

THE WALK 6

Some practical questions ...

When do I tend to think that my experiences ... or my good deeds ... or my thinking ... aren't good enough for me to truly know God?
In what ways do I think that I can't be a real Christian ... because of what I'm like ... or because of the things I've done ...?

Are there particular areas where I tend to believe that being a Christian means I can live however I like?
Am I careless about sin?
Do I think that such carelessness is serious?
How do I cheapen grace?
What am I missing out on if I don't treat sin very seriously?

Can I identify the specific sinful things in my *personality* or in my *behaviour* that I am currently denying to be sinful?
Confess those things before God for the sins that they are; make a point of grasping hold of the truth that through Jesus God forgives and cleanses me.

In 1517, Martin Luther, the famous German reformer, sparked off the Reformation by nailing his **Ninety-Five Theses** to the church door in Wittenberg. The first item of the 95 that he was raising for debate was: 'Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ, when He said *Poenitentiam agite*, willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance.'

Is the whole of my life about repentance?
Do I expect my Christian life to feel as if it's getting better or getting worse? Why?
Is my Christian life getting better or getting worse? how do I measure that?

How can I make 'repenting every day' a regular spiritual discipline?
Are there ways that I can enlist the help of others in this?
How can I make the weekly 'confessing our sins' in our Sunday service more meaningful/significant?

THE WALK 6

Repenting Every Day 1 John 1:5-2:6

The theme of this study

Is our day-to-day life authentically Christian? How can we know? All kinds of markers are suggested as the signs that someone really knows God. For example, some might suggest that we should be having ecstatic religious experiences. Or doing impressive new things for God. Or having unique spiritual insights that exceed those of the people around us.

One issue is the question of ongoing sin. What about the times when we mess up and are conscious of having let God down badly ... does that suggest that we're not really converted after all – that we don't actually have a relationship with God? Here are two wrong answers that some Christian groups have given to this issue:

1 once a Christian, we can (and should expect to) lead a sinless life ('sinless perfection'). Or (in a weaker form), a real Christian will certainly be really good. So if we mess up really badly, the implication is that we will need to get converted all over again, but this time 'properly'.

2 as a Christian, we can live however we like, because Jesus has died for our sins. And actually living with 'license' like this is a sign that we really know God through Jesus and are confident that total forgiveness is available to us.

The letter of 1 John has some important words for us.

MS

The letter of 1 John – John tackles the Gnostics

As far as we can tell, 1 John was written by the apostle John as a circular letter from Ephesus to various churches in Asia Minor. His style of writing, as with his Gospel, is different from the apostle Paul. Whereas Paul's letters feature a linear progression of logic, John's letters are more like a spiral staircase: as you climb the stairs you find yourself circling round and round, visiting the same ideas again and again, but from an increasingly elevated height.

John is tackling some serious issues that are beginning to spring up – in particular, false teaching and false living that would later be associated with a movement known as **Gnosticism**. Gnosticism may have seemed sophisticated and attractive, but it was deadly. It claimed a special knowledge (= *gnosis* in Greek) of God that went beyond that of ordinary Christians, leading to a division of fellowship within the church. Gnostics exalted the mind over faith and behaviour, and regarded matter (including the human body) as evil.

John appears like a wise and kindly old man, speaking about life and fellowship, truth and love, and emphatically rooting all this in the historical, human, person of Jesus Christ, who he himself looked upon and touched (1:1-4).

Theme Sentence

True fellowship with God and one another is about walking in the light and confessing our sins.

Group study outline

Launching question

A young Christian tells you that they're worried: 'I know I don't do what God wants me to do, certainly not all the time. Does my ongoing sin mean that I don't really know him?' What would you say?

John is telling his readers about authentic fellowship – fellowship between Christians and fellowship with God.

READ 1 John 1:5-2:6

What is John's starting point in verse 5? what is he saying here about God's truthfulness and morality?

If we mock the concept of sin, what might that suggest we don't know (5)?

What's the First False Claim, in 6-7?

How does it fit with what John's said about God's nature?

Does this mean we only really know God if we live in sinless perfection? how would you argue from the text that that isn't the case?

What's the Second False Claim, in 8-9?

What would it show about our knowledge of ourselves?

What would it show about our fellowship with God?

How would true fellowship with God stop us making this kind of claim, given what John's already said about Him?

There's a Third False Claim, in 10: how is it different from the claim in 8-9?

How might this claim be even worse than the false claim in 8-9?

If we claim never to do any wrong thing, what does that show about our relationship with God?

What provision has God given for sinners, according to the whole passage? We've already seen how God's light *reveals* our sin; how, according to 1:9, does he *deal* with our sin?

What's the image in 2:1-2? what quality of Jesus means He can do this?

What does authentic knowledge of God look like, according to 2:3-6?

If repentance is essentially about turning from sin to Christ, how does this link with both walking in the light and confessing our sins?

What's the significance of this for day to day Christian living?

In summary, what does the passage tell us about the authentic Christian life?

What would you now add to your answer to the launching question?

Commentary

1:5 **God's nature.** God made man in His image, yet man's tendency has always been to try to make God in his own image, ie idolatry (see the significance of 5:21). And when your view of God is messed up, your views on everything else get messed up, including your view of Christian living. John, who has met God in the flesh (1:1-4), passes on the authentic apostolic message about what God is really like, telling us that **God is 100% light** – understood here in terms of being 100% true and 100% good (cf 1:6-10). This has massive implications for anyone's claims to be in fellowship with God:

1:6-7 **First false claim: 'Sin doesn't matter'.** A sinful lifestyle and a claim to have fellowship with God can't truthfully go together – our lifestyle must match the God we worship and he is completely true and good. This is about ongoing orientation, *not* sinless perfection, as the text shows in two ways:

- John is talking about our 'walk', our basic direction of travel, rather than the total absence of any possible 'deeds of darkness'.
- those who walk in the light – which will be seen in our 'fellowship with one another' – still need the blood of Jesus to cleanse them from their sins (7). (Note that 'cleanses' is present tense as Jesus' blood goes on cleansing us: the cross is a one-off event, but its cleansing effect on Christians is ongoing).

1:8-9 **Second false claim: 'I'm not a sinner'.** This is about denying that we have a sinful *nature*. If we claim to be a sinless person then we're self-deluded and living a lie. It's evidence that we don't have fellowship with God – the lie itself implies that we're not walking in the light. After all, God's light is so dazzlingly bright that even a moment in His presence reveals all our grubby sinfulness. It's such an error for anyone – Christian or non-Christian – to claim to be morally perfect. True fellowship with God leads us to confess our sins.

1:10 **Third false claim: 'I haven't sinned'.** This seems to go even further than v.8: if we say not just that there's nothing wrong with us (8) but also that we've never done anything wrong (10), then we're not only self-deluded, but also calling God a liar! If we deny *any* of our actions to be sinful, then we clearly haven't listened to a word He's said. You can imagine someone saying, 'I'm a good person who sometimes does bad things', but it seems unlikely they'd say, 'I'm a bad person, but I never do anything wrong!' So it seems anyone making the false claim of 10 will also be making the false claim of 8-9.

1:9 **God's wonderful nature and actions.** God's light shows up our sinfulness, but it also beautifully provides for our spiritual healing. Whereas *our nature* is sinful (8), *God's nature* is faithful and just. Whereas *our actions* are sinful (10), *God* acts to forgive and cleanse us. His faithfulness to His covenant and His just treatment of sin means that, because of our sins being punished once for all at the cross, He can do nothing other than forgive us and cleanse us. We are wonderfully absolved from the punishment of sin and continually cleansed from its pollution. We are given both peace in our conscience and power to live differently.

2:1-2 **Christ's propitiation for our sins.** As if in a law court, Christ is pleading our case if ever we sin. Amazingly, even though we're sinful, this plea is right because of the cross. 'Propitiation' means 'turning away God's wrath'.

2:3-6 **An obedient walk.** Truly knowing God isn't shown by mystical visions or intellectual insights, but by love-driven obedience to His commandments.