

1

The scripture reading from 1 John starts out fine, but then it heads in a direction most of us would rather avoid talking about. I like how the passage begins by suggesting we walk in the light, for God is like light, pushing away the shadows of darkness.

While reading the first portion about light, I was reminded of the time I went spelunking—cave exploring. We were told to bring three sources of light, for if one or two lights failed, you always wanted another backup to light the way through the cave. After walking for quite some time into the cave, our guide suggested we turn off all our flashlights. I'll never forget the darkness of the cave, for I couldn't even see my hand when I wiggled my fingers in front of my face. No reflections. No light seeping into the cave from above. No colors. All I could see was nothingness. I began to feel a bit anxious, for I had never been in such darkness, and when our guide invited us to turn on our lights, I felt a sense of relief as light once again flooded the room.

Light is such wonderful imagery, and it would be much easier to reflect on the topic of light and ignore the rest of today's passage from 1 John. The topic would tie so well into last week's theme about seeing it to believe it, for one needs light in order to see something and believe it.

But in this portion of 1 John, the author takes a shift in a direction most of us don't wanna talk about: sin. It's not a topic one usually brings up in a conversation: "Hey, how you doing today—done any good sinning lately?" While reviewing the upcoming weekly schedule with your spouse or friend, how many of you have asked, "What sins do you have planned for the weekend?"

Sin is a topic most of us would rather avoid, but in these seven verses in 1 John, the author uses a form of the Greek word *ἁμαρτανω* (*hamartano*) nine times, often translated as "sin." The word means "to miss" or "not to hit," as when aiming an arrow at the target and it lands in the dirt instead of hitting the target. We all miss the mark, for we make mistakes, avoid the truth, turn our eyes away from someone

2

in pain, say unkind words, avoid someone who doesn't live the same lifestyle as we do, or exclude someone who believes differently than you do. It's so easy to avoid looking at our own sins by focusing on the behaviors of others—those murderers and thieves we hear about in the news. Most of *our* sins don't make headlines, so it's easy to forget about them. We don't wanna talk about them, giving ourselves the false notion that we live without any sin.

That's why this passage from 1 John feels so uncomfortable, for the author writes: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us," or as *The Message Bible* translates these words: "If we claim that we're free of sin, we're only fooling ourselves. A claim like that is errant nonsense."

Although it's an uncomfortable topic, the author of 1 John knew that each person has sinned, has missed the target, and often it's the light that reveals when we go astray, as was the case when

The entire University of Michigan football team checked into their hotel rooms the night before the big game with Ohio State University. The Michigan coach had given clear instructions that his players were to get a good night's sleep. They were not to leave their rooms.

One rebellious lineman, however, wanted to get out and see the city of Columbus by night. The lineman deceptively put a floor lamp on the bed and put covers around it so it looked like he was already asleep in bed. Then he left his room to go out on the town. Late that night the coach went around to all his players' rooms and did a bed check. He opened each door and hit the light switch.

Arriving at the lineman's room, he turned on the light. The covers were still covering the floor lamp, but the player had not unplugged the lamp. So when the coach hit the switch, the lamp shed light on the lineman's deception.¹

The author of 1 John suggests a remedy for the times when we sin: be honest and confess, for through Jesus we have an advocate, one who offers cleansing and another chance. Rather than pointing out what others are doing wrong, we need to instead recognize our own mistakes, for we're all

3

fallible and make mistakes. Although we most likely can't make someone else change, we do have the power within us through Christ to change ourselves.

Forgiveness is such a powerful experience, one that requires us to look deep within ourselves and recognize what we have done. Confession is not an easy thing to do, for we like to think we have complete control of our lives, and when we recognize a fragile part of ourselves that can lead us astray, we may not want to admit that brokenness within us. But it's through our confession that we discover God's forgiveness. All three go together: sin, confession, and forgiveness. Sin and confession are hard to discuss, as was the case when

A Sunday school teacher had just concluded her lesson and wanted to make sure she had made her point. She said, "Can anyone tell me what you must do before you can obtain forgiveness of sin?"

There was a short interval of silence and then, from the back of the room, a small boy spoke up and said, "Sin."²

When we recognize our own brokenness, when we realize that we need to make a change in our lives, we open a place within ourselves where God's Spirit can move, a place where transformation can happen. Sometimes it takes take a wake-up call, a nudge in another direction to prompt us to make a change in our lives. Late Disciples preacher Fred Craddock tells of a time he

was pastoring in Tennessee; there was a girl about seven years old who came to our church regularly for Sunday school, and sometimes her parents let her stay for the worship service. They didn't come. We had a circular drive at that church. It was built for people who let their children off and drove on. We didn't want to inconvenience them, so we had a circular drive. But they were very faithful, Mom and Dad. They had moved from New Jersey with the new chemical plant. He was upwardly mobile; they were both very ambitious; and they didn't come to church. There wasn't really any need for that, I guess.

But on Saturday nights, the whole town knew of their parties. They gave parties, not for entertainment, but as part of the upwardly mobile thing. That determined who was invited:

the right people, the one just above, and finally on up to the boss. And those parties were full of drinking and wild and vulgar things. Everybody knew. But there was their beautiful girl every Sunday.

One Sunday morning I looked out, and she was there. I thought, “Well, she’s with her friends,” but it was her Mom and Dad. After the sermon, at the close of the service, as is the custom at my church, came an invitation to discipleship, and Mr. and Mrs. Mom and Dad came to the front. They confessed faith in Christ. Afterward I asked, “What prompted this?”

They said, “Well, do you know about our parties?”

And I said, “Yeah, I have heard about your parties.”

They said, “Well, we had one last night again, and it got a little loud, it got a little rough, and there was too much drinking. [Our noise woke] our daughter, and she came downstairs to about the third step. She saw that

we were eating and drinking, and she said, ‘Oh, can I say the blessing? God is great, God is good, let us thank him for our food. Good-night, everybody.’ She went back upstairs. ‘Oh, my land, it’s time to go, we’ve got to be going.’ ‘We’ve stayed way too long.’ Within two minutes the room was empty.”

Mr. and Mrs. Mons and Dad began cleaning up, picking up crumpled napkins and wasted and spilled peanuts and half sandwiches, and taking empty glasses on trays to the kitchen. And with two trays, he and she met on either side of the sink, they looked at each other, and he expressed what both were thinking: “Where do we think we’re going?” The moment of truth.³

Sin—we may not wanna talk about it, but when we do, God awaits with open arms of forgiveness and a chance to try again. And that’s something to talk about!

¹ Hodgins, Michael. *1002 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers* (Kindle Locations 5022-5029). Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #846.

² Hodgins, Michael. *1001 More Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, and Compelling Illustrations*

for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers (Kindle Locations 4203-4206). Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #838.

³ Fred B. Craddock; Mike Graves; Richard F. Ward. *Craddock Stories* (Kindle Locations 302-314). Kindle Edition.