

St. John the Evangelist, 2009

Text: 1 John 1:1 – 2:2

Title: “We”

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Have you ever been intimidated by another Christian’s faith? Have you ever felt like there were certain people that were so holy and so faithful that you could never live up to their example? Maybe it was one of your pastors or teachers. Maybe it was a parent or grandparent or godparent.

Chances are that there have been spiritual people in your life that you’ve not only looked up to, but maybe even been a little intimidated by. You see how they live their life and feel like you could never measure up.

I can think of several pastors in my life and some of my professors at college and the seminary that I have been intimidated by. It’s not just their knowledge, and that fact that they know the scriptures inside and out, but it’s also been their lifestyle. These men live the Christian faith and have a personal piety and devotional life that seem unreachable, unattainable. They can seem to be super-Christians, and that can be intimidating.

St. John would have been one of the more intimidating figures in the Early Church. Can you imagine having John as your pastor?

John was not only one of Jesus’ disciples, he was one of the big three: Peter, James and John. Peter was a regular guy, who often spoke without thinking. He had denied Jesus three times and embarrassed himself on several occasions. We can usually identify with Peter pretty easily. James was a solid character, but he died young, executed by Herod, the first of the apostles to die.

But John, John was the model disciple. John sat next to Jesus at the last supper, and they discussed Jesus’ betrayal. John was friend of the high priest’s family, and was there for Jesus’ trial. John was there at the cross as Jesus was dying, and Jesus entrusted His mother Mary into John’s care. On Easter John was the first of the disciples to reach the empty tomb, outrunning Peter. Along with Peter he was a leader in the early church, and the book of Acts speaks of his role in establishing the Christian faith.

According to legend, John was the only disciple to die a natural death. He lived to an old age and was pastor in Ephesus. John saw his share of persecution. He was exiled to the island of Patmos, and according to legend, they also attempted to kill him by poison and by boiling oil.

But John lived to a ripe old age, possibly to ninety or beyond. He wrote the fourth gospel, three letters and the book of Revelation. As the story goes, when John was near the end of his life, he could no longer walk. They carried him on a mat through the streets of Ephesus and he would say over and over, “Little children, love one another.”

It must have been intimidating to be around St. John, particularly near the end of his life. Here was the last living disciple of Jesus. There were even rumors that he would not die until Jesus returned. John had written about a quarter of the New Testament. He was there when Jesus was baptized. He was there for all three years of Jesus' miracles and teachings. He was there on the mount of transfiguration. He was there for the ride into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. He was there at the Last Supper. He was there in Gethsemane. He was there for Jesus' trial. He was there at the foot of the cross. He was there at the empty tomb. He was there in the upper room on Easter. He was there to watch Jesus ascend into heaven. He was there on the day of Pentecost. Can you imagine having John as a pastor?

The incredible thing is that, given all of these experiences, John does not set himself apart. He does not boast. He does not play the disciple card at all.

Look at how John begins his first letter. Listen to the first four verses again:

^{1(A)} That which was ^(B) from the beginning, ^(C) which I have heard, ^(D) which I have seen with my eyes, ^(E) which I looked upon and ^(F) have touched with my hands, concerning the word of life—^{2(G)} the life ^(H) was made manifest, and I have seen it, and ^(I) I testify to it and I proclaim to you the eternal life, ^(J) which was with the Father and was made manifest to me—^{3(K)} that which I have seen and heard I proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with me; and indeed ^(L) my fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. ⁴And I am writing these things so ^(M) that my ^[a] joy may be complete.

But that's not it, is it. No, that's not the way that John writes. You'd expect Him to write like this. He's the last apostle. He's the last one who's actually seen and heard and touched Jesus in person. You'd expect him to talk about himself.

And yet John keeps saying "we". All the way through it's we and us, and not I and me. "We have heard, we have seen with our eyes, we have looked and our hands have touched." It's all "we."

How can John talk like this?

John writes this way because we have heard Jesus. We have seen Him. We have touched Him.

In the word and the sacraments we have heard, seen and touched Jesus. John doesn't make a distinction. John doesn't differentiate. We have all seen and heard and touched Jesus. John's not in some special, elite class because he was a disciple, instead all those who have experienced Jesus are joined together. Together we proclaim the eternal life so that we may all have fellowship, all be joined together in Christ Jesus, that we all may rejoice.

John doesn't claim any special status. Instead, John reminds us that we all have seen, heard, and touched Jesus. We're all in the same boat.

We're all in the same boat when it comes to sin, too. John doesn't leave himself out when he talks about sin and repentance. John writes five conditional statements, five if-then sentences.

They all begin “if we...” John doesn’t leave himself out. It’s not “if you” do this or that. No, John includes himself all the way through.

First: If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and^(Q) do not practice the truth. Darkness and light don’t go together. You have experienced the light of Christ this Christmas. Don’t go back to live in the darkness of sin- to do so would be living a lie. You are children of the light, so live like it.

Second statement: But^(R) if we walk in the light,^(S) as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and^(T) the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. Walking in the light does not mean totally avoiding sin. It would be great if we could do so, but we’re not going to be able to escape sin completely. Walking in the light means walking in forgiveness. Walking in the light means confessing our sins and receiving forgiveness through the blood of Christ.

Third statement: If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and^(V) the truth is not in us. That one should sound familiar. If anyone claims to be without sin, he is a liar. John includes himself in this one, yet again. He doesn’t say, “If you say you have no sin, you deceive yourself...” No, once more John says “we”. John acknowledges the fact that we are all sinners.

Sometimes it’s hard to picture certain religious folks sinning. We put them high up on pedestals and are somehow shocked when they come crashing down to earth. The fact is, apart from Christ, everyone is a sinner. Pastors and teachers and bishops sin, even apostles like John sin.

Thankfully, that’s not the end of John’s letter.

Fourth statement: If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. When we confess our sins, God forgives them and cleanse us. If we hold onto our sins, and keep them away from God, if we say, “That’s not too bad, everyone does it, I don’t need to worry about it,” then we’re in trouble. But if we acknowledge our sin, if we confess our sins, then God will forgive us. It’s that simple.

Finally, the fifth statement: If we don’t confess our sin, then we are calling God a liar, and His word is not in us. Confessing our sin is simply agreeing with God. God’s word says that we’re all sinners. God’s word contains His law, and we clearly don’t follow and obey His Law as we should. Confession is just agreeing with God and saying that we’re sinners. But remember, when we confess our sin, God forgives our sin.

So, to review,

1. If we claim to be united with God and yet live the opposite way, we’re liars.
2. If we walk in the light, through the cleansing of Jesus’ blood, we’re united to God.
3. If we claim to be sinless, we’re liars.
4. If we confess our sin, God forgives us.
5. If we say we’ve never sinned, we’re calling God a liar.

Or even more simply...

Being a Christian does not mean avoiding sin entirely. If we claim to be without sin, we're lying to ourselves and to God. This goes for all of us, and even for the apostle John himself. This is walking in darkness, apart from the light of God's word.

Being a Christian means confessing your sins and living in the forgiveness that we have in Jesus' blood.

John does not write this to us so that we go out there and keep sinning. John writes this so that when we do sin, we know that we have a way out.

Finally, John says that Jesus Christ is the "propitiation" for our sin. This is a heavily loaded theological term. You could preach entire sermons on this one word. It was used in the Old Testament to refer to what happened on the Day of Atonement, when the blood of the sacrificial lamb was poured out in the Ark of the Covenant to satisfy the wrath of God.

Sin is something that makes God angry. Sin harms ourselves, our neighbors and disrupts the entire order of creation. When God forgives sin, He doesn't just change His mind and decide to be happy. Instead, God is placated by something else. His wrath is redirected.

This happens in Jesus' death on the cross. The perfect, holy blood of Jesus covers us and takes away God's wrath.

And this is not just for us. It is for the whole world. John expands the scope of salvation to include everyone. Salvation is for all, not just for the apostles and missionaries and pastors, not just for people who live a decent, moral life, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ is for all. Jesus was born for all, Jesus lived for all, Jesus died for all, Jesus rose for all. We're all in need of salvation, and we're all saved through Jesus Christ.

I began by asking if you were intimidated by anyone's spirituality. The chances are, there are people in your life who are intimidated by you, who put you on a pedestal. The fact that you're in church two days after Christmas says something about you.

But John reminds us that we're all in the same boat. We're all sinners, we're all in need of salvation, and we're all saved by the sacrifice of Jesus. Your challenge is to take that to the people in your life who are still in darkness, who still need to see the light of Christ. Learn from John. Use the pronoun "we" a lot. Testify to the things that you have seen, heard and touched, so that our joy may be complete.