

We Have an Advocate

Text:

I John 2: 1 – 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. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

Introduction:

We have organized the contents of this Epistle around the purpose that John announces at the beginning: “That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship *is* with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full” (I John 1:3-4). John writes so that we might have fellowship with God, with his Son, Jesus Christ, and with one another, and in so doing experience the fullness of joy that Christ has procured for us by his work on our behalf. To experience this joy and this fellowship John says that we must first “walk in the light”, and secondly “walk as children of God.” We have been looking at the first condition of walking in the light and walking as children of God, namely, to renounce sin.

Furthermore we have been considering false claims about sin and their remedy. These claims were actually being made by some in the community John was writing to, and in various ways, if we are not careful, we can act on the same assumptions. We have seen that we may assume that sin doesn’t really matter that it has no affect on our relationship with God, or we may assume that we really aren’t sinners, that our malfunctions, maladaptations, and malaises come

from something other than our innate sinfulness. Instead of downplaying and denying our sin we have seen that if we want to grow and deepen our fellowship with God, we need first, to proactively seek to walk in the light, and secondly, to truly confess our sins. When we do our sins are not just forgiven, but cleansed.

Today we are going to look at the final false claim and especially at the third rectification of the false claim. The false claim is that we have not sinned. It is similar to the second, but there is a nuance of difference. In the second case, it is a denial of sin as a part of my being, the denial, we might say, of our inherent sinfulness. It is saying that we are by nature good that we do not have an inclination to wrongdoing, that the explanation for the existence of evil in human history and relationships must be sought somewhere other than in the hearts of humans. In the present case it is the denial of specific acts of sin. It is saying that we have done no wrong when we have. It is projecting the wrong onto someone else rather than accepting responsibility our self. It is Adam saying: “The woman whom you gave to be with me”.

In the text John specifically says that he is writing so that we won't sin and what he is speaking of is committing specific acts of sin. We live each day with choices between right and wrong. We either chose to do the right thing and avoid a specific act of sin, or to do the wrong thing and sin. The understanding Christian will have a deep desire not to sin because they understand sin's negative consequences both for themselves and for those around them. John understands this. This is the reason he writes not just to encourage us not to sin, but to instruct us in how sin may be avoided. It is never a good thing to sin, and when we avoid sin it often sets off a chain of events that only eternity can make clear.

But it is also abundantly clear in this text and the rest of the book that acts of sin will be committed. None of us will have a hard time grasping that fact, because if we are honest with ourselves and with each other we know that we do sin; that we commit specific acts of sin. As we saw last week these acts need to be confessed. When they are they can be forgiven and cleansed. John tells us something else that is reassuring in this passage. He tells us why we can be assured of the forgiveness of our sins. He reminds us of two very important facts

about Jesus Christ and his work on our behalf. First he tells us that he is our advocate before the Father, and secondly that Jesus Christ has offered his own life as a propitiatory sacrifice for our sins.

I. Christ our Advocate

“But if any man sin”, says John, “we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous”. The fact that Jesus Christ is described as “the righteous” has importance for both his being our advocate and the sacrificial offering for our sins. We cannot defend ourselves before the throne of heaven, neither can we offer any atoning sacrifice for our own sins because we are unrighteous, but Christ is eminently qualified to do both because he is perfectly righteous.

The word here translated “advocate” is the same word that in John’s Gospel is translated “comforter” when it is applied to the Holy Spirit. Here it is applied to Jesus Christ in reference to his work in heaven on our behalf. John means the same thing when he calls Christ our “advocate” that Hebrews means when he call him our Great High Priest, or when Paul says: “there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time” (I Timothy 1:5 – 6). Notice that in each case Christ’s work as Mediator, or as High Priest, or as our Advocate is linked to his atoning death. Christ can intercede for us on the basis of his own life offered up once for all as a perfect sacrifice for sins.

The following poem written by Martha Snell Nicolson helps us to visualize Christ interceding on our behalf, and why his intercession is effective.

I sinned. And straightway, posthaste, Satan flew
before the presence of the Most High God,
and made a railing accusation there.
He said, "This soul, this thing of clay and sod,
has sinned. 'Tis true that he has named Thy name,
but I demand his death, for Thou hast said,

"The soul that sinneth, it shall die."
Shall not Thy sentence be fulfilled? Is justice dead?
Send now this wretched sinner to his doom.
What other thing can Righteous Ruler do?"
And thus he did accuse me day and night,
and every word he spoke, O God, was true!

Then quickly One rose up from God's right hand,
before whose glory angels veiled their eyes,
He spoke, "Each jot and tittle of the Law
must be fulfilled; the guilty sinner dies!
But wait--suppose his guilt were all transferred
to Me, and that I paid his penalty!
Behold My hands, My side, My feet! One day
I was made sin for him, and died that he
might be presented faultless at Thy throne!"
And Satan fled away. Full well he knew
that he could not prevail against such love,
for every word my dear Lord spoke was true!

II. Christ our Sacrifice

The second thing we are told in the text that gives us assurance that our sins will not be held against us, that God will forgive us, is that Christ, himself, is the "propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but for the sins of the entire world". Propitiation is not a word that we use every day. Most likely you never learned to spell it in school. In fact, outside of the Bible, you may never have heard it used. To propitiate is to "appease", to turn away wrath and judgment. The roots of the word are in the Old Testament, but its full meaning is to be found in the saving work of Jesus Christ. It is one of the major groups of words that describe what Christ did when he died on the cross.

One image in the Old Testament that comes to mind is the mercy seat. The altar that was placed over the ark of the covenant where once a year the High Priest entered and offered a sacrifice for his own sins and for the sins of the nation of Israel. What, in English, is translated “mercy seat”, in Greek, is translated by a word from the same family of words that is here translated “propitiation”. In French it is called the *propitiatoire*, i. e. the place where propitiation is made.

Because we propitiate a person not a thing some have argued that we should translate this verse by sacrifice or expiation. Biblically, sacrifices are offered for sins to propitiate God. Indeed we cannot properly propitiate sins. We can expiate sins, i.e. remove them, but we cannot propitiate them. It is God who must be propitiated. However, what John says here is not that Christ has made propitiation for our sins, but concerning our sins. We should understand it in the way it is understood in the Old Testament; Christ has offered himself as an atoning sacrifice for our sins or for us, sinners; God has accepted his sacrifice. He is propitiated or appeased. Christ, judged in our place, has satisfied God’s justice and made our forgiveness and reconciliation possible.

The Old Testament passage which best illustrates this is Leviticus 16 which gives the instructions as to how the High Priest is to enter into the Holy of Holies once a year on *Yom Kippur*, the day of atonement, to offer a sacrifice for his own sins and the sins of the people. Hebrews chapter 9 has the images of Leviticus 16 in mind when it uses the tabernacle, and especially the inner sanctuary, the Holy of Holies, to explain the work of Christ, our Great High Priest or Mediator. It says that the sacrifices offered there by the High Priest had to be reoffered each year and that they really had no power to deal with our sin, but could only anticipate our real High Priest who would one day enter into the heavenly sanctuary and offer his own life as a perfect once-for-all sacrifice for the sins of all mankind. This is how the entry of Christ into the heavenly sanctuary is described:

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his

own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God. (Hebrews 9:11-14).

This is the reason Hebrews says that we may “come boldly to the throne of grace”. It is not because we are so good that we deserve access to God, but because the perfect sacrifice of Christ has secured for us an eternal redemption. We need not fear God, not because we have done nothing to offend him, but because his love is greater than our sin. As John will say later in this Epistle: “Herein is Love; not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be a propitiation for our sins” (I John 4:10).

Conclusion:

Martin Luther is known for his pithy statements. He had a way of stating things that stick in your mind. One of the best known of those statements is: “sin boldly”. However, he did not mean by that statement what most people think. There is, for example, a web site that sells a license to sin card with this statement on it, and this is the way that the statement is usually taken, because most people are unaware of the rest of what he said on that occasion and why he said it. So they put Luther on the side of John’s opponents, those who say sin doesn’t really matter. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact when we see all that he said and why he said it, we will come to the conclusion that he is simply echoing what John is saying in our text. “I don’t want you to sin, but if you do, be assured that God has made provision for your sins.

To appreciate this statement, you must first have an understanding of the great struggle Luther had before his conversion trying to win God’s favor by his own works of righteousness. He had a fear of God and of God’s judgment that is unknown in our time and culture. When he did finally come to understand that he was justified by faith and not by works, and that his hope of salvation was

entirely in what Christ had done for him, and not by works that he might perform, it brought him a relief and joy and confidence in the grace of God that only those who have had the same experience can appreciate.

So what did he mean when he said “sin boldly”. He said it in a letter to his close friend and collaborator, Philip Melanchthon, in August 1521. Melanchthon was still struggling with the guilt of sin and assurance of salvation. The full quote from Luther to Melanchthon reads: "Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly... Pray boldly - for you too are a mighty sinner." What Luther meant by this is what John is telling us. We are sinners and we will sin even when we don't want to, but God's grace is always greater than our sin. Or as Paul says: "Where sin abounds, grace abounds even more." (Romans 5:20). Having this confidence in God's grace, we no longer have to deny our sin, but we can acknowledge it with the confidence that it has been taken care of by the saving death and life of the Lord Jesus Christ, our advocate before the Father.