

First John: Authentic Faith for Jesus' People

#3: The Word of Life in the Christian Life

1 John 2:1-6

Take a first look.

I. Some time ago, I liked or reposted on Facebook a post from The Babylon Bee, a website that specializes in poking fun at people and ideas from a Christian orientation. Think of it like The Onion with a Christian twist. The item I liked or reposted was having a good laugh at Joel Osteen. I think the picture associated with the post had Osteen in mid-air flying above his congregation. Anyway, I thought it was funny and said so. Then, in a surprise twist, a friend from way back in high school commented on my repost. He said something like, "Hey, I am a new Christian and have been reading a devotional guide each day by Joel Osteen. My wife says that Osteen is something like dessert and not like solid food. I would like to talk with you about this some day and see what you think." What surprised me was this. I hadn't heard from this friend since we both turned up at a mutual friend's father's funeral a couple of years prior. We hadn't seen each other for probably 30 years before that. I had no idea that he had become a follower of Jesus! I was impressed also with his wife's tactical and generous comment about Osteen.

I told you recently about a book written by Ross Douthat and published in 2012, entitled *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*. Douthat devotes a chapter to what he and many others label "the Prosperity Gospel." His chapter is called "Pray and Grow Rich." Osteen plays prominently in Douthat's critique of what he considers heresy, and I agree with him.

Douthat considers this heresy a marriage between God and Mammon (or Money): the idea that if a person has enough *faith*, and if that person says the right *words*, then money, houses, cars, promotions at work, recognition and more will be his/hers. Osteen has moderated the approach taken by the so-called Word-Faith preachers of the past, but there is still a generous emphasis on the "name-it-and-claim-it" approach to the Christian life.

Now I can hear Jesus re-asking, perhaps over and over in American Christian circles, "*What does it profit a man to gain the whole world yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?*" (cf. Matthew 16:26). Or, He might confront us with this warning that He issued to His hearers: "*Take care and be on your guard against all covetousness [or, greed], for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions*" (Luke 12:15, ESV). Or, Jesus might just repeat Himself for us in our time (Matthew 6:19-21, FJV¹): "¹⁹ *Stop storing up for yourselves treasures on the earth, where moth and rust are destroying and where thieves are breaking through and stealing;* ²⁰ *but keep storing up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves are not breaking through and stealing.*" [And then He turned from the general to the personal, as the Greek pronoun becomes singular:] "²¹ *for where your² treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

[In this week of celebrating the Independence of the United States of America, I remind you of what our founders pledged to secure this great republic. The *Declaration of Independence* ends with these sobering words: "For the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor." They clearly saw this experiment in self-government as worthy of sacrifice. Now back to the business at hand.]

¹ My own translation of the original Greek text.

² Both instances of "you" in v. 21 are singular in the original Greek.

II. This brings us around to our study of *First John: Authentic Faith for Jesus' People*. John challenges ideas then current which distorted the original truth and message of Jesus. And then he corrects the record. He calls us to allow the Word of Life, our Lord Jesus Himself, to be expressed fully in each of our lives as His people. In short, he calls us to become more and more like Jesus, in His character and values. This is the authentic Christian life. Listen to what he says in the beginning of the second chapter.

1 John 2:1-6, FJV:

¹ My little children, I am writing these things to you^p in order that you^p may not sin. But if anyone should sin, we have an Intercessor with the Father, Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. ² And He Himself is a propitiation³ concerning our sins, and not concerning our sins only, but also concerning the entire world. ³ And by this we know that we have come to know Him, if we are keeping His commands. ⁴ The one who claims, "I know Him," and is not keeping His commands is a liar, and the truth is not in this person; ⁵ but whoever is keeping His word, truly in this person the love of God has been perfected; in this way we know that we are in Him. ⁶ The one who claims to remain in Him ought, just as That One walked, also himself likewise to keep walking.

Take a closer look at *the Word of Life in the Christian life*.

I. The Word of Life, our Lord Jesus Christ, deals effectively with human sin. Vv. 1-3

1. *He leads us away from sin.* V. 1a. John reveals at least one purpose for writing to his current readers: "in order that you may not sin." Now, as we have already observed in chapter 1 and argued in a couple of segments of this study, if God wants each of Jesus' people to live a holy life of moral uprightness, then, it makes sense that He does not want us to make a habit of sin. It never hurts to state the obvious. Remember, this is what Jesus taught us to pray [See Matthew 6:13, FJV, in The Lord's Prayer].

*"and do not bring us into temptation,
But rescue us from the evil one."*

So, this the first thing to consider about the work of the Word of Life in every Christian life: He doesn't want us to sin. Again, this is pretty obvious for most readers of the New Testament.

2. *He intercedes for us regarding sin.* V. 1b. "If anyone should sin," really includes every single one of us, doesn't it? [Yes, it does!] And so, we need the intercession of the Word of Life, "Jesus Christ, the Righteous One." "We have an Intercessor with the Father," asserts John.

I—Imagine a scene in court, the Law and Order of the Cosmos. God the Father is sitting on the justice's bench. The devil, "the accuser of the brothers and sisters ... who accuses them day and night before our God," according to Revelation 12:10 (ESV), is making a case against us. "They have sinned!" he argues confidently. And we are the defendants, under the indictment of the Law, having sinned in truth in thought, word, and deed. This is the picture behind this simple word, "Intercessor." It means something like "defense attorney." So, in this

³ For the technical discussion about the difference between "propitiation" and "expiation" in translating ἱλασμόν (hilasmon), see Leon Morris in *The New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd Edition, ad loc. (and extended discussions referenced there), and the discussion in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (NIDNTT), Volume 3, pp. 151ff. "In short, propitiation is directed towards the offended person, whereas expiation is concerned with nullifying the offensive act" (Colin Brown, NIDNTT, Vol. 3, p. 151).

court setting, Jesus steps up to answer the accusations directly. “Yes,” He concedes, “they have sinned, and keep falling short of the glory of God. But there is more to the story than you have let on, Satan. Their punishment has been borne, by Me! Look at my hands and feet and side (cf. John 20:27). See the scars which I have kept for all eternity to demonstrate my love and saving power for them. See their simple faith, placed in that ominous death, where I, the Righteous One, suffered once for all for the unrighteous, to reunite these fallen humans to the Father” (cf. 1 Peter 3:18). “Yes, they are guilty, but I have taken away their guilt. They are united to Me in My holiness and righteousness.” That makes a pretty powerful argument as it turns out.

The Apostle Paul gets at this, too (Romans 5:6-8, FJV): “⁶ For while we were still weak, at the proper time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For scarcely will anyone die for a righteous man; though for a good man perhaps someone even dares to die; ⁸ but God demonstrates His own love for us, in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.”

3. He satisfies true justice regarding sin. V. 2. John says, “He Himself is a propitiation concerning our sins, and not concerning our sins only, but also concerning the entire world” (v. 2, NJV). Much conversation has been had regarding the meaning of that word which I translate with the older versions as “propitiation.” The word is *ἱλασμόν* (hilasmon). *Propitiation* roughly means something like “turning away the wrath of God by the offering of a gift.” Some modern folks do not wish to attribute anger to God, so they found a different word, *expiation*, to use for this elusive Greek word, used mostly by John. This is a technical conversation, to be sure, but Colin Brown has summarized the points of difference like this: “In short, propitiation is directed towards the offended person, whereas expiation is concerned with nullifying the offensive act.”⁴ I do not find “the wrath of God” to be an offensive idea. God is the one being in all possible worlds who can abhor sin while at one and the same time love sinners. To say that His wrath is aimed inexorably toward evil and yet at the very same time His love is aimed relentlessly toward people who do evil things is the paradox in the center of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is what Paul, at a very early stage of Christian witness, recognizes as the heart of the Good News: “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3, ESV).

A—So Christ has dealt effectively with human sin: He took the punishment upon Himself that our sins deserve. He now speaks on our behalf before the Judge of all the earth so that we will not receive that punishment ourselves. He now works in our lives by the Holy Spirit to empower us to overcome sin from day to day (more on this as we go along).

I—Think of it like this, recounted by Mark Batterson:

On September 3, 1939, German troops invaded Bielsko, Poland. A fifteen year-old girl, Gerda Weissman, and her family survived in a Jewish ghetto until June of 1942. That's when Gerda was torn from her mother, kicking and screaming. Her mother, Helene, was sent to a death camp. Gerda would spend three years in a Nazi concentration camp, followed by a 350-mile death march that she somehow survived. By the time she was liberated by American troops, Gerda was a sixty-eight-pound skeleton. And in what must rank as one of the most improbable love stories ever, Gerda actually married the soldier who found her, Lieutenant Kurt Klein.

There are six glass towers at the Holocaust Memorial in Boston, Massachusetts, representing the six extermination camps where six million Jews lost their lives. Five towers tell the story of unconscionable cruelty and unimaginable suffering, but the sixth tower stands as a testimony to hope. Inscribed on it is a short story titled “One Raspberry,” written by Gerda Weissman Klein.

⁴ *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology (NIDNTT)*, Volume 3, p. 151.

"Ilse, a childhood friend of mine, once found a raspberry in the camp and carried it in her pocket all day to present to me that night on a leaf." Imagine a world in which your entire possession is one raspberry and you gave it to your friend.

The true measure of a gift is what you gave up to give it. One raspberry isn't much unless it's all you have! Then it's not next to nothing; it's everything.⁵

Such is the gift of God for each of us through the cross of Christ: "*For in this manner God loved the world, so that He gave the only begotten Son, in order that everyone who keeps on believing in Him should not perish but should have eternal life*" (John 3:16, FJV).

II. So, what should be our response to the work of the Word of Life?

1. We should keep His commands. Vv. 3-5. This again should be obvious. If we have come to experience the love He has for us and to realize the purpose He has for us to live holy lives, we should want this with all our hearts.

a. Assurance is reinforced through obedience. He says, "**By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we are keeping His commands**" (v. 3, FJV). When we obey what He has revealed about our lives in His world, then we gain a growing assurance of our salvation. "**In this way we know that we are in Him**" (v. 5).

b. This is the first evidence of true faith: we fulfill the moral test: we keep His commands. Again, in characteristic directness, John says that if we claim to know God and don't keep His commands, we are simply liars. Truth is not just an abstract concept; it should be a living reality.

c. The love of God is perfected in the obedient life (or, we fulfill the social test: we love one another). This is how the three tests of authentic faith for Jesus' people come together: We believe in Jesus Christ (the *doctrinal* test), Who gave His human life for our rescue from sin and death. We keep His commands (the *moral* test). And He commands us to love one another as He has loved us (the *social* test). There cannot really be one without the other two. His love makes a complete circle when we return it to God by showing love to one another. "In this person the love of God has been perfected."

2. We walk/live as Jesus did. V. 6. Here is where the imitation of Christ takes on a personal dimension. As we go about our lives in the manner that Jesus did, we adjust our priorities to those that matter forever. We place a higher value on people than on possessions. We value the life of the spirit over what we eat, drink, or wear (see Matthew 6:31-33). Our character is shaped by the Holy Spirit (and yes, more about Him to come!). We grow in "*love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, self-control; law is not against such things*" (Galatians 5:22-23, FJV).

A—How fully have we responded to the personal and corporate intentions of the Word of Life, our Lord Jesus?

I—Randy Alcorn asks us to consider the cumulative effect of our day to day actions, and of the inner life that only we and God know about.

⁵ Mark Batterson, *Chase the Lion*, (Multnomah, 2016), Pages 34-35.

Have you ever seen a sinkhole? Cars can be parked on a street day after day, and everything appears normal, then one day the asphalt caves in and cars disappear into a gigantic hole.

Everybody says, "That hole came out of nowhere." But they're wrong. The hole appears suddenly but the process that led to it has gone on for many years. The underground erosion was invisible, but it was there all along.

Sinkholes remind us of two things: first, something can look good on the outside, when underneath major problems have been going on for years, and disaster's about to happen. Second, our lives are affected by little choices, which have cumulative effects that can result in either moral strength or moral disaster.⁶

Only God, working through the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross and in His resurrection, can shore up the ground beneath the surface of our lives. Only He can put our lives on a solid foundation, on which all that we build will stand for eternity.

Take it home (final applications).

I. This comes back to a central question, asked by Pontius Pilate as he was trying to worm his way out of condemning Jesus to death by crucifixion: "What shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ" (Matthew 27:22, ESV). The religious leaders cried out, "Let him be crucified!" The followers of Jesus had cried out, "Hosanna!" ("Save us"). What do we say? Will we turn violently against Him? Ignore Him passively? Or declare Him Lord and God?

II. If we have declared Him Lord and God, then we must allow Him to be free to work in our lives, dealing effectively with sin on a personal and corporate basis. He transforms us one by one, so that the effect we have with each other and in His broken world will be known and felt. We are still, as the Apostle Paul put it in that dramatic analogy, "the body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Corinthians 12:27, ESV). So, as the *Body* of Christ, we are the visible representation of Jesus in the world. We must live to make Him known, both through our lives, our actions, and our words. How would He wish to keep that work going in us today?

⁶ Randy Alcorn; "The Cumulative Effect of Our Little Choices," EPM Blog, (5-8-17); submitted by Van Morris, Mt. Washington, Ky. To PreachingToday.com.