

First Presbyterian Church of Upland

“JESUS PEOPLE”

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Text: 1 JOHN 2: 1-14

Before we go into the text, I need to say something about the mood in which John is writing. You can often tell an author’s attitude by their tone. For instance, as we worked through Galatians last fall, it was clear that Paul was quite miffed with the Galatians. But John, in this letter, is full of love and divine inspiration.

This is a love letter to the Church. John sees the church with a very mature Christian love. John was older—probably the last surviving apostle at this point—and he has grown to see the Christian community very much as Christ does.

His heart is full as he writes and he wants them to know God’s love for them.

John himself—I believe—feels that great love as he writes. He is full of that love, and with joy he reveals his love motive.

Today, we will read the text in three parts. The first part is about the people who belong to Christ—the Church, the Jesus People. The second part is about making a practice of love, and the third part is John’s poem to encourage his people. We start with 1 John 2, verses 1-6:

[Read 1 John 2: 1-6]

I. JESUS PEOPLE

John wants us to not sin. You got that, everyone? *No more sinning!* Can this be what John means? How can a person stop sinning altogether? I mean, come on, people—do not sin ever again, okay?

It’s not that simple; we need to understand what John means by *sin*.

The original meaning of the word *sin* is to wander or be lost. When God freed the people from Egypt, where did they wander for forty years? The wilderness of SIN—or as we call it today, *Sinai*. To be a sinner is to be one who is lost and wandering. The sinner is one who does not know her way, like a wandering sheep without a shepherd, she is *lost*. That is sin—to be lost and wandering.

Christians are neither lost nor wandering. We have Christ for our Shepherd, so we know where to go, whom to follow, and the right paths to walk in order *not* to be lost, but to follow Christ our Shepherd. The Christian cannot be a sinner because the Christian is never lost in following Christ. We are found—have been found—and know Whom to follow and therefore are wanderers no more.

Christians do not establish righteousness by perfect, sinless behavior, but by following Christ and trusting in Him alone. We are People following Jesus—that is the Church. We are like lambs following our shepherd. We may trip, slip off the path from time to time, but none of that changes our commitment and following Christ.

Righteousness is not moral perfection; it is knowing the Shepherd and belonging to Him.

Our righteousness is established by following Jesus.

“I am the good shepherd,” He says, “and my sheep know my voice.” [John 10:27]

If you are following Jesus, you are no longer a sinner, no longer lost, no longer wandering aimlessly.

But we still have our problems don't we? We still sin. There are profound differences between a sheep and their shepherd. The sheep don't really know where they're going; they just know whom to follow. The Shepherd takes responsibility for the safety and salvation of the sheep—they can't do that for themselves. The Shepherd knows all; the sheep know very little.

We are right to ascribe all goodness, glory, and saving power to the Shepherd and hang on to precious little ourselves.

We will not and cannot escape the affects of living in a sinful world, which it is. We still carry the aroma of wandering. Israel in the wilderness still craved idol worship and Egyptian slave chow.

We cannot justify ourselves and should not expect to. This is the very recipe of self-righteousness. If we begin to focus on righteousness as moral perfection, we quickly become like dust fanatics—trying to rid ourselves and our world of every speck of dust. The problem is, the world is made of dust, and even if we wear one of those clean suits they use in manufacturing computer chips, guess what—our skin continues to manufacture dust. We cannot escape dust and it is a futility to try.

And so it is with moral righteousness. We will never arrive.

Still, it is right and good to strive for righteousness. Goodness is good and sinful behaviors are destructive. We should hate sin—especially our own—and daily submit our sins to God. Ask forgiveness and know—truly believe—that we are forgiven.

We may *commit* sins, but we do not make sin our *practice*.

In September 1961, a high school student in Brooklyn, New York, wrote to C. S. Lewis in England. He had read Lewis' book *The Screwtape Letters* and asked the author, "When you wrote this book, did Satan give you any trouble, and if he did, what did you do about it?" Lewis penned a reply in which he affirmed that he still had

plenty of temptations. He said that in facing them,

"Perhaps . . . the most important thing is to keep on; not to be discouraged however often one yields to the temptation, but always to pick yourself up again and ask forgiveness."

Again, our virtue is not in ourselves, but in the One whom we follow. We know the Shepherd's voice and call; we follow.

As we follow, we refuse to make a practice of sin. Rather, we make love our practice.

John addresses our practice of love, so hear now 1 John 2, verses 7-11:

[Read 1 John 2: 7-11]

II. LOVE PRACTICE

So we are no longer obliged to fulfill righteousness, that means we are free to practice obedience to God. And remember, when John talks about obeying the commandments, he is not talking about the 10 Commandments from Sinai (or Sin), but the love commandments of Christ, which contain the Law and the Prophets: *Love the Lord God with everything you've got and love your neighbor as yourself*. This is the righteousness that we followers of Jesus are to commit to as a *practice*.

By *practice*, we mean our lifestyle. We *practice* Love the way a lawyer *practices* law, or a doctor *practices* medicine.

Q: How does a doctor practice medicine?

A: With patients

Christians, in following our Shepherd Christ, are those who make Love their practice and profession.

How do we make a practice of love? That is the question that defines our spirituality.

John says: darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.

Like dawn at the end of a cold, dark night, the Kingdom of Dawn is inevitable—it is coming and its light will drive out all darkness. We, like John, must live this life confident in Christ's triumph that is coming. We live by trust in His promises. The new day is dawning, and darkness will have no place in it.

In a pitch black room, like a darkened basement, turning on a light disperses darkness—the light takes over everything and the shadows are chased into the furthest corners. Darkness has no substance; it is the absence of light. We know this is true because you can't go into a light room and turn on darkness—there is no way to extinguish light with something called darkness.

So John tells us of good and evil, healthy and sick, straight or crooked—light and love have come into this world by Christ, and He is the light, and all darkness is in the process of being extinguished even now.

Therefore, we who follow Him are necessarily practitioners of love.

Christians practice Love.

And this creates a kind of loop: because we practice love by practicing love.

And as the saying goes, *practice makes perfect*. Follow this:

- Loving God and others is the calling of every Christian.
- Loving God and others is our path toward completion.
- Loving God and others is walking in the light without stumbling.
- Loving God and others is spiritual formation—our movement toward Christ.
- Loving God and loving others is the right path in following our Shepherd.

That is walking in the light, and if we walk in the light, we need not trouble ourselves with any thoughts about darkness.

Now, the third part is the strangest but also the loveliest. It is a short poem, verses 12-14.

[Read 1 John 2: 12-14]

III. THE POEM

Here, John pauses to pour out some love on his readers. It's a lot like in the book of Revelation when in the midst of strange apocalyptic imagery, a chorus of praise and worship breaks out. John speaks to little children, fathers, and young men, but he might as well be saying, "Ladies and Gentlemen, boys and girls" as he was certainly speaking to the whole community.

He calls them *babies*, or *newborns*, with affection—for many in that community were certainly newly born to the faith.

He call them *fathers*, those who are longer-term followers and more mature in their faith.

He calls them *young men*, those midway on the journey, still seeking and questioning, but following in grace.

This is encouragement, affirmation—like we said at the start, a *love letter*.

Years ago, a "Dear Abby" (Arizona Daily Sun [1/10/99]) column ran a story by a retired schoolteacher. One day she had her students take out two sheets of paper and list the names of the other students in the room. Then she told them to think of the nicest thing they could say about each of their classmates and write it down by their names. She took the papers home that weekend and compiled a list for each student of what the others had said about him or her. On Monday she gave each student his or her list. Before long, everyone was smiling.

"Really?" one whispered. "I never knew that meant anything to anyone."

"I didn't know anyone liked me that much!"

Years later, the teacher went to the funeral of one of her former students, who had been killed in Vietnam. Many who had been in that class years before were there. After the service, the young man's parents approached the teacher and said,

"We want to show you something. Mark was carrying this when he was killed."

The father pulled out of a wallet the list of all the good things Mark's classmates had said about him.

"Thank you so much for doing that," Mark's mother said. "As you can see, Mark treasured it." A group of Mark's classmates overheard the exchange. One smiled sheepishly and said, "I still have my list. It's in my top desk drawer at home." Another said, "I have mine, too. It's in my diary."

"I put mine in our wedding album," said a third.

"I bet we all saved them," said a fourth.

“I carry mine with me at all times.”

At that point, the teacher sat down and cried. And, she used that assignment in every class for the rest of her teaching career.

Do you know what has real power in this world? Encouragement—a truthfully-spoken affirmation of others is an increasing rarity, but it changes lives and destinies.

One of the best ways we practice love is by affirming and encouraging others. Tell them what they’re doing right without noting exceptions. Affirm them for who God has made them and who He is yet making them to become (which we know, is like Himself).

If you’ve been following Jesus a long time, isn’t it time you wrote a love letter to someone? I don’t mean a syrupy, maudlin gushing-out, but a sincere and mature affirmation of someone in your life? A blessing. When was the last time you intentionally *blessed* someone else?

I’ve heard it said that the chief thing wrong with young men in America today is that they missed their fathers’ blessings—it used to be a ritual! Don’t forget how important those blessings were Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Have we lost something crucial here? Fathers, bless your sons. Mothers, bless your sons and daughters. Fathers, bless your daughters.

IV. THEREFORE...

John sees the Church as a community of God’s precious beloved children.

He does *not* see the Church as:

1. A conquering army
2. A Mighty Fortress
3. An entrepreneurial startup
4. An elite club for the specially gifted
5. A grand institution of moral authority commanding the respect of all

We should be wary of attempts to turn Christ’s Church into any of these things.

John *does* see the Church as a precious and vulnerable tribe that seeks to live its life peaceably:

- unmolested by the worldly powers of Rome,

- Un-pestered by the self-righteousness of religious Jews or pagans
- The Jesus People are gentle, vulnerable, and perhaps a bit gullible.

He sees them as *God’s Beloved*—those following Christ and seeking to live lives that complete that following.

And that’s us today as well. We are His people. We’re far from perfect, but we are not lost because we are following Him. We are pointed in His direction, which makes us His.

It’s not about what we’ve done—right or wrong—so don’t imagine it is.

It’s not about *who* we are or who we think we are—our ideas about identity are all forms of pride.

Rather, it is about *Whose* we are—Who we belong to.

QUESTIONS

1. What is the original meaning of the word sin?
2. How do Christians establish their righteousness?
3. What are some differences between sheep and a shepherd?
4. Why is self-righteous like being a dust fanatic?
5. What is the difference between committing a sin and practicing sin?
6. How do we make a practice of love?
7. What does it mean to say that sin, like darkness, has no substance?
8. If love means light, what things make up darkness?