

Spin Control Versus Sin Control

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1 John 1:1-2:2

1 We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— 2 this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us— 3 we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. 4 We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. 6 If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; 7 but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. 8 If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

2:1 My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; 2 and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

SPIRIT IN THE SKY

There's a rock and roll song from the 70s called *Spirit in the Sky*. It's a catchy tune that those of us of a certain age remember very well.

One line goes:

"Never been a sinner, I've never sinned
I've got a friend in Jesus"

I hope you didn't learn all your theology from old rock and roll songs. But, just in case let me take this opportunity to say that they got it all wrong.

And people are still getting it wrong.

That song may have come out in the 1970s, but there are still people in the church and people not in the church who sing those same words today.
"Never been a sinner. I've never sinned. I've got a friend in Jesus."

Maybe you're one of those singing along.
Jesus loves us good boys and girls. Right?

Well, not exactly.

Faith does not begin with a declaration of innocence.
Faith begins with a confession of sin.

SIN VERSUS SPIN

But, confession of sin has never been all that popular.

Maybe it's because deep down many of us like to believe that we are basically pretty good. It's those "other people" who mess things up. It's those "other people" who are blame for what goes wrong in our lives.

Listen to the politicians for more than a few minutes and you get the message that everything that's wrong with the world can be attributed to the actions of the other party ... whatever that party may be.

The same approach is often taken in the church.

We blame those who think differently from us for what is wrong with the church. The problem with the church are those traditionalists or those liberals or those who like a modern style of worship or ... you name it.

We try to define sin as what that "other" person does.
We become experts at *spin* control instead of sin control!
We are desperate to tell others and ourselves that what we have done is really okay.

And yet, as the theologian Paul Tillich once put it,
“Year after year the longed for perfection of life does not appear.”

Perfection does not appear because human perfection is a great lie. We deceive ourselves with this lie, and we separate ourselves from the real truth that could in fact save us.

Of all the lies, the lie of human perfection is the most dangerous. If we truly believe that our enemy or our opponent is always in the wrong and we are the right, then we will inevitably find reasons to justify bad behavior.

Indeed, we can even find “religious” reasons to do the wrong thing.

The Gospel will not allow us to delude ourselves on this point. When we say that Jesus died for *our* sins on the cross, we are saying that the cross tells the truth about *us*.

We are sinners. We cannot escape sin.
We sin in what we do.
We sin in what we don’t do.
We are part of a society that is tainted by sin.

And there is no *human* way to escape the effects of sin.

We need to turn the words of *Spirit in the Sky* on their head, “We’ve always been a sinner. We’ve always sinned.”

But, the last line we can leave alone.
Despite all this we still have a friend in Jesus.

That’s the message of the cross.
Jesus died for *our* sins.
He loves us that much.

DARKNESS AND LIGHT

But, if we cannot acknowledge that we are sinners, then we are blind to the most basic of spiritual insights. John calls this “walking in the darkness”. He writes in what I think is one of the most delightful lines in the Bible,

"If we say that we have no sin we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."

When we grow spiritually, it does not mean that we feel more holy, more righteous. It is quite the opposite. To grow spiritually means to live in the light of God's presence.

And that holy light makes us uncomfortably aware of our failings.

Have you ever tried to *really* clean your home? I remember when our family did a spring cleaning. We were going to do it right. We were going to get rid of every speck of dirt and dust just like grandma used to do.

But, the more we cleaned the more we understood just how dirty our home actually was.

We noticed that the spots on the floor were not a part of the tile but ground in dirt. We began to see cobwebs in the corner that we thought were shadows.

Our desire to have a clean house would make us clean with even more fervor, and then the morning light would expose the futility of our endeavor. The counter tops were smeared with grease. The drapes were not as clean as we would like them to be.

Eventually we decided that our house needed more help than we could give it.

And so, we called in professional cleaners.

The same is true in our spiritual lives.

When the light of God shines on our life we see that we have been walking in darkness.

Our lives are spotted by the stain of sin. We see our lives in the light of God's presence and it is not a pretty sight. In all honesty we recognize the fact that our "house" is just too dirty for us to clean.

Self-deception is no longer possible.

But, that truth enables us to seek the one who can cleanse us of our sin, the Lamb of God who comes into the world in order to take away the sins of the world.

TEMPTED AS WE ARE

In John's community some dissenters split off from the church because they didn't believe that they were sinners. They believed that just as Jesus was sinless and wise, so were they. But, that belief required them to "reimagine" the life of Jesus.

Instead of emphasizing the cross these dissenters emphasized their special knowledge and their superior intellect. They imagined a Jesus who was more "spiritual," a Jesus who was not affected by the problems of life.

They said of Jesus, "He just seemed to be human. He just seemed to suffer on the cross."

For these dissenters, perhaps early followers of a heresy called Docetism, Jesus was not really a human being like you and me.

Jesus was Clark Kent.

He was Superman in disguise.

John countered this by emphasizing that God's self-revelation did not come in the form of a disembodied spirit. God's self-revelation came in the form of a human being.

Once again the rock and roll song provides a contrast to John's message. God is not some "Spirit in the Sky."

God is with us and for us.

God is one *of us*. God is one *with us*.

This is the way that God has chosen to save the world from its own deadly hubris.

The book of Hebrews put it this way. Jesus can sympathize with our struggles because he was a human being, just like us. He knew what it was like to be tempted. He knew the deadly attraction of sin.

But, in the end Jesus was able to overcome that temptation. His death and resurrection spelled the death knell for the power of sin and death.

In Jesus Christ we find forgiveness. (See Hebrews 4:15)

CHRISTMAS AND EASTER NECESSARY

Some of you may have noticed that the first verses of our lesson for today are reminiscent of how the gospel of John begins. We read that story last Christmas.

It was the story of a man named Jesus, a man that people could see and hear and touch.

But, this man was also God incarnate.

The fourth gospel told us that the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us.

John in his letter reminded his community that this wasn't a new story. This was the message they had been taught from the very beginning.

God was in Christ.

And this is what makes Christianity different.

God is not revealed in a philosophy or a system of doctrine.

God is revealed in a person, the man Jesus.

John is reminding us that we cannot know the risen Lord unless we take the message of the incarnation seriously. Christmas and Easter are both necessary in the Christian year and in the Christian experience.

If we say that God was in Christ, then we must attend to the words that Jesus spoke.

If Jesus was the way, the truth and the life then we must try to model our lives after his.

To put it another way, Christianity is a very down to earth, human faith.

Christianity is not just about what we believe but also (and perhaps more importantly) how we live.

Christianity is a way of life that connects us with God through Christ.

And Christianity is also a way of life also connects us with each other.

THE WAY OF FORGIVENESS

Now you may ask, “How is this Christian way of life different?” I’m glad you asked that question!

The Christian life is different because it is a way of life in which we do not hide our sinfulness.

Instead, we confess our sin. We remember that we’ve always been a sinner. We’ve always sinned.

But, at the same time, we also remember that we still have a friend in Jesus.

On the cross we see the horror of “our” sin on display.

The Apostle Paul tells us, “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for *us*.”

Christ died for *us*. Christ died because of *us*.

But, we also know that in Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

In his letter John does a good job of following a delicate balance that all of us must preserve.

On the one hand, we must acknowledge our sin.

But, we must not *wallow* in our sin.

Confession involves not only wiping away the old sins but also the establishment of a new righteousness, a new way of life.

We bow to confess our sins and receive God’s forgiveness so that we might rise to walk in a new way.

This new way of living does not come from a sense of guilt and shame.
This new way of living comes from a sense of gratitude and grace.

This is what it means to walk in the light, the light of God's grace as revealed in Jesus Christ. It is a Word that we can touch and feel because the Spirit of the risen Christ is among us even today.

John's motivation for writing his letter is clear.
He wants to protect his "little children" from succumbing to temptation.

He wants to remind them that they have not been saved to lie down and get comfortable with their sin.

They have been saved *from* their sin.

But, John is also realistic.
Sin is a reality in everyone's life.
The word translated "sin" in our passage for today means literally "to miss the mark."

All of us miss the mark in life.
We are not perfect.

Only God is perfect.

And so John says, "If we do sin" (and we will) we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. In the gospel of John the word "advocate" refers to the Spirit. Another way to translate "advocate" is "the one who comes alongside."

When we sin, the Spirit of God in Christ comes alongside us and guides us through the darkness into the light. The advocate atones for our sins and for the sins of the world.

ATONEMENT

Some suggest that we should say the word atonement, at-one-ment. In other words the advocate atones for our sin by bringing together what has been torn apart.

Confession and forgiveness are at their heart the mending of relationships, our relationship with God and our relationship with each other.

When we confess our sins, we are honest about the damage we have done.

But at the same time we claim the promise that what has happened does not determine the future. When we confess and forgive sin, we bring the divine down to earth.

We reconnect with God, the source of all life.

And at the same time broken human relationships are restored. Through the process of confession and forgiveness God invites all of us into community.

If we insist on walking alone, we walk in darkness.

But, when we walk together with God, we walk in the light of joy and fellowship.

COUPLES AND CONFESSION

I've noticed over the years that couples who have good marriage are successful at this way of living. These couples do not ignore their own sins or the sins of their mate. Instead, in a good natured way they often make reference to the way they or their spouse "miss the mark" in life.

But, when this is mentioned there are no hurt feelings or recriminations. Instead, with a sense of grace, honesty and even laughter there is an admission of guilt. They say by their demeanor, "Yes, that's who I am. I hope to do better. But, I know that I'm loved anyway."

Contrast this with couples who are in trouble. Any mention of less than perfect behavior is immediately rejected with anger. There are hurt feelings and recriminations. "Who are you to talk about something like that? Don't you remember when you ...?"

And, of course, the conversation deteriorates from that point forward.

What that couple in trouble does not need is *spin control*, trying to shift the conversation so that the other person takes the blame. What that couple in

trouble does need *is sin control*, recognizing that all of us are sinners who need the forgiveness of God as revealed in Christ Jesus.

In all our relationships confession and forgiveness of sin need to play a prominent role.

This need not be some dark, confrontational moment. If we live in the light of God's grace as revealed in Jesus, confession and forgiveness can be as natural as breathing.

Confession and forgiveness can even be accompanied in some cases with laughter and joy.

Of course we miss the mark.

Of course we sin.

But, that's not who we are.

Sin doesn't define us.

God does.

And who does God say that we are?

We are God's adopted children, forgiven and freed to live in the light of his grace and glory.

Amen.