

I Believe In The Forgiveness of Sins

A sermon for The Apostles' Creed series, rooted in 1 John 1:5-2:2

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Friends, let me tell you a story. The hour is late. A grim stranger with fierce-looking eyes pounds on the door of an old man's house. With thinning white hair and a back bowed with age, the old man shuffles to the door. The stranger on the threshold has heard that the old man's home is always open to those in need of refuge, without question, without judgment. There have been whispers in town of a suspicious vagabond lurking in nearby villages. But, heedless of these rumors, the old man sweeps his arm wide, stepping back from the door. "You are suffering," he tells the stranger. "You are hungry and thirsty; you are welcome."

The old man sets the dinner table with fine silver. Though he has given away most everything of value in his long years, the silver he kept, so as to elevate the dignity of any lost soul who darkened his door. The stranger sits down at the table, and like a mangy dog that hasn't been fed in days, greedily scarfs his food. Once finished, the old man leads the stranger through the house. They pass through the old man's own bedroom, a rather spartan affair with only a gleaming pair of silver candlesticks to catch the eye. He invites the stranger into the guest bedroom, and invokes peace and rest upon the man, gently closing the door behind him.

The next day, the old man hears a ruckus outside his house – angry voices, scuffling boots. He opens the door to find three police officers holding someone by the collar. They push their way into the house, and one of the officers tells the old man that they caught a thief sneaking through his garden. From the thief's knapsack, the officer pulls out a small collection of fine silverware, and asks if they belong to the old man.

The old man's vision lingers on the lowered eyes of the thief. They are the same fierce eyes of the stranger he welcomed into his home just hours before. The old man looks at his now-bare dining table. He considers the silver in the hands of the police officer. The old man pauses. And then he speaks.¹ (pause)

If you were the old man whose silver had been stolen, what would you have said in that moment? Words of anger against the thief's crime? Words of resentment or disappointment for his betrayal of your hospitality? Words of gratitude to the police who captured him? Words of relief that your valuable possession had been recovered? Sit with that question for a moment. What would you have said? How would you have reacted if you were in the old man's place?

Let's now turn to a different story, a true story that we call the Bible. Let's listen together to God's Word from 1 John 1:5-2:2

⁵ This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. ⁷ But 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, purifies us from all^[e] sin. ⁸ If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us. My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. ² He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

¹ Paraphrased from Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, pp 73-82

Much of this language in 1 John is familiar to those of us who have spent years in church, light, darkness, confession and sin. But I want us to consider more carefully what this concept of walking in the light in v.7. What does this actually mean? The Greek verb that we translate “to walk” also means “to conduct one’s life.” It refers to the sphere in which one lives or ought to live, and the way someone is characterized by that sphere. So, to “walk in the light” is a metaphor for living in relationship with God, conformed to and embodying God’s character. As New Testament scholar Marianne Meye Thompson writes “to walk in the light means to shape one’s whole being - all of one’s actions, decisions, thoughts, and beliefs - by the standard of God, who is the essence of light.”² In other words, it’s about living in relationship with God. Walking in the light essentially summarizes the goal of Christian discipleship: living in unity with God, conformed to His character, and following in His way as we enjoy God forever.

This concept of walking or living with God harkens all the way back to the very beginning. The writers of Genesis described the unfiltered, fully-accessible presence of God walking in the garden home he created for our first parents. That word “walk” evokes a similar meaning in Genesis as it does in 1 John: dwelling in a unified relationship, fully present, fully known. This is the type of relationship for which God designed humanity – a relationship defined by union with God and marked by the pure light of His character.

But as anyone knows who has tried to play the game sardines in broad daylight, when you’re fully in the light, there is nowhere to hide. We’ve all heard the tragic story of how our first parents, people who were designed to be children of light, succumbed to shadow. Early in the history of God’s relationship with His people, our first parents found themselves stepping out of the light in which God intended them to dwell, hoping that darkness would cover the shame of their rebellion against God.

If walking in the light is a metaphor for a life conformed to and united with God, then darkness is a metaphor for our broken relationship with God. In other words, darkness is a metaphor for sin.

Sin describes a posture that is opposed to God and His ways. The writers of Scripture say over and over, without batting an eye, that we have all inherited the sin of our first parents. This is what’s behind the statement in v.8 that if anyone claims to be without sin, they deceive themselves. All people are sinful, Scripture tells us. It’s not that a baby emerges from the womb consciously choosing evil, born with wicked intentions for her new family. [Although for those of us with young babies, there probably have been moments in the middle of the night when we’ve wondered if our infants are, in fact, intentionally plundering all our hope and joy.] What the writers of Scripture mean in saying we have inherited the sin of our first parents is that we all are born into postures that turn us away from God: obsession with self-image or self-gratification, obsession with pleasure or power. Sin is like an off-center magnet in a compass that constantly draws the arrow away from true north. Sin is *manifested* in our hard-hearted action and inaction; it is *expressed* in disobedience and immoral choices. But sin cannot be boiled down to a matter of mere immorality. It is an all-encompassing posture that orients us away from the God who deserves our full devotion.

Let’s summarize what we’ve talked about so far. We’ve discussed what it means to walk in the light by conforming one’s whole life to God. This is what it means to be in relationship with God. And we’ve discussed how darkness – that realm of hostility against God – prevents us from walking in the light. This leaves us in quite a quandary! If the entirety of human existence is directed toward being in relationship with God, how are we to do this when our sin barricades us from doing so? How do we walk with God in His light when we are innately drawn toward darkness? It’s like the ultimate stuckness between a rock and a hard place! It’s like being asked to drive on business 40 but a giant asteroid is blocking all the lanes! It’s an impossible problem that is simply too massive for us to do anything about.

² Thompson, Marianne Meye, *1-3 John, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series*.

If this were a movie, we've arrived at the moment in the plot when the hero steps into the scene at the most desperate hour. And so steps Jesus into the hopeless situation of our sin. He metaphorically removes the asteroid blocking the lanes on Business 40. Through his incarnation, death, and resurrection, Jesus takes away the sin of the whole world. We see this in the last verse we read from 1 John. Jesus atones for the sin of the whole world! In other words, Jesus provides the solution to the impossible problem of our inability to walk in the light. And in doing so Jesus enables us to do that very thing we've been called to do since the very beginning – to be in vulnerable, honest, intimate relationship with God, fully known, fully seen, fully alive.

How does Jesus do this? Through something the writer of 1 John calls the forgiveness of sin. Check out verse 9: *if we confess our sin, He is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sin and purify us from all unrighteousness.* Forgiveness is a word we hear all the time. But what does it really mean? Imagine one partner in a marriage defining and identifying her spouse not by the encouragement, love and support he gives her, but instead by the very worst things he's ever said or done. We all know how our closest relationships bring out the worst in us. Think for a moment about the very worst, calloused, bitter, selfish, fearful postures in which you have found yourself in relation to others, those things about yourself that make you cringe. Now imagine how fractured a marriage or close relationship would be if one person viewed and defined the other person exclusively through the lens of those very worst attitudes, actions or posture. This would be an awful relationship! Given our unfaltering propensity for sin, here we see the absolute necessity of forgiveness. Forgiveness means we are not defined by the very worst within us, even though we deserve to be defined by those our very worst sides.

When we are forgiven, we are separated from our sin and given the ability to live into a new identity – one defined by light, rather than darkness. Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God gives us the gift of not counting our sin against us. And this enables us to pursue our purpose as humans: to worship God and dwell with Him, fully alive in His presence. In other words, God's forgiveness allows us children prone to darkness to walk in His light, living in transformed relationship with Him.

With the restorative nature of forgiveness in mind, let's return to our opening story of the old man and the thief. At the beginning of the sermon I asked what you would have said if you were in the old man's shoes. I wondered how you would have reacted to the thief who stole your silver. According to Victor Hugo, the author of this story that we know as *Les Miserables*, here's what the old man said when the police presented him with the stolen silver:

"Ah, there you are," the old bishop said, looking at Jean Valjean, the thief. "I'm glad to see you. But I gave you the candlesticks too. They are silver like the rest – why didn't you take them along with the cutlery?"

Jean Valjean opened his eyes and looked at the bishop with an expression no human tongue could describe.

"But good sir," the police officer said to the bishop, "we caught this man acting like a fugitive. He had this silver stashed in his bag."

"And I'm sure he told you," interrupted the bishop, with a smile, "that it had been given to him by a good old priest at whose house he slept. His arrest was unwarranted, you see."

Turning to Jean Valjean, the bishop continued, "My friend, before you go on your way, here are your candlesticks. Take them."

Jean Valjean was trembling all over. He took the two candlesticks with a bewildered expression.

"Now," said the bishop, "go in peace." And then in a lowered voice, he whispered in Jean Valjean's ear, "and do not forget, ever, that you have promised me to use this silver to become an honest man."

Jean Valjean, who had no recollection of any such promise, stood dumbfounded as the bishop continued, “My brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul I am buying for you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts, and I give it to God!”³

The bishop’s response to the thief is so surprising because it goes against the instinctual response most of us would have – a desire to claim back what is mine, to get vindication for a crime, to make right what has been wrong. And in his surprising response, the bishop gives us a glimpse of the radical power of forgiveness. Even knowing that Jean Valjean has stolen his silver and betrayed his trust, the bishop chooses not to view the stranger through the lens of his treachery. Instead, he gives Jean Valjean an unexpected gift that points him toward a transformed life.

God has given you and me a surprising and undeserved gift, like the candlesticks the bishop gave to Jean Valjean. Like Victor Hugo’s bishop, through Christ God separates us from our sin, viewing us not as traitors marked by darkness, but as children of the light. And not only that, he gives us the gift of restored relationship with Him. The truth is, my friends, no matter how kind our actions, no matter how pure our thoughts, no matter how good we strive to be, each of us finds ourselves bent toward sin. Each of us has betrayed God’s welcome by turning toward the darkness of hostility or selfishness. But by forgiving through Jesus, God no longer views us through the dark lens of our sin. Instead, Jesus transfers us from the dominion of darkness into the kingdom of light. He shows us how to live a transformed life in relationship with God.

How does God’s forgiveness shape our lives?

First, it gives us a new lens to see ourselves. When we are forgiven, by God or by another person, we are viewed as loved and cherished, brought into the light even though we deserve to bear the dark consequences of our sin. The bishop saw in Jean Valjean something the man himself could not see: the potential for a transformed life. Sisters and brothers, even in the depths of your own shame and brokenness, allow yourself to see as God sees you: loved, cherished, cleansed, restored. If God considers you worthy of forgiveness, then you are indeed worthy!

God’s forgiveness also models how we are to treat others. When we receive forgiveness from God, the restoration of our relationship with Him permeates the other relationships in our lives. Just as in Christ God has forgiven you, so you are to seek reconciliation with those who have wronged you – even when that feels out of reach, unsafe, or almost impossible.

But only when we first open ourselves to receive God’s forgiveness and be transformed by it can we ever hope to extend forgiveness to others. Opening ourselves to receive forgiveness hinges on acknowledging our need for it. This is what we do each Sunday when we confess our sin. We don’t confess to feel bad or guilty about ourselves. Instead, confession is the means by which we bring our whole selves – shame, dirt, guilt, pride, fear and all – into God’s light, in order to be conformed into God’s own image. In other words, in order to be restored into relationship with Him. Our honest confessions before God put us in a posture to receive healing from Him and to be brought into reconciled relationship with Him and with others.

As we conclude, we’re going to spend some time in the presence of the Lord, grappling with the radical idea of forgiveness. Maybe, like Jean Valjean, you are a person who considers yourself unworthy of receiving this incredible gift. Forgiveness might be something that you grasp intellectually, but has yet to permeate your life in a transformative way. What causes you to feel undeserving of this gift? It’s time to step out of the shadows. Are you willing to step fully into God’s light and be liberated from your shame and receive forgiveness?

³ Hugo, Victor. *Les Misérables*, p.105-106

Or maybe you consider yourself always the saint, never in the wrong, while casting another person always as the sinner. There is another character in *Les Misérables*, the police inspector Javert, who typifies this posture. Javert is so obsessed with righteousness, with guarding himself against wrongdoing, that he is blind to his need for grace and is incapable of receiving it. Maybe, like Javert, in your self-righteousness, your own participation in darkness is hard for you to even see, let alone name. What causes you to feel so self-righteous, so justified? It's time to step out of the shadows. Are you willing to step fully into God's light and be liberated from your pride and receive forgiveness?

Or maybe you have been deeply wronged by another, your trust betrayed, your confidence broken, your heart torn apart. Maybe the wounds you bear sting too much to expose them in the process of offering forgiveness. What causes you to feel so wounded? Are you willing to love again? To trust again? Are you willing to step fully into God's light and be liberated from being defined by your pain?

Each of these postures are heavy burdens, like rocks that weigh us down and impede us from leaning into transformed life in union with God and others. You picked up a rock today as you entered this room. That rock symbolizes the weight of our struggles with forgiveness: how unfair forgiveness seems. How scandalous it is. How unworthy of it I am. How hard forgiveness is to offer and receive. In the coming minutes, as the music plays, consider the magnitude of what God has done for you in Christ. Consider with gratitude that God no longer views you through the dark lens of your sin, but instead has brought you into the light of restored relationship with Him. When you are ready, come forward to place your rock at the foot of the cross. Lay down the heavy burden of your sin, and allow God's Spirit to draw you into step with God. In the light of God, in which we are fully known and fully seen, we recognize our own impurity in contrast to God's perfection. But we do not need to hide or cower in shame, but rather be drawn upward toward God's beauty. As we approach the cross, that marvelous throne of grace, let us trust that God will grant us power to truly believe in the forgiveness of sin.

"My brother, my sister," Jesus says to you, "I love you. I forgive you. You no longer belong to evil, but to good. I am withdrawing you from darkness, and giving you to God."