

If We Say

1 John 1:5-10

With Study Questions

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If We Say

1 John 1:5-10

This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice 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 Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.⁸ If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us (1 John 1:5-10).

I. This Is The Message

This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all (1 John 1:5).

God Is Light

On the first day God created light. Here we learn that God is light. Later John will tell us that God is love. In fact we read that God is many things: God is a consuming fire (Deuteronomy 4:24); God is a gracious (2 Chronicles 30:9); God is wise (Job 9:4); God is mighty (Job 36:5); God is great (Job 36:26); God is a just judge (Psalm 7:11); God is a sun and a shield (Psalm 84:11); God is holy (Psalm 99:9); God is merciful (Psalm 116:5); God is righteous (Daniel 9:14); God is jealous (Nahum 1:2); God is faithful (1 Corinthians 1:9) and more.

There simply is not a virtue which God isn't. And virtue itself can only rightly be deemed a virtue if properly measured against God. Virtues are not independent. They're not just floating out in the universe somewhere. They are extensions of the character and nature of God. This is why, when men seek to remove God from the equation, the long term (and sometimes not so long term) effect is ethical anarchy. Apart from acknowledging One (we'll call that person God) from whom all these immaterial things, which we all know exist, flow, we will be hard-pressed to explain how any particular virtue is actually and objectively virtuous.

Still Brilliant

John tells us, **“this is the message... God is light.”** There may not be an adjective¹ that better describes God. He is pure light. There is no darkness in Him at all. I can't think of anything left in this fallen creation, that has remained so brilliant, that upon looking at it the eye would be destroyed. As much justice as man can

¹ or more specifically, a predicate nominative.

muster – as much faithfulness as the church might generate – as much might as any army can produce – we can still gaze upon these things and walk away with our eyes unscathed. But the Sun, which is ninety-three million miles away, whose rays must pass through miles of atmosphere tainted with smog and pollution, produces a vision the human eye can behold but for seconds.

No Hiding From The Light

You just can't look at the Sun. You know it is there. It makes all sorts of things possible – from seeing things to growing things to healing things, to life itself – but it cannot be gazed upon for any length of time (Apart from the sunset or with special eye-protection) without serious eye damage taking place. What is more, if you are in the Sun you cannot hide your own blemishes. Like the interrogation room where the detectives put the bright light upon the alleged perpetrator. This will lessen his ability to think he can hide his crime. His crime and hypocrisy will be exposed and he must throw himself upon the mercy of the court. He who does so will have an advocate who is capable of appeasing the wrath of the court, as we shall soon see (1 John 2:1, 2) but the light does not allow darkness to continue.

II. The Five Ifs

Of course the context in which John uses the word **"light"** to describe God is moral. There is no immorality with God. God is perfectly righteous in every conceivable way. And it is in light of this blinding righteousness that John begins to write of our relationship with God.

Subjunctive Mood

In each of the next five verses we see the subjunctive mood: **"If we say we have fellowship but walk in darkness...If we walk in the light...if we say we have no sin...if we confess our sins...if we say we have not sinned."** The subjunctive mood is the mood of possibility and potential. The action described may or may not occur or be the case. "If I were a rich man," would be a subjunctive clause because I am describing what I might potentially be or become. In conjunction with the subjunctive clause there generally comes a description of what the actual case would be if the potential became reality. In other words "If I were a rich man," would be the subjunctive clause. "All day long I'd biddy biddy bum" would be an indicative statement of what would actually happen if the subjunctive were a reality.

I mention all this because this passage is full of these "if," "then," statements. These are statements we must take to heart since they describe what the case actually would be if we were to find ourselves in a certain condition. Hopefully this will be clear as we look at these five "if" statements.

A. Fellowship

If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth (1 John 1:6).

“If we say we have fellowship with God and yet walk in darkness,” is the subjunctive. It is very possible that there are people who say they have fellowship with God and yet walk in darkness. John tells us what the actual case would be if that potential clause were the case – **“We lie and do not practice the truth,”** (or act truthfully.) If there was ever a warning to people in the church, this is it. God is light and you’re saying that you have fellowship with Him yet walk in darkness!? We say our father is king yet we walk in rags and have the manners of an oaf!

Have...Fellowship

To **“have”** here has the sense of possessing something. **“Fellowship”** means association or communion. What we must recognize here is that even though a person gets saved only once, and at that point in time moves out of death and into life, the life they move into is a life wherein they will remain. Walking down the sawdust trail (or more biblically, being baptized) is not the end of the journey but the beginning. And here we must be very careful! A person who walks forward at an evangelistic crusade or church service, and makes a profession of faith and is baptized, can easily be misled into thinking that his/her job is done. How often the sinner’s prayer is uttered and speedily followed by verses of assurance – as if God has not called us into His moral light for life.

Walk...Darkness...Lying

When John uses the word **“walk”** *peripatomen* he talks of the way we regulate our lives. And it should be obvious that **“darkness”** here refers to moral darkness. Any claim to inner enlightenment that is not accompanied by changed conduct is mere hypocrisy. It’s been said,

Light can be shut out, but it cannot be shut in.²

In short, if we say we’re Christians yet our lives do not so indicate, we are liars. This suggests that it is not an innocent mistake but a known falsehood. So when there is a conflict between what we profess and what we do, it is what we do that reveals what we really are. **“If we say,”** must always be accompanied by **“then we do.”**

² Alfred Plummer, *The Epistles of St. John, Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges* (1883; reprint ed., London: Cambridge University Press, 1938), p. 70.

A man who says he loves God and leaves his wife or continues in a habit of lying or stealing or cheating without repentance is openly demonstrating he has no love for God or genuine inner enlightenment whatsoever.

B. Walking In Light

But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7).

“**If we walk in the light,**” is the subjunctive. What is the reality (or indicative) which accompanies this potential condition? **“We have fellowship with one another and the blood of Christ cleanses us from all sin.”** In other words we’re saved and we’re part of the assembly of the saints.

Walking...Not The Cause

I think we have to be careful to recognize that walking in the light is not the cause of our salvation. But at the same time we must recognize that walking in the light (living out our repentance) is so tied into our conversion that apart from it we shouldn’t think we are redeemed. As Calvin states,

“...for Christ is no redeemer except to those who turn from iniquity, and lead a new life.”³

If we have received a sure cure for a disease and yet no healing takes place, we must question whether or not we actually received the injection. On the other hand, if we begin to heal, we surely don’t think that our healing was a result of anything we earned but on account of the medicine.

Genuine Religion

In the first subjunctive we learned that no matter what kind of religious experience we may have had in the past, if we’re not walking in a manner consistent with our faith we’re liars and do not practice the truth. Here we’re learning what the religious experience actually entails. We’re not walking in the darkness but the light. And we’re not liars but saints who are cleansed⁴ by the blood of Jesus and have fellowship (loving fellowship as we’ll see later) with one another.

Do I Walk In The Light?

³ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries, Volume XXII* (Baker Book House, Reprinted 1993), p. 165.

⁴ It is important to note that “cleanse” is in the present tense. This delineates the repeated experience of cleansing as we continue to walk in the light. This will be built upon in verse nine.

All this shouldn't be shocking to us. Verse six describes a hypocrite. Verse seven describes a Christian. At this point you may be entombed in introspection because you know, or at least think, you don't walk in the light. In fact there is a great deal of darkness which still remains in your thoughts and behavior. So much that you would be embarrassed to confess it openly and recoil at the thought of people knowing the real you. Many people will argue that meaning for these verses. Of course all we must do is read a bit to see how that is not the case. As a matter of fact the following subjunctive reveals something about people who believe in Christians reaching perfection in this life.

C. No Sin

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us (1 John 1:8).

"If we say we have no sin," is the subjunctive. What would be the reality if that potential statement were the case? The person would be deceiving himself and the truth would not be in him. So if the perfectionist⁵ were correct in his doctrine, nobody would be saved – especially the people who thought they were saved.

So before we start doubting our salvation let us recognize that walking in the light does not mean we have no sin in our lives. We needn't go searching other books in the Bible to arrive at this conclusion. The very context demands it. Surely John isn't saying, **"If you have sin you're a liar and if you say you have no sin you're deceiving yourself and the truth is not in you."** If that's the case we might as well shut the book right now!

Regulated By Light Or Darkness

A person who walks in darkness, regulates his life by the darkness. A person who walks in the light, regulates his life by the light. One who walks in darkness will not acknowledge his sin (or perhaps even the idea of sin nature)⁶ and need for a Savior. One who walks in the light will seek after righteousness and, in so doing, recognize his own sin and continual need for a Savior. He would never consider putting off the righteous robes of Christ but will ever wear them. And though he falls short, he never gives up seeking to serve his gracious Master. Again, Calvin writing of one who walks in the light, indicates he,

...is therefore said to be like God, who aspires to his likeness, however distant from it he may as yet be.⁷

⁵ Perfectionists or Eradicationists say they once had sin or a sinful nature but no longer do.

⁶ The denial of sin nature rears its ugly head from time to time in the church. One needn't study too long or hard to see this as patently unbiblical and an offense to the cross where Jesus died for our sins.

⁷ Calvin, p. 164.

I pray that none of us ever starts to lead the “victorious Christian life” to the extent that we think we need Jesus one iota less today than the hour we first believed. If that’s the case, truly we are moving backward in our faith. This leads us to the next subjunctive.

D. Confession

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

“**If we confess our sin,**” is the subjunctive. What is the reality if this potential clause were the actual case? “**He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.**” A couple of quick notes about this very well-known verse:

Confess... Faithful... Just... Forgive... Cleanse

To “**confess**” *homologeō* means to say the same thing as another. In other words, God says we sin and so do we.

God is “**faithful.**” There is no chance that a sincere sinner who turns to God will be turned away. As the Westminster Confession teaches,

As there is no sin so small, but it deserves damnation; so there is no sin so great, that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent.⁸

God is “**just.**” We must wonder why John uses this term here. Wouldn’t it be more appropriate to mention God’s mercy at this juncture? God can forgive sinners and remain just because the punishment they deserved, Christ took. God does not wink at sin nor will he acquit the guilty (Exodus 23:7).

God punishes sin. He must! But He remains just when He passes over, or “**forgives us,**” our sins because of the paschal lamb, slain for us, who is Christ. But if I may take this one step further. I don’t think mentioning God’s mercy could ease our troubled hearts as much as mentioning God’s justice and here is why: God could rightly say, “I’ve chosen not to be merciful,” and in no way deny His own character. For God is not required to be merciful in every case.

But on the other hand God must be just. We can always rely on God being just. So how does this comfort us? This comforts us because God cannot justly condemn those for whom Christ died. Jesus has paid the price. He has bought us and has secured us by His own blood and righteousness. As John Owen states,

⁸ Morton H. Smith, *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, (Simpsonville, SC: Christian Classics Foundation) 1997.

Forgiveness is thus an act of justice, then, not to us, but to Christ, who made an atonement for sins.⁹

This, therefore, comforts my soul for I know God must be just. And if Jesus died for me, it would be unjust, and therefore impossible, for God to turn me away. And if I can't trust in the justice of God, I don't know what there is left to trust in.

"Forgive," here means to remove or literally, "to send away." Our sins no longer stand between us and God. Lenski states, they are...

...sent away as a cloud is dissolved, never to appear again.¹⁰

The sins of our past should not be allowed to haunt us and we should regard those who use them against us, at least in this regard, as serving, perhaps unwittingly, the enemy.

"He will cleanse us from all unrighteousness." In one respect this has already been done. The righteousness of Christ has been imputed (or credited to our account.) When God sees us in this respect He sees the righteousness of Christ. In another respect this is a process and will only reach its fullness when we shed our mortal coils.

Seeking Forgiveness?

Let me quickly address a teaching here that, perhaps, some of you have heard. Some suggest that Christians, since they are already forgiven, needn't seek forgiveness. I find this inconsistent with the dominant teaching of Scripture. After all, did not David, who trusted God as his mother's breast (Psalm 22), plead with God to have mercy, blot out his transgressions and cleanse him from his sin (Psalm 51)? Some would argue that David was saved under the old covenant. But then you would have to argue that the blood of Christ (or at very least the promise of God) was less effective for them? Did not Moses esteem **"the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt"** (Hebrews 11:26)? Surely the Christ of Moses wasn't a different Christ than the Christ of Calvary.

E. Not Sinned?

If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us (1 John 1:10).

The final subjunctive is, **"If we say that we have not sinned."** If this be the case then we make God a liar and show His word is not in us. The denial of our own depravity is in such stark contradiction to the Holy Scriptures that to assert such is to call God a liar and clearly reveals that His word is not in us, which means we are not in the faith. Men who deny their sin are at war with God.

⁹ John Owens, *Calvin's Commentaries, Volume XXII* (Baker Book House, Reprinted 1993), p. 168.

¹⁰ R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude* (Columbus, Ohio: Wartburg Press, 1945), p. 394.

I can think of few things more obvious than the notion that there is a God (who is good) from whom we have been estranged by our own sin. To deny this is to deny something that is so conspicuously apparent that further conversation is almost useless. Yet if, by the grace of God, the conversation continues, the sinful man will find there is an Advocate who will end the war and make peace between him and his Holy Creator. This reconciliation is by the blood of that Advocate of which John writes in chapter two. Our Advocate is Jesus Christ the righteous, truly our only hope in life and death.

Questions for Study

1. Is it possible for a virtue to be objectively virtuous apart from the existence of God? Explain your answer.
2. Why is "light" such an appropriate description of God?
3. What are some things "light" does?
4. What is a subjunctive mood or clause?
5. What is the actual case regarding those who walk in darkness yet say they are Christians?
6. Explain how the sinner's prayer or baptism can be misleading?
7. What does John mean by the word, "walk?"
8. What is the actual case regarding those who walk in the light?
9. Is repentance really necessary?
10. Does "walking in the light," mean you never sin?
11. What is the actual case regarding those who say they have no sin?
12. Explain Calvin's statement regarding walking in the light.
13. What is the actual case regarding those who confess their sins?
14. Why does John mention God being "just?"
15. What happens when we confess our sin?
16. Should we only confess once or should we confess continually?

17. What is the actual case regarding one who say they have no sin?

18. What should be conspicuously apparent to all men?