born again, or gotten saved: you’ve got unconfessed sin in your life.

Sin that you hold onto, justify, excuse, tolerate, put up with – it separates you from God. I’m not saying you lose your salvation or forfeit Heaven. I am saying that a sense of spiritual life or a personal connection with God can be forfeited. The result is that you feel isolated from Him at a very deep level. That feeling of being on the outside looking in starts to creep into your soul again. I remember learning an important spiritual principle from a godly teacher in high school years ago now. He told me, “Rick, keep short accounts with God.” He meant that the moment the Holy Spirit speaks into my inner spirit about an ungodly act, a spiteful attitude, or an unkind word – at that very moment – I need to confess that sin and ask for God’s forgiveness immediately. That’s made a big impact on my daily walk with God. Don’t let the spiritual crud pile up. Keep short accounts. It’s one way to keeping that outside looking in feeling out of my life.

Third, ask forgiveness from and give forgiveness to other people. The major obstacle to great relationships – be it marriage, family, friends, people at church

– is sin. Sin just messes up everything and especially our relationships with other people. Until sin is dealt with in a biblical way, you'll experience a growing discomfort in your soul. Often, it's that old, familiar feeling of being on the outside looking in. You start to feel alone, cut off, disconnected from God and other people. What do I mean by asking forgiveness from other people? Quite simply, it means walking up to someone you've offended – looking him or her right in the eye – and saying, "I did such and such. I was wrong. I want to ask for your forgiveness." But that's so hard to do, isn't it? It's just hard on your pride which God is going to destroy completely one day anyway. I guarantee that not one of us will take one morsel of our sinful pride into Heaven with us, so why not allow God to kill it off here and now? Humility before God and others goes a long way to restoring a sense of connectedness with God and with others. John alludes to that spiritual reality when he says, "But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:7 NLT). Forgiveness is necessary to living in the light of God's grace and love.

The other part of this forgiveness equation is when we give or extend it to those who have hurt us. This can be much harder than going and asking someone to forgive us. The Bible has much to say about all of this and Christmas time is a great occasion to review what it teaches. Why give forgiveness to those who have hurt us? Let me suggest three biblical principles. One, forgive others because Jesus forgave you, not because they deserve it. What does one have to do with the other? Jesus was the One who tied them together. He said, "... 'You can't get forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your part, you cut yourself off from God's part.'" (Matt 6:14-15 MSG) When you extend forgiveness, you aren't admitting that what that person did to you was somehow OK. No, you're simply recognizing that if God could forgive you of your sins against Him, you can now be enabled by His Spirit to give forgiveness to those who offend you. Please recognize the force of what Jesus is saying. If you refuse forgiveness to someone, you give evidence that God's grace has not yet truly penetrated your own heart. The reality of your conversion is in doubt. When you refuse to forgive someone, one result will be the return of that feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

Two, forgive others even when the wrong is not acknowledged and forgiveness is not requested. Jesus did exactly that when, hanging from the cross, He said, "... 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing...'" (Luke 23:34 NIV) Some people will never acknowledge their offense or ask your forgiveness. Some people will never be at peace with you because at a deep, fundamental level they're not at peace with God. They have a far more serious issue than the fact they've offended you. They're out of touch with the God of the Universe. Of course, they're on the outside looking in spiritually, but they will not admit it. Their pride requires them to maintain until the day they die that everyone else is wrong and they're right. So, why extend forgiveness to people like that?

Three, forgive others because you must not allow resentment to build a stronghold in your life. There's nothing quite so dangerous to your personal spiritual life than holding on to bitterness, resentment or a stubborn unwillingness to forgive. Talk about that feeling of being on the outside looking in! Lack of forgiveness is a spiritual poison that will alienate you from God and others. Listen and obey God's Word when it says, "Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many." (Heb 2:15 NLT) It also says, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger.... Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you." (Eph 4:31-32 NLT)

There's a great scene about the importance of forgiveness in the movie *Home Alone*. Kevin is afraid of an older man who lives next door to him. He seems mean and gruff to say the least. Rumor has it that this older man has a criminal past. One evening, Kevin walks into a neighborhood church and who should be sitting in the pew across from him? The mean old man himself! They end up having a great conversation about forgiveness. Let's watch!

Are you afraid to ask someone to forgive you? Or, are you afraid to extend forgiveness to someone? I can't think of a better Christmas gift to give someone else or to give yourself this year than to forgive. No, lack of forgiveness isn't the only reason you can feel like you're on the outside looking in. But we sure do need to check our inner lives frequently to make sure those pesky seeds of bitterness and resentment haven't taken root somewhere and are growing again. When you ask for and give forgiveness God's way, you will feel connected spiritually – connected to God and to others. Here's a final solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #3: PURSUE JESUS

Several years ago, a book I read had a profound effect on me. The author said that the greatest desire that a follower of Jesus should have is simply to be with Jesus. Yes, we are called to be like Jesus. Our inner character should experience spiritual transformation as we follow Jesus. Yes, we are called to be for Jesus. We should serve Him with our time, talents and treasure. But above all, you and I should relentlessly pursue the sheer joy of being with Jesus. It reminds me of a verse in our text today. "We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us.

And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." (1 John 1:3 NLT) What a gift it is to pursue and experience the presence of Jesus – His love, His grace, His excellence, His perfection, His completeness, His power!

I've come to realize in my own life that when I start to feel as if I'm on the outside looking in at life – frustrated, disconnected, unfulfilled, stressed – it's often

because I've stopped pursuing Jesus and simply being with Him. I've gotten distracted by life. I've gotten preoccupied with myself. I've gotten ahead of Jesus. When Jesus first selected the twelve disciples, the Bible says, "He appointed twelve that they might be with him...." (Mark 3:14 NIV) Yes, they did other things as Jesus' disciples, to be sure, but, first and foremost, it was all about being with Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can become like Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can be for Jesus. Ironically, it's so much easier to become like Jesus and for Jesus when I focus, first and foremost, on being with Jesus.

In his book entitled "Good Morning, Merry Sunshine", author, Bob Greene, chronicles his infant daughter's first year of life. When little Amanda started to crawl, she started doing something that Bob found a little weird at first. He'd be lying in bed reading a book or watching TV when all of sudden he'd look down at the foot of the bed to find Amanda there just staring back at him. She'd pulled herself up to a standing position by the bed and she was just gazing at her daddy. Apparently, he'd become an object that fascinated her. Bob didn't quite know how to react at first. All he could figure out was that Amanda just liked coming in and looking at him. She didn't expect anything in return – conversation, interaction, getting picked up. So Bob simply began to return her gaze. He just stared back. After a few minutes, Amanda decided that was enough. She plopped back down and crawled back into the living room.

There is a simple pleasure in just looking at the one you love – what Bob and his daughter, Amanda, enjoyed. By faith, you and I can just stare at Jesus. You can just gaze upon His majesty and grace with the eyes of faith. Learn how to be with Jesus. Pursue Him. That matters? It matters more than you will ever know and it may be the single best solution to those times in life when you feel like you're on the outside looking in. Jesus loves you. Love Him.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN 1 JOHN 1:1-10

This Advent season I'm using four classic Christmas movies to underline or emphasize some wonderful, biblical truths about Christmas. The movie I want to feature today is entitled *Home Alone*. It's the story of eight year old Kevin at Christmastime. His large, extended family takes off a few days before Christmas for a vacation in Paris. Quite by accident, Kevin is left behind at home all by himself. At first, he's delighted by this turn of events. He and a few members of his family were really getting on each other's nerves. Suddenly he had the freedom to do anything he wanted to do, eat whatever he wanted to eat and go to bed whenever he wanted. It was fantastic – for awhile. But before too long, young Kevin starts to get lonely and miss his family. Now, the movie is a comedy and much of it has to do with Kevin's clever defense of his home from two bumbling crooks who want to rob the place. But there are a few poignant moments. One of them is when Kevin starts to feel lonely. He realizes he is terribly and utterly alone. I want to show you that scene right now. Kevin finds Santa Claus and asks that his family be returned to him as his Christmas gift. On Christmas Eve, he walks back to his house alone. From the sidewalk, he observes a family getting together for a meal and exchanging of gifts. The look on his face is one of sadness and longing. He's on the outside looking in.

Have you ever been on the outside looking in? Not literally, but spiritually or emotionally. The Bible makes it clear that God created you to be a relational being. You were never meant to do life completely alone. Now, because of sin, our relationship with God was broken. And also because of sin – either our sins against other people or their sins against us – we experience many broken relationships in life. The results are feelings of loneliness, separation and isolation. For many people, those feelings pick up in intensity during the Christmas season. I'm sure you've heard that many people struggle with feelings of depression this time of year. Part of the reason is this feeling of being on the outside looking in. People don't feel connected to God or to other people. They feel like Kevin in that scene – alone and isolated. Do you ever feel like you're on the outside looking in? You don't have to feel that way. I want you to think with me biblically about that today. Let's turn to one passage in the Bible that addresses the issue of being on the outside looking in and how to fix it. Here's the first biblical solution for being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #1: FIND GOD

That solution is offered to anyone here today who doesn't have a personal relationship with God yet. I know finding God sounds incredibly basic and obvious, but sometimes the most basic, obvious things get overlooked. One reason you feel like you're on the outside looking in is because you are on the outside looking in! Your feelings point to a very real spiritual problem. Again, the Bible says that you were created by God for a personal relationship with God. Sin messed it up. Every one of us is a sinner meaning that each of us has broken

God's laws and fallen short of God's standards. Everybody? Everybody. As a result, each of us is spiritually disconnected from God. One symptom of that lack of connection with God is this hard to define feeling that we're on the outside looking in about so much in life. You can feel deeply lonely even though you have lots of family and friends around you. Why? You're actually lonely for God. Your life lacks purpose because purpose comes from God. You might even have this kind of vague sense of anxiety all of the time – a sense that your life is missing something important. St. Augustine said centuries ago that every one of us has a God-shaped vacuum inside of us that only God can fill. Because you start out life lacking God, you must go out and find Him. Author Larry Crabb observes, "Feeling better has become more important to us than finding God." In other words, we dodge and evade and downplay this need for God, but there's just no substitute for finding Him. You will never feel better until you find God.

In the Bible passage we read, John tells us that God took the initiative to solve this most basic of human problems. "We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life." (1 John 1:1 NLT) Who's John talking about? Jesus, of course. He's pointing to what Christians call the Incarnation – God took upon Himself human flesh in the person of a man known as Jesus of Nazareth. John spent about three years following this Jesus around the land of Israel. He heard Jesus teach. He saw Jesus perform miracles. Then, he watched Him die on a cross. But three days, later this same Jesus got up again very much alive. John saw Jesus with his own eyes, touched Jesus' body with his own hands, and heard Him speak with John's own ears. Jesus was no ghost, no fantasy, no figment of John's imagination. And in Jesus, John found God. He found truth and reality. In Jesus, John found what his own soul could not define but what it craved.

Finding God. It's the single, most fundamental human need of all. It's not finding religion. Keeping rules and regulations or even following a strict moral code of conduct will not do it. It's not finding church. Singing songs, hearing a Bible message and hanging out with church folk will not do it in and of itself. It's not finding spirituality. Our culture will congratulate you for meditating, praying and thinking sentimentally about life, but that won't do it either. No, you must find God. You must somehow touch the Eternal. You must experience life – the life by which God Himself lives. And that life comes to you and me through this Jesus. How does John put it? "This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us." (1 John 1:2 NLT) The Bible and followers of Jesus call it by different names – being born again, getting saved, becoming a Christian, believing in Jesus, making a personal commitment to Christ – but it all points to the same basic, obvious reality: finding God! Has that ever happened to you?

Now, I realize that most everyone here today will say, “Rick, I’ve found God.” But there may be one, or two, or five or ten folk here today who haven’t yet. You might have religion, but you don’t have God. You might attend church regularly, but you don’t have God. You might be a spiritual person, but you don’t have God. If there’s anything that I pray that you will experience this Christmas, it’s that. Please find God. After all, that’s why God sent His Son into this world. You don’t have to be on the outside looking in at what God has done. It starts with finding God. Here’s a second solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling of being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #2: PRACTICE FORGIVENESS

Did you notice what a big place John gives to forgiveness in the verses we read? He talks about walking in the light, the blood of Jesus purifying us from all sin and God forgiving our sins when we sincerely confess those to Him. Why? One big reason for that uncomfortable feeling that you’re always somehow on the outside looking in is stuff going on in your life that needs forgiveness. We’ve said or done things – or failed to say or do things – that desperately need to be renounced by us and forgiven by God. John’s words here reveal some basic truths about forgiveness that each of us would do well to remember and practice.

First, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness. That happens initially when you find God. You admit you’re a sinner and you ask God to forgive all of your sins. You ask Jesus to be your Savior and Lord and you experience His forgiveness. That’s where it all starts. Second, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness continually. John says here, “But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.” (1 John 1:9 NLT) Here’s one reason why you can still feel like you’re on the outside looking in even after you’ve found God, or been born again, or gotten saved: you’ve got unconfessed sin in your life.

Sin that you hold onto, justify, excuse, tolerate, put up with – it separates you from God. I’m not saying you lose your salvation or forfeit Heaven. I am saying that a sense of spiritual life or a personal connection with God can be forfeited. The result is that you feel isolated from Him at a very deep level. That feeling of being on the outside looking in starts to creep into your soul again. I remember learning an important spiritual principle from a godly teacher in high school years ago now. He told me, “Rick, keep short accounts with God.” He meant that the moment the Holy Spirit speaks into my inner spirit about an ungodly act, a spiteful attitude, or an unkind word – at that very moment – I need to confess that sin and ask for God’s forgiveness immediately. That’s made a big impact on my daily walk with God. Don’t let the spiritual crud pile up. Keep short accounts. It’s one way to keeping that outside looking in feeling out of my life.

Third, ask forgiveness from and give forgiveness to other people. The major obstacle to great relationships – be it marriage, family, friends, people at church

– is sin. Sin just messes up everything and especially our relationships with other people. Until sin is dealt with in a biblical way, you'll experience a growing discomfort in your soul. Often, it's that old, familiar feeling of being on the outside looking in. You start to feel alone, cut off, disconnected from God and other people. What do I mean by asking forgiveness from other people? Quite simply, it means walking up to someone you've offended – looking him or her right in the eye – and saying, "I did such and such. I was wrong. I want to ask for your forgiveness." But that's so hard to do, isn't it? It's just hard on your pride which God is going to destroy completely one day anyway. I guarantee that not one of us will take one morsel of our sinful pride into Heaven with us, so why not allow God to kill it off here and now? Humility before God and others goes a long way to restoring a sense of connectedness with God and with others. John alludes to that spiritual reality when he says, "But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:7 NLT). Forgiveness is necessary to living in the light of God's grace and love.

The other part of this forgiveness equation is when we give or extend it to those who have hurt us. This can be much harder than going and asking someone to forgive us. The Bible has much to say about all of this and Christmas time is a great occasion to review what it teaches. Why give forgiveness to those who have hurt us? Let me suggest three biblical principles. One, forgive others because Jesus forgave you, not because they deserve it. What does one have to do with the other? Jesus was the One who tied them together. He said, "... 'You can't get forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your part, you cut yourself off from God's part.'" (Matt 6:14-15 MSG) When you extend forgiveness, you aren't admitting that what that person did to you was somehow OK. No, you're simply recognizing that if God could forgive you of your sins against Him, you can now be enabled by His Spirit to give forgiveness to those who offend you. Please recognize the force of what Jesus is saying. If you refuse forgiveness to someone, you give evidence that God's grace has not yet truly penetrated your own heart. The reality of your conversion is in doubt. When you refuse to forgive someone, one result will be the return of that feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

Two, forgive others even when the wrong is not acknowledged and forgiveness is not requested. Jesus did exactly that when, hanging from the cross, He said, "... 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing...'" (Luke 23:34 NIV) Some people will never acknowledge their offense or ask your forgiveness. Some people will never be at peace with you because at a deep, fundamental level they're not at peace with God. They have a far more serious issue than the fact they've offended you. They're out of touch with the God of the Universe. Of course, they're on the outside looking in spiritually, but they will not admit it. Their pride requires them to maintain until the day they die that everyone else is wrong and they're right. So, why extend forgiveness to people like that?

Three, forgive others because you must not allow resentment to build a stronghold in your life. There's nothing quite so dangerous to your personal spiritual life than holding on to bitterness, resentment or a stubborn unwillingness to forgive. Talk about that feeling of being on the outside looking in! Lack of forgiveness is a spiritual poison that will alienate you from God and others. Listen and obey God's Word when it says, "Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many." (Heb 2:15 NLT) It also says, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger.... Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you." (Eph 4:31-32 NLT)

There's a great scene about the importance of forgiveness in the movie *Home Alone*. Kevin is afraid of an older man who lives next door to him. He seems mean and gruff to say the least. Rumor has it that this older man has a criminal past. One evening, Kevin walks into a neighborhood church and who should be sitting in the pew across from him? The mean old man himself! They end up having a great conversation about forgiveness. Let's watch!

Are you afraid to ask someone to forgive you? Or, are you afraid to extend forgiveness to someone? I can't think of a better Christmas gift to give someone else or to give yourself this year than to forgive. No, lack of forgiveness isn't the only reason you can feel like you're on the outside looking in. But we sure do need to check our inner lives frequently to make sure those pesky seeds of bitterness and resentment haven't taken root somewhere and are growing again. When you ask for and give forgiveness God's way, you will feel connected spiritually – connected to God and to others. Here's a final solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #3: PURSUE JESUS

Several years ago, a book I read had a profound effect on me. The author said that the greatest desire that a follower of Jesus should have is simply to be with Jesus. Yes, we are called to be like Jesus. Our inner character should experience spiritual transformation as we follow Jesus. Yes, we are called to be for Jesus. We should serve Him with our time, talents and treasure. But above all, you and I should relentlessly pursue the sheer joy of being with Jesus. It reminds me of a verse in our text today. "We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us.

And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." (1 John 1:3 NLT) What a gift it is to pursue and experience the presence of Jesus – His love, His grace, His excellence, His perfection, His completeness, His power!

I've come to realize in my own life that when I start to feel as if I'm on the outside looking in at life – frustrated, disconnected, unfulfilled, stressed – it's often

because I've stopped pursuing Jesus and simply being with Him. I've gotten distracted by life. I've gotten preoccupied with myself. I've gotten ahead of Jesus. When Jesus first selected the twelve disciples, the Bible says, "He appointed twelve that they might be with him...." (Mark 3:14 NIV) Yes, they did other things as Jesus' disciples, to be sure, but, first and foremost, it was all about being with Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can become like Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can be for Jesus. Ironically, it's so much easier to become like Jesus and for Jesus when I focus, first and foremost, on being with Jesus.

In his book entitled "Good Morning, Merry Sunshine", author, Bob Greene, chronicles his infant daughter's first year of life. When little Amanda started to crawl, she started doing something that Bob found a little weird at first. He'd be lying in bed reading a book or watching TV when all of sudden he'd look down at the foot of the bed to find Amanda there just staring back at him. She'd pulled herself up to a standing position by the bed and she was just gazing at her daddy. Apparently, he'd become an object that fascinated her. Bob didn't quite know how to react at first. All he could figure out was that Amanda just liked coming in and looking at him. She didn't expect anything in return – conversation, interaction, getting picked up. So Bob simply began to return her gaze. He just stared back. After a few minutes, Amanda decided that was enough. She plopped back down and crawled back into the living room.

There is a simple pleasure in just looking at the one you love – what Bob and his daughter, Amanda, enjoyed. By faith, you and I can just stare at Jesus. You can just gaze upon His majesty and grace with the eyes of faith. Learn how to be with Jesus. Pursue Him. That matters? It matters more than you will ever know and it may be the single best solution to those times in life when you feel like you're on the outside looking in. Jesus loves you. Love Him.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN 1 JOHN 1:1-10

This Advent season I'm using four classic Christmas movies to underline or emphasize some wonderful, biblical truths about Christmas. The movie I want to feature today is entitled *Home Alone*. It's the story of eight year old Kevin at Christmastime. His large, extended family takes off a few days before Christmas for a vacation in Paris. Quite by accident, Kevin is left behind at home all by himself. At first, he's delighted by this turn of events. He and a few members of his family were really getting on each other's nerves. Suddenly he had the freedom to do anything he wanted to do, eat whatever he wanted to eat and go to bed whenever he wanted. It was fantastic – for awhile. But before too long, young Kevin starts to get lonely and miss his family. Now, the movie is a comedy and much of it has to do with Kevin's clever defense of his home from two bumbling crooks who want to rob the place. But there are a few poignant moments. One of them is when Kevin starts to feel lonely. He realizes he is terribly and utterly alone. I want to show you that scene right now. Kevin finds Santa Claus and asks that his family be returned to him as his Christmas gift. On Christmas Eve, he walks back to his house alone. From the sidewalk, he observes a family getting together for a meal and exchanging of gifts. The look on his face is one of sadness and longing. He's on the outside looking in.

Have you ever been on the outside looking in? Not literally, but spiritually or emotionally. The Bible makes it clear that God created you to be a relational being. You were never meant to do life completely alone. Now, because of sin, our relationship with God was broken. And also because of sin – either our sins against other people or their sins against us – we experience many broken relationships in life. The results are feelings of loneliness, separation and isolation. For many people, those feelings pick up in intensity during the Christmas season. I'm sure you've heard that many people struggle with feelings of depression this time of year. Part of the reason is this feeling of being on the outside looking in. People don't feel connected to God or to other people. They feel like Kevin in that scene – alone and isolated. Do you ever feel like you're on the outside looking in? You don't have to feel that way. I want you to think with me biblically about that today. Let's turn to one passage in the Bible that addresses the issue of being on the outside looking in and how to fix it. Here's the first biblical solution for being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #1: FIND GOD

That solution is offered to anyone here today who doesn't have a personal relationship with God yet. I know finding God sounds incredibly basic and obvious, but sometimes the most basic, obvious things get overlooked. One reason you feel like you're on the outside looking in is because you are on the outside looking in! Your feelings point to a very real spiritual problem. Again, the Bible says that you were created by God for a personal relationship with God. Sin messed it up. Every one of us is a sinner meaning that each of us has broken

God's laws and fallen short of God's standards. Everybody? Everybody. As a result, each of us is spiritually disconnected from God. One symptom of that lack of connection with God is this hard to define feeling that we're on the outside looking in about so much in life. You can feel deeply lonely even though you have lots of family and friends around you. Why? You're actually lonely for God. Your life lacks purpose because purpose comes from God. You might even have this kind of vague sense of anxiety all of the time – a sense that your life is missing something important. St. Augustine said centuries ago that every one of us has a God-shaped vacuum inside of us that only God can fill. Because you start out life lacking God, you must go out and find Him. Author Larry Crabb observes, "Feeling better has become more important to us than finding God." In other words, we dodge and evade and downplay this need for God, but there's just no substitute for finding Him. You will never feel better until you find God.

In the Bible passage we read, John tells us that God took the initiative to solve this most basic of human problems. "We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life." (1 John 1:1 NLT) Who's John talking about? Jesus, of course. He's pointing to what Christians call the Incarnation – God took upon Himself human flesh in the person of a man known as Jesus of Nazareth. John spent about three years following this Jesus around the land of Israel. He heard Jesus teach. He saw Jesus perform miracles. Then, he watched Him die on a cross. But three days, later this same Jesus got up again very much alive. John saw Jesus with his own eyes, touched Jesus' body with his own hands, and heard Him speak with John's own ears. Jesus was no ghost, no fantasy, no figment of John's imagination. And in Jesus, John found God. He found truth and reality. In Jesus, John found what his own soul could not define but what it craved.

Finding God. It's the single, most fundamental human need of all. It's not finding religion. Keeping rules and regulations or even following a strict moral code of conduct will not do it. It's not finding church. Singing songs, hearing a Bible message and hanging out with church folk will not do it in and of itself. It's not finding spirituality. Our culture will congratulate you for meditating, praying and thinking sentimentally about life, but that won't do it either. No, you must find God. You must somehow touch the Eternal. You must experience life – the life by which God Himself lives. And that life comes to you and me through this Jesus. How does John put it? "This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us." (1 John 1:2 NLT) The Bible and followers of Jesus call it by different names – being born again, getting saved, becoming a Christian, believing in Jesus, making a personal commitment to Christ – but it all points to the same basic, obvious reality: finding God! Has that ever happened to you?

Now, I realize that most everyone here today will say, “Rick, I’ve found God.” But there may be one, or two, or five or ten folk here today who haven’t yet. You might have religion, but you don’t have God. You might attend church regularly, but you don’t have God. You might be a spiritual person, but you don’t have God. If there’s anything that I pray that you will experience this Christmas, it’s that. Please find God. After all, that’s why God sent His Son into this world. You don’t have to be on the outside looking in at what God has done. It starts with finding God. Here’s a second solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling of being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #2: PRACTICE FORGIVENESS

Did you notice what a big place John gives to forgiveness in the verses we read? He talks about walking in the light, the blood of Jesus purifying us from all sin and God forgiving our sins when we sincerely confess those to Him. Why? One big reason for that uncomfortable feeling that you’re always somehow on the outside looking in is stuff going on in your life that needs forgiveness. We’ve said or done things – or failed to say or do things – that desperately need to be renounced by us and forgiven by God. John’s words here reveal some basic truths about forgiveness that each of us would do well to remember and practice.

First, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness. That happens initially when you find God. You admit you’re a sinner and you ask God to forgive all of your sins. You ask Jesus to be your Savior and Lord and you experience His forgiveness. That’s where it all starts. Second, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness continually. John says here, “But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.” (1 John 1:9 NLT) Here’s one reason why you can still feel like you’re on the outside looking in even after you’ve found God, or been born again, or gotten saved: you’ve got unconfessed sin in your life.

Sin that you hold onto, justify, excuse, tolerate, put up with – it separates you from God. I’m not saying you lose your salvation or forfeit Heaven. I am saying that a sense of spiritual life or a personal connection with God can be forfeited. The result is that you feel isolated from Him at a very deep level. That feeling of being on the outside looking in starts to creep into your soul again. I remember learning an important spiritual principle from a godly teacher in high school years ago now. He told me, “Rick, keep short accounts with God.” He meant that the moment the Holy Spirit speaks into my inner spirit about an ungodly act, a spiteful attitude, or an unkind word – at that very moment – I need to confess that sin and ask for God’s forgiveness immediately. That’s made a big impact on my daily walk with God. Don’t let the spiritual crud pile up. Keep short accounts. It’s one way to keeping that outside looking in feeling out of my life.

Third, ask forgiveness from and give forgiveness to other people. The major obstacle to great relationships – be it marriage, family, friends, people at church

– is sin. Sin just messes up everything and especially our relationships with other people. Until sin is dealt with in a biblical way, you'll experience a growing discomfort in your soul. Often, it's that old, familiar feeling of being on the outside looking in. You start to feel alone, cut off, disconnected from God and other people. What do I mean by asking forgiveness from other people? Quite simply, it means walking up to someone you've offended – looking him or her right in the eye – and saying, "I did such and such. I was wrong. I want to ask for your forgiveness." But that's so hard to do, isn't it? It's just hard on your pride which God is going to destroy completely one day anyway. I guarantee that not one of us will take one morsel of our sinful pride into Heaven with us, so why not allow God to kill it off here and now? Humility before God and others goes a long way to restoring a sense of connectedness with God and with others. John alludes to that spiritual reality when he says, "But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:7 NLT). Forgiveness is necessary to living in the light of God's grace and love.

The other part of this forgiveness equation is when we give or extend it to those who have hurt us. This can be much harder than going and asking someone to forgive us. The Bible has much to say about all of this and Christmas time is a great occasion to review what it teaches. Why give forgiveness to those who have hurt us? Let me suggest three biblical principles. One, forgive others because Jesus forgave you, not because they deserve it. What does one have to do with the other? Jesus was the One who tied them together. He said, "... 'You can't get forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your part, you cut yourself off from God's part.'" (Matt 6:14-15 MSG) When you extend forgiveness, you aren't admitting that what that person did to you was somehow OK. No, you're simply recognizing that if God could forgive you of your sins against Him, you can now be enabled by His Spirit to give forgiveness to those who offend you. Please recognize the force of what Jesus is saying. If you refuse forgiveness to someone, you give evidence that God's grace has not yet truly penetrated your own heart. The reality of your conversion is in doubt. When you refuse to forgive someone, one result will be the return of that feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

Two, forgive others even when the wrong is not acknowledged and forgiveness is not requested. Jesus did exactly that when, hanging from the cross, He said, "... 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing...'" (Luke 23:34 NIV) Some people will never acknowledge their offense or ask your forgiveness. Some people will never be at peace with you because at a deep, fundamental level they're not at peace with God. They have a far more serious issue than the fact they've offended you. They're out of touch with the God of the Universe. Of course, they're on the outside looking in spiritually, but they will not admit it. Their pride requires them to maintain until the day they die that everyone else is wrong and they're right. So, why extend forgiveness to people like that?

Three, forgive others because you must not allow resentment to build a stronghold in your life. There's nothing quite so dangerous to your personal spiritual life than holding on to bitterness, resentment or a stubborn unwillingness to forgive. Talk about that feeling of being on the outside looking in! Lack of forgiveness is a spiritual poison that will alienate you from God and others. Listen and obey God's Word when it says, "Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many." (Heb 2:15 NLT) It also says, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger.... Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you." (Eph 4:31-32 NLT)

There's a great scene about the importance of forgiveness in the movie *Home Alone*. Kevin is afraid of an older man who lives next door to him. He seems mean and gruff to say the least. Rumor has it that this older man has a criminal past. One evening, Kevin walks into a neighborhood church and who should be sitting in the pew across from him? The mean old man himself! They end up having a great conversation about forgiveness. Let's watch!

Are you afraid to ask someone to forgive you? Or, are you afraid to extend forgiveness to someone? I can't think of a better Christmas gift to give someone else or to give yourself this year than to forgive. No, lack of forgiveness isn't the only reason you can feel like you're on the outside looking in. But we sure do need to check our inner lives frequently to make sure those pesky seeds of bitterness and resentment haven't taken root somewhere and are growing again. When you ask for and give forgiveness God's way, you will feel connected spiritually – connected to God and to others. Here's a final solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #3: PURSUE JESUS

Several years ago, a book I read had a profound effect on me. The author said that the greatest desire that a follower of Jesus should have is simply to be with Jesus. Yes, we are called to be like Jesus. Our inner character should experience spiritual transformation as we follow Jesus. Yes, we are called to be for Jesus. We should serve Him with our time, talents and treasure. But above all, you and I should relentlessly pursue the sheer joy of being with Jesus. It reminds me of a verse in our text today. "We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us.

And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." (1 John 1:3 NLT) What a gift it is to pursue and experience the presence of Jesus – His love, His grace, His excellence, His perfection, His completeness, His power!

I've come to realize in my own life that when I start to feel as if I'm on the outside looking in at life – frustrated, disconnected, unfulfilled, stressed – it's often

because I've stopped pursuing Jesus and simply being with Him. I've gotten distracted by life. I've gotten preoccupied with myself. I've gotten ahead of Jesus. When Jesus first selected the twelve disciples, the Bible says, "He appointed twelve that they might be with him...." (Mark 3:14 NIV) Yes, they did other things as Jesus' disciples, to be sure, but, first and foremost, it was all about being with Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can become like Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can be for Jesus. Ironically, it's so much easier to become like Jesus and for Jesus when I focus, first and foremost, on being with Jesus.

In his book entitled "Good Morning, Merry Sunshine", author, Bob Greene, chronicles his infant daughter's first year of life. When little Amanda started to crawl, she started doing something that Bob found a little weird at first. He'd be lying in bed reading a book or watching TV when all of sudden he'd look down at the foot of the bed to find Amanda there just staring back at him. She'd pulled herself up to a standing position by the bed and she was just gazing at her daddy. Apparently, he'd become an object that fascinated her. Bob didn't quite know how to react at first. All he could figure out was that Amanda just liked coming in and looking at him. She didn't expect anything in return – conversation, interaction, getting picked up. So Bob simply began to return her gaze. He just stared back. After a few minutes, Amanda decided that was enough. She plopped back down and crawled back into the living room.

There is a simple pleasure in just looking at the one you love – what Bob and his daughter, Amanda, enjoyed. By faith, you and I can just stare at Jesus. You can just gaze upon His majesty and grace with the eyes of faith. Learn how to be with Jesus. Pursue Him. That matters? It matters more than you will ever know and it may be the single best solution to those times in life when you feel like you're on the outside looking in. Jesus loves you. Love Him.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN 1 JOHN 1:1-10

This Advent season I'm using four classic Christmas movies to underline or emphasize some wonderful, biblical truths about Christmas. The movie I want to feature today is entitled *Home Alone*. It's the story of eight year old Kevin at Christmastime. His large, extended family takes off a few days before Christmas for a vacation in Paris. Quite by accident, Kevin is left behind at home all by himself. At first, he's delighted by this turn of events. He and a few members of his family were really getting on each other's nerves. Suddenly he had the freedom to do anything he wanted to do, eat whatever he wanted to eat and go to bed whenever he wanted. It was fantastic – for awhile. But before too long, young Kevin starts to get lonely and miss his family. Now, the movie is a comedy and much of it has to do with Kevin's clever defense of his home from two bumbling crooks who want to rob the place. But there are a few poignant moments. One of them is when Kevin starts to feel lonely. He realizes he is terribly and utterly alone. I want to show you that scene right now. Kevin finds Santa Claus and asks that his family be returned to him as his Christmas gift. On Christmas Eve, he walks back to his house alone. From the sidewalk, he observes a family getting together for a meal and exchanging of gifts. The look on his face is one of sadness and longing. He's on the outside looking in.

Have you ever been on the outside looking in? Not literally, but spiritually or emotionally. The Bible makes it clear that God created you to be a relational being. You were never meant to do life completely alone. Now, because of sin, our relationship with God was broken. And also because of sin – either our sins against other people or their sins against us – we experience many broken relationships in life. The results are feelings of loneliness, separation and isolation. For many people, those feelings pick up in intensity during the Christmas season. I'm sure you've heard that many people struggle with feelings of depression this time of year. Part of the reason is this feeling of being on the outside looking in. People don't feel connected to God or to other people. They feel like Kevin in that scene – alone and isolated. Do you ever feel like you're on the outside looking in? You don't have to feel that way. I want you to think with me biblically about that today. Let's turn to one passage in the Bible that addresses the issue of being on the outside looking in and how to fix it. Here's the first biblical solution for being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #1: FIND GOD

That solution is offered to anyone here today who doesn't have a personal relationship with God yet. I know finding God sounds incredibly basic and obvious, but sometimes the most basic, obvious things get overlooked. One reason you feel like you're on the outside looking in is because you are on the outside looking in! Your feelings point to a very real spiritual problem. Again, the Bible says that you were created by God for a personal relationship with God. Sin messed it up. Every one of us is a sinner meaning that each of us has broken

God's laws and fallen short of God's standards. Everybody? Everybody. As a result, each of us is spiritually disconnected from God. One symptom of that lack of connection with God is this hard to define feeling that we're on the outside looking in about so much in life. You can feel deeply lonely even though you have lots of family and friends around you. Why? You're actually lonely for God. Your life lacks purpose because purpose comes from God. You might even have this kind of vague sense of anxiety all of the time – a sense that your life is missing something important. St. Augustine said centuries ago that every one of us has a God-shaped vacuum inside of us that only God can fill. Because you start out life lacking God, you must go out and find Him. Author Larry Crabb observes, "Feeling better has become more important to us than finding God." In other words, we dodge and evade and downplay this need for God, but there's just no substitute for finding Him. You will never feel better until you find God.

In the Bible passage we read, John tells us that God took the initiative to solve this most basic of human problems. "We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life." (1 John 1:1 NLT) Who's John talking about? Jesus, of course. He's pointing to what Christians call the Incarnation – God took upon Himself human flesh in the person of a man known as Jesus of Nazareth. John spent about three years following this Jesus around the land of Israel. He heard Jesus teach. He saw Jesus perform miracles. Then, he watched Him die on a cross. But three days, later this same Jesus got up again very much alive. John saw Jesus with his own eyes, touched Jesus' body with his own hands, and heard Him speak with John's own ears. Jesus was no ghost, no fantasy, no figment of John's imagination. And in Jesus, John found God. He found truth and reality. In Jesus, John found what his own soul could not define but what it craved.

Finding God. It's the single, most fundamental human need of all. It's not finding religion. Keeping rules and regulations or even following a strict moral code of conduct will not do it. It's not finding church. Singing songs, hearing a Bible message and hanging out with church folk will not do it in and of itself. It's not finding spirituality. Our culture will congratulate you for meditating, praying and thinking sentimentally about life, but that won't do it either. No, you must find God. You must somehow touch the Eternal. You must experience life – the life by which God Himself lives. And that life comes to you and me through this Jesus. How does John put it? "This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us." (1 John 1:2 NLT) The Bible and followers of Jesus call it by different names – being born again, getting saved, becoming a Christian, believing in Jesus, making a personal commitment to Christ – but it all points to the same basic, obvious reality: finding God! Has that ever happened to you?

Now, I realize that most everyone here today will say, “Rick, I’ve found God.” But there may be one, or two, or five or ten folk here today who haven’t yet. You might have religion, but you don’t have God. You might attend church regularly, but you don’t have God. You might be a spiritual person, but you don’t have God. If there’s anything that I pray that you will experience this Christmas, it’s that. Please find God. After all, that’s why God sent His Son into this world. You don’t have to be on the outside looking in at what God has done. It starts with finding God. Here’s a second solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling of being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #2: PRACTICE FORGIVENESS

Did you notice what a big place John gives to forgiveness in the verses we read? He talks about walking in the light, the blood of Jesus purifying us from all sin and God forgiving our sins when we sincerely confess those to Him. Why? One big reason for that uncomfortable feeling that you’re always somehow on the outside looking in is stuff going on in your life that needs forgiveness. We’ve said or done things – or failed to say or do things – that desperately need to be renounced by us and forgiven by God. John’s words here reveal some basic truths about forgiveness that each of us would do well to remember and practice.

First, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness. That happens initially when you find God. You admit you’re a sinner and you ask God to forgive all of your sins. You ask Jesus to be your Savior and Lord and you experience His forgiveness. That’s where it all starts. Second, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness continually. John says here, “But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.” (1 John 1:9 NLT) Here’s one reason why you can still feel like you’re on the outside looking in even after you’ve found God, or been born again, or gotten saved: you’ve got unconfessed sin in your life.

Sin that you hold onto, justify, excuse, tolerate, put up with – it separates you from God. I’m not saying you lose your salvation or forfeit Heaven. I am saying that a sense of spiritual life or a personal connection with God can be forfeited. The result is that you feel isolated from Him at a very deep level. That feeling of being on the outside looking in starts to creep into your soul again. I remember learning an important spiritual principle from a godly teacher in high school years ago now. He told me, “Rick, keep short accounts with God.” He meant that the moment the Holy Spirit speaks into my inner spirit about an ungodly act, a spiteful attitude, or an unkind word – at that very moment – I need to confess that sin and ask for God’s forgiveness immediately. That’s made a big impact on my daily walk with God. Don’t let the spiritual crud pile up. Keep short accounts. It’s one way to keeping that outside looking in feeling out of my life.

Third, ask forgiveness from and give forgiveness to other people. The major obstacle to great relationships – be it marriage, family, friends, people at church

– is sin. Sin just messes up everything and especially our relationships with other people. Until sin is dealt with in a biblical way, you'll experience a growing discomfort in your soul. Often, it's that old, familiar feeling of being on the outside looking in. You start to feel alone, cut off, disconnected from God and other people. What do I mean by asking forgiveness from other people? Quite simply, it means walking up to someone you've offended – looking him or her right in the eye – and saying, "I did such and such. I was wrong. I want to ask for your forgiveness." But that's so hard to do, isn't it? It's just hard on your pride which God is going to destroy completely one day anyway. I guarantee that not one of us will take one morsel of our sinful pride into Heaven with us, so why not allow God to kill it off here and now? Humility before God and others goes a long way to restoring a sense of connectedness with God and with others. John alludes to that spiritual reality when he says, "But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:7 NLT). Forgiveness is necessary to living in the light of God's grace and love.

The other part of this forgiveness equation is when we give or extend it to those who have hurt us. This can be much harder than going and asking someone to forgive us. The Bible has much to say about all of this and Christmas time is a great occasion to review what it teaches. Why give forgiveness to those who have hurt us? Let me suggest three biblical principles. One, forgive others because Jesus forgave you, not because they deserve it. What does one have to do with the other? Jesus was the One who tied them together. He said, "... 'You can't get forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your part, you cut yourself off from God's part.'" (Matt 6:14-15 MSG) When you extend forgiveness, you aren't admitting that what that person did to you was somehow OK. No, you're simply recognizing that if God could forgive you of your sins against Him, you can now be enabled by His Spirit to give forgiveness to those who offend you. Please recognize the force of what Jesus is saying. If you refuse forgiveness to someone, you give evidence that God's grace has not yet truly penetrated your own heart. The reality of your conversion is in doubt. When you refuse to forgive someone, one result will be the return of that feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

Two, forgive others even when the wrong is not acknowledged and forgiveness is not requested. Jesus did exactly that when, hanging from the cross, He said, "... 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing...'" (Luke 23:34 NIV) Some people will never acknowledge their offense or ask your forgiveness. Some people will never be at peace with you because at a deep, fundamental level they're not at peace with God. They have a far more serious issue than the fact they've offended you. They're out of touch with the God of the Universe. Of course, they're on the outside looking in spiritually, but they will not admit it. Their pride requires them to maintain until the day they die that everyone else is wrong and they're right. So, why extend forgiveness to people like that?

Three, forgive others because you must not allow resentment to build a stronghold in your life. There's nothing quite so dangerous to your personal spiritual life than holding on to bitterness, resentment or a stubborn unwillingness to forgive. Talk about that feeling of being on the outside looking in! Lack of forgiveness is a spiritual poison that will alienate you from God and others. Listen and obey God's Word when it says, "Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many." (Heb 2:15 NLT) It also says, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger.... Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you." (Eph 4:31-32 NLT)

There's a great scene about the importance of forgiveness in the movie *Home Alone*. Kevin is afraid of an older man who lives next door to him. He seems mean and gruff to say the least. Rumor has it that this older man has a criminal past. One evening, Kevin walks into a neighborhood church and who should be sitting in the pew across from him? The mean old man himself! They end up having a great conversation about forgiveness. Let's watch!

Are you afraid to ask someone to forgive you? Or, are you afraid to extend forgiveness to someone? I can't think of a better Christmas gift to give someone else or to give yourself this year than to forgive. No, lack of forgiveness isn't the only reason you can feel like you're on the outside looking in. But we sure do need to check our inner lives frequently to make sure those pesky seeds of bitterness and resentment haven't taken root somewhere and are growing again. When you ask for and give forgiveness God's way, you will feel connected spiritually – connected to God and to others. Here's a final solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #3: PURSUE JESUS

Several years ago, a book I read had a profound effect on me. The author said that the greatest desire that a follower of Jesus should have is simply to be with Jesus. Yes, we are called to be like Jesus. Our inner character should experience spiritual transformation as we follow Jesus. Yes, we are called to be for Jesus. We should serve Him with our time, talents and treasure. But above all, you and I should relentlessly pursue the sheer joy of being with Jesus. It reminds me of a verse in our text today. "We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us.

And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." (1 John 1:3 NLT) What a gift it is to pursue and experience the presence of Jesus – His love, His grace, His excellence, His perfection, His completeness, His power!

I've come to realize in my own life that when I start to feel as if I'm on the outside looking in at life – frustrated, disconnected, unfulfilled, stressed – it's often

because I've stopped pursuing Jesus and simply being with Him. I've gotten distracted by life. I've gotten preoccupied with myself. I've gotten ahead of Jesus. When Jesus first selected the twelve disciples, the Bible says, "He appointed twelve that they might be with him...." (Mark 3:14 NIV) Yes, they did other things as Jesus' disciples, to be sure, but, first and foremost, it was all about being with Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can become like Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can be for Jesus. Ironically, it's so much easier to become like Jesus and for Jesus when I focus, first and foremost, on being with Jesus.

In his book entitled "Good Morning, Merry Sunshine", author, Bob Greene, chronicles his infant daughter's first year of life. When little Amanda started to crawl, she started doing something that Bob found a little weird at first. He'd be lying in bed reading a book or watching TV when all of sudden he'd look down at the foot of the bed to find Amanda there just staring back at him. She'd pulled herself up to a standing position by the bed and she was just gazing at her daddy. Apparently, he'd become an object that fascinated her. Bob didn't quite know how to react at first. All he could figure out was that Amanda just liked coming in and looking at him. She didn't expect anything in return – conversation, interaction, getting picked up. So Bob simply began to return her gaze. He just stared back. After a few minutes, Amanda decided that was enough. She plopped back down and crawled back into the living room.

There is a simple pleasure in just looking at the one you love – what Bob and his daughter, Amanda, enjoyed. By faith, you and I can just stare at Jesus. You can just gaze upon His majesty and grace with the eyes of faith. Learn how to be with Jesus. Pursue Him. That matters? It matters more than you will ever know and it may be the single best solution to those times in life when you feel like you're on the outside looking in. Jesus loves you. Love Him.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN 1 JOHN 1:1-10

This Advent season I'm using four classic Christmas movies to underline or emphasize some wonderful, biblical truths about Christmas. The movie I want to feature today is entitled *Home Alone*. It's the story of eight year old Kevin at Christmastime. His large, extended family takes off a few days before Christmas for a vacation in Paris. Quite by accident, Kevin is left behind at home all by himself. At first, he's delighted by this turn of events. He and a few members of his family were really getting on each other's nerves. Suddenly he had the freedom to do anything he wanted to do, eat whatever he wanted to eat and go to bed whenever he wanted. It was fantastic – for awhile. But before too long, young Kevin starts to get lonely and miss his family. Now, the movie is a comedy and much of it has to do with Kevin's clever defense of his home from two bumbling crooks who want to rob the place. But there are a few poignant moments. One of them is when Kevin starts to feel lonely. He realizes he is terribly and utterly alone. I want to show you that scene right now. Kevin finds Santa Claus and asks that his family be returned to him as his Christmas gift. On Christmas Eve, he walks back to his house alone. From the sidewalk, he observes a family getting together for a meal and exchanging of gifts. The look on his face is one of sadness and longing. He's on the outside looking in.

Have you ever been on the outside looking in? Not literally, but spiritually or emotionally. The Bible makes it clear that God created you to be a relational being. You were never meant to do life completely alone. Now, because of sin, our relationship with God was broken. And also because of sin – either our sins against other people or their sins against us – we experience many broken relationships in life. The results are feelings of loneliness, separation and isolation. For many people, those feelings pick up in intensity during the Christmas season. I'm sure you've heard that many people struggle with feelings of depression this time of year. Part of the reason is this feeling of being on the outside looking in. People don't feel connected to God or to other people. They feel like Kevin in that scene – alone and isolated. Do you ever feel like you're on the outside looking in? You don't have to feel that way. I want you to think with me biblically about that today. Let's turn to one passage in the Bible that addresses the issue of being on the outside looking in and how to fix it. Here's the first biblical solution for being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #1: FIND GOD

That solution is offered to anyone here today who doesn't have a personal relationship with God yet. I know finding God sounds incredibly basic and obvious, but sometimes the most basic, obvious things get overlooked. One reason you feel like you're on the outside looking in is because you are on the outside looking in! Your feelings point to a very real spiritual problem. Again, the Bible says that you were created by God for a personal relationship with God. Sin messed it up. Every one of us is a sinner meaning that each of us has broken

God's laws and fallen short of God's standards. Everybody? Everybody. As a result, each of us is spiritually disconnected from God. One symptom of that lack of connection with God is this hard to define feeling that we're on the outside looking in about so much in life. You can feel deeply lonely even though you have lots of family and friends around you. Why? You're actually lonely for God. Your life lacks purpose because purpose comes from God. You might even have this kind of vague sense of anxiety all of the time – a sense that your life is missing something important. St. Augustine said centuries ago that every one of us has a God-shaped vacuum inside of us that only God can fill. Because you start out life lacking God, you must go out and find Him. Author Larry Crabb observes, "Feeling better has become more important to us than finding God." In other words, we dodge and evade and downplay this need for God, but there's just no substitute for finding Him. You will never feel better until you find God.

In the Bible passage we read, John tells us that God took the initiative to solve this most basic of human problems. "We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life." (1 John 1:1 NLT) Who's John talking about? Jesus, of course. He's pointing to what Christians call the Incarnation – God took upon Himself human flesh in the person of a man known as Jesus of Nazareth. John spent about three years following this Jesus around the land of Israel. He heard Jesus teach. He saw Jesus perform miracles. Then, he watched Him die on a cross. But three days, later this same Jesus got up again very much alive. John saw Jesus with his own eyes, touched Jesus' body with his own hands, and heard Him speak with John's own ears. Jesus was no ghost, no fantasy, no figment of John's imagination. And in Jesus, John found God. He found truth and reality. In Jesus, John found what his own soul could not define but what it craved.

Finding God. It's the single, most fundamental human need of all. It's not finding religion. Keeping rules and regulations or even following a strict moral code of conduct will not do it. It's not finding church. Singing songs, hearing a Bible message and hanging out with church folk will not do it in and of itself. It's not finding spirituality. Our culture will congratulate you for meditating, praying and thinking sentimentally about life, but that won't do it either. No, you must find God. You must somehow touch the Eternal. You must experience life – the life by which God Himself lives. And that life comes to you and me through this Jesus. How does John put it? "This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us." (1 John 1:2 NLT) The Bible and followers of Jesus call it by different names – being born again, getting saved, becoming a Christian, believing in Jesus, making a personal commitment to Christ – but it all points to the same basic, obvious reality: finding God! Has that ever happened to you?

Now, I realize that most everyone here today will say, “Rick, I’ve found God.” But there may be one, or two, or five or ten folk here today who haven’t yet. You might have religion, but you don’t have God. You might attend church regularly, but you don’t have God. You might be a spiritual person, but you don’t have God. If there’s anything that I pray that you will experience this Christmas, it’s that. Please find God. After all, that’s why God sent His Son into this world. You don’t have to be on the outside looking in at what God has done. It starts with finding God. Here’s a second solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling of being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #2: PRACTICE FORGIVENESS

Did you notice what a big place John gives to forgiveness in the verses we read? He talks about walking in the light, the blood of Jesus purifying us from all sin and God forgiving our sins when we sincerely confess those to Him. Why? One big reason for that uncomfortable feeling that you’re always somehow on the outside looking in is stuff going on in your life that needs forgiveness. We’ve said or done things – or failed to say or do things – that desperately need to be renounced by us and forgiven by God. John’s words here reveal some basic truths about forgiveness that each of us would do well to remember and practice.

First, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness. That happens initially when you find God. You admit you’re a sinner and you ask God to forgive all of your sins. You ask Jesus to be your Savior and Lord and you experience His forgiveness. That’s where it all starts. Second, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness continually. John says here, “But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.” (1 John 1:9 NLT) Here’s one reason why you can still feel like you’re on the outside looking in even after you’ve found God, or been born again, or gotten saved: you’ve got unconfessed sin in your life.

Sin that you hold onto, justify, excuse, tolerate, put up with – it separates you from God. I’m not saying you lose your salvation or forfeit Heaven. I am saying that a sense of spiritual life or a personal connection with God can be forfeited. The result is that you feel isolated from Him at a very deep level. That feeling of being on the outside looking in starts to creep into your soul again. I remember learning an important spiritual principle from a godly teacher in high school years ago now. He told me, “Rick, keep short accounts with God.” He meant that the moment the Holy Spirit speaks into my inner spirit about an ungodly act, a spiteful attitude, or an unkind word – at that very moment – I need to confess that sin and ask for God’s forgiveness immediately. That’s made a big impact on my daily walk with God. Don’t let the spiritual crud pile up. Keep short accounts. It’s one way to keeping that outside looking in feeling out of my life.

Third, ask forgiveness from and give forgiveness to other people. The major obstacle to great relationships – be it marriage, family, friends, people at church

– is sin. Sin just messes up everything and especially our relationships with other people. Until sin is dealt with in a biblical way, you'll experience a growing discomfort in your soul. Often, it's that old, familiar feeling of being on the outside looking in. You start to feel alone, cut off, disconnected from God and other people. What do I mean by asking forgiveness from other people? Quite simply, it means walking up to someone you've offended – looking him or her right in the eye – and saying, "I did such and such. I was wrong. I want to ask for your forgiveness." But that's so hard to do, isn't it? It's just hard on your pride which God is going to destroy completely one day anyway. I guarantee that not one of us will take one morsel of our sinful pride into Heaven with us, so why not allow God to kill it off here and now? Humility before God and others goes a long way to restoring a sense of connectedness with God and with others. John alludes to that spiritual reality when he says, "But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:7 NLT). Forgiveness is necessary to living in the light of God's grace and love.

The other part of this forgiveness equation is when we give or extend it to those who have hurt us. This can be much harder than going and asking someone to forgive us. The Bible has much to say about all of this and Christmas time is a great occasion to review what it teaches. Why give forgiveness to those who have hurt us? Let me suggest three biblical principles. One, forgive others because Jesus forgave you, not because they deserve it. What does one have to do with the other? Jesus was the One who tied them together. He said, "... 'You can't get forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your part, you cut yourself off from God's part.'" (Matt 6:14-15 MSG) When you extend forgiveness, you aren't admitting that what that person did to you was somehow OK. No, you're simply recognizing that if God could forgive you of your sins against Him, you can now be enabled by His Spirit to give forgiveness to those who offend you. Please recognize the force of what Jesus is saying. If you refuse forgiveness to someone, you give evidence that God's grace has not yet truly penetrated your own heart. The reality of your conversion is in doubt. When you refuse to forgive someone, one result will be the return of that feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

Two, forgive others even when the wrong is not acknowledged and forgiveness is not requested. Jesus did exactly that when, hanging from the cross, He said, "... 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing...'" (Luke 23:34 NIV) Some people will never acknowledge their offense or ask your forgiveness. Some people will never be at peace with you because at a deep, fundamental level they're not at peace with God. They have a far more serious issue than the fact they've offended you. They're out of touch with the God of the Universe. Of course, they're on the outside looking in spiritually, but they will not admit it. Their pride requires them to maintain until the day they die that everyone else is wrong and they're right. So, why extend forgiveness to people like that?

Three, forgive others because you must not allow resentment to build a stronghold in your life. There's nothing quite so dangerous to your personal spiritual life than holding on to bitterness, resentment or a stubborn unwillingness to forgive. Talk about that feeling of being on the outside looking in! Lack of forgiveness is a spiritual poison that will alienate you from God and others. Listen and obey God's Word when it says, "Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many." (Heb 2:15 NLT) It also says, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger.... Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you." (Eph 4:31-32 NLT)

There's a great scene about the importance of forgiveness in the movie *Home Alone*. Kevin is afraid of an older man who lives next door to him. He seems mean and gruff to say the least. Rumor has it that this older man has a criminal past. One evening, Kevin walks into a neighborhood church and who should be sitting in the pew across from him? The mean old man himself! They end up having a great conversation about forgiveness. Let's watch!

Are you afraid to ask someone to forgive you? Or, are you afraid to extend forgiveness to someone? I can't think of a better Christmas gift to give someone else or to give yourself this year than to forgive. No, lack of forgiveness isn't the only reason you can feel like you're on the outside looking in. But we sure do need to check our inner lives frequently to make sure those pesky seeds of bitterness and resentment haven't taken root somewhere and are growing again. When you ask for and give forgiveness God's way, you will feel connected spiritually – connected to God and to others. Here's a final solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #3: PURSUE JESUS

Several years ago, a book I read had a profound effect on me. The author said that the greatest desire that a follower of Jesus should have is simply to be with Jesus. Yes, we are called to be like Jesus. Our inner character should experience spiritual transformation as we follow Jesus. Yes, we are called to be for Jesus. We should serve Him with our time, talents and treasure. But above all, you and I should relentlessly pursue the sheer joy of being with Jesus. It reminds me of a verse in our text today. "We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us.

And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." (1 John 1:3 NLT) What a gift it is to pursue and experience the presence of Jesus – His love, His grace, His excellence, His perfection, His completeness, His power!

I've come to realize in my own life that when I start to feel as if I'm on the outside looking in at life – frustrated, disconnected, unfulfilled, stressed – it's often

because I've stopped pursuing Jesus and simply being with Him. I've gotten distracted by life. I've gotten preoccupied with myself. I've gotten ahead of Jesus. When Jesus first selected the twelve disciples, the Bible says, "He appointed twelve that they might be with him...." (Mark 3:14 NIV) Yes, they did other things as Jesus' disciples, to be sure, but, first and foremost, it was all about being with Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can become like Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can be for Jesus. Ironically, it's so much easier to become like Jesus and for Jesus when I focus, first and foremost, on being with Jesus.

In his book entitled "Good Morning, Merry Sunshine", author, Bob Greene, chronicles his infant daughter's first year of life. When little Amanda started to crawl, she started doing something that Bob found a little weird at first. He'd be lying in bed reading a book or watching TV when all of sudden he'd look down at the foot of the bed to find Amanda there just staring back at him. She'd pulled herself up to a standing position by the bed and she was just gazing at her daddy. Apparently, he'd become an object that fascinated her. Bob didn't quite know how to react at first. All he could figure out was that Amanda just liked coming in and looking at him. She didn't expect anything in return – conversation, interaction, getting picked up. So Bob simply began to return her gaze. He just stared back. After a few minutes, Amanda decided that was enough. She plopped back down and crawled back into the living room.

There is a simple pleasure in just looking at the one you love – what Bob and his daughter, Amanda, enjoyed. By faith, you and I can just stare at Jesus. You can just gaze upon His majesty and grace with the eyes of faith. Learn how to be with Jesus. Pursue Him. That matters? It matters more than you will ever know and it may be the single best solution to those times in life when you feel like you're on the outside looking in. Jesus loves you. Love Him.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN 1 JOHN 1:1-10

This Advent season I'm using four classic Christmas movies to underline or emphasize some wonderful, biblical truths about Christmas. The movie I want to feature today is entitled *Home Alone*. It's the story of eight year old Kevin at Christmastime. His large, extended family takes off a few days before Christmas for a vacation in Paris. Quite by accident, Kevin is left behind at home all by himself. At first, he's delighted by this turn of events. He and a few members of his family were really getting on each other's nerves. Suddenly he had the freedom to do anything he wanted to do, eat whatever he wanted to eat and go to bed whenever he wanted. It was fantastic – for awhile. But before too long, young Kevin starts to get lonely and miss his family. Now, the movie is a comedy and much of it has to do with Kevin's clever defense of his home from two bumbling crooks who want to rob the place. But there are a few poignant moments. One of them is when Kevin starts to feel lonely. He realizes he is terribly and utterly alone. I want to show you that scene right now. Kevin finds Santa Claus and asks that his family be returned to him as his Christmas gift. On Christmas Eve, he walks back to his house alone. From the sidewalk, he observes a family getting together for a meal and exchanging of gifts. The look on his face is one of sadness and longing. He's on the outside looking in.

Have you ever been on the outside looking in? Not literally, but spiritually or emotionally. The Bible makes it clear that God created you to be a relational being. You were never meant to do life completely alone. Now, because of sin, our relationship with God was broken. And also because of sin – either our sins against other people or their sins against us – we experience many broken relationships in life. The results are feelings of loneliness, separation and isolation. For many people, those feelings pick up in intensity during the Christmas season. I'm sure you've heard that many people struggle with feelings of depression this time of year. Part of the reason is this feeling of being on the outside looking in. People don't feel connected to God or to other people. They feel like Kevin in that scene – alone and isolated. Do you ever feel like you're on the outside looking in? You don't have to feel that way. I want you to think with me biblically about that today. Let's turn to one passage in the Bible that addresses the issue of being on the outside looking in and how to fix it. Here's the first biblical solution for being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #1: FIND GOD

That solution is offered to anyone here today who doesn't have a personal relationship with God yet. I know finding God sounds incredibly basic and obvious, but sometimes the most basic, obvious things get overlooked. One reason you feel like you're on the outside looking in is because you are on the outside looking in! Your feelings point to a very real spiritual problem. Again, the Bible says that you were created by God for a personal relationship with God. Sin messed it up. Every one of us is a sinner meaning that each of us has broken

God's laws and fallen short of God's standards. Everybody? Everybody. As a result, each of us is spiritually disconnected from God. One symptom of that lack of connection with God is this hard to define feeling that we're on the outside looking in about so much in life. You can feel deeply lonely even though you have lots of family and friends around you. Why? You're actually lonely for God. Your life lacks purpose because purpose comes from God. You might even have this kind of vague sense of anxiety all of the time – a sense that your life is missing something important. St. Augustine said centuries ago that every one of us has a God-shaped vacuum inside of us that only God can fill. Because you start out life lacking God, you must go out and find Him. Author Larry Crabb observes, "Feeling better has become more important to us than finding God." In other words, we dodge and evade and downplay this need for God, but there's just no substitute for finding Him. You will never feel better until you find God.

In the Bible passage we read, John tells us that God took the initiative to solve this most basic of human problems. "We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life." (1 John 1:1 NLT) Who's John talking about? Jesus, of course. He's pointing to what Christians call the Incarnation – God took upon Himself human flesh in the person of a man known as Jesus of Nazareth. John spent about three years following this Jesus around the land of Israel. He heard Jesus teach. He saw Jesus perform miracles. Then, he watched Him die on a cross. But three days, later this same Jesus got up again very much alive. John saw Jesus with his own eyes, touched Jesus' body with his own hands, and heard Him speak with John's own ears. Jesus was no ghost, no fantasy, no figment of John's imagination. And in Jesus, John found God. He found truth and reality. In Jesus, John found what his own soul could not define but what it craved.

Finding God. It's the single, most fundamental human need of all. It's not finding religion. Keeping rules and regulations or even following a strict moral code of conduct will not do it. It's not finding church. Singing songs, hearing a Bible message and hanging out with church folk will not do it in and of itself. It's not finding spirituality. Our culture will congratulate you for meditating, praying and thinking sentimentally about life, but that won't do it either. No, you must find God. You must somehow touch the Eternal. You must experience life – the life by which God Himself lives. And that life comes to you and me through this Jesus. How does John put it? "This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us." (1 John 1:2 NLT) The Bible and followers of Jesus call it by different names – being born again, getting saved, becoming a Christian, believing in Jesus, making a personal commitment to Christ – but it all points to the same basic, obvious reality: finding God! Has that ever happened to you?

Now, I realize that most everyone here today will say, “Rick, I’ve found God.” But there may be one, or two, or five or ten folk here today who haven’t yet. You might have religion, but you don’t have God. You might attend church regularly, but you don’t have God. You might be a spiritual person, but you don’t have God. If there’s anything that I pray that you will experience this Christmas, it’s that. Please find God. After all, that’s why God sent His Son into this world. You don’t have to be on the outside looking in at what God has done. It starts with finding God. Here’s a second solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling of being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #2: PRACTICE FORGIVENESS

Did you notice what a big place John gives to forgiveness in the verses we read? He talks about walking in the light, the blood of Jesus purifying us from all sin and God forgiving our sins when we sincerely confess those to Him. Why? One big reason for that uncomfortable feeling that you’re always somehow on the outside looking in is stuff going on in your life that needs forgiveness. We’ve said or done things – or failed to say or do things – that desperately need to be renounced by us and forgiven by God. John’s words here reveal some basic truths about forgiveness that each of us would do well to remember and practice.

First, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness. That happens initially when you find God. You admit you’re a sinner and you ask God to forgive all of your sins. You ask Jesus to be your Savior and Lord and you experience His forgiveness. That’s where it all starts. Second, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness continually. John says here, “But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.” (1 John 1:9 NLT) Here’s one reason why you can still feel like you’re on the outside looking in even after you’ve found God, or been born again, or gotten saved: you’ve got unconfessed sin in your life.

Sin that you hold onto, justify, excuse, tolerate, put up with – it separates you from God. I’m not saying you lose your salvation or forfeit Heaven. I am saying that a sense of spiritual life or a personal connection with God can be forfeited. The result is that you feel isolated from Him at a very deep level. That feeling of being on the outside looking in starts to creep into your soul again. I remember learning an important spiritual principle from a godly teacher in high school years ago now. He told me, “Rick, keep short accounts with God.” He meant that the moment the Holy Spirit speaks into my inner spirit about an ungodly act, a spiteful attitude, or an unkind word – at that very moment – I need to confess that sin and ask for God’s forgiveness immediately. That’s made a big impact on my daily walk with God. Don’t let the spiritual crud pile up. Keep short accounts. It’s one way to keeping that outside looking in feeling out of my life.

Third, ask forgiveness from and give forgiveness to other people. The major obstacle to great relationships – be it marriage, family, friends, people at church

– is sin. Sin just messes up everything and especially our relationships with other people. Until sin is dealt with in a biblical way, you'll experience a growing discomfort in your soul. Often, it's that old, familiar feeling of being on the outside looking in. You start to feel alone, cut off, disconnected from God and other people. What do I mean by asking forgiveness from other people? Quite simply, it means walking up to someone you've offended – looking him or her right in the eye – and saying, "I did such and such. I was wrong. I want to ask for your forgiveness." But that's so hard to do, isn't it? It's just hard on your pride which God is going to destroy completely one day anyway. I guarantee that not one of us will take one morsel of our sinful pride into Heaven with us, so why not allow God to kill it off here and now? Humility before God and others goes a long way to restoring a sense of connectedness with God and with others. John alludes to that spiritual reality when he says, "But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:7 NLT). Forgiveness is necessary to living in the light of God's grace and love.

The other part of this forgiveness equation is when we give or extend it to those who have hurt us. This can be much harder than going and asking someone to forgive us. The Bible has much to say about all of this and Christmas time is a great occasion to review what it teaches. Why give forgiveness to those who have hurt us? Let me suggest three biblical principles. One, forgive others because Jesus forgave you, not because they deserve it. What does one have to do with the other? Jesus was the One who tied them together. He said, "... 'You can't get forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your part, you cut yourself off from God's part.'" (Matt 6:14-15 MSG) When you extend forgiveness, you aren't admitting that what that person did to you was somehow OK. No, you're simply recognizing that if God could forgive you of your sins against Him, you can now be enabled by His Spirit to give forgiveness to those who offend you. Please recognize the force of what Jesus is saying. If you refuse forgiveness to someone, you give evidence that God's grace has not yet truly penetrated your own heart. The reality of your conversion is in doubt. When you refuse to forgive someone, one result will be the return of that feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

Two, forgive others even when the wrong is not acknowledged and forgiveness is not requested. Jesus did exactly that when, hanging from the cross, He said, "... 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing...'" (Luke 23:34 NIV) Some people will never acknowledge their offense or ask your forgiveness. Some people will never be at peace with you because at a deep, fundamental level they're not at peace with God. They have a far more serious issue than the fact they've offended you. They're out of touch with the God of the Universe. Of course, they're on the outside looking in spiritually, but they will not admit it. Their pride requires them to maintain until the day they die that everyone else is wrong and they're right. So, why extend forgiveness to people like that?

Three, forgive others because you must not allow resentment to build a stronghold in your life. There's nothing quite so dangerous to your personal spiritual life than holding on to bitterness, resentment or a stubborn unwillingness to forgive. Talk about that feeling of being on the outside looking in! Lack of forgiveness is a spiritual poison that will alienate you from God and others. Listen and obey God's Word when it says, "Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many." (Heb 2:15 NLT) It also says, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger.... Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you." (Eph 4:31-32 NLT)

There's a great scene about the importance of forgiveness in the movie *Home Alone*. Kevin is afraid of an older man who lives next door to him. He seems mean and gruff to say the least. Rumor has it that this older man has a criminal past. One evening, Kevin walks into a neighborhood church and who should be sitting in the pew across from him? The mean old man himself! They end up having a great conversation about forgiveness. Let's watch!

Are you afraid to ask someone to forgive you? Or, are you afraid to extend forgiveness to someone? I can't think of a better Christmas gift to give someone else or to give yourself this year than to forgive. No, lack of forgiveness isn't the only reason you can feel like you're on the outside looking in. But we sure do need to check our inner lives frequently to make sure those pesky seeds of bitterness and resentment haven't taken root somewhere and are growing again. When you ask for and give forgiveness God's way, you will feel connected spiritually – connected to God and to others. Here's a final solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #3: PURSUE JESUS

Several years ago, a book I read had a profound effect on me. The author said that the greatest desire that a follower of Jesus should have is simply to be with Jesus. Yes, we are called to be like Jesus. Our inner character should experience spiritual transformation as we follow Jesus. Yes, we are called to be for Jesus. We should serve Him with our time, talents and treasure. But above all, you and I should relentlessly pursue the sheer joy of being with Jesus. It reminds me of a verse in our text today. "We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us.

And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." (1 John 1:3 NLT) What a gift it is to pursue and experience the presence of Jesus – His love, His grace, His excellence, His perfection, His completeness, His power!

I've come to realize in my own life that when I start to feel as if I'm on the outside looking in at life – frustrated, disconnected, unfulfilled, stressed – it's often

because I've stopped pursuing Jesus and simply being with Him. I've gotten distracted by life. I've gotten preoccupied with myself. I've gotten ahead of Jesus. When Jesus first selected the twelve disciples, the Bible says, "He appointed twelve that they might be with him...." (Mark 3:14 NIV) Yes, they did other things as Jesus' disciples, to be sure, but, first and foremost, it was all about being with Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can become like Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can be for Jesus. Ironically, it's so much easier to become like Jesus and for Jesus when I focus, first and foremost, on being with Jesus.

In his book entitled "Good Morning, Merry Sunshine", author, Bob Greene, chronicles his infant daughter's first year of life. When little Amanda started to crawl, she started doing something that Bob found a little weird at first. He'd be lying in bed reading a book or watching TV when all of sudden he'd look down at the foot of the bed to find Amanda there just staring back at him. She'd pulled herself up to a standing position by the bed and she was just gazing at her daddy. Apparently, he'd become an object that fascinated her. Bob didn't quite know how to react at first. All he could figure out was that Amanda just liked coming in and looking at him. She didn't expect anything in return – conversation, interaction, getting picked up. So Bob simply began to return her gaze. He just stared back. After a few minutes, Amanda decided that was enough. She plopped back down and crawled back into the living room.

There is a simple pleasure in just looking at the one you love – what Bob and his daughter, Amanda, enjoyed. By faith, you and I can just stare at Jesus. You can just gaze upon His majesty and grace with the eyes of faith. Learn how to be with Jesus. Pursue Him. That matters? It matters more than you will ever know and it may be the single best solution to those times in life when you feel like you're on the outside looking in. Jesus loves you. Love Him.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN 1 JOHN 1:1-10

This Advent season I'm using four classic Christmas movies to underline or emphasize some wonderful, biblical truths about Christmas. The movie I want to feature today is entitled *Home Alone*. It's the story of eight year old Kevin at Christmastime. His large, extended family takes off a few days before Christmas for a vacation in Paris. Quite by accident, Kevin is left behind at home all by himself. At first, he's delighted by this turn of events. He and a few members of his family were really getting on each other's nerves. Suddenly he had the freedom to do anything he wanted to do, eat whatever he wanted to eat and go to bed whenever he wanted. It was fantastic – for awhile. But before too long, young Kevin starts to get lonely and miss his family. Now, the movie is a comedy and much of it has to do with Kevin's clever defense of his home from two bumbling crooks who want to rob the place. But there are a few poignant moments. One of them is when Kevin starts to feel lonely. He realizes he is terribly and utterly alone. I want to show you that scene right now. Kevin finds Santa Claus and asks that his family be returned to him as his Christmas gift. On Christmas Eve, he walks back to his house alone. From the sidewalk, he observes a family getting together for a meal and exchanging of gifts. The look on his face is one of sadness and longing. He's on the outside looking in.

Have you ever been on the outside looking in? Not literally, but spiritually or emotionally. The Bible makes it clear that God created you to be a relational being. You were never meant to do life completely alone. Now, because of sin, our relationship with God was broken. And also because of sin – either our sins against other people or their sins against us – we experience many broken relationships in life. The results are feelings of loneliness, separation and isolation. For many people, those feelings pick up in intensity during the Christmas season. I'm sure you've heard that many people struggle with feelings of depression this time of year. Part of the reason is this feeling of being on the outside looking in. People don't feel connected to God or to other people. They feel like Kevin in that scene – alone and isolated. Do you ever feel like you're on the outside looking in? You don't have to feel that way. I want you to think with me biblically about that today. Let's turn to one passage in the Bible that addresses the issue of being on the outside looking in and how to fix it. Here's the first biblical solution for being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #1: FIND GOD

That solution is offered to anyone here today who doesn't have a personal relationship with God yet. I know finding God sounds incredibly basic and obvious, but sometimes the most basic, obvious things get overlooked. One reason you feel like you're on the outside looking in is because you are on the outside looking in! Your feelings point to a very real spiritual problem. Again, the Bible says that you were created by God for a personal relationship with God. Sin messed it up. Every one of us is a sinner meaning that each of us has broken

God's laws and fallen short of God's standards. Everybody? Everybody. As a result, each of us is spiritually disconnected from God. One symptom of that lack of connection with God is this hard to define feeling that we're on the outside looking in about so much in life. You can feel deeply lonely even though you have lots of family and friends around you. Why? You're actually lonely for God. Your life lacks purpose because purpose comes from God. You might even have this kind of vague sense of anxiety all of the time – a sense that your life is missing something important. St. Augustine said centuries ago that every one of us has a God-shaped vacuum inside of us that only God can fill. Because you start out life lacking God, you must go out and find Him. Author Larry Crabb observes, "Feeling better has become more important to us than finding God." In other words, we dodge and evade and downplay this need for God, but there's just no substitute for finding Him. You will never feel better until you find God.

In the Bible passage we read, John tells us that God took the initiative to solve this most basic of human problems. "We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life." (1 John 1:1 NLT) Who's John talking about? Jesus, of course. He's pointing to what Christians call the Incarnation – God took upon Himself human flesh in the person of a man known as Jesus of Nazareth. John spent about three years following this Jesus around the land of Israel. He heard Jesus teach. He saw Jesus perform miracles. Then, he watched Him die on a cross. But three days, later this same Jesus got up again very much alive. John saw Jesus with his own eyes, touched Jesus' body with his own hands, and heard Him speak with John's own ears. Jesus was no ghost, no fantasy, no figment of John's imagination. And in Jesus, John found God. He found truth and reality. In Jesus, John found what his own soul could not define but what it craved.

Finding God. It's the single, most fundamental human need of all. It's not finding religion. Keeping rules and regulations or even following a strict moral code of conduct will not do it. It's not finding church. Singing songs, hearing a Bible message and hanging out with church folk will not do it in and of itself. It's not finding spirituality. Our culture will congratulate you for meditating, praying and thinking sentimentally about life, but that won't do it either. No, you must find God. You must somehow touch the Eternal. You must experience life – the life by which God Himself lives. And that life comes to you and me through this Jesus. How does John put it? "This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us." (1 John 1:2 NLT) The Bible and followers of Jesus call it by different names – being born again, getting saved, becoming a Christian, believing in Jesus, making a personal commitment to Christ – but it all points to the same basic, obvious reality: finding God! Has that ever happened to you?

Now, I realize that most everyone here today will say, “Rick, I’ve found God.” But there may be one, or two, or five or ten folk here today who haven’t yet. You might have religion, but you don’t have God. You might attend church regularly, but you don’t have God. You might be a spiritual person, but you don’t have God. If there’s anything that I pray that you will experience this Christmas, it’s that. Please find God. After all, that’s why God sent His Son into this world. You don’t have to be on the outside looking in at what God has done. It starts with finding God. Here’s a second solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling of being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #2: PRACTICE FORGIVENESS

Did you notice what a big place John gives to forgiveness in the verses we read? He talks about walking in the light, the blood of Jesus purifying us from all sin and God forgiving our sins when we sincerely confess those to Him. Why? One big reason for that uncomfortable feeling that you’re always somehow on the outside looking in is stuff going on in your life that needs forgiveness. We’ve said or done things – or failed to say or do things – that desperately need to be renounced by us and forgiven by God. John’s words here reveal some basic truths about forgiveness that each of us would do well to remember and practice.

First, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness. That happens initially when you find God. You admit you’re a sinner and you ask God to forgive all of your sins. You ask Jesus to be your Savior and Lord and you experience His forgiveness. That’s where it all starts. Second, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness continually. John says here, “But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.” (1 John 1:9 NLT) Here’s one reason why you can still feel like you’re on the outside looking in even after you’ve found God, or been born again, or gotten saved: you’ve got unconfessed sin in your life.

Sin that you hold onto, justify, excuse, tolerate, put up with – it separates you from God. I’m not saying you lose your salvation or forfeit Heaven. I am saying that a sense of spiritual life or a personal connection with God can be forfeited. The result is that you feel isolated from Him at a very deep level. That feeling of being on the outside looking in starts to creep into your soul again. I remember learning an important spiritual principle from a godly teacher in high school years ago now. He told me, “Rick, keep short accounts with God.” He meant that the moment the Holy Spirit speaks into my inner spirit about an ungodly act, a spiteful attitude, or an unkind word – at that very moment – I need to confess that sin and ask for God’s forgiveness immediately. That’s made a big impact on my daily walk with God. Don’t let the spiritual crud pile up. Keep short accounts. It’s one way to keeping that outside looking in feeling out of my life.

Third, ask forgiveness from and give forgiveness to other people. The major obstacle to great relationships – be it marriage, family, friends, people at church

– is sin. Sin just messes up everything and especially our relationships with other people. Until sin is dealt with in a biblical way, you'll experience a growing discomfort in your soul. Often, it's that old, familiar feeling of being on the outside looking in. You start to feel alone, cut off, disconnected from God and other people. What do I mean by asking forgiveness from other people? Quite simply, it means walking up to someone you've offended – looking him or her right in the eye – and saying, "I did such and such. I was wrong. I want to ask for your forgiveness." But that's so hard to do, isn't it? It's just hard on your pride which God is going to destroy completely one day anyway. I guarantee that not one of us will take one morsel of our sinful pride into Heaven with us, so why not allow God to kill it off here and now? Humility before God and others goes a long way to restoring a sense of connectedness with God and with others. John alludes to that spiritual reality when he says, "But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:7 NLT). Forgiveness is necessary to living in the light of God's grace and love.

The other part of this forgiveness equation is when we give or extend it to those who have hurt us. This can be much harder than going and asking someone to forgive us. The Bible has much to say about all of this and Christmas time is a great occasion to review what it teaches. Why give forgiveness to those who have hurt us? Let me suggest three biblical principles. One, forgive others because Jesus forgave you, not because they deserve it. What does one have to do with the other? Jesus was the One who tied them together. He said, "... 'You can't get forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your part, you cut yourself off from God's part.'" (Matt 6:14-15 MSG) When you extend forgiveness, you aren't admitting that what that person did to you was somehow OK. No, you're simply recognizing that if God could forgive you of your sins against Him, you can now be enabled by His Spirit to give forgiveness to those who offend you. Please recognize the force of what Jesus is saying. If you refuse forgiveness to someone, you give evidence that God's grace has not yet truly penetrated your own heart. The reality of your conversion is in doubt. When you refuse to forgive someone, one result will be the return of that feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

Two, forgive others even when the wrong is not acknowledged and forgiveness is not requested. Jesus did exactly that when, hanging from the cross, He said, "... 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing...'" (Luke 23:34 NIV) Some people will never acknowledge their offense or ask your forgiveness. Some people will never be at peace with you because at a deep, fundamental level they're not at peace with God. They have a far more serious issue than the fact they've offended you. They're out of touch with the God of the Universe. Of course, they're on the outside looking in spiritually, but they will not admit it. Their pride requires them to maintain until the day they die that everyone else is wrong and they're right. So, why extend forgiveness to people like that?

Three, forgive others because you must not allow resentment to build a stronghold in your life. There's nothing quite so dangerous to your personal spiritual life than holding on to bitterness, resentment or a stubborn unwillingness to forgive. Talk about that feeling of being on the outside looking in! Lack of forgiveness is a spiritual poison that will alienate you from God and others. Listen and obey God's Word when it says, "Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many." (Heb 2:15 NLT) It also says, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger.... Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you." (Eph 4:31-32 NLT)

There's a great scene about the importance of forgiveness in the movie *Home Alone*. Kevin is afraid of an older man who lives next door to him. He seems mean and gruff to say the least. Rumor has it that this older man has a criminal past. One evening, Kevin walks into a neighborhood church and who should be sitting in the pew across from him? The mean old man himself! They end up having a great conversation about forgiveness. Let's watch!

Are you afraid to ask someone to forgive you? Or, are you afraid to extend forgiveness to someone? I can't think of a better Christmas gift to give someone else or to give yourself this year than to forgive. No, lack of forgiveness isn't the only reason you can feel like you're on the outside looking in. But we sure do need to check our inner lives frequently to make sure those pesky seeds of bitterness and resentment haven't taken root somewhere and are growing again. When you ask for and give forgiveness God's way, you will feel connected spiritually – connected to God and to others. Here's a final solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #3: PURSUE JESUS

Several years ago, a book I read had a profound effect on me. The author said that the greatest desire that a follower of Jesus should have is simply to be with Jesus. Yes, we are called to be like Jesus. Our inner character should experience spiritual transformation as we follow Jesus. Yes, we are called to be for Jesus. We should serve Him with our time, talents and treasure. But above all, you and I should relentlessly pursue the sheer joy of being with Jesus. It reminds me of a verse in our text today. "We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us.

And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." (1 John 1:3 NLT) What a gift it is to pursue and experience the presence of Jesus – His love, His grace, His excellence, His perfection, His completeness, His power!

I've come to realize in my own life that when I start to feel as if I'm on the outside looking in at life – frustrated, disconnected, unfulfilled, stressed – it's often

because I've stopped pursuing Jesus and simply being with Him. I've gotten distracted by life. I've gotten preoccupied with myself. I've gotten ahead of Jesus. When Jesus first selected the twelve disciples, the Bible says, "He appointed twelve that they might be with him...." (Mark 3:14 NIV) Yes, they did other things as Jesus' disciples, to be sure, but, first and foremost, it was all about being with Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can become like Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can be for Jesus. Ironically, it's so much easier to become like Jesus and for Jesus when I focus, first and foremost, on being with Jesus.

In his book entitled "Good Morning, Merry Sunshine", author, Bob Greene, chronicles his infant daughter's first year of life. When little Amanda started to crawl, she started doing something that Bob found a little weird at first. He'd be lying in bed reading a book or watching TV when all of sudden he'd look down at the foot of the bed to find Amanda there just staring back at him. She'd pulled herself up to a standing position by the bed and she was just gazing at her daddy. Apparently, he'd become an object that fascinated her. Bob didn't quite know how to react at first. All he could figure out was that Amanda just liked coming in and looking at him. She didn't expect anything in return – conversation, interaction, getting picked up. So Bob simply began to return her gaze. He just stared back. After a few minutes, Amanda decided that was enough. She plopped back down and crawled back into the living room.

There is a simple pleasure in just looking at the one you love – what Bob and his daughter, Amanda, enjoyed. By faith, you and I can just stare at Jesus. You can just gaze upon His majesty and grace with the eyes of faith. Learn how to be with Jesus. Pursue Him. That matters? It matters more than you will ever know and it may be the single best solution to those times in life when you feel like you're on the outside looking in. Jesus loves you. Love Him.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN 1 JOHN 1:1-10

This Advent season I'm using four classic Christmas movies to underline or emphasize some wonderful, biblical truths about Christmas. The movie I want to feature today is entitled *Home Alone*. It's the story of eight year old Kevin at Christmastime. His large, extended family takes off a few days before Christmas for a vacation in Paris. Quite by accident, Kevin is left behind at home all by himself. At first, he's delighted by this turn of events. He and a few members of his family were really getting on each other's nerves. Suddenly he had the freedom to do anything he wanted to do, eat whatever he wanted to eat and go to bed whenever he wanted. It was fantastic – for awhile. But before too long, young Kevin starts to get lonely and miss his family. Now, the movie is a comedy and much of it has to do with Kevin's clever defense of his home from two bumbling crooks who want to rob the place. But there are a few poignant moments. One of them is when Kevin starts to feel lonely. He realizes he is terribly and utterly alone. I want to show you that scene right now. Kevin finds Santa Claus and asks that his family be returned to him as his Christmas gift. On Christmas Eve, he walks back to his house alone. From the sidewalk, he observes a family getting together for a meal and exchanging of gifts. The look on his face is one of sadness and longing. He's on the outside looking in.

Have you ever been on the outside looking in? Not literally, but spiritually or emotionally. The Bible makes it clear that God created you to be a relational being. You were never meant to do life completely alone. Now, because of sin, our relationship with God was broken. And also because of sin – either our sins against other people or their sins against us – we experience many broken relationships in life. The results are feelings of loneliness, separation and isolation. For many people, those feelings pick up in intensity during the Christmas season. I'm sure you've heard that many people struggle with feelings of depression this time of year. Part of the reason is this feeling of being on the outside looking in. People don't feel connected to God or to other people. They feel like Kevin in that scene – alone and isolated. Do you ever feel like you're on the outside looking in? You don't have to feel that way. I want you to think with me biblically about that today. Let's turn to one passage in the Bible that addresses the issue of being on the outside looking in and how to fix it. Here's the first biblical solution for being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #1: FIND GOD

That solution is offered to anyone here today who doesn't have a personal relationship with God yet. I know finding God sounds incredibly basic and obvious, but sometimes the most basic, obvious things get overlooked. One reason you feel like you're on the outside looking in is because you are on the outside looking in! Your feelings point to a very real spiritual problem. Again, the Bible says that you were created by God for a personal relationship with God. Sin messed it up. Every one of us is a sinner meaning that each of us has broken

God's laws and fallen short of God's standards. Everybody? Everybody. As a result, each of us is spiritually disconnected from God. One symptom of that lack of connection with God is this hard to define feeling that we're on the outside looking in about so much in life. You can feel deeply lonely even though you have lots of family and friends around you. Why? You're actually lonely for God. Your life lacks purpose because purpose comes from God. You might even have this kind of vague sense of anxiety all of the time – a sense that your life is missing something important. St. Augustine said centuries ago that every one of us has a God-shaped vacuum inside of us that only God can fill. Because you start out life lacking God, you must go out and find Him. Author Larry Crabb observes, "Feeling better has become more important to us than finding God." In other words, we dodge and evade and downplay this need for God, but there's just no substitute for finding Him. You will never feel better until you find God.

In the Bible passage we read, John tells us that God took the initiative to solve this most basic of human problems. "We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life." (1 John 1:1 NLT) Who's John talking about? Jesus, of course. He's pointing to what Christians call the Incarnation – God took upon Himself human flesh in the person of a man known as Jesus of Nazareth. John spent about three years following this Jesus around the land of Israel. He heard Jesus teach. He saw Jesus perform miracles. Then, he watched Him die on a cross. But three days, later this same Jesus got up again very much alive. John saw Jesus with his own eyes, touched Jesus' body with his own hands, and heard Him speak with John's own ears. Jesus was no ghost, no fantasy, no figment of John's imagination. And in Jesus, John found God. He found truth and reality. In Jesus, John found what his own soul could not define but what it craved.

Finding God. It's the single, most fundamental human need of all. It's not finding religion. Keeping rules and regulations or even following a strict moral code of conduct will not do it. It's not finding church. Singing songs, hearing a Bible message and hanging out with church folk will not do it in and of itself. It's not finding spirituality. Our culture will congratulate you for meditating, praying and thinking sentimentally about life, but that won't do it either. No, you must find God. You must somehow touch the Eternal. You must experience life – the life by which God Himself lives. And that life comes to you and me through this Jesus. How does John put it? "This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us." (1 John 1:2 NLT) The Bible and followers of Jesus call it by different names – being born again, getting saved, becoming a Christian, believing in Jesus, making a personal commitment to Christ – but it all points to the same basic, obvious reality: finding God! Has that ever happened to you?

Now, I realize that most everyone here today will say, “Rick, I’ve found God.” But there may be one, or two, or five or ten folk here today who haven’t yet. You might have religion, but you don’t have God. You might attend church regularly, but you don’t have God. You might be a spiritual person, but you don’t have God. If there’s anything that I pray that you will experience this Christmas, it’s that. Please find God. After all, that’s why God sent His Son into this world. You don’t have to be on the outside looking in at what God has done. It starts with finding God. Here’s a second solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling of being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #2: PRACTICE FORGIVENESS

Did you notice what a big place John gives to forgiveness in the verses we read? He talks about walking in the light, the blood of Jesus purifying us from all sin and God forgiving our sins when we sincerely confess those to Him. Why? One big reason for that uncomfortable feeling that you’re always somehow on the outside looking in is stuff going on in your life that needs forgiveness. We’ve said or done things – or failed to say or do things – that desperately need to be renounced by us and forgiven by God. John’s words here reveal some basic truths about forgiveness that each of us would do well to remember and practice.

First, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness. That happens initially when you find God. You admit you’re a sinner and you ask God to forgive all of your sins. You ask Jesus to be your Savior and Lord and you experience His forgiveness. That’s where it all starts. Second, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness continually. John says here, “But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.” (1 John 1:9 NLT) Here’s one reason why you can still feel like you’re on the outside looking in even after you’ve found God, or been born again, or gotten saved: you’ve got unconfessed sin in your life.

Sin that you hold onto, justify, excuse, tolerate, put up with – it separates you from God. I’m not saying you lose your salvation or forfeit Heaven. I am saying that a sense of spiritual life or a personal connection with God can be forfeited. The result is that you feel isolated from Him at a very deep level. That feeling of being on the outside looking in starts to creep into your soul again. I remember learning an important spiritual principle from a godly teacher in high school years ago now. He told me, “Rick, keep short accounts with God.” He meant that the moment the Holy Spirit speaks into my inner spirit about an ungodly act, a spiteful attitude, or an unkind word – at that very moment – I need to confess that sin and ask for God’s forgiveness immediately. That’s made a big impact on my daily walk with God. Don’t let the spiritual crud pile up. Keep short accounts. It’s one way to keeping that outside looking in feeling out of my life.

Third, ask forgiveness from and give forgiveness to other people. The major obstacle to great relationships – be it marriage, family, friends, people at church

– is sin. Sin just messes up everything and especially our relationships with other people. Until sin is dealt with in a biblical way, you'll experience a growing discomfort in your soul. Often, it's that old, familiar feeling of being on the outside looking in. You start to feel alone, cut off, disconnected from God and other people. What do I mean by asking forgiveness from other people? Quite simply, it means walking up to someone you've offended – looking him or her right in the eye – and saying, "I did such and such. I was wrong. I want to ask for your forgiveness." But that's so hard to do, isn't it? It's just hard on your pride which God is going to destroy completely one day anyway. I guarantee that not one of us will take one morsel of our sinful pride into Heaven with us, so why not allow God to kill it off here and now? Humility before God and others goes a long way to restoring a sense of connectedness with God and with others. John alludes to that spiritual reality when he says, "But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:7 NLT). Forgiveness is necessary to living in the light of God's grace and love.

The other part of this forgiveness equation is when we give or extend it to those who have hurt us. This can be much harder than going and asking someone to forgive us. The Bible has much to say about all of this and Christmas time is a great occasion to review what it teaches. Why give forgiveness to those who have hurt us? Let me suggest three biblical principles. One, forgive others because Jesus forgave you, not because they deserve it. What does one have to do with the other? Jesus was the One who tied them together. He said, "... 'You can't get forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your part, you cut yourself off from God's part.'" (Matt 6:14-15 MSG) When you extend forgiveness, you aren't admitting that what that person did to you was somehow OK. No, you're simply recognizing that if God could forgive you of your sins against Him, you can now be enabled by His Spirit to give forgiveness to those who offend you. Please recognize the force of what Jesus is saying. If you refuse forgiveness to someone, you give evidence that God's grace has not yet truly penetrated your own heart. The reality of your conversion is in doubt. When you refuse to forgive someone, one result will be the return of that feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

Two, forgive others even when the wrong is not acknowledged and forgiveness is not requested. Jesus did exactly that when, hanging from the cross, He said, "... 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing...'" (Luke 23:34 NIV) Some people will never acknowledge their offense or ask your forgiveness. Some people will never be at peace with you because at a deep, fundamental level they're not at peace with God. They have a far more serious issue than the fact they've offended you. They're out of touch with the God of the Universe. Of course, they're on the outside looking in spiritually, but they will not admit it. Their pride requires them to maintain until the day they die that everyone else is wrong and they're right. So, why extend forgiveness to people like that?

Three, forgive others because you must not allow resentment to build a stronghold in your life. There's nothing quite so dangerous to your personal spiritual life than holding on to bitterness, resentment or a stubborn unwillingness to forgive. Talk about that feeling of being on the outside looking in! Lack of forgiveness is a spiritual poison that will alienate you from God and others. Listen and obey God's Word when it says, "Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many." (Heb 2:15 NLT) It also says, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger.... Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you." (Eph 4:31-32 NLT)

There's a great scene about the importance of forgiveness in the movie *Home Alone*. Kevin is afraid of an older man who lives next door to him. He seems mean and gruff to say the least. Rumor has it that this older man has a criminal past. One evening, Kevin walks into a neighborhood church and who should be sitting in the pew across from him? The mean old man himself! They end up having a great conversation about forgiveness. Let's watch!

Are you afraid to ask someone to forgive you? Or, are you afraid to extend forgiveness to someone? I can't think of a better Christmas gift to give someone else or to give yourself this year than to forgive. No, lack of forgiveness isn't the only reason you can feel like you're on the outside looking in. But we sure do need to check our inner lives frequently to make sure those pesky seeds of bitterness and resentment haven't taken root somewhere and are growing again. When you ask for and give forgiveness God's way, you will feel connected spiritually – connected to God and to others. Here's a final solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #3: PURSUE JESUS

Several years ago, a book I read had a profound effect on me. The author said that the greatest desire that a follower of Jesus should have is simply to be with Jesus. Yes, we are called to be like Jesus. Our inner character should experience spiritual transformation as we follow Jesus. Yes, we are called to be for Jesus. We should serve Him with our time, talents and treasure. But above all, you and I should relentlessly pursue the sheer joy of being with Jesus. It reminds me of a verse in our text today. "We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us.

And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." (1 John 1:3 NLT) What a gift it is to pursue and experience the presence of Jesus – His love, His grace, His excellence, His perfection, His completeness, His power!

I've come to realize in my own life that when I start to feel as if I'm on the outside looking in at life – frustrated, disconnected, unfulfilled, stressed – it's often

because I've stopped pursuing Jesus and simply being with Him. I've gotten distracted by life. I've gotten preoccupied with myself. I've gotten ahead of Jesus. When Jesus first selected the twelve disciples, the Bible says, "He appointed twelve that they might be with him...." (Mark 3:14 NIV) Yes, they did other things as Jesus' disciples, to be sure, but, first and foremost, it was all about being with Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can become like Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can be for Jesus. Ironically, it's so much easier to become like Jesus and for Jesus when I focus, first and foremost, on being with Jesus.

In his book entitled "Good Morning, Merry Sunshine", author, Bob Greene, chronicles his infant daughter's first year of life. When little Amanda started to crawl, she started doing something that Bob found a little weird at first. He'd be lying in bed reading a book or watching TV when all of sudden he'd look down at the foot of the bed to find Amanda there just staring back at him. She'd pulled herself up to a standing position by the bed and she was just gazing at her daddy. Apparently, he'd become an object that fascinated her. Bob didn't quite know how to react at first. All he could figure out was that Amanda just liked coming in and looking at him. She didn't expect anything in return – conversation, interaction, getting picked up. So Bob simply began to return her gaze. He just stared back. After a few minutes, Amanda decided that was enough. She plopped back down and crawled back into the living room.

There is a simple pleasure in just looking at the one you love – what Bob and his daughter, Amanda, enjoyed. By faith, you and I can just stare at Jesus. You can just gaze upon His majesty and grace with the eyes of faith. Learn how to be with Jesus. Pursue Him. That matters? It matters more than you will ever know and it may be the single best solution to those times in life when you feel like you're on the outside looking in. Jesus loves you. Love Him.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN 1 JOHN 1:1-10

This Advent season I'm using four classic Christmas movies to underline or emphasize some wonderful, biblical truths about Christmas. The movie I want to feature today is entitled *Home Alone*. It's the story of eight year old Kevin at Christmastime. His large, extended family takes off a few days before Christmas for a vacation in Paris. Quite by accident, Kevin is left behind at home all by himself. At first, he's delighted by this turn of events. He and a few members of his family were really getting on each other's nerves. Suddenly he had the freedom to do anything he wanted to do, eat whatever he wanted to eat and go to bed whenever he wanted. It was fantastic – for awhile. But before too long, young Kevin starts to get lonely and miss his family. Now, the movie is a comedy and much of it has to do with Kevin's clever defense of his home from two bumbling crooks who want to rob the place. But there are a few poignant moments. One of them is when Kevin starts to feel lonely. He realizes he is terribly and utterly alone. I want to show you that scene right now. Kevin finds Santa Claus and asks that his family be returned to him as his Christmas gift. On Christmas Eve, he walks back to his house alone. From the sidewalk, he observes a family getting together for a meal and exchanging of gifts. The look on his face is one of sadness and longing. He's on the outside looking in.

Have you ever been on the outside looking in? Not literally, but spiritually or emotionally. The Bible makes it clear that God created you to be a relational being. You were never meant to do life completely alone. Now, because of sin, our relationship with God was broken. And also because of sin – either our sins against other people or their sins against us – we experience many broken relationships in life. The results are feelings of loneliness, separation and isolation. For many people, those feelings pick up in intensity during the Christmas season. I'm sure you've heard that many people struggle with feelings of depression this time of year. Part of the reason is this feeling of being on the outside looking in. People don't feel connected to God or to other people. They feel like Kevin in that scene – alone and isolated. Do you ever feel like you're on the outside looking in? You don't have to feel that way. I want you to think with me biblically about that today. Let's turn to one passage in the Bible that addresses the issue of being on the outside looking in and how to fix it. Here's the first biblical solution for being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #1: FIND GOD

That solution is offered to anyone here today who doesn't have a personal relationship with God yet. I know finding God sounds incredibly basic and obvious, but sometimes the most basic, obvious things get overlooked. One reason you feel like you're on the outside looking in is because you are on the outside looking in! Your feelings point to a very real spiritual problem. Again, the Bible says that you were created by God for a personal relationship with God. Sin messed it up. Every one of us is a sinner meaning that each of us has broken

God's laws and fallen short of God's standards. Everybody? Everybody. As a result, each of us is spiritually disconnected from God. One symptom of that lack of connection with God is this hard to define feeling that we're on the outside looking in about so much in life. You can feel deeply lonely even though you have lots of family and friends around you. Why? You're actually lonely for God. Your life lacks purpose because purpose comes from God. You might even have this kind of vague sense of anxiety all of the time – a sense that your life is missing something important. St. Augustine said centuries ago that every one of us has a God-shaped vacuum inside of us that only God can fill. Because you start out life lacking God, you must go out and find Him. Author Larry Crabb observes, "Feeling better has become more important to us than finding God." In other words, we dodge and evade and downplay this need for God, but there's just no substitute for finding Him. You will never feel better until you find God.

In the Bible passage we read, John tells us that God took the initiative to solve this most basic of human problems. "We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life." (1 John 1:1 NLT) Who's John talking about? Jesus, of course. He's pointing to what Christians call the Incarnation – God took upon Himself human flesh in the person of a man known as Jesus of Nazareth. John spent about three years following this Jesus around the land of Israel. He heard Jesus teach. He saw Jesus perform miracles. Then, he watched Him die on a cross. But three days, later this same Jesus got up again very much alive. John saw Jesus with his own eyes, touched Jesus' body with his own hands, and heard Him speak with John's own ears. Jesus was no ghost, no fantasy, no figment of John's imagination. And in Jesus, John found God. He found truth and reality. In Jesus, John found what his own soul could not define but what it craved.

Finding God. It's the single, most fundamental human need of all. It's not finding religion. Keeping rules and regulations or even following a strict moral code of conduct will not do it. It's not finding church. Singing songs, hearing a Bible message and hanging out with church folk will not do it in and of itself. It's not finding spirituality. Our culture will congratulate you for meditating, praying and thinking sentimentally about life, but that won't do it either. No, you must find God. You must somehow touch the Eternal. You must experience life – the life by which God Himself lives. And that life comes to you and me through this Jesus. How does John put it? "This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us." (1 John 1:2 NLT) The Bible and followers of Jesus call it by different names – being born again, getting saved, becoming a Christian, believing in Jesus, making a personal commitment to Christ – but it all points to the same basic, obvious reality: finding God! Has that ever happened to you?

Now, I realize that most everyone here today will say, “Rick, I’ve found God.” But there may be one, or two, or five or ten folk here today who haven’t yet. You might have religion, but you don’t have God. You might attend church regularly, but you don’t have God. You might be a spiritual person, but you don’t have God. If there’s anything that I pray that you will experience this Christmas, it’s that. Please find God. After all, that’s why God sent His Son into this world. You don’t have to be on the outside looking in at what God has done. It starts with finding God. Here’s a second solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling of being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #2: PRACTICE FORGIVENESS

Did you notice what a big place John gives to forgiveness in the verses we read? He talks about walking in the light, the blood of Jesus purifying us from all sin and God forgiving our sins when we sincerely confess those to Him. Why? One big reason for that uncomfortable feeling that you’re always somehow on the outside looking in is stuff going on in your life that needs forgiveness. We’ve said or done things – or failed to say or do things – that desperately need to be renounced by us and forgiven by God. John’s words here reveal some basic truths about forgiveness that each of us would do well to remember and practice.

First, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness. That happens initially when you find God. You admit you’re a sinner and you ask God to forgive all of your sins. You ask Jesus to be your Savior and Lord and you experience His forgiveness. That’s where it all starts. Second, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness continually. John says here, “But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.” (1 John 1:9 NLT) Here’s one reason why you can still feel like you’re on the outside looking in even after you’ve found God, or been born again, or gotten saved: you’ve got unconfessed sin in your life.

Sin that you hold onto, justify, excuse, tolerate, put up with – it separates you from God. I’m not saying you lose your salvation or forfeit Heaven. I am saying that a sense of spiritual life or a personal connection with God can be forfeited. The result is that you feel isolated from Him at a very deep level. That feeling of being on the outside looking in starts to creep into your soul again. I remember learning an important spiritual principle from a godly teacher in high school years ago now. He told me, “Rick, keep short accounts with God.” He meant that the moment the Holy Spirit speaks into my inner spirit about an ungodly act, a spiteful attitude, or an unkind word – at that very moment – I need to confess that sin and ask for God’s forgiveness immediately. That’s made a big impact on my daily walk with God. Don’t let the spiritual crud pile up. Keep short accounts. It’s one way to keeping that outside looking in feeling out of my life.

Third, ask forgiveness from and give forgiveness to other people. The major obstacle to great relationships – be it marriage, family, friends, people at church

– is sin. Sin just messes up everything and especially our relationships with other people. Until sin is dealt with in a biblical way, you'll experience a growing discomfort in your soul. Often, it's that old, familiar feeling of being on the outside looking in. You start to feel alone, cut off, disconnected from God and other people. What do I mean by asking forgiveness from other people? Quite simply, it means walking up to someone you've offended – looking him or her right in the eye – and saying, "I did such and such. I was wrong. I want to ask for your forgiveness." But that's so hard to do, isn't it? It's just hard on your pride which God is going to destroy completely one day anyway. I guarantee that not one of us will take one morsel of our sinful pride into Heaven with us, so why not allow God to kill it off here and now? Humility before God and others goes a long way to restoring a sense of connectedness with God and with others. John alludes to that spiritual reality when he says, "But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:7 NLT). Forgiveness is necessary to living in the light of God's grace and love.

The other part of this forgiveness equation is when we give or extend it to those who have hurt us. This can be much harder than going and asking someone to forgive us. The Bible has much to say about all of this and Christmas time is a great occasion to review what it teaches. Why give forgiveness to those who have hurt us? Let me suggest three biblical principles. One, forgive others because Jesus forgave you, not because they deserve it. What does one have to do with the other? Jesus was the One who tied them together. He said, "... 'You can't get forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your part, you cut yourself off from God's part.'" (Matt 6:14-15 MSG) When you extend forgiveness, you aren't admitting that what that person did to you was somehow OK. No, you're simply recognizing that if God could forgive you of your sins against Him, you can now be enabled by His Spirit to give forgiveness to those who offend you. Please recognize the force of what Jesus is saying. If you refuse forgiveness to someone, you give evidence that God's grace has not yet truly penetrated your own heart. The reality of your conversion is in doubt. When you refuse to forgive someone, one result will be the return of that feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

Two, forgive others even when the wrong is not acknowledged and forgiveness is not requested. Jesus did exactly that when, hanging from the cross, He said, "... 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing...'" (Luke 23:34 NIV) Some people will never acknowledge their offense or ask your forgiveness. Some people will never be at peace with you because at a deep, fundamental level they're not at peace with God. They have a far more serious issue than the fact they've offended you. They're out of touch with the God of the Universe. Of course, they're on the outside looking in spiritually, but they will not admit it. Their pride requires them to maintain until the day they die that everyone else is wrong and they're right. So, why extend forgiveness to people like that?

Three, forgive others because you must not allow resentment to build a stronghold in your life. There's nothing quite so dangerous to your personal spiritual life than holding on to bitterness, resentment or a stubborn unwillingness to forgive. Talk about that feeling of being on the outside looking in! Lack of forgiveness is a spiritual poison that will alienate you from God and others. Listen and obey God's Word when it says, "Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many." (Heb 2:15 NLT) It also says, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger.... Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you." (Eph 4:31-32 NLT)

There's a great scene about the importance of forgiveness in the movie *Home Alone*. Kevin is afraid of an older man who lives next door to him. He seems mean and gruff to say the least. Rumor has it that this older man has a criminal past. One evening, Kevin walks into a neighborhood church and who should be sitting in the pew across from him? The mean old man himself! They end up having a great conversation about forgiveness. Let's watch!

Are you afraid to ask someone to forgive you? Or, are you afraid to extend forgiveness to someone? I can't think of a better Christmas gift to give someone else or to give yourself this year than to forgive. No, lack of forgiveness isn't the only reason you can feel like you're on the outside looking in. But we sure do need to check our inner lives frequently to make sure those pesky seeds of bitterness and resentment haven't taken root somewhere and are growing again. When you ask for and give forgiveness God's way, you will feel connected spiritually – connected to God and to others. Here's a final solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #3: PURSUE JESUS

Several years ago, a book I read had a profound effect on me. The author said that the greatest desire that a follower of Jesus should have is simply to be with Jesus. Yes, we are called to be like Jesus. Our inner character should experience spiritual transformation as we follow Jesus. Yes, we are called to be for Jesus. We should serve Him with our time, talents and treasure. But above all, you and I should relentlessly pursue the sheer joy of being with Jesus. It reminds me of a verse in our text today. "We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us.

And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." (1 John 1:3 NLT) What a gift it is to pursue and experience the presence of Jesus – His love, His grace, His excellence, His perfection, His completeness, His power!

I've come to realize in my own life that when I start to feel as if I'm on the outside looking in at life – frustrated, disconnected, unfulfilled, stressed – it's often

because I've stopped pursuing Jesus and simply being with Him. I've gotten distracted by life. I've gotten preoccupied with myself. I've gotten ahead of Jesus. When Jesus first selected the twelve disciples, the Bible says, "He appointed twelve that they might be with him...." (Mark 3:14 NIV) Yes, they did other things as Jesus' disciples, to be sure, but, first and foremost, it was all about being with Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can become like Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can be for Jesus. Ironically, it's so much easier to become like Jesus and for Jesus when I focus, first and foremost, on being with Jesus.

In his book entitled "Good Morning, Merry Sunshine", author, Bob Greene, chronicles his infant daughter's first year of life. When little Amanda started to crawl, she started doing something that Bob found a little weird at first. He'd be lying in bed reading a book or watching TV when all of sudden he'd look down at the foot of the bed to find Amanda there just staring back at him. She'd pulled herself up to a standing position by the bed and she was just gazing at her daddy. Apparently, he'd become an object that fascinated her. Bob didn't quite know how to react at first. All he could figure out was that Amanda just liked coming in and looking at him. She didn't expect anything in return – conversation, interaction, getting picked up. So Bob simply began to return her gaze. He just stared back. After a few minutes, Amanda decided that was enough. She plopped back down and crawled back into the living room.

There is a simple pleasure in just looking at the one you love – what Bob and his daughter, Amanda, enjoyed. By faith, you and I can just stare at Jesus. You can just gaze upon His majesty and grace with the eyes of faith. Learn how to be with Jesus. Pursue Him. That matters? It matters more than you will ever know and it may be the single best solution to those times in life when you feel like you're on the outside looking in. Jesus loves you. Love Him.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN 1 JOHN 1:1-10

This Advent season I'm using four classic Christmas movies to underline or emphasize some wonderful, biblical truths about Christmas. The movie I want to feature today is entitled *Home Alone*. It's the story of eight year old Kevin at Christmastime. His large, extended family takes off a few days before Christmas for a vacation in Paris. Quite by accident, Kevin is left behind at home all by himself. At first, he's delighted by this turn of events. He and a few members of his family were really getting on each other's nerves. Suddenly he had the freedom to do anything he wanted to do, eat whatever he wanted to eat and go to bed whenever he wanted. It was fantastic – for awhile. But before too long, young Kevin starts to get lonely and miss his family. Now, the movie is a comedy and much of it has to do with Kevin's clever defense of his home from two bumbling crooks who want to rob the place. But there are a few poignant moments. One of them is when Kevin starts to feel lonely. He realizes he is terribly and utterly alone. I want to show you that scene right now. Kevin finds Santa Claus and asks that his family be returned to him as his Christmas gift. On Christmas Eve, he walks back to his house alone. From the sidewalk, he observes a family getting together for a meal and exchanging of gifts. The look on his face is one of sadness and longing. He's on the outside looking in.

Have you ever been on the outside looking in? Not literally, but spiritually or emotionally. The Bible makes it clear that God created you to be a relational being. You were never meant to do life completely alone. Now, because of sin, our relationship with God was broken. And also because of sin – either our sins against other people or their sins against us – we experience many broken relationships in life. The results are feelings of loneliness, separation and isolation. For many people, those feelings pick up in intensity during the Christmas season. I'm sure you've heard that many people struggle with feelings of depression this time of year. Part of the reason is this feeling of being on the outside looking in. People don't feel connected to God or to other people. They feel like Kevin in that scene – alone and isolated. Do you ever feel like you're on the outside looking in? You don't have to feel that way. I want you to think with me biblically about that today. Let's turn to one passage in the Bible that addresses the issue of being on the outside looking in and how to fix it. Here's the first biblical solution for being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #1: FIND GOD

That solution is offered to anyone here today who doesn't have a personal relationship with God yet. I know finding God sounds incredibly basic and obvious, but sometimes the most basic, obvious things get overlooked. One reason you feel like you're on the outside looking in is because you are on the outside looking in! Your feelings point to a very real spiritual problem. Again, the Bible says that you were created by God for a personal relationship with God. Sin messed it up. Every one of us is a sinner meaning that each of us has broken

God's laws and fallen short of God's standards. Everybody? Everybody. As a result, each of us is spiritually disconnected from God. One symptom of that lack of connection with God is this hard to define feeling that we're on the outside looking in about so much in life. You can feel deeply lonely even though you have lots of family and friends around you. Why? You're actually lonely for God. Your life lacks purpose because purpose comes from God. You might even have this kind of vague sense of anxiety all of the time – a sense that your life is missing something important. St. Augustine said centuries ago that every one of us has a God-shaped vacuum inside of us that only God can fill. Because you start out life lacking God, you must go out and find Him. Author Larry Crabb observes, "Feeling better has become more important to us than finding God." In other words, we dodge and evade and downplay this need for God, but there's just no substitute for finding Him. You will never feel better until you find God.

In the Bible passage we read, John tells us that God took the initiative to solve this most basic of human problems. "We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life." (1 John 1:1 NLT) Who's John talking about? Jesus, of course. He's pointing to what Christians call the Incarnation – God took upon Himself human flesh in the person of a man known as Jesus of Nazareth. John spent about three years following this Jesus around the land of Israel. He heard Jesus teach. He saw Jesus perform miracles. Then, he watched Him die on a cross. But three days, later this same Jesus got up again very much alive. John saw Jesus with his own eyes, touched Jesus' body with his own hands, and heard Him speak with John's own ears. Jesus was no ghost, no fantasy, no figment of John's imagination. And in Jesus, John found God. He found truth and reality. In Jesus, John found what his own soul could not define but what it craved.

Finding God. It's the single, most fundamental human need of all. It's not finding religion. Keeping rules and regulations or even following a strict moral code of conduct will not do it. It's not finding church. Singing songs, hearing a Bible message and hanging out with church folk will not do it in and of itself. It's not finding spirituality. Our culture will congratulate you for meditating, praying and thinking sentimentally about life, but that won't do it either. No, you must find God. You must somehow touch the Eternal. You must experience life – the life by which God Himself lives. And that life comes to you and me through this Jesus. How does John put it? "This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us." (1 John 1:2 NLT) The Bible and followers of Jesus call it by different names – being born again, getting saved, becoming a Christian, believing in Jesus, making a personal commitment to Christ – but it all points to the same basic, obvious reality: finding God! Has that ever happened to you?

Now, I realize that most everyone here today will say, “Rick, I’ve found God.” But there may be one, or two, or five or ten folk here today who haven’t yet. You might have religion, but you don’t have God. You might attend church regularly, but you don’t have God. You might be a spiritual person, but you don’t have God. If there’s anything that I pray that you will experience this Christmas, it’s that. Please find God. After all, that’s why God sent His Son into this world. You don’t have to be on the outside looking in at what God has done. It starts with finding God. Here’s a second solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling of being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #2: PRACTICE FORGIVENESS

Did you notice what a big place John gives to forgiveness in the verses we read? He talks about walking in the light, the blood of Jesus purifying us from all sin and God forgiving our sins when we sincerely confess those to Him. Why? One big reason for that uncomfortable feeling that you’re always somehow on the outside looking in is stuff going on in your life that needs forgiveness. We’ve said or done things – or failed to say or do things – that desperately need to be renounced by us and forgiven by God. John’s words here reveal some basic truths about forgiveness that each of us would do well to remember and practice.

First, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness. That happens initially when you find God. You admit you’re a sinner and you ask God to forgive all of your sins. You ask Jesus to be your Savior and Lord and you experience His forgiveness. That’s where it all starts. Second, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness continually. John says here, “But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.” (1 John 1:9 NLT) Here’s one reason why you can still feel like you’re on the outside looking in even after you’ve found God, or been born again, or gotten saved: you’ve got unconfessed sin in your life.

Sin that you hold onto, justify, excuse, tolerate, put up with – it separates you from God. I’m not saying you lose your salvation or forfeit Heaven. I am saying that a sense of spiritual life or a personal connection with God can be forfeited. The result is that you feel isolated from Him at a very deep level. That feeling of being on the outside looking in starts to creep into your soul again. I remember learning an important spiritual principle from a godly teacher in high school years ago now. He told me, “Rick, keep short accounts with God.” He meant that the moment the Holy Spirit speaks into my inner spirit about an ungodly act, a spiteful attitude, or an unkind word – at that very moment – I need to confess that sin and ask for God’s forgiveness immediately. That’s made a big impact on my daily walk with God. Don’t let the spiritual crud pile up. Keep short accounts. It’s one way to keeping that outside looking in feeling out of my life.

Third, ask forgiveness from and give forgiveness to other people. The major obstacle to great relationships – be it marriage, family, friends, people at church

– is sin. Sin just messes up everything and especially our relationships with other people. Until sin is dealt with in a biblical way, you'll experience a growing discomfort in your soul. Often, it's that old, familiar feeling of being on the outside looking in. You start to feel alone, cut off, disconnected from God and other people. What do I mean by asking forgiveness from other people? Quite simply, it means walking up to someone you've offended – looking him or her right in the eye – and saying, "I did such and such. I was wrong. I want to ask for your forgiveness." But that's so hard to do, isn't it? It's just hard on your pride which God is going to destroy completely one day anyway. I guarantee that not one of us will take one morsel of our sinful pride into Heaven with us, so why not allow God to kill it off here and now? Humility before God and others goes a long way to restoring a sense of connectedness with God and with others. John alludes to that spiritual reality when he says, "But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:7 NLT). Forgiveness is necessary to living in the light of God's grace and love.

The other part of this forgiveness equation is when we give or extend it to those who have hurt us. This can be much harder than going and asking someone to forgive us. The Bible has much to say about all of this and Christmas time is a great occasion to review what it teaches. Why give forgiveness to those who have hurt us? Let me suggest three biblical principles. One, forgive others because Jesus forgave you, not because they deserve it. What does one have to do with the other? Jesus was the One who tied them together. He said, "... 'You can't get forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your part, you cut yourself off from God's part.'" (Matt 6:14-15 MSG) When you extend forgiveness, you aren't admitting that what that person did to you was somehow OK. No, you're simply recognizing that if God could forgive you of your sins against Him, you can now be enabled by His Spirit to give forgiveness to those who offend you. Please recognize the force of what Jesus is saying. If you refuse forgiveness to someone, you give evidence that God's grace has not yet truly penetrated your own heart. The reality of your conversion is in doubt. When you refuse to forgive someone, one result will be the return of that feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

Two, forgive others even when the wrong is not acknowledged and forgiveness is not requested. Jesus did exactly that when, hanging from the cross, He said, "... 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing...'" (Luke 23:34 NIV) Some people will never acknowledge their offense or ask your forgiveness. Some people will never be at peace with you because at a deep, fundamental level they're not at peace with God. They have a far more serious issue than the fact they've offended you. They're out of touch with the God of the Universe. Of course, they're on the outside looking in spiritually, but they will not admit it. Their pride requires them to maintain until the day they die that everyone else is wrong and they're right. So, why extend forgiveness to people like that?

Three, forgive others because you must not allow resentment to build a stronghold in your life. There's nothing quite so dangerous to your personal spiritual life than holding on to bitterness, resentment or a stubborn unwillingness to forgive. Talk about that feeling of being on the outside looking in! Lack of forgiveness is a spiritual poison that will alienate you from God and others. Listen and obey God's Word when it says, "Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many." (Heb 2:15 NLT) It also says, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger.... Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you." (Eph 4:31-32 NLT)

There's a great scene about the importance of forgiveness in the movie *Home Alone*. Kevin is afraid of an older man who lives next door to him. He seems mean and gruff to say the least. Rumor has it that this older man has a criminal past. One evening, Kevin walks into a neighborhood church and who should be sitting in the pew across from him? The mean old man himself! They end up having a great conversation about forgiveness. Let's watch!

Are you afraid to ask someone to forgive you? Or, are you afraid to extend forgiveness to someone? I can't think of a better Christmas gift to give someone else or to give yourself this year than to forgive. No, lack of forgiveness isn't the only reason you can feel like you're on the outside looking in. But we sure do need to check our inner lives frequently to make sure those pesky seeds of bitterness and resentment haven't taken root somewhere and are growing again. When you ask for and give forgiveness God's way, you will feel connected spiritually – connected to God and to others. Here's a final solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #3: PURSUE JESUS

Several years ago, a book I read had a profound effect on me. The author said that the greatest desire that a follower of Jesus should have is simply to be with Jesus. Yes, we are called to be like Jesus. Our inner character should experience spiritual transformation as we follow Jesus. Yes, we are called to be for Jesus. We should serve Him with our time, talents and treasure. But above all, you and I should relentlessly pursue the sheer joy of being with Jesus. It reminds me of a verse in our text today. "We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us.

And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." (1 John 1:3 NLT) What a gift it is to pursue and experience the presence of Jesus – His love, His grace, His excellence, His perfection, His completeness, His power!

I've come to realize in my own life that when I start to feel as if I'm on the outside looking in at life – frustrated, disconnected, unfulfilled, stressed – it's often

because I've stopped pursuing Jesus and simply being with Him. I've gotten distracted by life. I've gotten preoccupied with myself. I've gotten ahead of Jesus. When Jesus first selected the twelve disciples, the Bible says, "He appointed twelve that they might be with him...." (Mark 3:14 NIV) Yes, they did other things as Jesus' disciples, to be sure, but, first and foremost, it was all about being with Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can become like Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can be for Jesus. Ironically, it's so much easier to become like Jesus and for Jesus when I focus, first and foremost, on being with Jesus.

In his book entitled "Good Morning, Merry Sunshine", author, Bob Greene, chronicles his infant daughter's first year of life. When little Amanda started to crawl, she started doing something that Bob found a little weird at first. He'd be lying in bed reading a book or watching TV when all of sudden he'd look down at the foot of the bed to find Amanda there just staring back at him. She'd pulled herself up to a standing position by the bed and she was just gazing at her daddy. Apparently, he'd become an object that fascinated her. Bob didn't quite know how to react at first. All he could figure out was that Amanda just liked coming in and looking at him. She didn't expect anything in return – conversation, interaction, getting picked up. So Bob simply began to return her gaze. He just stared back. After a few minutes, Amanda decided that was enough. She plopped back down and crawled back into the living room.

There is a simple pleasure in just looking at the one you love – what Bob and his daughter, Amanda, enjoyed. By faith, you and I can just stare at Jesus. You can just gaze upon His majesty and grace with the eyes of faith. Learn how to be with Jesus. Pursue Him. That matters? It matters more than you will ever know and it may be the single best solution to those times in life when you feel like you're on the outside looking in. Jesus loves you. Love Him.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE ON THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN 1 JOHN 1:1-10

This Advent season I'm using four classic Christmas movies to underline or emphasize some wonderful, biblical truths about Christmas. The movie I want to feature today is entitled *Home Alone*. It's the story of eight year old Kevin at Christmastime. His large, extended family takes off a few days before Christmas for a vacation in Paris. Quite by accident, Kevin is left behind at home all by himself. At first, he's delighted by this turn of events. He and a few members of his family were really getting on each other's nerves. Suddenly he had the freedom to do anything he wanted to do, eat whatever he wanted to eat and go to bed whenever he wanted. It was fantastic – for awhile. But before too long, young Kevin starts to get lonely and miss his family. Now, the movie is a comedy and much of it has to do with Kevin's clever defense of his home from two bumbling crooks who want to rob the place. But there are a few poignant moments. One of them is when Kevin starts to feel lonely. He realizes he is terribly and utterly alone. I want to show you that scene right now. Kevin finds Santa Claus and asks that his family be returned to him as his Christmas gift. On Christmas Eve, he walks back to his house alone. From the sidewalk, he observes a family getting together for a meal and exchanging of gifts. The look on his face is one of sadness and longing. He's on the outside looking in.

Have you ever been on the outside looking in? Not literally, but spiritually or emotionally. The Bible makes it clear that God created you to be a relational being. You were never meant to do life completely alone. Now, because of sin, our relationship with God was broken. And also because of sin – either our sins against other people or their sins against us – we experience many broken relationships in life. The results are feelings of loneliness, separation and isolation. For many people, those feelings pick up in intensity during the Christmas season. I'm sure you've heard that many people struggle with feelings of depression this time of year. Part of the reason is this feeling of being on the outside looking in. People don't feel connected to God or to other people. They feel like Kevin in that scene – alone and isolated. Do you ever feel like you're on the outside looking in? You don't have to feel that way. I want you to think with me biblically about that today. Let's turn to one passage in the Bible that addresses the issue of being on the outside looking in and how to fix it. Here's the first biblical solution for being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #1: FIND GOD

That solution is offered to anyone here today who doesn't have a personal relationship with God yet. I know finding God sounds incredibly basic and obvious, but sometimes the most basic, obvious things get overlooked. One reason you feel like you're on the outside looking in is because you are on the outside looking in! Your feelings point to a very real spiritual problem. Again, the Bible says that you were created by God for a personal relationship with God. Sin messed it up. Every one of us is a sinner meaning that each of us has broken

God's laws and fallen short of God's standards. Everybody? Everybody. As a result, each of us is spiritually disconnected from God. One symptom of that lack of connection with God is this hard to define feeling that we're on the outside looking in about so much in life. You can feel deeply lonely even though you have lots of family and friends around you. Why? You're actually lonely for God. Your life lacks purpose because purpose comes from God. You might even have this kind of vague sense of anxiety all of the time – a sense that your life is missing something important. St. Augustine said centuries ago that every one of us has a God-shaped vacuum inside of us that only God can fill. Because you start out life lacking God, you must go out and find Him. Author Larry Crabb observes, "Feeling better has become more important to us than finding God." In other words, we dodge and evade and downplay this need for God, but there's just no substitute for finding Him. You will never feel better until you find God.

In the Bible passage we read, John tells us that God took the initiative to solve this most basic of human problems. "We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life." (1 John 1:1 NLT) Who's John talking about? Jesus, of course. He's pointing to what Christians call the Incarnation – God took upon Himself human flesh in the person of a man known as Jesus of Nazareth. John spent about three years following this Jesus around the land of Israel. He heard Jesus teach. He saw Jesus perform miracles. Then, he watched Him die on a cross. But three days, later this same Jesus got up again very much alive. John saw Jesus with his own eyes, touched Jesus' body with his own hands, and heard Him speak with John's own ears. Jesus was no ghost, no fantasy, no figment of John's imagination. And in Jesus, John found God. He found truth and reality. In Jesus, John found what his own soul could not define but what it craved.

Finding God. It's the single, most fundamental human need of all. It's not finding religion. Keeping rules and regulations or even following a strict moral code of conduct will not do it. It's not finding church. Singing songs, hearing a Bible message and hanging out with church folk will not do it in and of itself. It's not finding spirituality. Our culture will congratulate you for meditating, praying and thinking sentimentally about life, but that won't do it either. No, you must find God. You must somehow touch the Eternal. You must experience life – the life by which God Himself lives. And that life comes to you and me through this Jesus. How does John put it? "This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us." (1 John 1:2 NLT) The Bible and followers of Jesus call it by different names – being born again, getting saved, becoming a Christian, believing in Jesus, making a personal commitment to Christ – but it all points to the same basic, obvious reality: finding God! Has that ever happened to you?

Now, I realize that most everyone here today will say, “Rick, I’ve found God.” But there may be one, or two, or five or ten folk here today who haven’t yet. You might have religion, but you don’t have God. You might attend church regularly, but you don’t have God. You might be a spiritual person, but you don’t have God. If there’s anything that I pray that you will experience this Christmas, it’s that. Please find God. After all, that’s why God sent His Son into this world. You don’t have to be on the outside looking in at what God has done. It starts with finding God. Here’s a second solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling of being on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #2: PRACTICE FORGIVENESS

Did you notice what a big place John gives to forgiveness in the verses we read? He talks about walking in the light, the blood of Jesus purifying us from all sin and God forgiving our sins when we sincerely confess those to Him. Why? One big reason for that uncomfortable feeling that you’re always somehow on the outside looking in is stuff going on in your life that needs forgiveness. We’ve said or done things – or failed to say or do things – that desperately need to be renounced by us and forgiven by God. John’s words here reveal some basic truths about forgiveness that each of us would do well to remember and practice.

First, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness. That happens initially when you find God. You admit you’re a sinner and you ask God to forgive all of your sins. You ask Jesus to be your Savior and Lord and you experience His forgiveness. That’s where it all starts. Second, ask for and receive God’s forgiveness continually. John says here, “But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.” (1 John 1:9 NLT) Here’s one reason why you can still feel like you’re on the outside looking in even after you’ve found God, or been born again, or gotten saved: you’ve got unconfessed sin in your life.

Sin that you hold onto, justify, excuse, tolerate, put up with – it separates you from God. I’m not saying you lose your salvation or forfeit Heaven. I am saying that a sense of spiritual life or a personal connection with God can be forfeited. The result is that you feel isolated from Him at a very deep level. That feeling of being on the outside looking in starts to creep into your soul again. I remember learning an important spiritual principle from a godly teacher in high school years ago now. He told me, “Rick, keep short accounts with God.” He meant that the moment the Holy Spirit speaks into my inner spirit about an ungodly act, a spiteful attitude, or an unkind word – at that very moment – I need to confess that sin and ask for God’s forgiveness immediately. That’s made a big impact on my daily walk with God. Don’t let the spiritual crud pile up. Keep short accounts. It’s one way to keeping that outside looking in feeling out of my life.

Third, ask forgiveness from and give forgiveness to other people. The major obstacle to great relationships – be it marriage, family, friends, people at church

– is sin. Sin just messes up everything and especially our relationships with other people. Until sin is dealt with in a biblical way, you'll experience a growing discomfort in your soul. Often, it's that old, familiar feeling of being on the outside looking in. You start to feel alone, cut off, disconnected from God and other people. What do I mean by asking forgiveness from other people? Quite simply, it means walking up to someone you've offended – looking him or her right in the eye – and saying, "I did such and such. I was wrong. I want to ask for your forgiveness." But that's so hard to do, isn't it? It's just hard on your pride which God is going to destroy completely one day anyway. I guarantee that not one of us will take one morsel of our sinful pride into Heaven with us, so why not allow God to kill it off here and now? Humility before God and others goes a long way to restoring a sense of connectedness with God and with others. John alludes to that spiritual reality when he says, "But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin." (1 John 1:7 NLT). Forgiveness is necessary to living in the light of God's grace and love.

The other part of this forgiveness equation is when we give or extend it to those who have hurt us. This can be much harder than going and asking someone to forgive us. The Bible has much to say about all of this and Christmas time is a great occasion to review what it teaches. Why give forgiveness to those who have hurt us? Let me suggest three biblical principles. One, forgive others because Jesus forgave you, not because they deserve it. What does one have to do with the other? Jesus was the One who tied them together. He said, "... 'You can't get forgiveness from God, for instance, without also forgiving others. If you refuse to do your part, you cut yourself off from God's part.'" (Matt 6:14-15 MSG) When you extend forgiveness, you aren't admitting that what that person did to you was somehow OK. No, you're simply recognizing that if God could forgive you of your sins against Him, you can now be enabled by His Spirit to give forgiveness to those who offend you. Please recognize the force of what Jesus is saying. If you refuse forgiveness to someone, you give evidence that God's grace has not yet truly penetrated your own heart. The reality of your conversion is in doubt. When you refuse to forgive someone, one result will be the return of that feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

Two, forgive others even when the wrong is not acknowledged and forgiveness is not requested. Jesus did exactly that when, hanging from the cross, He said, "... 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing...'" (Luke 23:34 NIV) Some people will never acknowledge their offense or ask your forgiveness. Some people will never be at peace with you because at a deep, fundamental level they're not at peace with God. They have a far more serious issue than the fact they've offended you. They're out of touch with the God of the Universe. Of course, they're on the outside looking in spiritually, but they will not admit it. Their pride requires them to maintain until the day they die that everyone else is wrong and they're right. So, why extend forgiveness to people like that?

Three, forgive others because you must not allow resentment to build a stronghold in your life. There's nothing quite so dangerous to your personal spiritual life than holding on to bitterness, resentment or a stubborn unwillingness to forgive. Talk about that feeling of being on the outside looking in! Lack of forgiveness is a spiritual poison that will alienate you from God and others. Listen and obey God's Word when it says, "Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many." (Heb 2:15 NLT) It also says, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger.... Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you." (Eph 4:31-32 NLT)

There's a great scene about the importance of forgiveness in the movie *Home Alone*. Kevin is afraid of an older man who lives next door to him. He seems mean and gruff to say the least. Rumor has it that this older man has a criminal past. One evening, Kevin walks into a neighborhood church and who should be sitting in the pew across from him? The mean old man himself! They end up having a great conversation about forgiveness. Let's watch!

Are you afraid to ask someone to forgive you? Or, are you afraid to extend forgiveness to someone? I can't think of a better Christmas gift to give someone else or to give yourself this year than to forgive. No, lack of forgiveness isn't the only reason you can feel like you're on the outside looking in. But we sure do need to check our inner lives frequently to make sure those pesky seeds of bitterness and resentment haven't taken root somewhere and are growing again. When you ask for and give forgiveness God's way, you will feel connected spiritually – connected to God and to others. Here's a final solution to that uncomfortable, unwanted feeling that you're on the outside looking in.

SOLUTION #3: PURSUE JESUS

Several years ago, a book I read had a profound effect on me. The author said that the greatest desire that a follower of Jesus should have is simply to be with Jesus. Yes, we are called to be like Jesus. Our inner character should experience spiritual transformation as we follow Jesus. Yes, we are called to be for Jesus. We should serve Him with our time, talents and treasure. But above all, you and I should relentlessly pursue the sheer joy of being with Jesus. It reminds me of a verse in our text today. "We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us.

And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." (1 John 1:3 NLT) What a gift it is to pursue and experience the presence of Jesus – His love, His grace, His excellence, His perfection, His completeness, His power!

I've come to realize in my own life that when I start to feel as if I'm on the outside looking in at life – frustrated, disconnected, unfulfilled, stressed – it's often

because I've stopped pursuing Jesus and simply being with Him. I've gotten distracted by life. I've gotten preoccupied with myself. I've gotten ahead of Jesus. When Jesus first selected the twelve disciples, the Bible says, "He appointed twelve that they might be with him...." (Mark 3:14 NIV) Yes, they did other things as Jesus' disciples, to be sure, but, first and foremost, it was all about being with Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can become like Jesus. We must be with Jesus before we can be for Jesus. Ironically, it's so much easier to become like Jesus and for Jesus when I focus, first and foremost, on being with Jesus.

In his book entitled "Good Morning, Merry Sunshine", author, Bob Greene, chronicles his infant daughter's first year of life. When little Amanda started to crawl, she started doing something that Bob found a little weird at first. He'd be lying in bed reading a book or watching TV when all of sudden he'd look down at the foot of the bed to find Amanda there just staring back at him. She'd pulled herself up to a standing position by the bed and she was just gazing at her daddy. Apparently, he'd become an object that fascinated her. Bob didn't quite know how to react at first. All he could figure out was that Amanda just liked coming in and looking at him. She didn't expect anything in return – conversation, interaction, getting picked up. So Bob simply began to return her gaze. He just stared back. After a few minutes, Amanda decided that was enough. She plopped back down and crawled back into the living room.

There is a simple pleasure in just looking at the one you love – what Bob and his daughter, Amanda, enjoyed. By faith, you and I can just stare at Jesus. You can just gaze upon His majesty and grace with the eyes of faith. Learn how to be with Jesus. Pursue Him. That matters? It matters more than you will ever know and it may be the single best solution to those times in life when you feel like you're on the outside looking in. Jesus loves you. Love Him.