

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. ² The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. ³ We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. ⁴ We write this to make our joy complete.

⁵ This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by 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, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

⁸ If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.

2 *My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. ² He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 1:1-2:2)*

How Can We Have Fellowship with God?

What groups do you belong to? What organizations or clubs do you hold membership in? Some of us probably belong to professional organizations. Some of us belong to unions. Some of us belong to social clubs. Why do we join those organizations? Sometimes, we do it because there's an economic benefit. You have to join the union to work in your field. You belong to a professional organization because you can get training which will make you more marketable. But many organizations exist simply because we humans need each other. Even economic groups like unions have a strong "we're in this together" mentality. Certainly veterans organizations and sports leagues exist so we can be with people who share our interest or our history.

God designed us with a need to share our lives and our experiences. That truth has many implications for marriage and family, for congregational and professional life, for how we spend our time and how we raise our children. But this morning, we want to consider it in a greater context. That need for each other is really a reflection of our greatest need of all: our need to share our lives with God. God designed us as spiritual beings. And we can only find fulfillment in our lives if we share our lives with him. The Bible uses a special word for sharing our lives both with the people around us and with God. We usually translate this word as fellowship, but it literally does mean sharing. This morning the Apostle John talks about fellowship with God and with each other. His whole life was dedicated to teaching us the answer to the question: **how can we have fellowship with God?**

I.

Many people today would answer that question by talking about having a personal relationship with God. They usually mean that you feel God guiding you. In some cases, they claim to actually hear him talk to you. But most of the time, it means that you pray and then you follow your feelings and that's supposed to be God. John takes a totally different approach this morning, and what he tells us gives us the true answer to the question, **how can we have fellowship with God? Through the message he proclaimed to us.**

John says, "**That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.**" If you look in your bulletins, you'll see that the word "Word" is capitalized. John is using it here as a name, just as he did two days ago on Christmas morning in the opening verses of the gospel of John. "The Word" is Jesus there and here.

Jesus was there "from the beginning" of the world, thousands of years before John and the other apostles lived. Yet their ears heard him speak, their eyes saw him, their hands touched him. John isn't talking about some vague feeling that we think means God is leading us. He's talking about God actually coming and taking

on human flesh and living here with us. God the Son did that to make us a part of all that he does. That coming into our flesh – that incarnation, to use the big, scary, theological word – that gives us fellowship with God.

John actually knew Jesus. He talked with him and listened to him. John saw the miracles. John even touched the Lord – taking food from his hands and leaning against him at the Last Supper. John saw him die and then saw him alive again. He watched him ascend into heaven. John didn't have to depend on feelings. He saw it and heard it all. But you and I haven't. Jesus ascended into heaven almost two thousand years ago. So how do we have fellowship with God?

John said, **“We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.”** The only way for us to have fellowship with God and with Jesus is through the gospel. Only when we hear the message that Jesus came, that he lived and he died and he rose, do we have fellowship with God. It isn't about us feeling like God is leading us. It's about hearing what Jesus has done for us and what God promises us. Fellowship with God means knowing that he is always there, always working to bring us to heaven. We only know that through the gospel.

And as a rich side benefit, when we are united to God through that message, we are united to each other. Faith in Christ gives us true fellowship here. So all that God says to us not only draws us closer to him, it draws us closer to each other. By the same token, all that the devil says threatens to break our fellowship with God and damages our fellowship with each other here. John says that they proclaimed the gospel to make their joy complete. To a minister, there is no greater joy than seeing people embrace Christ as their Savior. Our fellowship together here at Peace is a blessing to me as your pastor. Every time someone stands up here and confesses their oneness with us, I rejoice. And I know that you do, too. But it doesn't end there. Every time you come to church to hear the word, every time you come to Bible class, every time you show that you put God and his word first in your life, you fill me with joy as your shepherd. And you also cause your brothers and sisters to rejoice in what God is doing for you. That is fellowship with God and with each other.

John 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.”** It's tempting to think of light and darkness simply as holiness and sin and there's an element of truth to that. But there's more to it than that. In the darkness, we knew nothing of God, either of his holiness or of his love. In the scriptures to be enlightened means that God reveals to us what we could never know on our own: his love for us in Christ. So darkness is sin, but it's also ignorance of God and of all that God says. Obviously, there can be no darkness like that in God.

John says that if we walk in the light we have fellowship with God. But if we walk in darkness, we don't. In fact, if we walk in darkness, but claim that we're in the light, we're liars. What does all that mean? Light means that we are free from the ignorance and the sin of our past. So we cannot walk in light if we don't care about doctrine. Doctrine means teaching. What God has taught us is what gives us fellowship with him. We must hear it and adjust our hearts and minds so that we agree with it. And then we must live according to it.

You can't live as a Christian if you don't care what God says. And you can't have true fellowship with your brothers and sisters in Christ if you don't want to walk in the light – if you're not willing to let God tell you what's true and to agree with him. It's just that simple. The heart of his message is that Jesus came to save us. But all that he says affects how we understand that. It is all the light of Christ.

II.

Can we live like that? Can we accept that God gets to decide what's true and it's our job to just believe it? Can we practice fellowship on the basis of confessing what God has taught and denying all things that disagree with what God says? It's very difficult, isn't it? In fact, it's impossible for us to do. We simply aren't equipped to stand up for the truth on our own. But we aren't alone. Jesus stands with us and he stands in for us. **How can we have fellowship with God? Through the defense he makes for us.**

John starts out with one of the most basic difficulties that all people have with faith: our sin. I've asked many people a very pointed question: why should God let you into heaven? What would you tell him? Most of the time, I've gotten some variation on the answer, “Because I'm a good person.” Sometimes, they focus on giving to the poor, sometimes on being faithful spouses or good parents or productive members of society. Always, the unspoken assumption is that there are lots of people out there who are way worse than I am – the prisons are full of them. Generally, the person will end with some statement to the effect that, “I would hope

that God would recognize all that and let me in.” Sadly, even members of my congregations have said things like that to me, sometimes.

John says, **“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.”** Now, you might say, “Wait a minute pastor. I didn’t say I had no sin. Everybody sins. I just said that I’m a good person.” But from God’s perspective, that’s the same thing. The only good person is the person who doesn’t sin. Thinking that we’re going to get into heaven because we come to church regularly or because we help the poor or because we’re good parents or faithful spouses is thinking that we haven’t really sinned enough to keep us out. And if we think that, we’re deceiving ourselves. The truth is not in us. We are unbelievers.

Have you ever said anything like that? Does it make you mad that I’m standing up here calling you an unbeliever? Being mad at me doesn’t change what God said. When we think we’re good people, the truth is not in us. In fact, John said, **“If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.”** When we say that we’ve been good enough to get into heaven, we’re calling God a liar because he says we’re not. That’s not my message – it’s his.

But that’s not the end of the story. John says, **“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”** I love this passage because it turns everything around. We don’t get to hide behind pride and the belief that we’re good enough to get into heaven. That sends us to hell. But if we confess our sins – if we hear that law that hurts us and makes us angry and we admit that what God says about me is true, then everything is different. Yes, it’s hard to let God say that. My sinful heart doesn’t want to believe that fellowship with God depends on letting him tell me what to think. My sinful heart doesn’t accept that fellowship with other Christians depends on something as dry as doctrine. But God says all that. I need to confess that I am a sinner because I don’t like what God says. I deserve death and hell. All those times my heart railed against what God says and what the guy up in the front says, all that was my sinful nature earning eternal hell.

When I fall before God and confess my sin, he is faithful – he keeps his promise to forgive me. And he is just. He lives by what he commanded. And what he commanded is that Jesus stands in our place. God sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins – to pay for our sins. God comes to us when we are on our knees and he says, “All that sin is gone forever. You will not suffer hell for it. Jesus paid for it and you will live with me for all eternity.”

Then he purifies us through that gospel. When I confess what I’m really guilty of, when I admit to those sins which defeat me again and again, then when God tells me that he has taken that sin away, the gospel that I hear applies to those things which torment me most, those things which strangle my faith. That gospel is power. God gives me strength to turn from my sin.

John wants us all to turn from sin. Hearing all this is designed to inspire us to do that. But John says, **“But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.”** John knows we won’t be 100 percent successful in our Christian lives. But when we sin, we have a defense attorney in heaven defending us. Jesus Christ, the righteous one, Jesus Christ, who gave his life to pay for all the sins of all the world, Jesus Christ who died and rose for you now stands in heaven. He will not let your sins count against you. He forgives you day after day. He restores you to fellowship with God and with his people. That is what we need most in this world. God has given it to us. My friends, every day, may you hear that gospel and grow in your unity with God. May that draw you ever closer to your brothers and sisters in faith here at Peace. Amen.