

Walking in the Light • John 1:5–7

As a pastor I am often asked theological questions, some of which I have answers for and others which sometimes stump me. They range from the very theoretical to the most practical. Some are kind of easy. Others are quite tough. But I'd like to switch roles, change the tables a little bit, and ask you the theological question. It's sort of in the form of a case study. It is the hypothetical couple Dan and Jane, and here are a few facts about them..

Dan and Jane both grew up in the church, both grew up in Christian homes, both prayed to accept Jesus Christ as Savior at comparatively young ages, she at age 11 at Christian summer camp, he at age 7 during Vacation Bible School at his church. If you ask either one of them, "Are you a Christian?" the answer is a quick resounding "yes." In fact, they have quite the right terminology. They are sinners; they admit to that. They confess that the only way to have their sins forgiven is through Jesus Christ, accepting him as Savior and coming to him as Lord. They will tell you that they believe all of that and have done all of that and will, if you ask, have details of the time and place and the circumstances of this spiritual new birth.

However, Dan and Jane, in the lives that they live, are really not very much different from the non-Christians who are all around them. Their priorities in life are pretty much the same. Their lifestyle is virtually identical with the people in the neighborhood, their non-Christian friends and their co-workers.

The language they speak, the movies they see, the books that they read, the way they spend their money and their general philosophy of life is apparently non-Christian.

Now we come to the question. Are Dan and Jane Christians? Or let me rephrase it quite pointedly. If tonight Dan and Jane are tragically and unexpectedly killed in an accident, will they when they die go to heaven? Or yet another way of asking the same question: If someone talks Jesus but doesn't live Jesus, is that person, in fact, a Christian?

This is a very practical question because there are so many to whom it applies. People who say one thing, but do another thing. It is not a new issue. Actually it's an issue that dates all the way

back to the first century when there were those who readily confessed Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord but who behaved unChristianly. They thought that it didn't matter how someone behaved as long as they said the right things.

The apostle John has his answer to this. His answer is written in First John, chapter 1, verses 5, 6 and 7. Listen to what he says:

This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. 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 sin.

The message is simple. Walk the talk. We have an interesting popular expression in middle America. We sometimes say or hear others say, "If it talks like a duck and walks like a duck, then in all probability it is a duck." However, if it just quacks like a duck but doesn't walk like a duck or look like a duck then, in all probability, it isn't a duck. Now it doesn't take sophisticated logic to say that or to figure it out, but transfer that over to what is here being taught by the Apostle John. He's saying that if he or she walks like a Christian and talks like a Christian, then in all probability that person is a Christian. But if that person talks like a Christian and doesn't look like or walk like a Christian, then in all probability that person is not a Christian.

Now let's see if we can follow the logic that goes through verses 5, 6 and 7. It begins in verse 5 with the teaching that God is light. All understanding of salvation begins here with God. "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all."

There is a very common, and I consider it major, human error in people's thinking. There are many of us who think that we are the ones who set the terms for eternity. It is we who decide how one gets to heaven, what God believes and what God does, and once we have set those terms it is up to us to comply with the terms that we have set. I find that there are people who will go so far as to say, "I couldn't believe in a God who would

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send people to hell,” or “I couldn’t believe in a God who says that the only way of salvation is through Jesus Christ.” Except what we can or cannot believe does not determine reality. God is who he is and God does what he does independent of whether we choose to agree or disagree, believe or not believe.

In the fall of 1976, Charleen and I were living in Colorado and we made a brief visit to the Twin Cities. We had a borrowed car that was made available to us, and we decided that we would take some gifts back to our children. While driving around, we came to a K-Mart. We went into the store and shopped around to find some gifts for our children. We bought those gifts, which included a plastic toy gun, and put them in the carry-on luggage and thought very little about it. Everything was rather routine until we went through the security check. We got through fine, but as the bag went through the X-ray machine a whole lot of things happened in a very short period of time. It started out when the attendant hit a button and shouted, “We have a gun; call the police.” It is amazing how many uniformed people can come from absolutely nowhere so quickly!

My first response was to be excited, to watch what was going on. My second response was to be amazed as they had us up against the wall because we were trying to smuggle a gun on to this airplane. Now I began to realize that they were unduly upset over some plastic pistol from K-Mart. I offered to go over and unzip the suitcase and show the officer, but he seemed unwilling to have me go and take the gun out of the suitcase and show it to him. So they kept us spread against the wall. If you want to try something embarrassing sometime, have everybody shouting and opening your suitcase in front of everybody in the airport. That’s what they did. They dug through it and laid everything out and came up with this toy pistol.

When they realized it was a toy, things settled down a great deal. However, they wouldn’t let us touch the suitcase or the toy gun, nor would they allow us to take it as carry-on luggage on that plane. They said the only way it was going back to Denver with us was as checked luggage in the hold of the plane. Now I could have argued. I could have reasoned. I could have objected. I could have said, “I’m a paying passenger.” I could have shown them my ticket. I could have said and done whatever I

chose, but they set the rules. Their rules. Toy or not a toy, they would not allow that gun onto that plane.

Now I say this to make the point about becoming a Christian and getting into heaven. It is God who sets the rules. Only God. We may argue; we may plead; we may offer money and we may offer our best reason. We may say that the rules don’t make sense and therefore we don’t accept them. But none of that determines whether or not we get into his heaven because God is the one, and God alone, who sets the terms.

It is this God who sets the rules, who is light, according to verse 5. He is not ‘a’ light. He IS light. Light is essential to his character. It is a primary attribute of God. It is who God is. By nature he is light.

Now that’s kind of abstract, I admit, but we can begin to see the meaning when we think about what we know about light. Light is bright. Light is magnificent. Light is glorious. Light is self-revealing. You never turn on a flashlight to find a light. If the light is there, and if it is on, you can find it without any other light. You don’t need something to illumine a light. A light illumines itself. Light is pure. Light shows up the qualities and the defects of those who are exposed to it.

And all of this is true about God. He is bright; he is pure; he is magnificent; he is glorious; he is holy; he is self-revealing. When we step into his presence our qualities are shown in a way that they cannot otherwise be seen. He shows up what we are, defects and all. He is, in a sense, like the sun: brilliant, magnificent. You can’t look at the sun. It’s too bright. And yet God, the creator of the sun is infinitely brighter than that celestial body.

Added to that, in verse 5, is that in him there is no darkness at all. You see, light and darkness are enemies of each other. They are by their very nature mutually exclusive. You cannot have them both in the same place at the same time. They cannot live together. Darkness is where things do not grow. Darkness is associated with fear, with ignorance, with blindness, with lost-ness. God’s none of these. God is light.

Recently I had this demonstrated to me when three times in one night the power went off on our side of the street. Although I have lived in this house longer than any place I have lived in my entire life, I couldn’t find my way around it in the dark. Dress-

ers and things that I have always been able to negotiate around somehow stuck out farther when the power was off. I'm amazed that our family, who has lived so long in this house, bump into each other in the dark even when we're talking to each other and hear where the people are.

There are also things you can't do in the dark. About the third time the lights went out, I was sitting in a chair working on a chapter of a book on a laptop computer which was plugged into the wall. When the lights went out, my heart sank for fear that everything I had just entered, or maybe everything that I had on that disk altogether, had been lost with that power failure. It wasn't until the lights came on that I discovered a little bit about my Toshiba laptop that I didn't know and that is that, apparently, the cord merely charges the battery but the unit runs off the battery. So nothing was lost. It means that I could have kept on typing. I could have kept on writing. Of course, I wouldn't be able to see what was on the screen. I wouldn't be able to use it, even though it still worked, because of the darkness. Darkness takes even things that are good and makes them inaccessible to us.

One of the times when the lights went out, it was about nine o'clock or so in the evening. That's too early to go to bed and too late to stay up in the dark. I lay down on the bed and Charleen lay down next to me and we talked and wondered whether we should stay there until morning. Would the alarm wake us up in the morning? As we lay there, we fell asleep until about forty-five minutes later when the power came on. We had left every light in the room on, unfortunately, and when the power came back on I just about jumped straight out of bed. There is a stark difference between darkness and light! Light is transforming. Light is exhilarating. In some ways, light is frightening. Light is powerful.

Now all of this is descriptive of God. He is the brilliant light of our lives. Without him we stumble into things. Without him we stumble through life because we can't see where we are going. Without him, in fact, we bump into each other. Without him, in the darkness, even the things in life that work we often do not have access to. We're not talking here about subtle shades of difference. We're not

talking about the in-between of grayness. We are talking about a vivid contrast, the farthest ends of the extreme, between God who is light and that which is darkness. It is not something subtle at all. It is the difference of brilliant light and absolute dark. "This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light, in him there is no darkness at all."

The apostle's logic continues off that in verse 5 into verse 6 where he teaches that talk without walk is a lie. He quotes the God who is light, saying, "If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth." He is here teaching us that walk must match talk. Here it describes someone who just gives lip service to God. He says, "I love God. I want to live for him," or she says, "I'm a Christian. I prayed a prayer once. I accepted Jesus." But then both he and she deliberately choose to walk in the darkness rather than in the light.

Another way of saying this is that someone claims to be a Christian, but deliberately chooses sin. Unfortunately there are many, many everyday examples of this. There's the person who claims to be a Christian but who frequently uses obscene humor. Someone who can see a sexual implication in everything that someone else says or does until it has become a habit of life in the darkness. Or it is someone who claims to be a Christian and

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who, in church on Sunday morning, will sing the name of Jesus in worship but on Monday morning will swear the name of Jesus in profanity. It is someone who claims to be a Christian and yet she has a vicious tongue that cuts people down and expresses anything but the kind of love of Jesus Christ that is typical of walking in the light. Or it's the couple, both of who may have their testimonies of faith and relationship with God, but whose lives do not reflect that in the adulterous relationship that they insist upon continuing. Or it's the business person who says the right words but abuses employees, cheats on taxes, lies to customers, manipulates expense accounts and generally behaves in a way totally inconsistent with walking in the light. It's the man who says he's a follower of Jesus Christ, but who beats his wife. The woman who says that she is a disciple of the

Savior, but sinfully undermines their marriage in the way she treats her husband.

None of this is to say that right words aren't good and necessary. Right words are good and necessary. There must be the talk. It is important to say the right things to God and about God. It is important to say that Jesus Christ is our one and only Savior from sin. But if the words are not matched with the walk, the words are a lie.

I don't know how you respond to that, but I find this sobering. I find it deeply, deeply disturbing because I find that it robs the comfort of those who think that they are spiritually safe because once upon a time they accepted Jesus Christ. Once upon a time they were baptized. Once upon a time they joined the church. Once upon a time they said and did the right things, but they have chosen thereafter to live otherwise. Back to that popular mid-western expression, quacking like a duck is not enough. All types of imitators can imitate a quack. To be a duck one must not only quack like a duck but look like a duck and walk like a duck. All kinds of imitators can mimic the right words, but to be a Christian is not just talk. One must look like a Christian and walk like a Christian.

I have a serious word for those walking in darkness. The word is repent. Repent means to change directions, to get out of the darkness of sinful behavior. If it's a wrong relationship, as painful as it may be, break off the relationship. If it's a sinful habit, as much as that gets down to the very root of life because it's so deeply ingrained, break that habit. If it is a commitment to a life style and an ordering of priorities that has anything but God as first, change the life style and reorder the priorities. Step out of the darkness and into God's light and choose to stop living a lie and to start living the truth.

Third in the apostle's logic is verse 7 where he paints a sharp contrast. This time he says that walk with talk is life. It is still the God who is light who speaks. "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 sin." Understand that the purpose of God's light is never just to see. It is always to do something. It is not just to see what's around us but to walk.

I John 1:7 describes the Christian who not only talks the truth but who walks like Jesus in the light. The results here are fantastic. There are two of them. One of them is that we have fellowship with

one another. That's what is described earlier in this chapter as *koinonia*, a common denominator, a common base with God and with each other through Jesus Christ. It means that we no longer bump into each other and stumble around in the darkness but that we walk hand and hand together in the light. Those whose walk and talk match do that. They have fellowship with one another.

The second result is that the blood, or the death of Jesus on the cross, not only gains us access to heaven forever, but purifies us of sin on an everyday basis. "The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin."

You know that every healthy human body has waste, waste which will kill us if it is not removed. Normally the impurities that are in the blood are filtered out, are removed, in a healthy body by the kidneys. That's a continual process. But if the kidneys don't work, dramatic changes take place. Physically it is life threatening if not life taking. But it's not just physical, for those toxins in the blood and throughout the body effect the way we think and how we feel and the way we relate to other people.

The Christian who deliberately chooses to walk the talk has Jesus Christ and his death on the cross through his spilled blood constantly purifying our lives, constantly taking out the toxins of sin that are a by-product of still being fallen creatures on this side of heaven. It is because of what Jesus Christ does in the life of those who walk in the light that we are able to be healthy Christians, relate well to one another, and have a right attitude. But when we step out of the light and into the darkness and no longer receive that purification, then those toxins of sin contaminate our entire lives - our relationships with each other at home and at work and at school and at church. It begins to permeate every aspect of who we are until eventually the result is death.

What we have here is a very sharp contrast between verses six and seven. One is of sin, of lying, of sickness, of darkness, of death. The other, for those who walk the talk, is one of holiness, of truth, of health, of light and life.

I want to conclude with some straight talk about what I think church and sermons are supposed to do. They are supposed to encourage people and give hope and uplift because, at least in the way I see the world, for most people life is tough. Most of us have gone through a hard week where

we have been battered and bruised and often down trodden. We come to church, not to have guilt laid all over us, not to be walked on, but to be encouraged and uplifted and given hope and strength so that we can make it through another week, whatever the difficulties are that we are facing. I believe that. I try to practice that. But then we come to a piece of the Bible like I John 1 verses 5 through 7, and here we're told that sin in our lives is wrong, that saying the right thing is not enough. We're confronted with walking in the darkness, and that reminds us of specific sins that we may be struggling with. All of this, perhaps, may indicate that those who thought they were Christians because they said the right thing are in fact not Christians because they don't walk what they talk. And that's kind of a bummer. It's not quite what we wanted to hear in a sermon.

Compare this to going to a physician for a physical examination, to a doctor who cares enough to choose to say it right and straight. A doctor who says you have to stop smoking or quit drinking, lose weight, or get exercise, or change because if you don't you'll die. And as hard as that news may be to take you're grateful for it.

So it is with the Bible. I'll tell you from my own experience that this wonderful book has in it

loads of encouragement and comfort and health and hope. When my own emotions and circumstances of life are down, I find the uplift there that I cannot find from anyone or from anything else. But let me also say that the God who provided for us this book is one who speaks straight, who gives us the words of warning as well as the words of comfort. So please take today's lesson as a call to inventory. Ask yourself, "Is my walk consistent with my talk or am I saying one thing and living another thing? Is my life a lie? Is it possible that I've said that I am a Christian but all the evidence of my life is to the contrary? If that is the conclusion of the inventory, then resolve to change. Go to God and make the commitment that transforms, and then walk differently. Resolve to step out of the darkness into the light. Decide to no longer live a lie but to live the truth. Then "we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin." Amen

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