

STAY IN THE LIGHT**1 JOHN 1:5 – 2:2**

Was Karl Menninger a prophet? Who? Karl Menninger was a highly educated, esteemed, and influential psychiatrist back in the 20th century. As far as I know, he was not a Christian. But he wrote a book that was, in some ways, prophetic. It was entitled “Whatever Became of Sin?” In it he expressed his fear that “sin” was disappearing - not just the word, but the very concept of any universal standard of wrongdoing. He warned against a declining sense of morality in our culture and people's reluctance to take responsibility for their behavior. He was concerned about the impact it might have on our society and on people's physical and emotional well-being. He wrote, *“The word ‘sin,’ which seems to have disappeared... was once a strong word, an ominous and serious word.... But the word went away. It has almost disappeared—the word, along with the notion. Why? Doesn’t anyone sin anymore? Doesn’t anyone believe in sin?”* Karl Menninger wrote that back in 1973 – 46 years ago. Do you agree that his fears have become a reality? Prophetic indeed. You actually don't hear the word “sin” much these days. We're more comfortable with words like “dysfunction,” “disease,” “mistakes,” or “failures.” A few years ago, the Oxford Junior Dictionary actually removed the word “sin” from its contents. The editors explained that it had fallen into disuse and was no longer relevant to younger generations. Hmmm.....

Last Sunday we began a new message series on 1 John. KISS: Keep It Simple, Saint. It was written by one of Jesus' original twelve disciples: John, the son of Zebedee. The overall point is this: following Jesus isn't complicated or confusing. It's actually quite simple and straightforward. But by simple, I don't mean superficial or lacking substance. Simple can also be profound, meaningful, and life-changing. Maybe the most important thing about 1 John is the answer to the question: how do you know if someone is a real Christian? How do you know if you're a real Christian? Throughout this letter, John kept coming back to three tests or marks of spiritual authenticity. The first mark is doctrinal accuracy. Especially when it comes to who Jesus is and what He did for us. The second mark is growth in a godly lifestyle. And a third mark or test is loving God's people. All three are equally important. If you get rid of one or you overemphasize one over the other two, you lose something essential. If you pay sufficient attention to all three, following Jesus will be genuine and authentic. So, today we continue where we left off in 1 John. The concept of light and staying in the light dominated these verses. So, let's think about what that means.

WALK IN THE LIGHT.

God is light. Right away, John wrote something revealing about God that's echoed elsewhere in Scripture. The psalmist had said, “The LORD is my light and my salvation—so why should I be afraid?” (Ps. 27:1 NLT) Jesus had said, “I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won't have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life.” (Jo. 8:12 NLT) Light is another way of saying God is absolutely good in every way. It means God is both truthful and holy. There's nothing bad, false, impure, or wrong in God. God can't deceive or mislead anyone and He can't

distort anything. Because God is light, He has the highest and greatest character or integrity that it's possible to possess. Darkness is the realm of lies and impurity.

John said one test or mark that we're spiritually authentic is that we walk in God's light. Imagine with me a pitch black stage used for performances. It's full of all kinds of obstacles and barriers that we could trip over. Suddenly, a spotlight of amazing power and brilliance is turned on. In the midst of that intense darkness is a circle of light. If we stay in that light – walk around in it – we can successfully avoid all those barriers and obstacles that could easily injure us if and when we collided with them. That's the importance of staying in God's light by making a decision to walk in it every day.

How do you walk in the light? If you call yourself a Christian, John implied here, then start living like one. This section of his letter really drills down on the second of those tests or marks of spiritual authenticity. Genuine followers of Jesus are people who are growing in a godly lifestyle. Becoming more like Jesus means looking at and dealing with sin God's way. John taught that people tend to have two mistaken ideas about sin that were true both in his own day as well as in ours. Both mistakes will bring any growth in a godly lifestyle to a screeching halt. First mistake: sin is not a problem. John wrote, "If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth." (1 Jo. 1:8 NLT) He described sin not just as an act, but also as a condition. Sin is not just something you do, but something you have. We all "have sin" meaning we all have an inner nature – a bent, a twist - that doesn't want to do life God's way. It's not just that we do wrong things; it's that there's something wrong with us and in us.

John was fighting against a philosophy called Gnosticism that some people were trying to combine with Christianity. That was an effort doomed from the start. Why? Among several bad ideas, Gnostics believed whatever was spiritual was good and whatever was physical or material was bad or evil. For that very reason, they had a hard time believing God had become an actual, literal human being in Jesus. We discussed that last week. Gnostics denied what Christians call the Incarnation. But this erroneous belief that spirit was good and matter was evil led many to believe that spirituality was the only thing that mattered. Material things like your physical body weren't important; they were passing away. Only your spirit was eternal. Therefore, they reasoned, it didn't matter what you did with your physical bodies. You could be sexually promiscuous, or a drunk, or a glutton. These things didn't affect a person's spirit, they thought, so there was no harm in indulging in them. Convenient, huh?

That leads right into a second mistaken idea people can have about sin. Sin is not a problem for me. In other words, other human beings may have a problem with sin, but I don't. I've gotten beyond it. I know some of us here today have had cataract surgery. Edna Faye Taylor began to lose her sight due to cataracts. She had surgery way back in 1970, but scar tissue made her vision even worse. Forty years later she had the scar tissue removed with a laser. After four decades of peering through cataract-caused glaze, Edna was shocked to see her own wrinkles and all that gray hair she had now! She said colors and textures seemed to jump out as she left her doctor's office. But an

even bigger surprise came when she looked in the mirror. “I saw age spots on my hands I didn’t know I had before. A friend told me not to worry until I saw all the rest of them!” When the scar tissue of sin gets removed by the laser beam of the Holy Spirit, then we start to see ourselves as God sees us. Perhaps only then can we admit sin is indeed a problem and, yes, it’s a problem for me.

John wrote, “If we claim we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar and showing that his word has no place in our hearts.” (1 Jo. 1:10 NLT) Now, here John wasn’t talking about sin as a condition, but sin as an action, a behavior. Apparently there were some Gnostic-influenced believers who claimed they had achieved a level of spirituality in which they no longer sinned anymore. John rejected that idea, too. In other words, if we think human beings don’t have a sin problem, we’re deluding ourselves. And if we claim we haven’t sinned, we’re making God out to be a liar. Strong language. The reality is all of us are sinners both by nature and by choice. In other words, we have a disposition toward sin – a sin nature – therefore, we commit sins. The simple fact is we’ve all sinned. Sometimes in ignorance, sometimes in moments of weakness, sometimes in flat out, “shake your fist in God’s face” rebellion. You and I – and everyone else who’s ever lived - are sinners by nature and by choice.

Scripture doesn’t say human beings are so evil that we can never do anything right. It says we’re created in the image of God. There’s something in all of us designed to reflect His goodness, love, justice, and beauty. And sometimes we do get it right. It’s just that ever since Adam and Eve, human beings have this bent – this twist - in our nature away from God and His goodness. We prefer darkness to His light. We have this disposition to do the wrong thing, to hurt people we love, and to trash what God meant to be beautiful. But if you and I are going to stay in the light, it will mean walking in the light or growing in a godly lifestyle. And that means admitting something as plain as the nose on your face. Sin is a problem and sin is a problem for me. So, let’s...

OWN UP TO THE LIGHT.

There are three possible responses to the presence of sin in your life and mine. The first response is to ignore it. We try not to think about it and make excuses for it. None of us probably deny sin exists, but practically speaking, we can choose to ignore our own up to our sin. How? We minimize it, rationalize it, and learn to live with it. It’s really just a cover-up, like John says. “So we are lying if we say we have fellowship with God but go on living in spiritual darkness; we are not practicing the truth.” (1 Jo.1:6 NLT) We don’t want to admit to ourselves and God that we have a problem.

A second response to sin is to obsess over it. That happens when we punish ourselves for it, beat ourselves up over it, and wallow in guilt, shame, and regret. The problem with obsessing over our sin is that it only serves to drive us deeper into it and its power and further from God, other people, and the person God wants us to become. The problem, of course, is that neither ignoring nor obsessing over sin works! Neither one removes the guilt, and neither one restores us to a relationship with God and others.

Thankfully, there's a third option for dealing with our sin. We can confess it. Here is one of the most wonderful verses in the entire Bible, "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 Jo. 1:9 NLT) Genuine confession isn't easy. To confess your sin is to admit it, to own up to it, to name it for the wrong that it is, to admit to yourself and to God that you've done it, to feel sorrow or regret over it, and to turn away from it. When it comes to confession, it's always best to start with God. He is the primary One we have offended, and He's the only one who can do something about it.

Here's something very important to remember when it comes to staying in the light and growing in a godly lifestyle. It doesn't require a sinless life. It's not our sin that forces us out of God's light back into spiritual darkness. It's unconfessed or unacknowledged sin. It's the sin we refuse to own up to. Confession of our sin is absolutely necessary if we're going to stay in the light and grow in a godly lifestyle. The Bible says, "Finally, I confessed all my sins to You and stopped trying to hide my guilt. I said to myself, 'I will confess my rebellion to the LORD.' And You forgave me! All my guilt is gone." (Ps. 32:5 NLT) It also says, "People who conceal their sins will not prosper, but if they confess and turn from them, they will receive mercy." (Pr. 28:13 NLT)

How can we do confession well? First, accept full responsibility for your sin. Don't put the blame on someone or something else. It's not the fault of someone in your family, or the environment you live in, or because you have a certain temperament, or because you were misled somehow. No, when you committed that sin, you were flat out wrong. Have you ever had people apologize to you and by the time they got done, you thought to yourself, "So, are they really even sorry for what they did?" When we confess our sins inadequately, it leads God to ask the same question!

Two, be specific and immediate in your confession. Confession is more than just saying, "Oh, yes, God, I'm a sinner." Call sin what God calls it. Lying. Stealing. Racism. Lust. Selfishness. Idolatry. Adultery. Hatred. Ungratefulness. Don't try to sugarcoat it. God takes all sin – every sin – very seriously. It cost Him the life of His Son on the cross. Someone told me years ago when it comes to confessing my sin to keep "short accounts" with God. It was good advice then and now. In other words, don't wait a week, a month, or a year to confess how you've sinned. Once the Holy Spirit convicts you of it, lay it out before God as soon as possible. Get rid of it quickly.

Three, turn away from the sin you've confessed. When I confess my sin to God, I agree with Him that I need to turn away from it. Confession without repentance doesn't mean much. Repentance means to turn away from whatever act or attitude I just confessed. I realize that's often much easier said than done particularly for entrenched sins that have gotten a real hold on us. Breaking the power of some sins in our lives can be a long – even in a lifelong – struggle, but it's necessary if we're going to stay in the light.

Remember the annual autumn drama between Charlie Brown and Lucy in the Peanuts comic strip? Lucy offers to hold the football for Charlie when he kicks it, but then always pulls it away at the last second. She asks every year. Charlie might resist at

first. “No, thanks! Every time you hold the football for me, I end up on the ground.” Lucy might even confess her “sin” with tears. “Oh, how true! I admit in the past I’ve played cruel tricks on you. But I’ve seen the error of my ways. I’ve seen the hurt look in your eyes when I’ve deceived you! I’ve been wrong and I’m so sorry. Won’t you please give a poor, repentant girl another chance?” You know how this turns out, right? Charlie gives her another chance. He runs up to the football determined to kick it a mile. Lucy can’t resist the temptation to pull it away and Charlie Brown ends up on the ground again with a sore backside. One of the other characters says, “Unfortunately, recognizing your faults and actually changing your ways, are two different things.”

Yes, by all means, you will need the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit to conquer sin’s power, but it will also require some personal effort and energy to defeat as well. In order to stay in the light – in order to grow in a godly lifestyle – we have to walk in the light and own up to the light. Very true. But even more important than what we do is what God has already done and still does. To stay in the light also means to...

REST IN THE LIGHT.

What happens when we confess our sin? First, God will forgive us: “But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins....” (1 Jo. 1:9 NLT) To forgive someone is to release him or her from a debt and obligation. When someone forgives a loan, it means you no longer need to make payments on that loan. When God forgives you for your sin, it means you no longer need to pay for that sin. You don’t need to punish yourself. You don’t need to do penance. You’re off the hook. The second thing God does when we confess our sin is cleanse us: “... and to cleanse us from all wickedness.” (1 Jo. 1:9 NLT) To cleanse something is to get rid of the dirt. The Greek word for cleanse there is “katharizo” from which we get our word “catharsis.” That word conveys an inner cleansing, emotional release, and spiritual healing. Both forgiveness and cleansing are precious. Forgiveness releases us from guilt. Cleansing removes our shame. Forgiveness takes care of our past. Cleansing makes possible our future. You can’t earn or deserve either. You simply receive and rest in it.

God’s ability to forgive our sin and cleanse it away is based, however, on something He did in and through Jesus. John explained it this way, “If anyone does sin, we have an advocate who pleads our case before the Father. He is Jesus Christ, the one who is truly righteous. He himself is the sacrifice that atones for our sins—and not only our sins but the sins of all the world.” (1 Jo. 2:1-2 NLT) In the Old Testament, God commanded His people to sacrifice animals for their sins as a way to teach them that the penalty for any and all sin is death. He was also teaching them that an innocent substitute could be provided. Jesus became the actual fulfillment of what God taught His people through animal sacrifice. At the cross, sinless, innocent Jesus literally died in our place as our substitute. He took upon Himself the penalty for our sin. Then, when He rose from the dead, it guaranteed for all eternity what Jesus accomplished at the cross.

Many people struggle with that truth. It makes some people think God is a bloodthirsty tyrant. But remember God is both a loving Father and a holy Judge. He could not be

truly just if He allowed sin to go unpunished. Sometimes we hear that a judge has brought down the “wrath of the court” upon a convicted individual. That doesn’t mean the judge stood up on his desk and yelled at the person – his face all red with anger. No, “judicial wrath” simply means the guilty person is punished and justice is preserved. The idea of a court is present here. Jesus is called our advocate here – our attorney, our lawyer - pleading our case before God the holy Judge in Heaven’s Court. But this case is very different. A lawyer usually defends his or her client on the merits of the case itself. OK, but the case against you and me was rock solid – a slam dunk. But Jesus – our Heavenly Attorney – argued in Heaven’s court on the basis of His own merits. He was the innocent substitute who took our place. Now, Jesus didn’t change His Father’s attitude toward us. Don’t ever think your Heavenly Father was or is reluctant to forgive you! But neither could He just overlook your sin by pretending it didn’t exist. So He did something incredibly gracious. He sent Himself in the person of His Son, Jesus, to be our substitute. The penalty of our sin was paid. A restored relationship with the God of the Universe is now possible and accessible.

Imagine God’s love as this huge body of water being held back by a dam. The dam is our sin and on the other side of the dam is our spiritually barren, dry lives – like a riverbed crying out for water. What will open those dam’s floodgates and release God’s love into our lives? Our confession? Yes, but confessing our sins would do precious little if Jesus had not first paid the penalty of our sins. When Jesus accomplished what He did at the cross and the empty tomb and we respond to it through confessing our sins, that’s when the dam of our sin can no longer hold back God’s love. It comes rushing into our lives. At the cross and the empty tomb, both God’s love and justice are fully revealed. And that’s why God can forgive the sins you and I confess. That’s the basis or the moral foundation upon which forgiveness is provided. That’s the mighty spiritual reality you can rest in each and every day. You can’t earn it, deserve it, or do anything to contribute toward it. You simply receive it and rest in it.

During the Civil War, a man by the name of George Wyatt was drawn by lot to go to the front. In other words, he was drafted. Wyatt had a wife and six children. A young man named Richard Pratt heard about it and offered to go in Wyatt’s place. He was accepted and joined the Army, bearing the name and number of George Wyatt. Sadly, Pratt was killed in action. The Army later tried to draft George Wyatt into service again. He protested. He claimed he had died in the person of Richard Pratt who took his place. He insisted the Army consult their records as to the fact that Pratt had become his substitute. It turned out he was right. George Wyatt was completely exempted from military service. He had died in the person of his substitute.

We stand before God today and forever, because Jesus was and is our substitute. He died for us and we died in Him. We rest in the light of that great truth every day and forever. And now we confess our sins and receive God’s forgiveness and cleansing confidently, because Jesus was and is our substitute. We rest in the light of that great truth every day and forever. How can you and I stay in the light? Keep it simple, saint. Walk in it. Own up to it. And, then, rest in it.