

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: DRAWING NEAR

(Growing in prayer)

Our Sin - and Drawing Near to God

(1 John 1:1-10)

Study #2

Introduction: Tending the garden of relationships...

Tender garden plants don't grow well untended.

These days I'm happy to say that I'm picking greens from our garden for dinner salads, but that's only because I covered the plants when the temperature dropped to 18 degrees on Tuesday morning.

And, just so that you get a full and accurate picture of my gardening prowess, my summer garden failed because I didn't get enough water to it in the middle of the drought and the plants all died of thirst.

Without nurture, tender plants wither and die that would have produced good fruit. And what is true about garden veggies is also true of relationships. Untended relationships don't grow.

Marriages and friendships go stale when UN-nurtured with time and attention.

Go long without tenderness in a marriage, don't take time to water the garden with kindness and "*I love you*" and unexpected gifts and intentional romance - and husbands and wives can drift apart. Intimacy is lost. The flame of connection fades.

Likewise, a friendship withers absent regular communication, texts, phone calls, emails, breakfasts or lunches.

If we want veggies or flowers, we tend our gardens. If we want to stay close to people we water our friendships. If we have hopes for intimacy with God, we will invest time and attention in our relationship with Him, too.

We are forever children of God through faith in Jesus. And, when we put our faith in Christ one of the things we say is that we have come to "*know the Lord.*" True.

We do know Him. But from day one, we want to know Him better.

The Apostle Paul certainly knew the Lord. And in his letter to the Philippians he writes about pressing on "*to know the Lord.*" There were worlds of knowing God Paul had yet to explore and he was desperate to know the Lord better and better.

We, too, know Him. We, too, desperately want to know Him - and so we pray. Prayer, in fact, is the domain of the desperate.¹

- We pray because we are convinced that apart from Him we can do nothing of eternal significance.
- We pray because we believe that "*with God, all things are possible.*"
- We pray because we understand that prayer is the path we have been given to maintain intimacy with God.
- We pray to keep our connection with Him fresh.
- We pray to draw near.

And everything is going great. You're pressing on and drawing near and getting to know God - and then you sin.

You do what you later wished you hadn't. You get caught up in something ugly. You violate what you understand God commands.

Now what?

What do you do when you have strayed? How should a Christian think about his or her sin? After sin is there hope for a vibrant walk with God?

¹ Words of a good friend, Dave Saathoff, pastor of BRCC.

Well, today we are thinking about approaching God when we have strayed. And the good news is that there are life-giving words in the Bible about how we can “draw near” to God after we sin.

*The Apostle John*²

Of those named “John” in the New Testament, the most prominent is the Apostle John, one of the twelve and a member of the twelve’s “inner circle” made up of himself, Peter, and John’s own brother, James.³

John was a fisherman and was likely a member of a wealthy Galilean family. When we first meet John, he was mending his nets after a night of fishing. He was one of the first Jesus called to “follow” - and he followed!

He heard all the teachings and he saw all the miracles. He was there when Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount. He was there when Jesus called Lazarus from the tomb.

Early on, John showed leadership potential, mixed with some troubling tendencies. He trended toward being exclusive (we might even say prejudiced...). He preferred his own tribe, his own clique. At one point he wanted fire to come down from heaven to consume Jesus’ enemies. One time, too, looking out for #1, he even sought prominence within the apostolic band.

My assessment is that as a young man, the Apostle John was a hot-headed zealot with a lot of room for growth.

Well, people change. By the power of the Holy Spirit, John changed.

² There are three major characters named “John” in the New Testament. One is the son of Zacharias and Elizabeth, John the Baptist. He was a few months older than Jesus and called people to repentance to prepare them Christ’s coming. Then there was John Mark, a young man who was a relative of Barnabas. John Mark suffered an early-in-life failure of nerve and then turned into a New Testament hero.

³ He and James were the “sons of thunder.”

Humanly speaking, John was a critical cog in the early growth of the church⁴, and in his mature years there was less of the hot-headed, brash, arrogance. John grew sweeter, more loving.

The mature John is on full display in the three letters we find near the end of the New Testament - 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John.⁵

The First Epistle of John

When he sat down to write these three short letters (2nd and 3rd John are only thirteen and fifteen verses long, respectively), he was likely a very old man.

He wrote during the fifteen year reign of Domitian, a cruel Roman Emperor who ruled near the end of the first Christian century, and followed the lead of Nero and Titus, persecuting Christians right and left.⁶

In these very personal letters, John’s main themes are TRUTH - hold on to the things that you know to be true in Jesus! - and LOVE. Love God. Love your brothers and sisters in Christ.

⁴ John went with Peter to the temple on the day that Peter raised a lame man to walk and preached a message where thousands came to faith. (3:1ff) John and Peter, together, were recognized as being bold witnesses for Jesus. (4:13-39) John went with Peter to Samaria to visit new non-Jewish converts. (8:14ff)

⁵ The twenty-one chapter long Gospel of John was explicitly written to present the message of Jesus in such a compelling way that those who read it would **[20:31] believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing [they] might have life in His name.**

1 John was written to those who *already believed* in Jesus. Scattered throughout this letter are statements of purpose. Among them, John says that he is writing: so that his readers - who have believed in Jesus - might not sin (2:1); because his readers sins have been forgiven (2:12); because his readers know God (2:13); because his readers are strong and have overcome the evil one (2:14); because his readers know the truth (2:21); so that his readers - who believe in Jesus - won’t be led astray (2:26); so that his readers would know that they have eternal life (5:13).

⁶ Called himself “lord and god” and was eventually assassinated.

John was taken with the beauty of relationship. So, he warned against things that damage relationships. Don't practice "one-upsmanship." (3 John 9) Don't be stingy. (1 John 3:17) These are death to relationships.

Instead, do the things that build relationships - things like "walk in love" and "walk in truth." Love and truth build relationships.

Friendships are established and strengthened with love and truth. So are marriages and sibling ties and parent/child bonds - and so is a relationship with God.

There is no formal greeting to this letter,⁷ but in the opening words we hear an old man's heart for relationship. John is probably about eighty years old. Listen to John as you would listen to a beloved great-grandfather.

The Point is Fellowship (1:1-7)

[1] What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word⁸ of Life— [2] and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us— [3] what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. [4] These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete. [5] This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. [6] If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; [7] but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.

Clearly, as far as John is concerned, it's all about relationship.

Fellowship with Each Other

John wants us (his readers) to experience fellowship with each other. The Greek word is "koinonia" and it means "shared life."

Koinonia speaks of deep, intimate, soul to soul connection. When we have "fellowship" with each other we are practicing the New Testament's "one anothers" - loving and bearing burdens and forgiving and encouraging and speaking the truth in love and serving and praying for one another.

These are the kinds of relationships that we all long to enjoy with each other - and the kinds of relationships that are actually possible for us who know Jesus.

Fellowship with God

In the lines I just read, though, John says as much about fellowship with God as he does about fellowship with fellow-believers. And he uses the same word to describe it: koinonia.

Now, a relationship with God is going to be, of necessity, different than a relationship with a flesh-and-blood human being you can see, touch, hear, and smell.

However, over time, and through prayer, through a growing grasp of His truth, and through obedience, we do come to have a growing sense of connection with God. We come to greater intimacy with God.

One of our great hopes about heaven is that then we will REALLY know the Lord. We will know Him then as we cannot know Him now. But one of our great hopes for the here and now is that we will get to know Him better and better as each day passes.

We want to know the Lord in such a way that His presence makes a difference in the way we live. We want to know Him in such a deep way that others see Him shining through us.

And this knowledge of God comes as we "**walk in the light.**"

⁷ In Greek) the first three verses make up one long sentence.

⁸ Jesus is the Word and the Word was John's Friend. The "Word" appears, too, in the Gospel of John (chapter 1) as the eternal creative agent of God and the communication of God (as in, "**The word of the Lord came to...**").

Walking in Darkness or Light

Light vs. darkness

In lots of places in the Bible, light is a common way to describe God and His ways.⁹ Light is pure - like God is pure. Light exposes. (John 3:19-21) It energizes and gives direction. (Matthew 4:16; Luke 2:32; John 1:4-9)

And there are only two possible ways to live the Christian life. We will walk in darkness or will we walk in light?

The presence of the word “if” (vv. 6, 7) means that there is a choice to be made.

Walking in darkness

In Christ, we have passed out of the darkness into God’s light. (1 Peter 2:9) We are light in the Lord. (Ephesians 5:8)

We are NOT darkness, and John would never suggest that a Christian is “darkness”. But he does lay out the possibility here that a Christian, who is light in the Lord, might walk in darkness.

We walk in the darkness, physically, by blowing out the candle, flipping the light switch “off,” or closing our eyes.

We walk in the darkness, spiritually, by living as if God is not. We walk in the darkness when we don’t allow God, His Word, or His people to expose us, to direct us, or to energize us.

When we live that way we are sitting ducks for temptation to sin. And John warns us against walking in the darkness precisely because he knew that we are so prone to go there.

It’s so much better to walk in the light!

Walking in light

Be reflective. Ask God to search you with the flashlight of His Word. Listen to the honest words of friends. Allow the sword of Scripture to convict and to cut clean.

Walking in the light does not mean that we don’t sin. John says that when we are walking in the light ***“the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.”***

To walk in the light is not to be perfect. It is to be perfectly willing to examine ourselves by God’s light and to allow Him to clean us up when we get dirty.

Two Christians will never have richer fellowship than when they are both walking in the light. A Christian will never enjoy a richer relationship with God than when he or she is walking in the light. And to walk in the light requires that we deal in a certain way with our sin.

For you and I who are desperate for a vibrant, rich, deep and intimate walk with God, John’s words are a lifeline.

And so, for the next few minutes we’re going to explore what John says that we who have believed in Jesus and want great connection with God should do when we sin.

Our first glimpse of John in the Gospels is of a net-mending fisherman. That’s what he is doing today. He is instructing us in the ways of mending a life, mending a relationship with God, damaged by sin.

He begins with a “Don’t”. Don’t deny that you have a sin problem.

What to Do With Sin (vv. 8-10)

Error #1: “I Have No Sin” (v. 8)

[8] If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.

If, at any given moment, we look at ourselves and see nothing wrong, we may be tempted to believe that there is nothing wrong.

⁹ Psalm 36:9; 1 Timothy 6:16

That, at least for now, we have conquered this whole “sin” thing. To come to that conclusion would be a tragic error.

By this statement, “*I have no sin*” I show myself to be self-deceived.¹⁰

There are now and have often been schools of thought within Christendom that say that Christians **in this life** may reach a state of perfection.¹¹ That it is possible that we will get to a place where we no longer sin.

That line of thinking runs smack into the buzz saw of 1 John 1:8, which says, “*Nope.*”¹² (You have heard the recommendation that the man who claims to be sinless should hope no one talks with his wife.)

A more biblical and realistic way of looking at personal sin is found in the self-assessment of the Apostle Paul who, early in his career, referred to himself as “*the least of the apostles*” (1 Corinthians 15:9), and then later as “*the least of the saints*” (Ephesians 3:8), and then, closer to the end of his life, “*the chief of all sinners.*” (1 Timothy 1:15)

As Paul grew in grace he became more aware of how far short he fell of God’s glory.

Could any of us, in light of the holiness of a God who **is light** say with a straight face, “*I am without sin.*”? Could we really read through the New Testament and hear its commands and exhortations and say, “*Check. Got it.*”?

We are redeemed by Jesus. Safe and secure for all eternity because of His grace and mercy. But sinless? No.

Denial of sin is a self-deceit. Sensitivity to sin and a growing awareness of how far short we fall is a mark of maturity.

¹⁰ Verses affirming the universality of our moral pollution by sin: Romans 3:23; Ephesians 2:1-10; Titus 3:4-7.

¹¹ John’s enemies (Gnostics? Cerinthians? Docetists?) claimed to be sinless.

¹² The belief is called “perfectionism” and has surfaced at several moments in church history. Benjamin B. Warfield wrote the definitive argument against it (Perfectionism) and effectively debunked the movement in his day (early 1900’s).

Now, skip from verse 8 down to verse 10 and you’ll find more counsel from the Apostle John about you and sin.

Here we come to what is probably the most common temptation of all when it comes to how we wrongly wrestle with sin. We rationalize.

Error #2: “I Have Not Sinned” (v. 10)

[10] If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us.

This is not someone claiming that they have never sinned. (When anyone comes to Jesus to be saved, they are owning the fact that they have sinned and are in need of a Savior!)

No, what is in view here is someone committing an act which God says is sin, and saying it is NOT sin.

It is rationalizing our actions. It is claiming that there are extenuating circumstances that excuse our behavior.

It is disagreeing with God’s assessment of our actions.

- That person is prejudiced; I have strong convictions.
- He is presumptuous; I take bold initiative.
- She is lazy; I’m wisely cautious.
- That guy loses his temper; I display righteous indignation.
- What a conceited braggart he is; God has given me a healthy dose of self-respect.
- She’s such a gossip; I’m only sharing prayer concerns.
- He lies; I exaggerate sometimes to make a point.

When we refuse to call our “little white lie” a “SIN” we make God out to be a liar.

You could go to your garage and re-label all of your engine degreasers and paint thinners “perfume” and “cooking oil” and “hand lotion” - but they would still be lethal.

If a rose by any other name would smell as sweet, then a sin by any other name still stinks.

So, stop fighting what God says about sin. Call the spade of sin in your life a spade and admit that you, like me, and like the apostles Paul and John, struggle with very real, tangible, ugly sins.

Stuff like...

- outbursts of temper
- selfishness
- gossip
- lust
- dishonesty
- lack of love
- self-pity

So, don't dare think that you've conquered Mount Sin. Not in this life. And don't reclassify behavior that God's Word files under sin into another category.

To go in either of these directions is to walk in darkness, which is OK if you aren't interested in a vibrant, growing, intimate relationship with God.

BUT, since you are, since you are longing to grow in the knowledge of God, you want to deal with sin in an entirely different way. You want to confess it.¹³

Getting it Right: "I Have Sinned" (1:9)

[9] If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

What is confession?

To "confess" is, literally in the language in which the New Testament was written (Greek) "to say the same thing."¹⁴

¹³ One of my personal heroes, Gordon MacDonald, writes, "People who have misbehaved must present themselves before God in openness and acknowledge their guilt."

To confess is to say the same thing about our sin that God says about our sin. It is to agree that when God says our actions, our words, our attitudes have been wrong, we also say that they are wrong.

It is to be specific, not general. Particular, not vague.

Not,

*"Lord, if I have wounded any soul today,
If I have caused one foot to go astray,
If I have lived in my own selfish way;
Dear Lord, please forgive me."*

Not as I heard someone in a public setting say recently, "If I offended anyone by what I said, I am truly sorry."

Not, "Lord, forgive us for our many sins." That's nothing more than a colossal cop-out.

No. True confession will sound more like,

- "Father, I stole from the company when I wasted time at work yesterday."
- "Lord, I lusted when I logged on to a pornographic web site last night."
- "Jesus, I disrespectfully lashed out at my husband for no good reason on Thursday evening."
- "Father, I've been harboring resentment toward my wife."

That's confession. Honest. Clear. Specific. Holding nothing back.

You will notice that John speaks by way of a condition, with the word "if" (verse 9). In other words, confession is something that we might or might not do.

But when we do, blessing comes!

Confession brings forgiveness

John says that if we confess our sins to God He will faithfully and righteously forgive and cleanse us.

¹⁴ *ὁμο* (same) + *λογεω* (to speak)

This is not a reference to the absolute forgiveness we receive when we come to Christ for eternal life.

No, this refers to our need for daily cleansing from sin.

When Jesus took out a basin and a towel and cleaned His disciples' feet at the Last Supper, he was picturing daily confession of sin. The disciples were clean. They were forgiven (except for Judas Iscariot). They didn't need a full bath. But they had soiled their feet by walking through the dirty streets of Jerusalem and needed a foot-washing.

So, you and I are forgiven, but need to confess when we become aware of our sins so that we may experience fresh cleansing from God.

Again, sin doesn't separate us from God's love. (see Romans 8)

It does, however, affect our fellowship with God. Intimacy and connection with God is very much affected by our sin - just as your relationship with a friend is affected when there is an offense.

When a good friend is offended by something we have done, we go to the friend, admit that we blew it, and say, "*I'm so sorry.*"

"Confession" is the word the Bible uses to describe what happens when we, having offended our Heavenly Father, bow before Him, admit to what we did wrong, and say, "*I'm so sorry.*"¹⁵

The moment of confession may hold a moment of pain. We fear the moment of exposure. But that moment of coming clean is essential if we want to enjoy fellowship with God.

Confession cleanses consciences. It assures us that we are not playing little games with God, anymore. Confession floods us with relief because we are re-assured that God forgives.

¹⁵ There are some great examples of confessions found in the Bible. Among them are Job's, (Job 40 and 42), Nehemiah's (Neh. 9), David's (Psalm 51), and Daniel's (Dan. 9). In the New Testament, the apostle Paul urges us to confess our sins before taking part in the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:27-34), and James tells us to confess our sins to each other (James 5:16).

To live with known and unconfessed sin is to experience a debilitating spiritual paralysis. It is to NOT draw near.

Can you imagine going through life without a sense of God's closeness? Doesn't that sound awful?

You long for connection with God. If you aren't experiencing it, isn't it something you would gladly come clean in confession to enjoy?

When God's Spirit shines His light on sin, confess it. Be pro-active and plead with God's Spirit to reveal sin so that you might confess it. (See Psal 139)

Glorious, rich, vibrant fellowship with God is not possible apart from acknowledgement and confession of sin. That rich koinonia with God is based on thanksgiving for grace and forgiveness from sin.

Conclusion:

God doesn't fill the pages of the Bible with sugarcoated stories of its heroes. It includes true and ugly records of the most revered saints.

The more familiar you become with the Bible, the more you see that Scripture paints with **realistic** brushstrokes. Warts and imperfections included.

- Abraham cowardly tries to pawn off his wife as his sister so that all goes well with him.
- His son, Isaac, did the same thing.
- Gideon defeats Midian by the power of God one day and fashions an idol the next.
- David defeats the giant, Goliath, leads the nation of Israel to prominence, walks with God - and then commits adultery and murders to cover it up.
- Solomon writes the book of Proverbs and foolishly compromises himself with pagan alliances.
- Simon Peter confesses, "***Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God***" (Matthew 16) - and then rebukes Jesus for suggesting that He was going to die.

And it's not as if God's people only sinned in Bible times. It still happens today. I sin. You sin.

When you become aware of sin, don't deny it. Admit it. Walk in the light and agree with God that what you did was ugly and wrong. Confess it and receive cleansing forgiveness from your heavenly Father.

There is no other way to move toward the fellowship with God we so desperately long for than to nurture that relationship with time and attention - and we do that even when (especially when!) we sin.

[2:1] My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous