

Hope for the Sinning Christian

1 John 2:1-2

If you read your Bible and really pay attention to what it is saying, there can be some troubling verses.

1 John contains a few of those verses. This morning, we are going to look at the first 2 verses of 1 John chapter 2, but before we do, I want us to look to ask you a question: What is your relationship to sin? If you are a believer in Christ, what is your relationship to sin?

I ask this because there can sometimes seem to be a disconnect between what we read in scripture, how we view our standing in Christ, and we view our sins on a day to day basis.

Sometimes we see the truths of scripture and the truths of our life in Christ and those things seem so clear and so in focus after I read my Bible...and then there's what happens when I get to work or when the kids start to talk back or when Mom and Dad tell me to do something I don't want to hear.

So, there's 1 Peter 1:13-16:

13 Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

("Okay, yeah, I can do that! That sounds positive and encouraging!")

14 As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, 15 but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, 16 since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."

("Ah, yeah, okay, I can try to work on being holy, but man, I don't know.")

Galatians 5:19-21:

Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity (that's hostility to another person), strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

If we take these verses seriously, if we hold to the inerrancy and sufficiency of scripture, then these verses can be a little unsettling. And maybe we should be unsettled by these verses.

Think about how Jesus redefines sin in Matthew 5,

"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire."

And, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' 28 But I say to you that *everyone* who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

And if we're paying attention, Jesus said, "everyone" who does these things. He didn't say, "all unbelievers" who do these things – he said, "*everyone*..."

It's like Jesus pulls the curtain back to show us that even our sinful thoughts; the sinful intentions of our heart cause us to be guilty. So, in the midst of my frustration, when I yell at my kids, I'm guilty of a fit of anger. And kids, when you don't get your way, you stomp around the house or slam your door, you're guilty of a fit of anger. Whether it's anger or jealousy or desiring the approval of others more than the approval of God (which *is* idolatry), looking at inappropriate things on the internet, or anything else that is on that list; Paul issues a very strong and unsettling warning, "I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God."

"Wow, I hope he's going somewhere with this..."

And some, on a daily basis, by their very attitude, actually deny their sin. Somehow, they don't think that their actions actually fit into this or any other list of sins. Oh, some may admit that they sin, but they deny the weight of their sin.

“It’s no big deal, hey, God will forgive me,” or, “Jesus was really talking about people who have a serious problem with their sin.” And so, one way or another, these people deny their sin and presume upon God’s grace.

Like, even now, are you thinking of your own sin, or are you thinking of the person next to you and their sin?

And there are others that very much feel weight of their sin. Sin seems to be an ever present enemy in their lives, one that is constantly crouching over their shoulder and condemning them. They constantly feel the weight and shame of their failings.

They feel the weight of their sinful past as a weight around their legs and their present sins as a tightening noose around their neck. When this person reads these, they see themselves as clearly condemned. They see every sin magnified and much larger than the cross. Their own sense of continued failure in their Christian walk turns them to paralyzing despair or anxiety. It is hard for these individuals to hear and actually believe the hope of gospel in the midst of the deafening noise of their sin.

Charles Simeon points out that, “There are two extremes to which men are apt to incline,” in regards to their attitude toward sin— they fall into either denial or despair, and, he says, “against these the Gospel is designed to guard us.” Our passage this morning addresses both of these extremes and all who fall somewhere in the middle. Within these two verses, John places the full weight of the gospel and fixes our gaze upon the person and work of Jesus Christ.

John begins in the first verse of chapter 2, “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.”

Anytime we see the words, “I am writing *these things* to you so that...” the author is *clearly* giving us his motivation; and so that immediately leads us to ask a few questions. The first question is, “When John says, ‘I write these things’; what are ‘these things’ John is referring to?”

Here, John is referring both to what he has just said as well as what he is about to say – because he’s actually talking about the same subject, he’s talking about the gospel. Looking back at chapter 1 starting in verse 5, John says that, “God is light and in him is no darkness at all.” He gives us God’s character (this is review from the last time I preached, like 4 months ago.) In verse 7, he says that “if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.” And then look at verses 8 – 10, “If we say we have no sin, we *deceive* ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.”

And when John says, “If we confess our sins,” he is saying – if we confess before God, if we agree with him that yes, I really did sin and I agree with God’s guilty verdict. If we agree to that, then he is faithful and just to forgive our sins. This message of the gospel of grace – that by the blood of Jesus, God’s own son, we are cleansed from all sin.

And so, John writes this beautiful message of grace and forgiveness of sin, he writes all these things, for what reason? Why? In verse 1 of chapter 2, John says, “So that we may not sin”....Wait, what? “So that way may not, like...ever sin?” Wait...How can he say that? John just told us that if we deny our sins we deceive ourselves, the truth is not in us, and we call God a liar. So, how can he turn around and just a few verses later tell us that the purpose of his message is that we may not sin?

The reason John can say that he is writing these things so that we may not sin is that John understands the weight of the message of the gospel in regards to forgiving our sin. John is saying, “I am not clearly conveying the gospel to you so that you will embrace your sin. Don’t do that. I am clearly conveying the gospel to you so that you will more clearly see Christ.”

John knows that it is possible for us to be too lenient on sins. He also knows that it is possible for us to be too severe so he speaks to us regarding both of these errors.

To the lenient; to those who act as if they believe that God will never execute his threatened judgments. He says, “I write these things that you won’t sin,” and to those who are too severe on their sin, he reminds them of the offices which Christ sustains on behalf of sinners.

John knows we will sin – he makes that plain in the previous verses and the way that the sentence is written, he is not saying that it is even possible for us to be free from sin, but he gives us more a sense of direction. It could be said this way, “My aim in writing these things is to move you away from sin as you move toward Christ.”

And so, we ask the question; how, as believers, do we move away from sin? How do we go about sinning less? In these two short verses, we will see that God has put forward one way to accomplish this and that is by continuing to place our trust in Christ and *his* work regarding our sin.

The first way that God wants you to sin less is by ...

1. *Trusting Christ who is your advocate when you do sin*

“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.”

So, what is an advocate?

An advocate is someone who comes alongside you to help you, to assist you, or to speak on your behalf. The word literally means “called alongside.” It can be used in describing a friend who comes alongside you to defend you against an accuser. Maybe your friend is able to defend your character or get the story straight in a misunderstanding.

When I worked for a benefits administrator, we had a department that specialized in Advocacy. The representatives were called, “Participant Advocates” and their job was to work with the people who were having difficulty getting their insurance company to pay their portion of a bill. Usually it was a case of the information being processed incorrectly or filed in the wrong place which would cause the insurance company not to pay their portion. It was not uncommon that the person didn’t know that there was a problem until the unpaid bill was sent to collections. So, the Advocate would work with the individual and the insurance company to clear up the misunderstanding and make sure that the claim got paid and that the collections people were called off.

And so, what was the benefit of the advocate?

Well, they were able to stand up for that person’s rights. They were able to speak on their behalf and, in a way, show that they were innocent. The unpaid bill was to be taken care of by another. And all the while, that Advocate would assure the person, “I’m here to help you; I’m working for your benefit; we’ll get this all cleared up.” The advocate then makes a bunch of phone calls and then, in the end, the insurance company pays the bill, collections are called off, and justice is served. And that’s a picture of an advocate, right; someone coming alongside, bringing comfort, pleading their case, interceding on their behalf.

And yet there are some vast difference between this example of an Advocate and an insurance company, and Jesus as your Advocate with the Father when you sin.

The first difference is that you are actually guilty.

The person in our example was innocent and it was the Advocate who worked with the insurance company to show their innocence, but not you, not me. We are all guilty of sinning against God.

The Bible affirms it –

“Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.” – Ecclesiastes 7:20

1 Kings 8:46 says, “there is no one who does not sin”

Our conscience affirms it as well. It is not just a misunderstanding of the facts. We are guilty as charged.

Imagine if that same person called up and told an Advocate that there was this unpaid bill that was just sent to collections. The conversation might start out the same, “I can definitely help look into this for you,” but as soon as that Advocate finds out that the *person* owes the money and not the insurance company, the Advocate is going to say, “I’m sorry, I can’t help you. You need to pay your bill.”

The first difference is that we stand guilty before the judge.

The second difference is that God is all knowing.

A lot of different people work at insurance companies and each of them can make mistakes and there is not one of those people who are able to know what is happening with each and every insurance claim, but God is different. He is infiniteⁱ and all knowingⁱⁱ. He knows us better than we know ourselves. So, where our sins are concerned, He is able to clearly see every action and thought clearly. He is able to see and judge our hearts completely.ⁱⁱⁱ

Whereas the insurance company might accidentally miss a detail or put a file in the wrong place, God never confuses facts or misfiles paperwork. And so, when you sin, God knows it – even if you don't realize you have sinned, God knows you've sinned. (Intense) And it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of just judge when you are a guilty criminal.

(compassion) But, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ.

Yes, we are guilty, but we are not abandoned. Our Advocate is different because our advocate knows our guilt and remains by our side. Jesus himself endured the same temptations that you and I do. As our advocate he is able to understand the pain and the sorrows we feel, he is also able to relate to the pull and the weight of any temptation. And so he acts as our comforter, to reassure us of grace and forgiveness.

It's good to be reminded that 1st John was written to believers for whom Christ died. Believers who still struggled with sin, just like we do. And with each sin, Christ continued to be their Advocate with the Father, just as he actively does with every believer – even today. The reason why I mention that now is because it is easy to forget that, even when you are in the midst of struggling with sin (you've just blown up at your kids, you just lied to your teacher, or you made a racist comment; at that moment when the guilt of your sin comes tumbling down on your head and you just want to run away because you're sure that Jesus is disgusted with you...

You imagine Jesus saying (disgust) "I died for this?" "I hung on a cross and this is how you act?"

Just when you are tempted to say, "I've already blown it, who cares – I might as well keep on sinning," "What's one more drink? I might as well finish bottle."

It is even at that moment of decision when you there is a momentary pause in your temper-tantrum of sin, that John says, "If anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father." Jesus is not standing there with his arms folded and a disgusted look on his face, He is interceding with the Father on your behalf.

Oh, how differently would we act if in that moment of greatest temptation, we imagined Jesus on pleading with the Father on our behalf?

One of the most amazing parts of the good news is that God does not adopt His children based on their good behavior. No, "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of *him* you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."^{iv}

Sometimes, especially with sins that we habitually struggle with, we feel like the tiny thread that was holding us up, restraining us from sinning, is cut and we feel as though we are hopelessly falling headlong into the bottomless pit of sin, but it's not true. When we sin, Christ is our advocate.

God wants you to sin less, but not by going off on your own, away from God, to work really hard to "clean up your act" and, somehow, by your own effort to stop your addiction to sin. No, God wants you to sin less by trusting in Christ who, when you do sin, does not leave you or abandon you, but intercedes for you! He does not turn his back on us, surely we should not turn our backs on him.

God wants you to sin less by ...

1. *Trusting Christ who is your advocate when you do sin and also by*
2. *Trusting Christ who is the righteous one when you do sin*

Now, why does John describe Jesus as the righteous one? He could have just said, "But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ." So, why does he insert that additional descriptor?

The first main reason that John highlights Christ's righteousness is in relation to Jesus' role as our Advocate – more specifically, His role as a Priest on our behalf. In the Old Testament, it was the role of the priest to offer sacrifices on behalf of the people. So, when you sinned, you would be required to make payment for that sin. Depending on what you did, you might need to an offering of grain or an offering of an animal and you would take that to the priest at the temple; and the priest would offer the sacrifice for you on your behalf. You couldn't offer up the sacrifice yourself because God only authorized the priests to offer up these sacrifices.

Now, before the priest could offer up *your* sacrifice, a sacrifice needed to be offered up on *his* behalf – to cleanse his own sins. It would be kind of like if one of my daughters came up to me because she fell down on her bike and scraped up her arm; if I'm out working in the garden picking weeds, I have to go clean my own hands before I can clean up her scraped arm.

And so, God set up a system where the priests went through specific washings and wore specific clothing and they did a sacrifice for themselves – they went through all of this in order to be clean of their sin so that they could take your sacrifice and offer it up to forgive your sins.

But as our priest, Jesus did not need any sacrifice made on his behalf because he himself is righteous. He committed no sin and we know that when he lived on the earth, when Jesus prayed, he was heard because of his reverence.^v Jesus was heard because of his righteousness. How much more so now that he is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven.^{vi} When Jesus intercedes for us, He is able to intercede with boldness and certainty of God's acceptance. And not only are we sure that God hears and accepts Christ's prayers on our behalf; we know that he continues to intercede for us for all time.

Under the Old Covenant, there were many priests because they would grow old and die and then new ones would need to come and take their place. Not so with Jesus. Because of his righteousness, Jesus rose from the dead and lives forevermore. Death could not hold him and so we are assured of His intercession for us for all time.

There is also something to be said about the character of our righteous advocate who is our High Priest. He knows the law so well that he was able to obey every aspect of it, he knows the Father and the Father is well pleased with him. He knows our sins and the penalty for those sins.

Imagine for a moment that you are guilty of a crime, let's say you were driving too fast down the interstate and you're going just fast enough that you've got to appear before the judge. You find out that this judge is really by the book – he would convict you for speeding even if you were only going one over, but let's say you were going a lot faster than that. Well, you have two attorneys who are willing to represent you.

The first attorney says, "Hey, this isn't a big deal. I'll see if I can dig up some technicality or something to get you out of this – maybe we can tell the judge you were on your way to the hospital. Don't worry, I can handle the judge, just don't admit you were speeding."

"Ah, well, actually, I wasn't going to the hospital and I really was speeding. And, are you sure you can handle the judge? I mean, I've heard he's pretty tough."

"Ah, judges are all the same. I can handle him, you just do exactly what I tell you."

But the second attorney says, "Well, this is serious, I know this judge and I am pretty sure you'll have to pay a fine, but I will talk to the Judge and ask him if he would be willing to put you on court supervision so that it won't go against your insurance premiums."

Now, who do you think a righteous judge is more likely to listen to?

You see, the second attorney knows the law, he knows the judge, and he doesn't minimize the offense. It's the same thing with Jesus Christ, the righteous. He knows the law, he knows the Father, and he doesn't minimize our sin.

God wants you to sin less, not by "wishing" that God would forgive your sins or relying on your own righteousness by working really hard and trying to enough right things so that God will see us as mostly righteous, or even by feeling really, really bad enough about your sins so that God will just have to believe in your sincerity when you ask him for forgiveness.

The Father hears the son and our sins are forgiven based on Christ's righteousness alone, not based on our own sincerity when we pray or if we've read our Bible 3 days in a row or if we listen to worship music in the car. No, God desires that we would trust Christ.

God wants you to sin less by ...

1. *Trusting Christ who is your advocate when you do sin*
2. *Trusting Christ who is the righteous one when you do sin and by*
3. *Trusting Christ who is your propitiation for your sins when you do sin*

Christ acts for us as our priest, to offer up a sacrifice on our behalf and now we see that Jesus himself is the sacrifice that is offered up.

He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. Just on a cursory glance and our previous understanding of the gospel, we know that Jesus died for our sins, right? We know that through his death on the cross, there comes a kind of payment and forgiveness of those sins. But John uses an interesting word choice here.

The word he uses is propitiation and in this form it is only used two times in the New Testament – once here and then once later in chapter 4. John could have used a more common term, but he used the word propitiation to convey a specific meaning and so I want us to learn this word so that when we see John use it, we will understand what he's trying to convey.

If you're reading from the NIV, you'll see that it translates the word as atoning sacrifice. That's a good jumping off point. And so, let's begin there. When the priests were offering up their sacrifices, there were certain requirements for those sacrifices. If it was an animal, it needed to be without defect – without spot or blemish. You couldn't look out across your heard of sheep and find the tiniest, sickliest sheep and say, "Whoa, I'm not letting my kids eat this one. Honey, let's take this one to sacrifice at the temple." No, you took your best animal to be offered up. It was that animal that was offered up as payment of your sins.

We see another example at first Passover. In Exodus chapter 11 and 12, Pharaoh refused to let the people of Israel go and worship in the wilderness and so God issued the punishment against Pharaoh's sin, the Angel of the Lord would go out and kill the firstborn of every household, whether man or beast. And God instructed the people to sacrifice a lamb and paint the blood of the lamb on the doorposts of their home. And then he said, "For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. The blood shall be a sign for you, on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt." And then at midnight, God poured out his wrath on the firstborn of all of Egypt; for the sins of Pharaoh and all of Egypt's rejection of God. And when he saw the shed blood of the lamb on the door of a house, he didn't pour out his wrath on that house. And so, that one year old, spotless lamb was the propitiation that turned away the wrath of God. If a family hadn't offered up a lamb, then the plague would be poured out upon their household and their firstborn would die.

It was the same with the sacrificial system. If the people did not offer up a sacrifice for their sins, then God's wrath and judgment would remain on them. *This* was the basis for the sacrificial system that God set up through Moses and Aaron.

So, why does God require this propitiation?

First we have to remember that all sin is lawlessness^{vii} and rebellion against God. And so any sin that I commit is primarily a breaking or offending of God's law. If I steal my neighbor's car, my neighbor might not like it, but the primary offense is not against my neighbor, my primary offense is against God.

Would God be just if he arbitrarily let things go by without ever bringing them to justice? No, at that point he would no longer be just. The consequence of sin is death and God's wrath. Romans 1:18 says, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth." And then in Romans 2 verse 5, it says, "But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed."

God's judgment and wrath are not just arbitrary and so, in the case of the sacrifice in the temple and of the lamb sacrificed for the Passover, propitiation for God's wrath is poured out on the animal.

But as our propitiation, Jesus is different – this is the second main reason John highlights Christ as righteous. When Jesus offers himself up as a sacrifice, he is greater than the spotless lamb offered up under the old covenant. No animal is ever equal in value to that of a human being, but Jesus is fully God and fully man. Jesus is the righteous one – who knew no sin. And so, the one being sacrificed is of infinitely greater worth than the ones for whom the sacrifice is being made.

What does it mean that Jesus Christ is our propitiation when we sin?

It means that when you or I sin, the wrath and punishment that should be yours is taken onto Christ. The punishment and wrath that God has against my sin is taken up by Christ. My sin is no less offensive to him, but Christ takes that wrath upon himself.

But here is a great mystery – who was it that told the people of Israel to sacrifice a lamb and put blood upon their doorposts? It was God.

Who was it that sent Jesus in the world to be a propitiation for our sins? It was God.

Look at 1 John 4:10, this is the other place that John uses the same word that we translate as propitiation. It says, "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins."

It was God himself who provides a propitiation for the rebellion that calls for his wrath and judgment; the sins that must be accounted and paid for.

But then what does John mean when he says, "the sins of the whole world"?

John uses the word "world" 23 times in the book of 1 John and 78 times in the gospel of John. It is really important that when we see "universal" type words, that we pay attention to the context to understand the meaning; as well as how the author uses the same word in other verses.

Just within the book of 1 John, he uses "world" in one place to mean the natural world (3:17) in other places it carries a sense of location – the place where someone goes or where they live (4:1, 4, 9, 14, 17) and in other places it means "worldly" values or attitudes that are opposed to God (2:15-17; 5:4, 5). It's also used to specifically speak of the unbelieving world that is opposed to believers (3:1, 13; 4:5; 5:19.)

And so, does it mean that Christ is the propitiation – (that he takes away the wrath) of every single person in the whole world, whether or not they trust in Christ?

Well, that can't be the case because we see John himself contradict this in John 3:36 when he says, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him."

And so, we know that John has a different use of the word world in verse 2 and that is this: Jesus took all the sins, from the smallest to the greatest, for all of time, of every single believer onto himself as he hung on the cross. In the entire

world, there is no sin too great that Christ's death cannot atone for. There is also not a limit to the number of sins that any one person can commit that cannot be forgiven.

That means that any non-believer – no matter how foul their disposition, no matter how vile their deeds – no matter what they have said or done; if they turn to Christ, their sins will be propitiated by his blood. They can receive forgiveness and newness of life.

It also means that there is no limit to the number of times, brothers and sisters, that you can sin where Christ will no longer absorb God's wrath in your place. Christ will not stop advocating on your behalf before the Father. The moment that he sees any rift in that relationship caused by our sin, Christ is right there by the Father's side, pleading on your behalf. Christ is righteous, He will be heard.

BUT, here is the caution. Before you leave here and think anyone has given you free reign to sin as much as you want because God must forgive us on the basis of Christ's sacrifice, we are given this warning: My little children, I am writing these things so that you may not sin. We are brought full circle.

My little children, I am writing these things so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but for the sins of the whole world.

For those of you who would take your sins lightly and think that somehow God doesn't care, I ask you to look to the cross and remember that all that Christ endured was for your sake, so that you would not have to face the wrath of God that would utterly destroy you and cast your soul into hell.

And for those of you who struggle over the pain of your sin with sorrow upon sorrow and grief upon grief, I ask you to look on the cross and remember that Jesus endured God's wrath and that he lives to intercede on your behalf, so cling to Christ the righteous one.

God wants you to sin less by trusting Christ who is...

1. Your advocate when you do sin
2. The righteous one when you do sin
3. Your propitiation for your sins when you do sin

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ⁱ [Psalm 145:3; Jeremiah 23:24](#)

ⁱⁱ [Psalm 147:4; Proverbs 15:3; Matthew 10:29](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ [Psalm 139:1; Jeremiah 17:10](#)

^{iv} [1 Corinthians 1:27-31](#)

^v [Hebrews 5:7](#)

^{vi} [Hebrews 8:1](#)

^{vii} [1 John 3:4](#)