

“GOD FORGIVES”
1 John 1:1 - 2:2

God forgives. That is a promise at the very heart of what we believe as Christians, isn't it? Without that, we might as well give up and go home. You can open the Bible more or less at random and find teaching about or examples of God's forgiveness. As Jesus hung on the cross, he was forgiving his executioners. Abraham, Isaac, David, Peter, Paul – they all experienced the forgiveness of God. And most of us sitting here this morning could bear witness to the forgiving love of God in our own lives, I'm sure.

The words we've just heard from the first letter of John emphasise God's forgiveness: so much so, in fact, that we often use them in our church worship either to lead into or out of our prayers for God's forgiveness. They're a kind of encouragement for us to believe in it, a seal on the promise of God. Just imagine for a moment what it would be like if God did not forgive; if all those things we had done, said and thought – openly and secretly, carelessly and deliberately – just kept piling up until the time when we met God face to face at the end of this earthly part of our lives. It would take most of eternity just to read through them all! Thank God that our sin can be dealt with and forgotten.

But if our sin is to be dealt with, we need to acknowledge it. It's not an automatic procedure. God doesn't just wipe out each sin as it is committed. Part of the humanity which we all share and which should reflect something of the image of God, is a measure of responsibility. You and I are responsible for the choices we make and we are responsible for seeking the forgiveness that God offers. The first part of the passage we read – and a strong theme of this letter – is to do with God being light and his people obviously walking in that light. If we are to be identified as God's people we need to show that we are walking in the light of God, to live in a way that is distinctive and different. *Vv5-7* are all about that.

Part of what that involves is an acknowledgement of our sin so that God can grant us forgiveness for it, so that it can be dealt with and not spoil our witness as *“children of the light”*. Unfortunately, John is having to deal with some people who just don't take it seriously, people who clearly are *“claim[ing] to be without sin”*, people who are deceiving themselves and going against God's clear teaching. Many people over the centuries have speculated on exactly who these people might be and there's no complete agreement. But whoever they were, their spiritual descendants are still with us today – people who will not take seriously the matter of sin in their lives. And that goes for those who call themselves Christians too.

1. PERFECTIONISTS

The strongest case for identifying the people John had in mind here seems to be a group called the “Gnostics”. I won't go into all the details this morning, but they had an idea that we are divided up

between flesh and spirit and so long as the spirit is saved, the flesh can do what it likes. In other words, once you have become a “Christian” (as they would put it), you’re perfect, you just can’t sin any more. Now anyone who knows anything about the Gnostics will realise that that’s a gross over-simplification, but the point is that they believed in a kind of perfectionism, which some Christians still hold to today. Somehow we become free from sin.

Let’s get this straight right from the beginning – being a Christian does not make you perfect. Once you have committed yourself to Christ (or however you want to express it), you enter a new relationship with him, but you’re still human, still subject to all the hassles and temptations that everyone else has to put up with. And, as you know if you’re honest, a lot of the time you give in to those temptations. Over time, maybe, you get a bit more able to resist some of them, but they’re still there. And that goes for all of us. I remember hearing a minister once say in a sermon that, because he spent more time reading the Bible than the rest of us, he didn’t sin as much. I laughed out loud, thinking he was joking – but he wasn’t! That kind of arrogance should have no place in the lives of any of us. Just remember what Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome in *Romans 7:18,19*: we looked at that just a couple of weeks ago.

2. MORAL RELATIVISTS

These people who don’t take sin seriously are those who think it’s all relative. Somehow or other, some things just aren’t sin any more. You cannot have any moral absolutes, they claim, and the things that are called sin in the Bible aren’t really that bad any more. “You see, the people who wrote the Bible didn’t have the same intellectual ability that we do, they didn’t have the same insights into psychology or socio-biology that we have today. Much of what was written then was written on the basis of prejudice and a lack of information.” Not only does such a line of reasoning betray an amazing arrogance, but it also conveniently ignores the idea that the Bible, although written by people with human limitations, was inspired by God through the Holy Spirit – and surely he knew what he was doing!

But even many Christians, who would be mortified if they were accused of denying biblical inspiration or selling out to moral relativism, still work this way when it comes to “*claim[ing] to be without sin.*” They measure themselves against other people rather than against the word of God. “Everyone else does it. It’s expected of me. It would be rocking the boat not to do it. Society has changed.” God may have included “*You shall not covet*” in the Ten Commandments, but our whole culture is built on the premise that coveting is good. He may have told us that lifelong heterosexual marriage is the only proper context for sexual intimacy, but there are so many complicating factors in today’s culture. He may have said “*You must not kill*”, but, of course, that doesn’t apply to defending one’s national economic interests or disposing of inconvenient embryos. He clearly says that we should work for six days out of seven, but

modern life has made that unworkable, hasn't it? (Maybe you could see that one in the light of the coveting commandment!)

Now, I am not for one moment trying to gloss the very real ethical dilemmas that confront us at every turn – and I am well aware that many of you face exceptionally difficult decisions in your own situations on a regular basis. But let's not simply sweep it all under the proverbial carpet and claim that it's not sin any more – because it is and we need to think seriously about it; more seriously than we are often prepared to think.

3. EXCUSERS

Perhaps we're moving on to more familiar territory for many of us now. Well, it might be seen as sin, but there are plenty of mitigating circumstances, so it's not really my sin. You can't hold me responsible. For some people the excuse is the moral relativism argument – everyone else does it, so it's not really considered wrong any more. Maybe we think we didn't really have any choice. Perhaps we found ourselves caught up in a situation where it was easier to go along with the wrongdoing than to try and get out of it.

Whatever it is, we try to shift the responsibility away from ourselves. That's been the case right from the beginning of time – “The woman made me do it: the serpent made me do it.” When we were kids, if we knocked the heads off mum's daffs playing football in the garden (never on a Sunday, of course) and mum appeared on the warpath, either we would blame each other or say, as a last resort, “The Devil made me do it”. It never worked! But it was a way of trying to excuse it. How often do you hear people say the same thing in different words? “It's just one of my little weaknesses, I'm afraid.” “I can't seem to be able to give it up.” “It would have so many knock-on effects if I tried to deal with it.” They're simply excuses. It's “*claim[ing] to be without sin.*”

4. APATHETIC

Now we all know the territory! There are those – maybe the majority – who don't actually claim to be without sin, but who don't actually acknowledge that they are sinning, just because they never think about it. Life goes on and we get into patterns of behaviour that never get questioned unless there's some thunderbolt from the blue that stops us short and forces us to consider what we're actually doing. I'm sure we all ask God's forgiveness for our sin on a regular basis – at least, I hope we do. But it's sin in a very **general** sense: it's just part of our pattern for praying and we never really think about what we're doing, much less ask for forgiveness for particular sins. Maybe our prayers would become unmanageably long if we stopped to confess everything, but it wouldn't do any harm to pause every now and then and

take stock of our lives, see how much we've slipped since the last time, acknowledge those things that are going wrong and resolve (with God's help) to sort them out.

You see, if we do try and claim that we are without sin, if we persist in not taking it seriously, John tells us that we are doing two things. Firstly, in v8, "*we deceive ourselves.*" We are fooling ourselves, lulling ourselves into a false sense of security. We think everything is OK until that thunderbolt from the blue, that situation that exposes our deceit or dishonesty and makes life even more complicated, as well as messing up our relationship with God. We just pootle along, assuming it's all going smoothly and we have nothing to worry about. And when God puts his finger on our lives, then the whole lot comes tumbling down.

Secondly, John says, in v10, "*we make [God] out to be a liar.*" We are dismissing everything God tells us in his Word. What we are effectively doing is saying that we don't actually believe God when he tells us about sin and its effect on our own lives and on the lives of others. And if we don't believe him on that, why believe him on anything else? Or, as John puts it, "*his word has no place in our lives.*"

Now that's all heavy stuff – it can be very challenging and leave us with a gathering sense of guilt and gloom. Well, I'm afraid that's the way the Bible is sometimes. But just as you always seem to find a dock leaf near a stinging nettle, so the challenges in God's word are always pretty close to the encouragements. When we do get round to acknowledging our sin – when we have put aside the relativism, the excuses, the perfectionist heresies – then God will forgive us. As F F Bruce puts it, "*God forgives, not because he is indulgent and easy-going, but because he is faithful and righteous.*" God doesn't dismiss sin as something that we don't need to worry about – he sacrificed his only Son to sort it out, for goodness sake! – but he has promised to forgive if we confess, and he will. He is "*faithful and just*". Those were pretty powerful concepts for Jews like John and what he is saying here is that God will faithfully keep to the promise that he has made because of his justice, his own inherent righteousness. In short, if he didn't forgive when we confess, then he wouldn't be God any more. Whatever your sin, God will forgive if you confess.

With God, there is none of this lynch-mob mentality such as we have seen in recent years in the cases of criminals who have served their sentences, or of people whose crimes were committed long ago and are seeking to rebuild their own lives. (There's some interesting material there if you're interested in moral relativism.) He will forgive and "*purify us from all unrighteousness.*" And that is possible, so John goes on to say, because of the atoning (or propitiating) death of Jesus. Jesus died on the cross to make possible the forgiveness of our sins and to demonstrate that when God said he'd forgive, he was speaking in

deadly earnest. Jesus is our advocate, he is the counsel for the defence – and he has never yet lost a case! However far you think you have fallen, however serious you think your sin is, Jesus has made possible your complete forgiveness.

“Yippee!!” you may be thinking, “that means I can do what I like and God will always forgive me.” Well, not quite. Look at what John has to say in *2:1*. It’s more or less the same as Paul says in *Romans 6:1*. This isn’t a licence to keep on sinning and not worry about the consequences. Yes, God will forgive when we do slip up, but we are still called to live in the light, to be obvious as the people of God. Keeping on sinning and not worrying about how often or how gravely we are doing it is yet another way of not taking it seriously. You have been redeemed, as Paul might put it, so live like it. Become what you are!

This passage is a challenge to us to look at our lives in the searching glare of God’s light. It is a rebuke to those of us who have forgotten what sin is all about, who have slipped into careless and ungodly patterns of behaviour. It’s a reminder, if we needed one, of just what a serious business living for God really is.

But it’s also a wonderful encouragement, because John is reminding us of God’s faithfulness and righteousness to those who acknowledge their sin and who want to do something about it. All is not lost. You can be – you *will* be – forgiven. Jesus has seen to that. Take heart and move forward in the promises and purposes of God.