

1 John Sermons-Robert Morgan

Introduction - Robert J Morgan is the teaching pastor at [Donelson Fellowship in Nashville, Tennessee](#) and is well known for expository messages that are rich in excellent illustrations of Biblical principles. These sermons are older messages preached on various passages in Romans.

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THE CURIOUS HISTORY OF CHRISTMAS

1 John

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. 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. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with His Son Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete. 1 John 1:1-4

Where did this stuff come from? The trees, lights, holly, poinsettias, and mistletoe? Where did all our traditions come from? The warm smells of gingerbread and the rich taste of eggnog? What about our family traditions around the tree with our gifts and presents and stockings and children?

During the five Sundays of December I'd like to preach two sermon series for the price of one. The first series is about the curious traditions of Christmas, because Christmas is under attack in the United States, and as Christians we ought to know the origins and customs of our holy season.

I'd also like to preach a series of sermons on the great truths of Christmas, why Jesus Christ came to this world as the apostle John describes him in his little letter of 1 John, which is a wonderful Christmas document.

Now here's the tricky part. I'm going to combine both series into one. So every Sunday I'd like to open the message with something about some of our traditions and then go right to the truth of God's Word as we have it recorded in 1 John. Today I'd like to begin with the odd and perplexing history of Christmas.

So where did all this stuff come from --our trees and bells and ornaments and lights and figgy pudding? The first Christmas, of course, was celebrated without Christmas trees, lights, holly, or mistletoe. The only nativity scene was the original one, and we aren't sure exactly what it looked like. Joseph and Mary found back-ally, make-shift accommodations in Bethlehem, where Jesus was born; but the holy family didn't stay in Bethlehem long, for they were driven out by King Herod to Egypt. Later they returned to Nazareth where the boy Jesus grew to manhood. He ministered for three years, died on the cross, rose from the grave, ascended into heaven, and sent His followers around the world with His message of redemption and eternal life.

During the first centuries of Christian history, little thought was given to observing a day honoring His birth. In fact, about the only great annual celebration recognized and practiced by the early church was Easter—and the early Christians even had a hard time trying to determine the exact date each year for that celebration.

Meanwhile, throughout antiquity nearly every culture (particularly throughout Europe and in winterish lands) celebrated the winter solstice, which is on or about December 22 of every year. In our northern hemisphere, that's the shortest day of the year in terms of daylight. During the autumn, the sunrise gets later and the sunset gets earlier—until on or about December 22, and then the days

begin to lengthen again and there is a sort of rebirth to sunshine.

So in antiquity, they would celebrate this day and the days that followed as the rebirth of Brother Sun—the time when the shortest days were now over and the sunlight was starting to increase again. In some pagan societies, December 25 was celebrated as the birthday of the sun god.

During the days of the Roman Empire, such celebrations also occurred, and Christians had a hard time knowing what to do about it. It was a national holiday and there was a great deal of paganism and hedonism, and it put Christians in a very difficult spot. One Roman emperor named Aurelian created an empire-wide holiday honoring the “Rebirth of the Invincible Sun” for December 25th. What were Christians to do on a day like that when everyone in the entire empire celebrated and took time off and rested and reveled?

Meanwhile, according to some accounts, a church leader named Telesphorus, who was bishop of Rome during the reign of Emperor Hadrian, suggested that the church begin celebrating the birthday of Christ; but no date was suggested or set. It just seemed as though there should be a day every year when we praise God for Christ’s miraculous entrance to earth.

So churches begin to have an annual Nativity day, but there was no set day for it. Many churches began celebrating the birth of Christ in September during the Jewish Feast of Trumpets; others celebrated on January 6th. The date varied from church to church and from region to region.

Eventually there were so many suggested dates that in AD 320, Pope Julius thought a standard date ought to be set, so he proclaimed December 25th as a day for celebrating our Lord’s birth, but the observance took a back seat to the Roman Festival to the Invincible Sun which was traditionally held on that day.

Let me use an analogy. Many churches around the world set aside a particular day each year to promote missions and to preach about the Great Commission. On this Missions Sunday, many churches try to raise money for their missions budget. We do this every year in the fall, in September or October, but some churches have their missions emphasis in the spring, or summer, or winter. What if some highly respected Christian leader said that we should standardize our Missions Emphasis for the Fourth of July? Well, we could do that, but there would be two problems. First, the Fourth of July is not usually a Sunday. Second, the patriotic nature of the day would still get the lion’s share of the attention in our society and the missions emphasis would have to compete with the fireworks and picnics and singing of “God Bless America.”

That’s the way it was when Pope Julius suggested that churches everywhere celebrate the Lord’s Nativity on the day of the great Roman celebration for the invincible sun. But eventually as the Roman Empire became more and more Christianized, the celebration of Christ’s birth began to crowd into the pagan celebration; but in the course of this transition, the two celebrations became mixed with unfortunate results.

December 25th became like Mardi Gras. Let me take a moment to talk about Mardi Gras, because that’s the best parallel I can think of regarding what happened to Christmas. I’m sure you know something about Mardi Gras. The words are French and literally mean Tuesday Fat, or Fat Tuesday.

Early in Christian history, Easter became the first and greatest of the great observances of the church, and the thought arose that Christians should spend forty days in partial fasting and in humble repentance so as to better appreciate the holiness and splendor of the resurrection. This forty day period became known as Lent (which comes from an old word meaning Springtime). The first day of Lent is called Ash Wednesday, for ashes were used in ancient times and in the Bible to denote a humble repentant attitude. The day before Ash Wednesday is Fat Tuesday or Mardi Gras, and is one of the most evil days of the year as it’s celebrated around the world. People said, “If I’m going to have to fast and deny myself and have ashes rubbed on my forehead and endure self-sacrifice and personal introspection, this is my last chance for forty days to indulge my appetites.” So Mardi Gras has become a day of drunkenness, gluttony, immorality, and lasciviousness.

That’s an example of how a religious holiday can become corrupted into a day of wild carousing and sinful behavior. Well, throughout the dark ages, the same thing was true of Christmas. For hundreds of years during the dark ages and the middle ages, it became an excuse to engage in all kinds of wild and evil behavior. It was a pagan holiday that had some religious overtones; but on the calendar it fell each year just when people needed an outlet for all their frustrations and appetites, in the middle of the darkest and coldest days of the calendar.

It became an out-of-control holiday. For example, it was common for mobs of people to roam the streets and storm the homes of

well-to-do citizens, demanding food and drink. If they host did not respond, the crowd broke in and took what they wanted. There's even an allusion to this in the Christmas song, "We wish you a Merry Christmas." One line says, "O bring us some figgiepudding," and the next line says, "We won't go until we get some."

It was a day given over to mobs and drinking and all kinds of carnality. That's why the Puritans outlawed Christmas in the 1600s. In some parts of London, Christmas was a day when women and children didn't dare leave their homes.

Even here in America, the drunken parties and violence and looting became so bad that the New York City Council met in a special session in 1828 to discuss the issue, and a special unit of the police force was created just to deal with the lawlessness and rioting that marked Christmas Day.

But there was one place on this globe that changed the way Christmas was celebrated. It wasn't the North Pole or the Little Town of Bethlehem. It was Martin Luther's Germany. Luther loved the story of Christmas, and when he sparked the Protestant Reformation, he took full advantage of the story of the birth of Christ. He wrote the famous Christmas carol "From Heaven Above to Earth I Come," written for his little boy, Hans; and it was sung each year during the Christmas Eve festivities at Luther's massive home, which was a former Augustinian monastery at the upper end of the main street of Wittenberg. Legend also has it that it was Luther who helped popularize Christmas trees.

At any rate, because of Luther and the Reformation, Christmas became a cherished holy day in Germany featuring the singing of Christmas carols, indoor trees and decorations, homemade treats, family togetherness, and simple worship and adoration of the newborn Savior.

And then something very important happened in 1840. England's Queen Victoria married Prince Albert of Germany—one of the great love stories of the English monarchy. When he moved into Windsor Castle, he brought with him all the hallowed and family-centered celebrations that he so cherished from his native Germany.

Christmas at Windsor Castle became an almost magical time with beautiful trees that Albert himself decorated, special treats, gift-giving among members of the royal family, and on Christmas day a simple worship service honoring the Lord Jesus Christ.

Soon these German Christmas traditions were picked up and practiced all across England. Gradually throughout the 1800s, Christmas began to take shape as we know it today, less a day of riots and lawlessness, and more a day for the worship and family and adoration of the Christchild.

So Christmas as we know and love it is a relatively modern phenomenon. It only goes back a couple of hundred years in the English speaking world. But, of course, the story of the incarnation is as old as history itself, for it was in the very mind of God when He created Adam and Eve. The story of redemption is as old as the Bible itself, for Jesus said that Abraham saw His day and rejoiced. The story of Bethlehem is as old as the ancient prophets, for Micah said, "And you, Bethlehem, though you are small among the thousands of Israel, yet out of you will come forth a ruler for my people whose comings and goings are of old, even from eternity." And the story of the Nativity of Christ is as old as the Gospel itself, for Luke tells us, "And it came to pass when the days were accomplished for her to be delivered, and she brought forth her first born son and wrapped Him in swaddling cloth, and laid Him in the manger for there was no room for Him in the inn."

The Bible in both its major sections is chock full of the glory of Messiah, the God-Man, the virgin-born Redeemer of the world.

Here in the prologue of 1 John, as we've already read it, we have--not the history of Christmas--but the history of the Christ of Christmas, and John gives it to us in four stages, and each stage is seen readily in the first phrase of each of these four verses. Look at them again with me and notice how each verse begins:

Verse 1: That which was from the beginning....

Verse 2: The life appeared....

Verse 3: We proclaim to you....

Verse 4: We write this to make our joy complete.

The Beginning of Christ

There you have the four stages of the history of Jesus Christ. Notice again the way he begins verse 1: That which was from the beginning. This reminds us of Genesis 1:1 and John 1:1: In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth... In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. How incredible that we have three books of the Bible

that begin with the same basic phrase! It speaks of the pre-existence and eternity of Jesus Christ. He was the first and only person in history who existed before He existed; that is, He existed prior to His conception, birth, and incarnation. As Micah 5 tells us, His comings and goings are of old, even from eternity. Jesus once shocked the Pharisees by telling them that He had been alive in Abraham's day. They asked incredulously, "You're not even fifty years old, and you were alive in Abraham's day!" But Jesus was alive before the foundation of the world. From everlasting to everlasting, He is God.

The Appearance of Christ

The next stage of his history is given in verse 2: That life appeared.... The eternal and preexistent God the Son became the Son of Man and was born on Christmas Day. This is one of the great themes of 1 John—God was manifested, God became a man, He showed up, He appeared. I don't have time to trace it through this letter, but I wish I did. It's exciting for me to see John's excitement. Even as an old man, as he presumably was when he wrote this letter, the apostle John had never gotten over this fact. He'd never lost his sense of wonder or amazement. God showed up on the human scene! He appeared. That which was from the beginning, 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. This life appeared; we have seen it!

In my kitchen I have a funnel, and from time to time I pull it out of the drawer when I need to pour liquid from a large container into a smaller one. I don't use it very often, but I'm very thankful for it when I do need it. Now, think of Christmas as a giant historical funnel. Up above it all is the immensity and eternity of God Himself—His perfect holiness, His illimitable honor and glory, His endless infinity, His matchless wisdom, His unfailing love, His omnipresence and omnipotence and omniscience. All there is of the God who fills the universe and beyond to the edges of reality and beyond. He is the King eternal, immortal, invisible, who dwells in inapproachable light.

At the incarnation of Jesus Christ all there is of God was funneled into the womb of a Jewish virgin, and God became flesh and dwelt among us. Jesus Christ is God Himself in a form that we can look at and see and touch and feel and handle and hear. And all the fullness of the Godhead dwells in Him in bodily form.

This life appeared!

The Proclamation of Christ

The third stage of the history of Christ is His proclamation. Look at verse 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.

Jesus ascended to heaven having given His followers a commission to take His message to the ends of the earth. The word proclamation here isn't just limited to the kind of preaching we do on Sunday morning. It has to do with the fact that our message is too wonderful to keep to ourselves, so we're all finding ways to share it with those around us. David Garrison, in his book *Church Planting Movements*, tells the story of the remarkable growth of the churches in Cambodia following the horrendous war that occurred there. One missiologist asked a church leader to explain how they had managed to start so many churches. The Cambodian Christian simply smiled and pointed to a woman standing nearby. The woman ran a small kiosk in the village market where she sold vegetables. Every so often someone from a neighboring village will come to buy something. This woman would always ask exactly the same question: "Do you have a Baptist church in your village?" Usually the person would ask, "What is a Baptist church?" The woman would reply, "Next week we will come and tell you about it."

The woman specifically learned to ask, "Do you have a Baptist church?" not because she was an ardent denominationalist, but because it caused the person to ask, "What is a Baptist church," giving her the open door she was looking for.

The following week, the woman and some other Christians would arrive in the village, and each one would share how Jesus changed his or her life, and at the end of the presentation they ask, "Now would you like to have a Baptist church in your village?" And in village after village, the Cambodians welcomed the message, learned about Jesus, and received Him as Savior. As a result, a wave of church planting initiatives have spread through that section of Cambodia.

Now we can do that. All of us can find ways of presenting our Lord Jesus to others. We can invite them to our Christmas productions, to our Easter services, to our outreach events. We can share our testimonies. We can write letters, distribute information, and send missionaries. We are living in this stage of the life and history of Christ.

The Joy of Christ

That leads to the last stage of our Lord's history—as He is proclaimed, He brings joy! Verse 4 says: We write this to make our joy complete. There is great controversy among Greek scholars as to whether this should be translated as "our joy" or "your joy." But

even those who follow the NIV translation here—our joy—say that the word our is plural and it's an inclusive word that reaches out to envelop both writer and speaker.

Surely and without a doubt, John was thinking back to what the Lord Jesus Christ had said in the Upper Room as recorded in John 15: I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

As we hear and respond to the proclamation of Jesus, it brings joy into our lives and we have the kind of peace that says, "It is well with my soul."

I read the other day about a psychiatrist who received a postcard from one of his patients who was on vacation. The patient wrote, "I am having a wonderful time. I wish you come be here to tell me why."

Well, those who know Jesus Christ as Savior have a wonderful time, and we know why. He brings us good tidings of great joy which shall be unto all people, for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord.

Joy to the world the Lord is come,
Let earth receive Her King,
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And heaven and nature sing.

Have you made room for Him in your heart? During this Christmas season of 2006, I hope you'll dedicate yourself fully to the Lord Jesus Christ, God in flesh, Christ by highest heaven adored, Christ the everlasting Lord.

That which was from the beginning...
This life appeared....
We proclaim to you...
That your joy may be complete!

THE LIGHTS OF CHRISTMAS

1 John 1:5-10

This week I read a rather sad and distressing report on the radio that children shouldn't be allowed to play under Christmas trees because of the danger of absorbing lead from the Christmas lights. Well, I know there's danger in everything, and I don't want to be an irresponsible parent or grandparent; but I must have absorbed a lot of lead when I was a child, because some of my earliest memories have to do with playing under the Christmas tree that stood proudly in the living room of our house on Riverview Drive in Elizabethton.

Every year my dad, prodded on by my mother, would pull out last year's lights and we'd untangle them on the living room floor, which took awhile, and then we'd plug them up. They almost never lit up, because if just one bulb was burned out, it cut the circuit to the entire strand. So we'd go through every bulb and make sure it was screwed in tightly. If all the bulbs were screwed in tightly and the string still didn't light up, then we'd have to take a bulb we knew to be good and start going from bulb to bulb, trying to figure out which one had died during the previous twelve months. If we got to the end of the strand and it still didn't light up, we'd have real problems, because that meant two or more bulbs had burned out.

At any rate, we'd finally get one strand going, then we'd start working on the next one. It was quite a process, but to me it was as exciting as could be. It was a sure sign that it was beginning to look a lot like Christmas.

Now, of course, times have changed. The trees come with the bulbs already pre-installed!

Where did this tradition come from--cutting down a tree, dragging it indoors, propping it up, and bedecking it with hundreds of lights?

In Scandinavia in ancient times, during the dark ages when the winters were so harsh and the days were so short—sometimes only three hours of daylight in these northern reaches—the evergreen tree was revered as a symbol that even in the middle of the frozen

darkness of winter, there was still life and hope in the world. In Viking regions, the people would cut down an evergreen tree and bring it into their homes as a source of encouragement during the middle of winter.

In the 600s, St. Boniface, a monk from the British Isles, traveled across the European continent as a missionary. He established hundreds of churches, and he reportedly used the evergreen tree as an object lesson and symbol of eternal life. He said that even the harsh winter couldn't kill that tree, and its triangular shape stood for the three persons of the Godhead who worked together in providing our salvation.

For several centuries afterward, every winter in France and Germany, people would cut down trees and bring them indoors. It created a celebratory atmosphere in the home, served as an illustration of God's eternal life, and the fragrance of the tree provided an aroma during the shut-up months of winter. The trees, however, were displayed a little differently in these crowded little huts and hovels across Europe—they were hung upside down from the ceiling.

Another custom developed during the Dark Ages. Evergreen trees were cut down and brought into the churches where apples were hung on them. They were called Paradise trees, and they were used to teach children the story of the Garden of Eden. Very often, church dramas were performed, with children playing the parts of Adam and Eve and the animals and the serpent, and the message of salvation through Christ was taught.

In the year 1510, in Latvia, someone placed a small fir tree on a table and it was actually called a Christmas tree, and the trend slowly began to catch on. People began sitting their winter trees on the floor instead of hanging them from the ceiling.

According to legend, it was Martin Luther who really catapulted the Christmas tree into modern popularity. He was reportedly walking home one night when he was struck by the beauty of the stars as they twinkled through the branches of the pine forest, and he wanted to replicate the impression in his home. He cut down a tree, brought it in, and began tying candle-holders and candles onto the branches. Luther used the tree as an object lesson, telling them that its evergreen color didn't fade just as God's love never fades, and His hope shines through the darkness like the candles flickering through the limbs of the tree.

The custom spread from German to England when England's Queen Victoria married Prince Albert of Germany; and the custom spread to America by Germans who immigrated to Pennsylvania at about the same time.

Then in 1851, a man named Mark Carr had a good idea. He was a New York businessman who took a huge horse-drawn sled into the Catskills, chopped down scores of evergreen trees, and hauled them back to New York City where he sat them out in a vacant lot and sold everyone one of them. That was the first Christmas tree lot in America.

About 10 years later, in the 1860s, a German company began making the first commercial Christmas tree ornaments in history—beautiful hand-blown glass ornaments, and Christmas trees became even more popular and even more beautiful.

Of course, there was a serious problem. The Christmas tree came to represent an extremely dangerous fire hazard, and no one knows how many homes were destroyed by fire, how many city blocks were consumed by the flames, or how many people lost their lives by Christmas trees set on fire by candles.

In the late 1800s, Thomas Edison invented the light bulb, and three years later one of his associates, a man named Edward Johnson, decided to apply that new invention to the Christmas tree. The year was 1882, and the Johnsons lived in New York. As they decorated their Christmas tree that year, Johnson poured all his creative energy into producing a string of eighty small, brightly-colored lights. They were so much brighter than the old-fashioned candles, and so much more colorful, and they burned for so much longer than the little candles. As the lights burned through the front window of the Johnson home, crowds of people lined up to gasp in wonder and amazement. It seemed magical, especially after Johnson developed a system for making them flash on and off. People knocked on the front door day and night, wanting to see the lights more closely. Newspapers sent reports all over the country, and reporters marched, one after another, into and out of the Johnson home.

Electric Christmas tree lights didn't become a commercial item, however, because almost no one except Thomas Edison, Edward Johnson, and a few other families had electricity in their homes. Furthermore, it was very, very expensive. A string of bulbs like the ones Johnson invented cost over \$100 just in materials—which is more money than some Americans made in a year.

Gradually, however, as more and more people got electricity into their homes, Christmas lights became more popular, and by 1910, General Electric introduced a string of bulbs that could be purchased for about twelve dollars. That was 97 years ago, and Christmas lights have been household items ever since.

Well, nothing expresses the sentiment of Christmas better than lights. Look at our text today—verse 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.

Now that's a little unusual for us. I've grown up in church and I've heard the Gospel all my life. I've preached the Gospel for almost forty years, if you go back to my very first sermon. Suppose you asked me to finish this statement: This is the message of the Christian faith. Our message is—what? I would say, it is Jesus Christ. It is God-made-man for the redemption of the human race. I would say it is God's loving the world so much that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

And, of course, that's a correct answer. But that is not the way John puts it. He said: "This is the message we have heard from Him and declare to you: God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all." This is a very unusual verse because it evidently gives us one of the statements of Jesus not recorded in the Gospels. The "Him" in this verse apparently refers to Jesus Himself. John was saying, in effect, "I want to tell you something that I heard Jesus say—God is light and in Him there is no darkness at all." Now, we don't have those words recorded for us in the Gospels, so John was evidently reaching back into his memory banks and telling us something that Jesus said, of which we were previously unaware. And notice that as it comes to relating the Gospel of the Lord Jesus, this is His beginning point—that God is light.

Now this is a good time for a little lesson in grammar. Sometimes when we see a word such as light, it is articular and other times it is anarthrous. If the word is articular, it has an article in front of it—the light, the truth, the way. If it is anarthrous, it does not have an article such as the word the in front of it. Just light, life, way.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus said, "I am the light of the world." That was articular. "I am the light of the world." That speaks to His function. He came to bring light into this world. But here in 1 John, it doesn't say that God is the light. It is anarthrous: God is light. That speaks to His very essence and essential being. Not just in His function, but in His divine nature itself, God is light.

What did John mean by that? Well, as we saw during our heaven series of sermons, God dwells in inapproachable light in a literal sense. But here in 1 John, the author seems to be referring to the intellectual and moral perfections of God.

Notice the phrase I'm using—the intellectual and moral perfections of God. God is intellectually perfect, and God is morally perfect. What do we call intellectual perfection? Truth. What do we call moral perfection? Holiness. God possesses the intellectual perfection of truth, and He possesses the moral perfection of holiness.

In His very essence, nature, and essential being, God is true and God is holy.

Now why do I suggest that the word light in this passage is a metaphor for truth and holiness? Well, let's begin with truth. Look at the passage again: 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... If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. John is very concerned here about the integrity of God's truthfulness.

As far as holiness is concerned, it isn't just an abstract truth that John is talking about, but he talks about walking in darkness and living by the truth. The work walk has the implication of behavior and morality. So that's where the concept of holiness comes in.

Truth and holiness are simply two sides of the same coin. God is utterly truthful and in Him is no shadow of deceit; and God is utterly holy, and in Him is no shadow of sin. So we can interpret this passage to say:

This is the message we have heard from Him and declare to you: God is a God of absolute truth and absolute holiness; in Him there is no error at all and no impurity at all.

Now, notice that John says this is the beginning of the Gospel. The Gospel doesn't begin with the love of God, although He is going to talk a lot about that later in his book. It doesn't begin with the forgiveness of God, although He's going to talk a lot about that later in this chapter; but the Gospel begins with the truth and holiness of God. Why is that the starting point?

It is the beginning of the Gospel because it establishes our need. Until we understand something about the absolute truth and utter holiness of God, it's very hard for us to appreciate our desperate need for salvation.

Let me give you a couple of simple illustrations. When I was a small child, I had a friend I played with almost every day. One of our

favorite diversions was to make mud pies. We'd find the best dirt we could find in the ditch or the garden, collect little containers full of water, and make mud pies of varying sizes which we'd decorate with flowers or sprigs of grass and bake in the hot sun. We were very proud of our mud cakes, even though we never ate one or sold one or did anything with one of them.

But then I had a relative who got married at our house in our living room, and the wedding cake was something to behold—three tiers, as I recall, each one on little columns, glistening with white icing with intricate and graceful designs. On top of the whole thing was a miniature bride and groom holding hands and looking longingly into each others' eyes.

What if I had wanted to bring my muddy hands and muddy feet into that wedding and cover the wedding table with my mud pies and mud cakes? My mother would have had a fit. Compared to that beautiful glistening wedding cake, my mud cakes were filthy and inedible and unwanted.

I'm sure you see the point. Compared to God's glistening perfections—His awful holiness and absolute truthfulness and dazzling splendor of light, all our righteous acts and best efforts are nothing more than pies and cakes of mud.

Let me give you another illustration. Several years ago, a couple invited Katrina and me to their home for supper. They lived in a nice home in a nice part of town, and we were under the impression that it was a casual meal, a cook-out. It was a hot day in the middle of the summer, and for some reason we assumed it was very informal. I don't remember what Katrina wore, but I wore a pair of shorts and some kind of casual shirt. When we arrived, it wasn't a cookout at all. It was a gourmet supper in the formal dining room, and the other couple was dressed to be killed. I still remember how uncomfortable I felt, knowing I was not dressed appropriately to the occasion.

That's an inadequate illustration, but that's a little of how we should feel in God's presence. The prophet said that in the light of His holiness, all our righteous acts are as filthy rags.

A lot of people today think they're pretty well-off spiritually, that they're probably going to heaven on the basis of their efforts to live a pretty good life. If we were to go out with a camera and microphone and do man-on-the-street interviews, asking people if they thought they were going to heaven or hell, many people would say heaven. And if we asked them why, they would say they are trying to live a good life.

But we can't compare ourselves with ourselves; we have to see ourselves in the transcendent light of God's holiness. And when we do, we no longer think of ourselves as clean and upright, we're covered with the mud and muck and mire. We no longer think of ourselves as well-dressed; we're clothed in rags. And that's when we begin to understand our need of salvation and the riches of God's infinite mercy.

John brings that home to us in this passage by giving us a series of six implications, each of which begins with the same word. It's the conditional word if. I don't have time to belabor these, but let me at least read them with you and say just a word about each one, beginning again with his foundational verse 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. That's the premise.

Now the first implication—verse 6: If we claim to have fellowship with Him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. In other words, don't try to claim you're perfect. We're all sinners, and if we claim otherwise we are lying and not living by the truth.

The second if is in verse 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 every sin.

I learned something as I studied for this message. I have always assumed that the phrase "one another" referred to us as Christians, and I've preached it that way many times. If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another as Christians. But the grammatical structure lends itself to a slightly different interpretation. It means that if we acknowledge our sin and begin living in the light of His truth and purity, we have fellowship with God.

If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we—that is, God and ourselves—have fellowship with each other. We can be friends with God, we can be reconciled to Him, we can have a vital relationship with Him who created us; and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son purifies us from all sin.

But now, here's the question. Does that mean once we've come to Christ and been purified by sin that we will never again sin in this

life and on this earth? Are we free from the influence of sin just because we've been purified from every sin by the blood of Christ? No. We are eternally forgiven, but in this world we will struggle with sin. That's the third if.

This third if is in verse 8: If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

So what do we do as Christians when commit a sin or fall into a sinful habit? Look at verse 9: If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. This is written to tell us as Christians what to do when we blow it. When we sin, it doesn't mean that we've lost our salvation, but it does mean that we've lost the joy of obedience. We've lost our abiding sense of God's unbroken fellowship. But there's a solution—we must confess our sins to Him and He will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

There's one thing, however, that we must not do. We mustn't deny our sin or lie about it or try to hide it or cover it up. Look at the next if in verse 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.

Instead we should recognize that we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteousness one. That brings us to the sixth and final if-statement, found in chapter 2, verses 1 and 2: My dear children, I write this 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. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

And that includes you. That's why He came, and that's what Christmas is all about.

I read this week that there's a village in England named Barrow, and this year they wanted to invite a real hero to turn on the Christmas tree lights in the town center. They looked high and low, and finally they found their town hero. It is a three-year-old boy named Jake Ellis. And why is he a hero? He has battled cancer twice and undergone chemotherapy thirteen times. He missed his first two Christmases because he was in the hospital, but this year they showed up for him with a chauffeur-driven limousine, and imagine that little fellow's excitement as he turned on the Christmas lights for all the town.

Jesus came as a helpless and downtrodden child, delivered to Bethlehem not in a chauffeur-driven limousine but on the back of a donkey and inside the womb of a virgin. He was so small and tiny, just a child; and yet He turned on the Christmas lights for all the world.

He can turn the lights on in your life, too. For if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

1 John 1:7,9 Sermon

Our Scripture today is from the last half of 1 John 1, and the first couple of verses of 1 John 2, and this passage contains two of our 100 memory verses—verses 7 and 9:

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.

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make Him out to be a liar and His Word has no place in our lives.

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. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 1:5-2:2)

Recently I saw a sermon by a preacher whom I admire, and the title was: If I Am a Christian, Why Do I Still Sin? As I was looking at that sermon, I came across a television program by another preacher dealing with the question: If I am a Christian, why do I still want to sin? Then I came across a book on the subject of overcoming stubborn sins, and this is what the author said in the introduction:

If I am a Christian, why do I keep struggling with this sin? Why can't I get victory over this stupid thing for more than a few days at a time? It's like it owns me. I've tried everything—read the books, prayed the prayers, gone to the seminars—but I always end up right back here in the same place, hanging my head in guilt and defeat and leaning on God's forgiveness one more time.

Will I ever beat this problem, or am I cursed to fight a losing battle with it until heaven?

...It may be those words that just fly out of your mouth whenever you're with a certain person. Or maybe it's where your mind—and your eyes—go whenever you're around someone of the opposite sex. Maybe it's what happens to you when that car keeps breaking down or that in-law keeps pushing your buttons. Maybe you've been trying to kick a habit, or you're facing an attitude you just can't change. (Clark Gerhart, *Say Goodbye to Stubborn Sin* (Lake Mary, FL: Strang Communications, 2005), from the introduction.)

These sample statements from books and sermons are hitting on a theme that's as old as the book of 1 John—what is an authentic Christian experience? If I am a Christian, why can't I live for Christ the way I want to? The way I know I should? Why do I keep struggling with these shortcomings in my life? That's one of the problems John addresses in this little book.

Background

Our best records from history tell us that after the Lord's resurrection and ascension, the Apostle John kept his headquarters in the city of Jerusalem until about the year AD 67. And then he fled with the masses who were escaping the city prior to its destruction by the Romans. Apparently John traveled with other Christians to the city of Ephesus, in modern-day Turkey, where a very strong and vibrant church existed. There in Ephesus, John settled down as a sort of Elder Statesman of Christianity. He became the last surviving member of the original band of Apostles. He likely wrote this letter of First John as a letter to churches in the surrounding region. It's even possible that this letter represents a sermon that we would have heard him preach if we could go back in time and visit a worship service in which he was speaking.

Now, the letter of 1 John rambles a lot, or it appears to. I think the ESV Study Bible puts it very well when it explains: The rhetoric of 1 John is challenging. John rarely sustains a clear line of argument for more than a few lines or verses. He wanders from subject to subject, unencumbered by any discernible outline. Yet if he has no plan, he does follow a pattern: after leaving a subject he often returns to it. His style of thought has been termed circular rather than linear. It has also been termed symphonic, in that he states themes, moves away from them, and then revisits them with variations.

Although this is an epistle or letter (and it was recognized as a letter by the early church), it doesn't have some of the common characteristics of a letter. It has no normal opening salutation or conclusion, and there are few personal references. It's more like a theological pamphlet, or, more interestingly, like a sermon. So this might be the closest thing we have to actually sitting down and listening to the old Apostle John speak to a group of people. It's like sitting at his feet and listening to a rambling sermon without a clear outline but with constantly recurring themes.

There are a couple of passages, however, that give us a little bit of the background. In 1 John 2:18-19, John talked about the number of people who were apparently abandoning Christianity and reverting back to secularism or paganism.

- 1 John 2:18-19: Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.

In other words, there was reason to doubt the authenticity of a lot of professing Christians who were apparently leaving the church and abandoning the faith. It was confusing, because some who had seemed to be genuine Christians evidently were not genuine at all. But now look at the end of the letter:

- 1 John 5:11-13: And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life, and He who does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.

This is addressing the opposite problem. While some who appeared to be Christians really weren't, there were some who really were Christians, but who were afraid they weren't. They were having doubts about their salvation. So this was the situation that concerned John: Not everyone who claimed to be a Christian really was a Christian, but, on the other hand, some who had doubts about their salvation really were saved.

So how do you recognize authentic Christianity? How do you know if you're an authentic Christian—especially if you struggle with addictive or sinful patterns in life? That brings us back to our opening question: If I am a Christian, why do I still struggle with sin?

Here is the answer. If we are truly Christians—if we have authentic Christianity, if we are being delivered from the grip of sin in our lives—there are four things that we need to appreciate and appropriate, four things we need to acknowledge.

1. We Acknowledge God's Purity

1 John 1: 5

First, we acknowledge God's purity. Notice how John begins this passage, in 1 John 1:5: This is the message we have heard from Him and declare to you: God is light; in Him there is no darkness at all.

It's incredible that John would summarize the message of Jesus in this way. He was the last surviving member of the Apostolic Band, of the original twelve disciples. He had previously spent three years listening to our Lord Jesus teach, preach, counsel and instruct. And he summarized Jesus' message this way—God is light; in Him there is no darkness at all. The beginning point of the Gospel is the holiness and purity of God. We call the Gospel the Good News—but it's really a message of Good News—Bad News—Good News. The Good News is that God is holy. There is a baseline of morality in this universe; there is true goodness at the heart of the cosmos. The Bad News is that we've all violated and fallen short of that holiness. The Good News is that God has provided a way through Jesus Christ for us to be forgiven and re-united in eternal fellowship with Him. So John is starting with that initial piece of Good News—God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all.

Light here is a symbol for holiness, for moral perfection. In other words, God Himself is the moral baseline for the universe. There is an absolute right and wrong. There is an absolute moral code in the cosmos. It is found in the holy character of a morally and perfectly pure God.

Everything in this universe is good to the extent that it conforms to the character of God, and evil to the degree in which it violates His character. We are good to the extent that we are like God, and we are evil to the extent that we fall short of or run counter to His character. The only way to morally evaluate our society or our own souls is in the light of His holiness.

I once knew a lady who was told that her house was going to be used for videotaping; an interview was going to take place in her living room. She dusted and scrubbed and cleaned until she thought everything was perfect. But when the technicians set up their bright lights and turned them on, she was appalled to see how much she had missed – dirt and stains and dust she hadn't noticed until the bright lights were turned on.

We may think we're pretty good or that we live in a pretty good world until we evaluate it in the light of the moral essence of God, but the moral essence of God is the blazing, burning, blinding light in which everything else is to be evaluated.

The world around us has lost its concept of sin because it has lost its concept of God. If you dispense with God, you dispense with moral absolutes; and if you dispense with moral absolutes, you do away with all sense of moral right and wrong. That means right and wrong are whatever we want them to be, and that effectively does away with sin.

But authentic Christianity begins with this—that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. That leads to the second insight that John offers.

2. We Acknowledge His Pardon

1 John 1: 6-10

If none of us can be righteous in God's sight by our own efforts, then we have to depend on His mercy, His cleansing, and His forgiveness. We have to acknowledge our sinfulness and His cleansing.

So John goes on to say, beginning in verse 6: If we claim to have fellowship with Him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. 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.

This is one of our 100 memory verses for one simple reason—it is a powerful statement of the pardoning grace of Jesus Christ. Many years ago there was an American evangelist named Charles Finney who preached from this verse during a revival meeting in Detroit, Michigan. Afterward a man came up to him and asked him to come to his house and to talk with him about his soul. Finney agreed. The pastor knew something about this man, and he advised Finney not to go, but the evangelist had already given his word. The man said he was intrigued because Finney had preached from the verse: “The blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanses us from all sin.” So Finney went with the man.

They walked three blocks, down a side street, into an ally, and through a darkened door into what appeared to be the back of an establishment. The man reached into his pocket and pulled out a revolver. He said, “I don’t intend to do you any harm... Brother Finney, you see this revolver? It has killed four people... Is there any hope for a man like me?”

Finney looked at the gun, looked at the man, and said, “The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin.”

The man went on to explain that he owned a saloon in that building and he sold every kind of liquor and everything else to every kind of person, sometimes taking the last coin from a man’s pockets knowing their families were going hungry and their children were suffering. He said, “Brother Finney, is there any hope for a man like me?”

Finney said, “The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin.”

The man continued, “Another question, Brother Finney. In back of this other partition is a gambling joint and it is as crooked as sin and Satan. There isn’t a decent wheel in the whole place. It is all loaded and crooked. A man leaves the saloon with some money left in his pocket, and we take his money away from him in there. Men have gone out of that gambling place to commit suicide.... Is there any hope for a man like me?”

Finney said, “The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin.”

Then the man went on to tell how he had cheated on his wife and broken the heart of his family. Not only that, he had been abusive to his wife and had beaten her. He had been abusive to his daughter. He had even pushed his little girl in anger and knocked her into a red-hot stove, causing terrible burns. He hung his head and said, “Brother Finney, is there any hope for a man like me?”

Finney took the man by the shoulders and said, “Oh, son, what a black story you have to tell! But God says, ‘The blood of Jesus Christ, his Son, cleanses us from all sin.’”

Charles Finney left, and that night the man took the swivel chair from his desk, went into the bar and smashed all the barrels and bottles of liquor, went into his gambling den and smashed all the implements of chance, and he went home and humbly begged his wife and daughter with many tears and much sorrow to forgive him. The next night, all three came to Finney’s meeting, listened to the Gospel, and walked down the aisle of the church, giving themselves to the Lord Jesus Christ. He discovered for himself the power of the one who said, “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.”

This is truly a life-changing verse that can be of enormous help to us. Since we’re focusing our memory efforts on this verse, let me share it with you phrase-by-phrase. It begins with the word If...

That implies a condition. All the sentences in this part of 1 John begin that way:

- Verse 6: If we claim to have fellowship with Him...
- Verse 7: If we walk in the light...
- Verse 8: If we claim to be without sin...
- Verse 9: If we confess our sins...
- Verse 10: If we claim we have not sinned...

John is presenting different options or scenarios and leading us to their logical implications or conclusions...

If we walk...

The word “walk” is often used in the Bible as a metaphor for “living.” It has to do with our daily behavior, our daily words and actions

and attitudes.

If we walk in the light...

The word "light," as we've seen, has to do with moral purity and holiness. So this is talking about conducting our daily lives as a reflection of God's holiness.

If we walk in the light as He is in the light...

If our lives are increasingly Christ-like.

...we have fellowship with one another...

Now, here I want to be honest and tell you that my understanding of this phrase has changed three times. I used to think that the phrase "one another" meant you and me—that if you as a Christian and I as a Christian are both walking in the light, then we have a basis of fellowship with one another. And, of course, that is a true statement; but is that really what this specific verse is saying?

And then I came to the conclusion that the "one another" here, in the specific context of 1 John 1, was referring to us and God. You see verses 5 and 6 would lead us to believe that: 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.... The context is our fellowship with God. The blood of Jesus Christ makes fellowship with God possible. If we walk in the light as Jesus is in the light, then God and I have fellowship with one another.

Now, as I've studied this verse again in preparation for this message, I've come to a third conclusion—that it is both, all of the above. If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have a one-and-only basis for fellowship with God and with other Christians.

And the thing that has changed my mind is noticing what verse 3 says: 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.

Our fellowship is with the Father, the Son, and with each other. Holiness leads to harmony. Purity leads to partnership. Following leads to fellowship, with both God and others. If we walk in the light as Christ is in the light, we have fellowship with God and with one another...

...and the blood of Jesus Christ...

This is the life-blood that was drained out of our Lord's battered body on the cross. The Bible keeps bringing this subject up. It's graphic and gruesome, and yet somehow it's glorious. There is power in the blood. The core of the theology of the Bible has to do with the sacrificial blood of an innocent victim being offered as a sacrifice of atonement for those who are guilty.

The blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, purifies...

It doesn't just forgive; there is a purifying effect, a cleansing action. There is a purification process that goes on. We are progressively being purified...

...from all sin.

Notice that little word "all." You cannot fall into a sin that is beyond the reach of the blood of Christ. You cannot possibly suffer from a guilt which He cannot forgive.

Let me tell you another story that illustrates this. Back in 1979, a debate was planned and sponsored by a radio station in Tulsa, Oklahoma, between the head of the Oklahoma NAACP and the Grand Dragon of the Oklahoma KKK. The head of the NAACP was named Wade Watts, and he was an African-American preacher. The head of the Ku Klux Klan was a man named Johnny Lee Clary.

They arrived for the radio show, and Watts put out his hand to greet Clary, but the latter refused to shake it. Watts tried again and said, "Hello, Mr. Clary, I'm Reverend Watts. Before we go in, I just want you to know that I love you and Jesus loves you."

The debate went as expected, but it ended when Watts quoted some Scripture and asked Clary about his personal beliefs. The

Klansman said, "I'm not listening to any more," and he walked off the set.

As they left the building, the two men met again. Watts had his little baby girl in his arms, and he said to the man, "This is my daughter, Tia. You say that you hate all black people. Tell me how you can hate this baby."

Carey brushed by and walked off, but Watts called to him, "I'm going to love you and pray for you, Mr. Clary, whether you like it or not."

Well, Clary did not like it, and for the next ten years he caused problems. Rev. Watts was harassed with threatening phone calls, broken windows, a cross was burned on his lawn, and even his church was burned down. Finally the highway patrol had to escort his children to school. But he kept right on displaying Jesus Christ, loving and praying for Johnny Lee Clary.

He had a terrific sense of humor. On one occasion, he and his family were eating at a roadside diner and suddenly they found themselves surrounded by Klansmen. The Imperial Wizard said to him, "Whatever you do to the chicken on your plate, the Klan will do to you."

Wade looked at the KKK members standing around him wearing their threatening shirts and with fierce scowls in their faces. And he calmly picked up his chicken and kissed it. Well, needless to say, the Klansmen didn't follow through on their promise, but even they had to break out in laughter over Watt's response to their treats.

Meanwhile, Clary's life was falling apart. He had become the national leader of the KKK, but his wife became an informant for the FBI, and then she divorced him, he lost custody of his baby girl, and he was overwhelmed with hatred as he tried to deal with the various white supremacist groups he was involved with—everything from skinheads to neo-Nazis. He was arrested here in Tennessee on a weapon's violation. He finally got sick of it all, resigned from everything, went to his shabby apartment, and put a loaded gun to his head.

But on his bookshelf, he saw an old Bible like the one Rev. Watts had carried with him to the radio station years before. He opened it and found the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. He read it three times, then fell on his knees and gave himself to the Lord Jesus as best he could.

He quietly began attending church, and one day he decided to phone Wade Watts. The preacher recognized his voice at once and before it was all over, Johnny Lee Clary stood in the pulpit of Wade Watts' church and shared how Jesus Christ has changed him, transformed, him, and cleansed him of all sin
(<http://www.johnnyleeclary.com/files/page.php?p=87>)

So this isn't just a theoretical thing or a theological set of concepts. This is a living reality. 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.

Now let's continue. John goes on to write: If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Perhaps there is a sin into which you've repeatedly fallen. Don't ever give up. Don't ever let that sin go unconfessed. If we know Jesus Christ as our Savior, we don't lose our salvation every time we sin, but we do lose something of the sweetness we should have with our Heavenly Father.

When my girls were little, if they did something bad they were still my little girls; nothing could change that. But there was some stress that came into our relationship until things were made right again.

The purpose of confession is not to be saved all over again, but to keep our relationship with God happy and strong.

There is a tremendous power to confession. To kneel humbly and say, "Dear God, I know that I have done this thing, but I hate it and I confess it and I ask you to help me overcome it" – that's a powerful force in this universe... even if we have to do it over and over and over.

- Proverbs 24:16 says (my paraphrase): A righteous person may fall a multitude of times, but he will keep getting up; but the wicked fall and stay down.

- Psalm 138:8 says: The Lord will perfect that which concerns me.
- Philippians 1:6 says that we can be confident that He who has begun a good work in us will complete it until the day of Christ Jesus.

The Gospel is this: God is light; and in Jesus Christ and through His blood we can walk in the light. We appreciate and appropriate His purity and His pardon.

3. We Acknowledge His Precepts

1 John 2:1

But now, John is going to introduce a third insight. We have to acknowledge His precepts. This is our secret weapon against the sins that so easily beset us—the Word of God. If we’re going to live in consistent victory, we have to acknowledge His purity and His pardon, but we also have to acknowledge His precepts. We have to study, learn, memorize, and apply His Word to our lives. Look at verse 10 and verse 1 of the next chapter: If we claim to have sinned, we make Him out to be a liar and His Word has no place in our lives. My dear children, I write this so that you will not sin...

I write this so that you will not sin.... The Book of 1 John was written as a sin-retardant, and what is true of 1 John is true for the rest of the Bible.

We have the Word in our lives. We have a Book that God has written so that by studying it we will not sin. Our greatest weapon against those besetting sins is the power of the Word of God.

John wrote this letter of 1 John, and the Lord gave us this book and 65 others, so that we will not sin. The Bible is a sin-retardant. It is a sin-restrainer. As we read and study and memorize God’s Word, we have ammunition for those stubborn sins.

4. We Acknowledge His Protection

John 2:1b-2

Finally, we have to acknowledge His protection. John knows that we aren’t going to be perfect in this world, that we’re occasionally going to foul up, to fall, to sin. In chapter 1, he tells us what we should do about it—we should confess it. In chapter 2, he tells us what Christ does about it. He comes to our defense before the Father’s throne.

If anyone does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.

“One who speaks in our defense” is a legal term—an advocate, a defense attorney.

The Bible teaches us that Satan is the “accuser of the brethren.” There are examples in the Old Testament of Satan accusing people before God in heaven, trying to destroy their reputation and their place in the Beloved.

- Job, in Job 1
- Joshua, in Zechariah 3

Jesus is our defense attorney. He pleads of our behalf.

- 1 John 2:1-2
- Hebrews 7:25
- Romans 8:31-37

So as we’re confessing our sins here below, Jesus is interceding for us with His precious blood up above. That’s the secret of our victory.

Many years ago, in the 1980s, we had a young man come and share his testimony with us on a Sunday night. His name was Van Johnson, and he was a quadriplegic. He grew up in a little town here in Middle Tennessee, and he broke his neck during a high school football game. He heard his neck snap just as he made the tackle. When the players unstacked, he was unable to move;

and at age 15, he found himself permanently paralyzed.

Van told us how he embraced Christ as Savior while flat on his back, and he began growing as a Christian. His spiritual progress was marked by several critical junctures. One of them occurred one day while Van, lying in bed, was struck by a missile of depression and self-pity. In his written account, he told of one terrible moment when he just lost control of himself:

Anger raged within me in mighty waves. I felt I was drowning. I wanted to kick, to flail my arms, to scream. Tears of anger and pity began to pour from my eyes. "You can't even wipe your tears away," I told myself. I beat my head against the mattress. "Maybe this will cause me to fall out of bed," I reasoned. "Then I'll be on the floor where I want to be."

Mom heard the commotion and came into my room to comfort me. "Van, what's wrong?" I refused to look at her, listen or answer her. Completely exhausted, I just lay there.

Van's rage faded into anguished guilt as he realized his pent-up anger and violent tantrum had been unwise, unhealthy, and dishonoring to God.

The words of 1 John 1:9 came to my mind: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins...." My prayer was this: "God, please forgive me for my stupidity. I have sinned against you through my anger and self-pity. I confess my sins to you."

His sweet presence came to me, and I felt a renewed sense of peace. I felt clean, because I knew as far as Jesus was concerned, it was all over—He would remember the episode no more.

That experience taught me so much about life. I realized that the Christian never needs to stay discouraged or depressed, no matter the circumstances. From that day on, I determined within my heart that I would look away from my problems to see Jesus. This would be my choice. (Adapted from Van Johnson, *Tackle the Impossible* (Melbourne, FL: Dove Christian Books, 1989), passim. particular quotes from pp. 121-125.)

You and I want consistent victory over all known sin. We want an authentic Christian experience. The Lord enables us to choose that very thing, based on:

- His purity
- His pardon
- His precepts
- His protection

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... If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

Legacy of Flowers, Legacy of Faith

1 John 2:15-17

Next week we begin a New Year of Sunday worship services and a new series of Sunday morning messages. I'd like to preach in January and February about the "everyday" aspect of Christianity. Someone said to me once, "Christianity is just so every-day!" Well, the Bible has six wonderful day-by-day passages that I'd like to share with you, and it's a good time to invite your friends to church. Some people want to start the New Year off by getting back into church; so do what you can to invite them.

Today we're coming to the end of our December messages on the traditions and the truths of Christmas. So far, I've shared with you several Christmas traditions and customs whose origins hail from Europe. But on this final Sunday of the year, I'd like to share a Christmas tradition that comes from Latin America, with its origins among the ancient Aztecs.

The Aztecs were probably the first to notice a great and beautiful tree-like shrub that grew about eight feet tall. It turns red in October with a color very much like that of blood; and the Aztecs all but worshipped it because of its striking appearance. It was considered so sacred that the common people were not allowed to touch it, and the Aztecs set it apart from all other plants.

When the Spanish conquistadors rumbled through the land looking for treasures and destroying the indigenous civilizations, they

cared little for the people and had no use for the striking red trees that beautified the area. But later came Catholic priests, many of whom genuinely loved the Aztec people. The Franciscan friars taught people the story of the birth of Christ, and they used simple nativity sets to do so. These nativity scenes came to be decorated with this red Christmas shrub.

One Christmas, according to a legend that arose among the Mexican Catholics, when a nativity scene was set was in the center of some village, a little girl named Pepita came to look at the baby Jesus; but she broke into tears. She explained she had no gift for the Christchild. Someone bent over to comfort her and told her reassuringly that any gift, if given in sincerity and love, would be accepted by Him. She left the mission grounds and walked into the country looking for a gift. By and by she saw some beautiful green weeds alongside the road, and she carefully picked them and brought the back to the manger. As she offered them to baby Jesus, suddenly a change fell over them. According to this legend, the weeds turned to brilliant red, and those attending the services that night believed they had seen a miracle. This story was soon carried across Mexico and throughout Central and South America; and in that way this red flower has been the Mexican symbol for Christmas. Its blooming in October of each year signals the approach of the Christmas season.

Well, that part is legend, but this part is true. In the 1800s there was a preacher's kid in South Carolina, and he was a character. He was a medical doctor, a botanist, a musician, and a diplomat. He was educated in America and Europe and became fluent in multiple languages. When he was about 30 years old, some of the Spanish colonies in Central and South America began revolutionary movements, trying to secure independence from Spain. President James Madison commissioned him as his special representative and sent him to South America to assess the situation.

When Mexico succeeded in gaining independence from Spain, he was named as the first Ambassador from the United States to Mexico. But the ambassador was not an easy man to get along with, and he wanted to step into the middle of Mexican affairs and tell them what to do. He was constantly stirring up trouble, and he meddled in everyone's business from the house servants who took care of his residence to the leaders of the new nation of Mexico.

He was recalled to Washington and, as one biographer put it, "He left Mexico accompanied by a million curses."

But there is one thing he did that has had lasting influence. On Christmas Eve of 1824, he attended services at a small Catholic church and watched the Franciscans adorn the nativity scene with rich red flowers. He was captivated by the color and beauty of these plants. After the service he inquired about the plant and the priests shared the legend of the Christmas plant and gave him some seeds, which he shipped back to his home in South Carolina. Later, after he was recalled from Mexico, he returned to South Carolina and spent the next year working on those seeds. He grew them in his greenhouse and presented them to churches in Charleston as Christmas gifts. They became known by his name; and his name was Joel Poinsett.

He went on to have a distinguished career in government and was elected to the United States House of Representatives, he served in the cabinet of President Martin Van Buren, and he helped found the National Institute for the Promotion of Science, which later became the Smithsonian Institution. But today he is best known for the flower that today bears his name—the Poinsettia.

And that brings us to our lesson on this final day of the year. We may do a lot of things and win a lot of awards and achieve a lot of success. But what do we really want our legacy to reveal? How do you and I want to be remembered when we're gone? What kind of impact do we want to make and what kind of heritage do we want to leave behind? I'd like to ask you to turn with me to the book of 1 John, and to a paragraph that I memorized in childhood. It answers those questions -- 1 John 2:15-17:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.

I'm going to give you the outline I'm going to use for this paragraph so that we can see how John unfolds his argument. In these three verses, we have:

- Ø One Commandment to Follow
- Ø Three Traps to Avoid
- Ø Two Warnings to Remember
- Ø One Way to Live

One Commandment to Follow

First, there's one commandment to follow, and this commandment should be inscribed on the walls of our hearts. It's a five-word

injunction: Do not love the world.

In researching this message, I was surprised to discover how many times John used the term world in his writings. He wrote the Gospel of John, and almost every chapter has some reference to the world. But he doesn't always use his words in exactly the same way. For example, in John 3:16, he used this same word when he wrote, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

In that passage, John tells us that God loves the world; but in this passage He tells us not to love the world. But the term world is used differently here. In John 3, it's referring to the whosoever of this world—to people. But in 1 John 2, it's referring to the character of this world, to this world's philosophy and values. He actually goes on to define his usage of this word, and that leads us to the three traps to avoid.

Three Traps to Avoid

For all that is in the world -- the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life....

The first danger is the lust of the flesh, and that's a pretty literal translation. In the original, John uses a three-word phrase: *πιθυμια τῶς σαρκός*. The first word, *πιθυμια*, means a strong impulse or desire; it has to do with hunger and appetites. The middle word is a definite article meaning of the, and the last word *σαρκός* or *σάρξ*. Literally the desires or appetites or cravings or drives of the flesh.

John is warning us about any physical desire that becomes a dominant or driving force in our lives, so that our actions are dictated by our appetites rather than by the Lord.

The second danger to the soul is the lust of the eyes. These are temptations that come to us through the gateway of our eyesight. It includes everything from pornography to materialism.

The third is the pride of life, the boasting of who we are or what we can accomplish. Over the holidays a polling firm took a survey of British schoolchildren, asking them to name the best things in the world. The very first item on the top of the list was being a celebrity. The second was good looks. The third was being rich. The one-word answer of God was down in tenth place. This is the pride of life and it has seeped into our world so as to saturate even our children.

Recently a reporter for the Tennessean asked me how I keep up with the popular culture, and I said that I scan the covers of the magazines and tabloids at the checkout counter of the grocery store, and if I'm in line for very long I thumb through some of the issues. Everything in them is about pleasure and possessions and sex and money and fame and good looks and celebrities. Those are the controlling aspects of our society today, and we've internalized these values.

The devil is constantly trying to lure us out of God's will, using these three things as bait. I received a letter from a woman this week who asked me to pray for her daughter, and this is what she said: "As a teenager, Penney seemed to be headed in the right direction and down the path God had for her. But around her senior year in high school, she began to change. She made some bad decisions when picking friends. Penney has never had a lot of confidence and even though she is a beautiful girl with a great personality, she somehow still has low self-esteem. She became involved with friends who were not raised as she was and who didn't know the Lord. She moved out on her own, she had her heart broken by a boyfriend. And at the same time our church went through a terrible split and somewhere along the way, Penney just stopped attending church." She fell into alcohol abuse and unholy habits and other things that came close to ruining her life. These are the traps the devil sets for us. This is what happens to us.

Now in this passage, the Lord issues two warnings.

Two Warnings To Remember

First, these traps are not from God. Look at these verses again: Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world...is not of the Father, but is of the world.

Our world is a system of values and goals that excludes the God who created us, who loves us, who knows what is best for us, and who wants to give us the true joys of abundant living.

The second warning is that these allurements are temporary. Verse 17 says: And the world is passing away. This week, James Brown, the godfather of soul music, passed away. One of his most famous songs is entitled "I Feel Good," and he sings I feel good, I knew that I would.... I feel nice, like sugar and spice....

Well, it's great to feel good and to feel nice, but this week James Brown felt sick, went to the hospital, and it slowly dawned on him he was dying. His last words were, "I'm going away tonight!" Then he took three long breaths and tumbled into eternity.

And in one instant, all his fame, all his achievements, all his money, all his music didn't mean a thing as he stood in the presence of God to give an account of his life. The Bible says that the world is passing away and the lusts thereof.

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it.

One Way to Live

But this passage ends by giving us one way to live: ...but he who does the will of God abides forever.

You ask, "How do I do that?" And I'd like to close today's sermon—and another year's worth of sermons—by suggesting a simple four-fold strategy for doing the will of God in your life.

First, take a stand. Determine once and for all that you're going to follow Jesus Christ. Several years ago we had a man come to our church for awhile before moving out of town. One day I asked him how he came to Christ, and he told me, as best as I can remember, that it happened one night when he was driving in snowy conditions somewhere in one of the northern states. He was on an isolated stretch of road, and it was bitterly cold. His car skidded out of control on the ice, slid off the road, and turned upside down. There he was, injured, hanging by his seatbelt, unable to free himself. His engine stalled, and there was no heat coming out of the ventilator. The prospects of anyone finding him were remote, and he thought he was going to die. And then and there he cried out to God and confessed his sins, accepting Jesus Christ as his Savior and Lord. I don't remember exactly how he got out of that jam, but someone came by who rescued him. But that night, he became a follower of Christ. Even though he was suspended upside down, he took a stand.

Now, you don't have to wait for the Lord to turn your life upside down. Just resolve to follow Him now. The key to all the other good decisions in life is to make this one, because it is the most foundational decision we'll ever face.

Second, build a fence. Once you take a stand for Christ, you have to begin living as this passage tells us to, and that means you have to build some fences in your life to separate yourself from the world and its temptation. The Bible says, "Come out from among them and be ye separate." So we have to erect boundaries between ourselves and the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life; and I'm speaking in very practical terms.

I'll give you a simple illustration that happened to me recently. Several months ago, a woman showed up here to see me without an appointment. I agreed to meet her in the conference room. I had never seen her before, but she was well-dressed and seemed a woman of some wealth and sophistication. She was pleasant, but troubled. She looked at me, and she glanced at the open door of the conference room, and she said, "Would you mind if we closed the door?" It was an innocent question. As it turned out, her husband was president of a corporation in another state and they had come to Nashville on business and were staying at a local hotel. They were having a rough spot in their marriage; and with a sense of desperation the woman had gotten in their rental car and driven down the street looking for a church. She needed someone to talk to, but she didn't want people overhearing our conversation, and so she said, "Would you mind if we closed the door?"

"Actually," I said, "I need for us to leave it open. It's just a policy I have. But we can talk quietly and no one will be listening"

She looked perplexed a moment, then she smiled and nodded, and said, "Well, that's actually what I came to talk with you about. I'm very troubled, because I've just found out that my own husband didn't have such a policy."

We have to build fences in various areas of our behavior. It might involve where we go for entertainment, what kind of movies we watch, what sort of people we're with, or what we allow and don't allow on our computer or iPod screens. These are issues of personal purity that we have to think through for ourselves. Teenagers need to do this before they go on their first date. We have to be stand-takers and fence-builders.

Third, close a door. In Matthew 6, Jesus told us to go into a quiet room and close the door behind us so that we could nourish

ourselves in God's presence through prayer and Bible study. If you're going to remain pure in an unholy world, you have to perform the spiritual maintenance on your soul. Recently I read an article by a newspaper columnist named Rosemary Smith who wrote that when she needs cheering up, she reads her paper towels. Her favorite brand of paper towels comes imprinted with sayings, jokes, and proverbs. Well, we all need inspiration for life, but we need a better source than paper towels. We need to shut ourselves in a room every day with some peace and quiet and a little time for personal renewal and replenishment. We've got to feed our faith. The old song says, "Take time to be holy, the world rushes on."

Finally, start a fire. When we take a stand for Christ, build fences in our lives, and learn to spend time with Christ, the outcropping is this: We go into the fire-starting business. We become sanctified fire-starters. If we went around dropping matches everywhere and starting fires in a literal sense, we'd be arrested for arson and sent to prison. But in a spiritual sense, that's exactly what we're supposed to do. Recently I've thought of myself, not as a match-maker, but as a match-dropper. I just light matches and drop them along the way, hoping some of them will kindle a fire. We do this by sharing Christ through our simple deeds, our words, and our attitudes.

Speaking once at Moody Church in Chicago, Dr. Harry Ironside told of a missionary in China who was translating the New Testament into the Chinese language. He was assisted by an eminent Chinese scholar, a Confucianist who had never before been exposed to Christianity. Week after week and month after month they sat side by side, working through the text.

When the project was nearly completed, the missionary told his friend, "You have been of great help to me. I could never have gotten along without you. Now I want to ask you a question. As we have gone together through the New Testament, hasn't the beauty of Christianity touched you? Wouldn't you like to become a Christian?"

The Confucianist replied, "Yes, it does appeal to me. I think that it presents the most wonderful system of ethics that I have ever known. I believe that if I ever saw a Christian, I might become more interested in becoming one myself."

"But," exclaimed the missionary, "I am a Christian!"

"You?" the scholar replied. "You, a Christian? I hope you will not take offence, but I must tell you that I have observed you and listened to you from the beginning. If I understand the New Testament, a Christian is one who follows Jesus, and Jesus said, 'By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.'

"You cannot be a Christian, for I have listened to you as you have talked about others in an unkind way. I have observed, too, that whereas your New Testament says that God will supply all your needs, you do not trust Him. You worry about this and about that, and if your check is a day late you become dreadfully concerned. No, you cannot be a Christian. But I think that if I ever see one, I should like to be one."

The missionary was so rebuked he broke down completely, sobbing out a confession asking God's forgiveness, and he asked for the scholar's forgiveness, too. He was so broken that the Confucianist later remarked, "Well, perhaps I have seen a Christian after all."

When people see you and me do they say, "Perhaps I have seen a Christian after all"? Are you a fire-starter for Christ? This coming year, I want us all to go around this city and around the world dropping matches here and there to see if any of them will catch. Let's do it by our words, by our deeds, by our literature, by our invitations, by our sermons, by our services, by our ministries, by our very lives and attitudes.

In this coming New Year, take a stand, build a fence, close a door, and strike a match. We may never have a flower like a Poinsettia named in our honor; but after all, Jesus said that the flowers fade and the grass withers. He intends for us to leave a lasting legacy for Him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.

A Saint, a Sugar Cane and Another John 3:16

1 John 3 & 4

Many people are familiar with the most famous verse in the Bible, John 3:16; but do you realize that there are two John 3:16s in the

Bible? Today I'd like to show you the other one -- First John 3:16, located near the back of the Bible in the exact middle of the little letter that we call 1 John. It says:

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.

This takes the original John 3:16 a step further, doesn't it? Today I'd like to share with you a man in Christian history who exemplified this, and how he produced a trail of candy that extends down to our own day, and how we should take up his example as we celebrate Christmas in an anti-Christian world.

And I'd like to begin my message by reading a rather ordinary little verse from the book of Acts. You don't need to turn there, but I'm going to put it on the screen. In Acts 21, the apostle Paul was finishing his third missionary tour of the Roman Empire, and he was traveling back to Jerusalem to make a report. In Acts 20, Paul met with elders from the church at Ephesus, and Acts 21:1 says:

After we had torn ourselves away from them, we put out to sea and sailed straight to Cos. The next day we went to Rhodes and from there to Patara. – Acts 21:1

In this verse Paul was traveling back to Jerusalem by water, and he was aboard a ship which landed in Patara, a beautiful seaside port city on the Northern Mediterranean on the coastline of Turkey. Today the town of Patara lies in ruins, but I noticed as I researched this message that its beach has been voted one of the most beautiful beaches in the world. Tourists come far and wide to admire the old Roman ruins of Patara and to enjoy the nearby Mediterranean coast.

Well, Paul and his companions docked in this city of Patara. We don't know how long they stayed or if they did any evangelistic work there; but from this port they caught another ship crossing over to Phoenicia, and so headed on to Jerusalem. But whether directly or indirectly, the ministry (or at least the message) of the apostle Paul reached this city.

Well, 200 years passed, and there lived in the city of Patara a man who owned a fleet of fishing ships. He and his wife were well-to-do, and in the course of time they had a little baby boy whom they named Nicholas. When Nicholas was about 17 years old, his parents both died when an epidemic swept through the city, and Nicholas inherited their fortune. This young man, however, knew Jesus and he felt God leading him to become a minister. He gave his money to charity, entered the ministry, and eventually moved a little further down the coast to the city of Myra. Even as a young man in his twenties, he became the city's leading pastor.

This was during the brutal reign of the Roman Emperor Diocletian, and there is indication that Bishop Nicholas suffered for his faith and was imprisoned. At that time, it's said that the prisons were so full of Christians and pastors and bishops that there was no room for the real criminals.

But eventually, Christianity was legalized in the Empire; and Nicholas was released and continued his pastoral ministry in the city of Myra. He attended the famous Church Council in Nicea in A.D. 325, and continued his ministry until his death.

We don't have many records of his life and work, but Nicholas seems to have been best-known for his kindness and generosity, and for his ministry to children. He was vitally concerned for the spiritual and physical needs of children, and he worked tirelessly in the area of child relief efforts and children's evangelism.

After his death in or about A.D. 343, people remembered his love and generosity and especially his love for children, and a day was set aside on the church calendar to commemorate his life -- St. Nicholas' Day. One of the earliest traditions connected with St. Nicholas' Day was that of giving children candy, in recognition of Nicholas' love for youngsters. In those days, candy was a rare delicacy, and it became associated with St. Nicholas Day, and thereby, as things unfolded, with Christmas.

Well, the centuries passed, and in the year 1670, the choirmaster at the great Cathedral in Cologne, Germany, took the idea of Christmas candy a step further. The information is sketchy, but it seems that this choirmaster visited a local candy-maker to see find some treats to give the children in his choir during Christmas services, maybe to help keep them quiet.

Among the items in the store were long, white candy sticks; and they were so hard it took a long time to dissolve. For some reason, the choirmaster and candy maker decided to put a crook at one end and, making it a candy cane instead of just a candy stick. One theory is that the choirmaster wanted to use the canes as an object lesson representing Christ as the Good Shepherd or perhaps explaining the fact that our Lord's birth was announced first to shepherds. So they invented candy in the shape of a shepherd's staff.

Well, as it turned out there was another great benefit to the curves in the candy sticks—they hung easily on the limbs of the Christmas trees. In this way, candy canes became a popular tree decoration throughout Germany, and the custom spread to England and America.

Well, the years passed. After World War I, an Army lieutenant named Bob McCormack from Birmingham visited Albany, Georgia, with the idea of starting a candy company. In time, Bob's Candy Company developed a way to twist colors into the candy cane, giving us the now-famous striped candy canes with a peppermint flavor which we see every Christmas.

Now here's where the urban legend comes in. According to a modern myth—at least, it seems to be an apocryphal story—it was an unnamed candy maker in Indiana who specifically brought all these elements together so as to teach the story of Christ. I don't know who that Indiana candy-maker was, or if he really existed. But when you think about it, it is remarkable that this simple piece of candy that developed over the centuries can teach us so many lessons about the Lord Jesus.

- Ø The three ribbons of color represent the three members of the Godhead—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.
- Ø The sweetness of the candy appeals to children, who are especially attracted to the story of Christ.
- Ø The white color speaks of Christ's sinless purity.
- Ø The red stripes symbolize the stripes that fell across His back at the scourging.
- Ø The bright red color speaks of His shed blood.
- Ø The peppermint flavor resembles the biblical herb of hyssop, which was a biblical symbol for cleansing and forgiveness.
- Ø The shape of the cane is that of a shepherd's crook, reminding us that Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and that shepherds were the first to hear the news of His birth.
- Ø And if you turn it upside down, the cane even spells "J" for Jesus.

And so this simple candy cane with its heritage going back through the ages is full of lessons about the person and work of Jesus Christ.

This is important because in our society we need to use every means at our disposal to reinforce the Biblical truth about the Christchild. The Bible presents Jesus as fully man and fully God, the eternal one who entered the river of human history through the womb of a virgin, who offered Himself as a perfect sacrifice for sin, who shed His blood, died on the cross, was buried in a borrowed tomb, and who rose again on the third day.

We have to use every tool we can find because the story of Jesus is under assault today as never before. All over the world Christians are being persecuted, just as in the days of Diocletian and Nicholas. And here in the West, this has been the most intense year of anti-Christian propaganda I've ever seen.

Just think back earlier this year to the popularity of books and movies like *The DaVinci Code*, which are so anti-Christian in their assertions. And this year we've heard celebrities like Rosie O'Donnell say that Christians are as dangerous as Islamic fanatics, and Elton John say that Christianity ought to be outlawed throughout the world. And Christmas trees being banned from public places.

But this is just the tip of the iceberg.

A new movement has gained a lot of momentum this year, and it's been dubbed New Atheism. You say, "What's new about atheism?" Well, this is what's new: Not only do the new atheists not believe in God, they don't believe that belief in God should be tolerated.

They say, in effect: Belief in God is harmful to a society. Belief in God is harmful to world peace. Belief in God is harmful to scientific inquiry. Belief in God is harmful to societal evolution. Belief in God is dangerous to the point of being criminal. Theists are dangerous people who need to be dwelt with.

One of the leading voices in this movement is Oxford biologist, Richard Dawkins. His book, *The God Delusion*, is one of the 2006's best sellers. This week it was ranked at #11 on Amazon's best-seller list.

In this book, Dawkins wrote, "As a scientist, I am hostile to fundamentalist religion because it actively debauches the scientific enterprise. It teaches us not to change our minds, and not to want to know exciting things that are available to be known. It subverts science and saps the intellect."

Dawkins said in an interview: "I'm quite keen on the politics of persuading people of the virtues of atheism.... The number of

nonreligious people in the US is... near... 30 million.... That's more than all the Jews in the world put together. I think we're in the same position the gay movement was in a few decades ago. There was a need for people to come out. The more people who came out, the more people who had the courage to come out. I think that's the case with atheists. They're more numerous than anybody realizes.... Highly intelligent people are mostly atheists."

Dawkins suggests that parents who teach their children about God should come under the scrutiny of the government. He said: "How much do we regard children as being the property of their parents? It's one thing to say people should be free to believe whatever they like, but should they be free to impose their beliefs on their children? Is there something to be said for society stepping in? What about bringing up children to believe manifest falsehoods?"

Well, all that is very disturbing; but one of the encouraging things to me is remembering that these people were around in the time of the apostle John, too, and saying much the same thing. In fact, one of the reasons John wrote his little book of 1 John was because the truth about the Lord Jesus was being bombarded by skeptics and critics. John refers to this again and again in his letter.

As I've been reading through this little book of 1 John in preparation for these Christmas messages, I keep coming back to the fact that this is the most difficult book in the Bible, as far as I'm concerned, to outline. John doesn't write in one-two-three order. Instead, he has a small handful of points, and he keeps cycling through them again and again. Let me conclude our message today by showing you three of his primary emphases.

This World is Fundamentally Anti-Christ

First, John asserts that this world is fundamentally anti-Christ and anti-Christian. Look at chapter 2, verse 18: Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour.

In the church of the first century, the Christians were aware of the coming of a terrible person of evil, known as the antichrist, whose coming would hasten the Great Tribulation. The prophet Daniel predicted this; Jesus referred to this in Matthew 24; Paul talked about it in 1 and 2 Thessalonians; and John wrote of it in the book of Revelation. But there are many people right now who are anti-Christian, who are bitterly opposed to the biblical truths about Jesus Christ. The spirit of the antichrist is even now at work in the world.

Look down at verse 22: Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist—he denies the Father and the Son.

Down in verse 26, he writes: I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray.

He repeats this down in chapter 3, verses 7ff: Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning.

Now drop down to chapter 4: Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.

Christians Have a Sound and Secure Faith

John's second point is that Christians have a sound and secure faith. This is the tone with which he opens and closes his letter. In chapter 1, he began: 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. 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. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard....

And in his last paragraph in chapter 5, he wrote: We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one. We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know Him who is true. And we are in Him who is true—even in His Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.

We Demonstrate Christ to the World through our Love

John's third point is that one of the primary ways we demonstrate the truth of Christ to the world is by loving others, and that brings

us back to our text today in 1 John 3:11ff:

This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous. Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you. We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers.

Now, what does this really mean? Look down at verse 16, our key text that I read at the beginning of the message: This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.

What does that mean? Does that mean that if someone fires a gun at you, I should try to jump in front of you and take the bullet? Well, yes, it does mean that; but that doesn't happen very often. John is talking about a laying our lives down for each other each and every day. Look at the next verse:

If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue, but with actions and in truth.

I've been thinking of this quite a bit recently because of a book I've been reading every night at bedtime. It's the account of two POWs who were shot down over North Vietnam at about the same time. One was Porter Halyburton, a white southern boy and somewhat of a racist. The other was Fred Cherry, the first black officer captured by the North Vietnamese.

The two men were thrown into the same cell amid the squalor and horrors of the infamous Hanoi Hilton, and Fred Cherry was not likely to survive. He had been injured and Porter soon discovered that he had to care for Fred in the most personal of ways, peeling off his clothes, cleaning out his festering and decaying flesh, helping him get onto the waste bucket, washing and bathing him, and giving him his own food and clothes. When Fred appeared to be near death, burning up with fever, Porter hovered over him day and night, bathing him, tending his loathsome wounds, giving and exhorting him to hold on.

On one occasion, Fred hadn't been able to wash his hair in months, and when he ran his hand through his thick afro, he pulled out a glob of oil and smeared it on the ground. Instantly a platoon of ants appeared from various cracks in the cell, and the ants began climbing up Fred's body to get to this hair. The two men tried to swat them off, but it was a like a plague; there seemed to be millions of them. Porter finally persuaded a guard to let him take Fred to the shower room.

Arriving there, they found the room was repulsive. It was cold and dark and dirty. The floor was covered with snails, and they stood in a quarter inch of slime. Fred couldn't move his arm because of his injury, so Porter helped him undress and positioned him under the cold water. Then the white boy rubbed soap in his hands and started washing the black boy's hair. At first nothing much happened, and finally the dirt and oil and grease turned into a paste, and it began to ooze off his scalp and down his body.

"You won't believe this," Porter said. "I'm going to have to wash your hair again." He washed the black man's hair again and again and again, until finally he broke through the grease and grim.

Later after the men were liberated, Fred Cherry said that he wouldn't have survived without Porter Halyburton. But Porter said the reverse was also true. Caring for Fred gave him a sense of mission and purpose, it enabled him to forget his own problems and to serve someone else, and it taught him to love a brother in need. And he said, that's why he survived the Hanoi Hilton. [James S. Hirsch, *Two Souls Indivisible: The Friendship that Saved Two POWs in Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), *passim*.]

To lay down our lives for someone doesn't always mean that we're literally going to die for them, although that's exactly what Christ did for us. But it means that we die to ourselves and live to meet the needs of others in Christ's name. And in a world such as ours, with all the pressure and problems and persecution, how can we, as followers of Christ, do anything less?

Going all the way back to St. John and St. Nicholas and all through the years, the story of Christianity is simply the story of the love of Jesus Christ being lived out in the lives of all those who embrace Him as Lord and Savior.

Is that you? The meaning of Christmas is found in the Bible's two great John 3:16s:

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but should have everlasting life.

And this is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brother

1 John 5:11-12 Sermon

And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. 1 John 5:11-12

I'm constantly amazed at the kinds of studies being conducted by major universities around the world and at how much money they spend to arrive at conclusions that seem perfectly logical to me. Last week there was an announcement by psychology professors and scholars at the University of Toronto with assistance by researchers at York University, which is also in Toronto. These scholars had decided to conduct an elaborate study to determine whether belief in God has an impact on a person's level of anxiety, and their results were published in papers all across Canada and around the world.

The scholars said they were shocked to find that the brains of religious people are calmer in the face of error and uncertainty than the brains of doubters. The psychologists discovered that those who believed in God had thirty-three percent less activity in the part of our brain that regulates anxiety. Those certain of God's existence had forty-five percent less activity in this region compared to those convinced that there is no God. According to these researchers, religious people were calmer in life and also more accurate in their decisions and perspectives.

Well, that seems to me that it would be an obvious conclusion, but the researchers said they were taken aback by the results, so they tested their results again and again. To their amazement, they found that faith in God is good psychology and a perfectly good strategy with dealing with life's anxieties. (Based on numerous online media reports, including "This is Your Brain on Religion" in the Toronto Globe and Mail, March 5, 2009, at <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/RTGAM.20090305.wbrains05/BNStory/Science/home>.)

Well, if we ever needed help in the face of fear, it's nowadays. Our planet seems to be teetering on the brink of a global economic tsunami that could send us all into a Great Depression unlike anything the world has ever seen. People everywhere are frightened; and truth be told, I'm uneasy myself. In economic and political terms—and humanly speaking—there's very little certainty in the world right now.

But a clear and present faith in God counters many a clear and present danger. And what I want to say today is that if you can't have certainty in the economic world or certainty in the political world, we can very definitively have certainty when it comes to our relationship with God, with His care over us, and with the confidence and assurance we can have in Him.

There's a great old hymn that says:
Jesus! What a Friend for sinners!
Jesus! Lover of my soul;
Friends may fail me, foes assail me,
He, my Savior, makes me whole.

Hallelujah! What a Savior!
Hallelujah! What a Friend!
Saving, helping, keeping, loving,
He is with me to the end.

I learned that hymn in college and I've loved it ever since. It's one of my favorites, and the author knows what he was talking about. It was written by Dr. J. Wilber Chapman, who was a great evangelist a hundred years ago.

Chapman grew up in a Christian family and never knew when, where, or how he became a Christian. There was a time in his childhood, however, when his Methodist Sunday School teacher encouraged him to stand up one day and make a public declaration of faith in Christ. As a college student, Chapman attended Lake Forest College, and while he was there he attended a series of meetings in Chicago conducted by evangelist D. L. Moody. As he listened to Moody preach, Chapman began doubting whether or not he was really saved. He had no certainty of his salvation. At the end of the service he went into the inquiry room with others

seeking spiritual counsel. To his surprise, Mr. Moody himself came in, walked over, and sat down right beside him. Chapman confessed to him that he wasn't sure whether or not he was really saved. Moody opened his Bible to John 5:24 and asked the young man to read the verse aloud.

With trembling voice, Chapman read, "Verily, verily, I say to you, He that heareth My word and believeth on Him that sent Me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life."

Moody said, "Do you believe this?"

"Certainly," said Chapman.

Moody said, "Are you a Christian?"

Chapman said, "Sometimes I think I am and again I am fearful."

"Read it again!" said Moody.

Chapman read it again, and Moody repeated his two questions—Do you believe this? Are you a Christian? Chapman replied in the same way.

The great evangelist seemed a little irritated and said sharply, "Whom are you doubting?" And then he said, "Read it again."

Chapman read it again: "Verily, verily, I say to you, He that heareth My word and believeth on Him that sent Me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life."

For the third time, Moody asked, "Do you believe this?"

Chapman said, "Yes, indeed I do."

"Well, are you a Christian?"

This time Chapman said, "Yes, Mr. Moody, I am."

"And from that day to this," Chapman said later as a world-famed evangelist, "I have never questioned my acceptance with God. (Ford C. Ottman, J. Wilbur Chapman: A Biography (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1920), 29-30.)

That's what I'm talking about. We should never go to bed at night worrying about our eternal condition or our eternal salvation; and yet many Christians do. I preached about this a few years ago, and my sermons were published in a book we called SIMPLE. One pastor later told me that he preached through the chapters of that book and as he was preaching on the topic of assurance of salvation, he was surprised at how many people in his congregation seemed unsure as to whether or not they were really saved. I wonder if that's true in many other churches.

Well, years ago the man who mentored me told me that 1 John 5:11-12 were the best verses in the Bible on the subject of assurance and he assigned them to me as memory verses. I've gone over them again and again, and I want to recommend them to you as memory verses today.

And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.

There are five simple statements here.

1. This Is The Testimony

The first phrase says, "This is the Testimony." These are the facts. This is the truth. This is the record. Now, the apostle John is simply bringing to a conclusion here the thought that he has been expounding in chapter 5. He is talking about the certainty of the things we believe. He is telling us that we don't have to "think so" or "hope so." We can "know so."

Look at verse 6: This is the one who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ.

Now we aren't sure exactly what John meant by that verse, but most of the commentators I consulted believe this has to do with the baptism and the death of Jesus. Our Lord Jesus began His ministry with water. He was baptized by John the Baptist, and at that very moment the Holy Spirit descended upon Him and God the Father spoke from heaven, saying, "This is My Beloved Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased." It was a remarkable convergence of the Trinity into human history as God the Son initiated His ministry, God the Father commended Him, and God the Holy Spirit anointed Him. That is evidently what John has in mind here by the word "water." And the word "blood" has to do with the death of Jesus Christ. It's quite remarkable when you think of how many ways Jesus bled during His death.

I know this is a rather strange and macabre subject if you don't realize its significance, but just think about it for a moment. The first blood was extracted by the slaps of the Roman soldiers and their crown of thorns as they ridiculed Him in the early morning hours of His crucifixion. Then came the scourging. Then came the nails to His hands and feet. And then the lance in His side. Jesus literally bled from the crown of His head to the soles of His feet, and His body was virtually drained of its blood.

The Bible says this was the price of our redemption. Without the shedding of blood there is no redemption of sin. The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. Peter says that we are redeemed by the precious blood of the Lamb of God. Hebrews calls it the blood of the eternal covenant.

Now, let's go back to verse 6. John wrote: This is the one who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood.

Water and blood book-ended our Lord's ministry. It opened with water and it closed with blood.

And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water, and the blood.

Now, let me put this in a simple alliterated form. How does the Spirit testify? He inspired the Holy Scriptures. All Scripture is God-breathed, for holy men of God spoke as they were borne along by the Holy Spirit. Jesus said that after He returned to Heaven, He would send the Holy Spirit who would bring all things to the remembrance of the apostles so they could record it.

So we have three testimonies as to our Lord Jesus:

His Baptism
His Blood
And His Book!

His Baptism opened His ministry. His Blood consummated His ministry. His Book recorded His ministry. And these three things constitute the testimony of God concerning His Son. Look at verse 6ff again:

This is the one who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is truth. For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three are in agreement. We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which He has given about His Son. Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in His heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made Him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about His Son. And this is the testimony.

2. God Has Given Us Eternal Life

And now we come to the second phrase in the verse: God has given us eternal life. I suppose we can say that this is the favorite theme of the apostle John. He uses the phrase "eternal life" twenty-two times in his writing: sixteen times in his Gospel and six times in 1 John. The most famous occurrence is in John 3:16, that those who believe in God's Only Begotten Son have everlasting life. But notice how often he brings this up here in this chapter, 1 John 5:

Verse 11: This is the testimony: God has given us eternal life.

Verse 13: I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.

Verse 20: Jesus Christ... is the true god and eternal life.

He is eternal life; He gives eternal life; and eternal life is in Him.

My wife, Katrina, recently read a book about a man who had a near-death experience and when he returned to conscious life he was able to remember the images he saw as he approached heaven. She told me that it was a great comfort and encouragement to her. This man saw lots of people and they were all on the move. They were active, coming and going and busy. There was happiness everywhere and great joy. There was singing and the most beautiful music you've ever heard. There was wonderful scenery and the most vivid colors you've ever seen.

I came to the same conclusion several years ago when I preached a series of sermons based on Revelation 21 and 22 on the New Heavens and the New Earth and the New Jerusalem.

And it's all a gift! The Bible says, "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." The Bible says, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son." The Bible says, "Praise be to God for His unspeakable gift." And this verse says: This is the record: God has given us eternal life.

3. This Life Is In His Son

The third phrase says: This life is in His Son. It is not just from Jesus; it is in Jesus. This is the way that John began his Gospel of John: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made. In Him was life, and that life was the light of men.

In John 11, Jesus told Mary and Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life."

In John 14, He said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life."

4. He Who Has the Son Has Life

The fourth phrase in our text says: He who has the Son has life, referring to eternal life. In other words, we don't have to worry about having heaven. We don't have to worry about having eternal life. We don't have to worry about what's going to happen when we die. We just have to be concerned about having Jesus in our heart. If we have Jesus, we have eternal life.

Let me use an iPod as an example. Let's say that I want to give you all my favorite songs. Now, you might not be interested in my favorite songs, but just suppose that you were. If you want to know what's loaded on my iPod, it's a lot of hymns and Christian music, and a good deal of classical music, and a lot of piano jazz and big band music. I also have an eclectic assortment of other albums, but it's all equally boring and you can roll your eyes if you want to. But just suppose you wanted a whole bunch of my music. Well, I could give you a song here and a song there—or I could just give you my iPod. If you had my iPod, you'd have all my songs included.

When God gave us Jesus Christ, He came with all the music of heaven already included, with all the songs of the soul, with all the blessings of eternity, with everything we'd ever want or need. When we have Jesus, we have everything else, and that includes eternal life! He who has the Son has life!

5. He Who Does Not Have the Son Of God Does Not Have Life

The last phrase, however, is a warning: He who does not have the Son of God does not have life. The greatest gift God could ever give us was Himself, and Jesus Christ is ours to receive or reject. And the Bible says, "How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?"

Last weekend I had the opportunity to speak in a church in Florida. For the most part, the members of this church were retired people who were living in retirement communities on Florida's west coast. Many of them had been Christians for many years, and quite a few of them had been very fruitful and successful Christian leaders. But there was one middle-aged man who was a more recent convert. He'd been saved within the last couple of years, and his baptism had been a cause of great joy in the church. I asked him about it and he told me his story.

For many years he had spurned the Gospel. His wife was a dedicated believer, and she prayed for him faithfully. In fact, she had prayed for him for 30 years. Well, this man specialized in walls—he painted and he hung wall paper and did very intricate work. But at midlife he became deeply depressed and nothing seemed to help him. One day, he told me, he was in a very affluent home doing some very detailed and exacting work. He was at the top of a thirty-foot ladder, because the ceilings were very high. On the top of that ladder, he came under deep conviction of sin and he started to weep, and he just kept crying. He called out to God and

asked for salvation. He started down the ladder, and, as he told me, by the time his foot hit the floor he was a new man. It's as though he had been born again, which he had. He raced home to tell his wife, but he didn't have to tell her. When he walked in the door his face was glowing and he said, "I have something to tell you." She said, "You don't have to. I already know it. You've been saved." He said, "How did you know." She answered, "I've been praying for you for 30 years."

And then he said something very interesting to me. He said, "I later thought that the whole thing reminded me of the moment when Neil Armstrong took that last step from the ladder and his foot stepped onto the moon and all history was changed. I took that last step from the ladder, my foot stepped onto the floor, and it was one small step for me, but a giant leap in my life."

From that moment, he has never gone to bed worried about the certainty of his salvation, and neither should we. Do you have the Son? Have you received Him as your Savior? Have you confessed Him as your Lord?

And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the same of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life

Simple Series: A is for Assurance of Salvation

1 John 5:13, John 20:30-31

A couple of years ago, the Fox Television Network introduced a "reality" television show called "The Simple Life" in which television and movie stars, particularly Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie, ventured into small town America to see what it was like to live an ordinary, simple life. I've never seen the show, but I think all of us would like a simpler life.

Nearly two hundred years ago, America's great philosopher, Henry David Thoreau, was advocating the same thing in his classic book, *Walden*. He said that to live simply was to live wisely, and that one of the most basic rules for healthy living was to "simplify! Simplify!"

My wife and I have been trying to do that. We call it de-cluttering. It's especially true because of Katrina's wheelchair. We can't have a lot of clutter lying around the house, so we're trying to be as simple and as frugal as we can. I keep thinking of something that Thoreau wrote in *Walden*. He said that he once had three pieces of limestone on his desk as souvenirs or paperweights or something. But he realized they had to be dusted and re-arranged and handled every day while his mind often remained undusted and disarranged; and so he tossed the rocks out the window.

Well, if there's anyone who should be an expert in simplicity, it's the Christian. We are not simple-minded, because we deal with the deepest and most wonderful truths under heaven. But we are simple of heart and simple of lifestyle. And while our beliefs are so deep that the world's greatest philosophers can't fully grasp them, they are simple enough for a child to understand. Success in Christian living comes from remaining close to the simple truths of Jesus and from always coming back to the basics.

We should never stray too far from the basic ABCs of our Christian faith. The great thing about Christianity is its simplicity. Even a child can become a Christian and understand the basic elements of the Christian walk and lifestyle. As long as we stay true to those basics, we'll be successful. In this series of messages, I'd like to devote the five Sundays of July to five essential, basic, fundamental truths and habits of the Christian Life, and we'll do it in ABC order:

- Ø Assurance of Salvation
- Ø Baptism
- Ø Church Involvement
- Ø Daily Devotions
- Ø Evangelism

Today, we'll begin with topic: Assurance of salvation. Can we know without a doubt, for certain, for sure, that we are Christians, born again, saved, converted, children of God, going to heaven when we die?

Some years ago, a lady in our church said, "Well, I hope I'm saved and going to heaven, but I don't think we can really know for sure until we die."

I read about another woman who was dying. On her deathbed, she told her son, "I have tried to be a Christian and believe I have trusted in Jesus, but I am scared and uncertain. I can only hope that I'm all right. I can only hope I'm going to heaven."

Another man who had been saved out of a horrible life of alcohol and drug addiction had similar concerns. One day, during a period of trouble and discouragement, he relapsed and started drinking again. "I'm not going to heaven now," he said. "I'm no longer a Christian."

Another family had a loved one at death's door, and they came to me wanting me to somehow assure them that their dying relative was really going to heaven. "How can we be sure?" they said. Now this man was a wonderful Christian, but for some reason his family was insecure about his eternal destination.

These are not uncommon experiences. Bill Bright, the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, once wrote, "My experience in counseling thousands of students and laymen through the years since I met Christ personally has convinced me that there are literally tens of thousands of good, faithful church-goers who have received Christ in prayer, but who are not sure of their salvation."^[1]

How different was the attitude of the apostle Paul! He exclaimed, "I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day" (2 Timothy 1:12, NKJV, emphasis mine).

Elsewhere he wrote, "I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:37-39, NKJV, emphasis mine).

Even in the Old Testament, the patriarch Job said: "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth; and after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God" (Job 19:25-26, NKJV, emphasis mine).

The Psalmist David said, "Now I know that the Lord saves His anointed" (Psalm 20:6, NKJV, emphasis mine).

Let me begin with three preliminary thoughts:

Ø Assurance of salvation isn't a matter of whether or not we feel saved. I like what the old Bible teacher, Dr. R. A. Torrey, wrote in his book for new Christians: "We may feel forgiven, or we may not feel forgiven, but that does not matter. It is not a question of what we feel but of what God says."^[2]

Ø It isn't a matter of knowing the exact time and place of your conversion. Some people are bothered because they do not know exactly when and where they were born again; but consider this: There is not a person in this room who can personally remember the moment you squirmed out of your mother's womb and were born, naked and wailing and hungry. But neither is there a person in this room who doubts that it happened. You may not remember, but God does. It's not a question of what we remember, but of what God has done and of what God has told us in His Word. And what has God told us in His Word? Acts 16:31 says: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved." There is no "maybe" or "might be." The Bible uses the vocabulary of certainty: "You will be saved."

Ø On the other hand, it is possible to have a false assurance of salvation. That is, some people think they are saved and going to heaven, but they are mistaken. In Matthew 7:21-23 is a stark passage of Scripture in which Jesus says: Not everyone who calls me their Lord will get into the kingdom of heaven. Only the ones who obey my Father in heaven will get in. On the Day of Judgment many will call me their Lord. They will say, "We preached in your name, and in your name we forced out demons and worked many miracles." But I will tell them, "I will have nothing to do with you!" (CEV).

So there are two vitally important questions to ask and to answer. First, do you know Christ? Second, do you know that you know Christ? Are you saved, and do you have assurance of your salvation?

Those are the two questions I want us to consider, and I'd like to approach this theme from two different passages of Scripture, both of them written by the Apostle John. When you read your New Testament, you'll find five different books written by John. He was very prolific, and his writings are very profound.

The apostle John could reasonably be called our Lord's best friend on this earth during the three years of His ministry. John

referred to himself “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” He was the disciple who sat next to Jesus at the Last Supper and to whom Jesus entrusted the care of His mother as He was dying on the cross. John became the last surviving member of the original apostolic band, and according to our best knowledge, he was the only apostle to have died a natural death. His five books are:

- Ø The Gospel of John, consisting of 21 chapters. This is the last of the four Gospels and written after the others. It is different from the other three Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) in that it stresses the fact that Jesus was both divine and human, the God-Man who was sent by the Father as a light into the world.
- Ø Three short letters near the end of the New Testament, which we call First John, Second John, and Third John.
- Ø And the last book of the Bible, Revelation.

One of the things I like best about John’s writings is that he was clear in stating his reason or his purpose in writing. In my years of studying the Bible, I’ve become convinced that God gave us a collection of sixty-six books because we have sixty-six different needs in our lives; and one of the richest elements of Bible study is discovering the specific, unique purpose addressed by each of the sixty-six books. Often it takes a lot of digging to figure out the exact purpose for some book in the Bible or another. Right now, I’m reading through the book of 1 Peter, reading the chapters over and over, looking for the exact reason why God included that book in the Bible. In John’s case, he tells us simply and plainly why he wrote as he did. His Gospel and his first epistle are very similar, and both of them contain purpose statements at the end of their respective chapters, and that’s what I’d like to show you this morning and this evening.

This morning, let’s look at his Gospel, the fourth Gospel and the fourth book of the New Testament. He states his purpose in writing his Gospel near the end of it, in chapter 20, verses 30-31:

1. Our Salvation

John 20:30-31

And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.

Our Salvation is Centered in Christ

There are three parts to this purpose statement found at the end of the Gospel of John. The first part of the statement tells us that our salvation is centered in Christ. It begins: And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book. The word “sign” was the codeword used by John for our Lord’s miracles. In His Gospel, John describes eight different miracles that Jesus performed. J. Sidlow Baxter called this “the octave of miracles in John’s Gospel. “As all musical sound is comprehended in eights or octaves,” wrote Baxter, “so John has comprehended the significance of all our Savior’s miracles in these eight.”[3]

But now at the end of his book, John admits that these eight miracles are only a sampling of our Lord’s miraculous works. In fact, the very last sentence of the Gospel of John says: And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. Amen. (John 21:25, NKJV).

Jesus came as a Miracle-Worker. He came with supernatural power. But exactly who was He? What was the secret of His identity? Who did He claim to be? John goes on to say: And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.... Notice those three names or titles for our Lord Jesus.

First, He is Jesus. His very name is significant. Now, from one perspective, there was nothing unusual about the name Jesus. It was a common designation in the biblical world, and many Jewish parents gave their boys this name, up until the second century. In some cultures, it’s still a popular name. The Bible records four other men named Jesus. This name therefore speaks of His humanity, His ordinariness.

But it also speaks of His extraordinariness. Jesus is the New Testament version of the Old Testament name Joshua, and it comes from two shorter Hebrew words—the name Jehovah coupled with the verb to save. Literally, “Jehovah Saves” or “Jehovah Delivers.”

That explains the angel’s message to Joseph: “You shall call His name Jesus—Jehovah Saves—for He shall save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). This name embodies His mission and conveys His purpose—to seek and to save those who are lost, to seek and to save people like you and me.

The whole teaching of the Bible is this: The God who created us is very powerful and very pure, but all of us have stumbled and brought shame and disgrace upon ourselves. We are all sinners, and sinners cannot inhabit God's presence in eternity. So God Himself became a man—Jesus Christ—born through the womb of a virgin, and He Himself was pure and perfect. When He died on the cross, He was bearing the penalty and punishment for our sins so that in Him we might have forgiveness. He took our sins upon Himself and He clothes us in His righteousness so that we can have eternal life, not on the basis of our own merits, but on the basis of His righteousness, His death on the cross, and His resurrection from the grave. Romans 4:25 says: "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification."

Second, He is the Christ. These things were written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ.... This is the English translation of the Greek word *Christos*, which was the Greek term for the Hebrew word *Messiah*, which literally meant Anointed One. Long before Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the Old Testament writers and prophets predicted that a Messiah was going to be sent into the world, anointed by God, to provide the human race with hope and heaven and forgiveness and everlasting life. In predicting the coming of Christ, the prophet Isaiah wrote these words approximately seven hundred years before Jesus was born in Bethlehem: "The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor...." (Isaiah 61:1). He was predicting the coming of the Anointed One, the Christ. John wrote His Gospel that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ.

Third, He is the Son of God. These things were written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

This is a classic title for Jesus, but many people underestimate its meaning because we don't hear those three words—Son of God—as they were understood in Bible times. We take them literally, but among the Hebrews it was an idiomatic phrase. They often thought of father and son as relating, not to lineage, but to characteristics. To say "son of..." was to mean "possessing the characteristics of."

For example, Genesis 4 describes two brothers, Jabal and Jubal. Jabal became the "father of those who dwell in tents and have livestock;" and Jubal became the "father of all those who play the flute." In other words, Jabal was the first rancher, and Jubal was the first musician.

The builders of the Tower of Babel were called "sons of men" because they were exhibiting the worst of human behavior. Ministerial students in the Old Testament were called "sons of the prophets." In the Gospels, Jesus referred to James and John as "sons of thunder" because of their volatile temper.

When our Lord is called Himself the "Son of Man," He was stressing His humanity. He possessed the characteristics of a human being. In other words, He was a man. When He called Himself the "Son of God," He was emphasizing His deity, His god-ness. He wasn't saying that He was less than God or a product or prodigy of God. He was claiming to be God Himself!

It was a message His Jewish audience couldn't miss. The Gospel of John makes this clear, and it's one of the great themes of John's Gospel. We see this plainly in John 5:18: Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His father, making Himself equal with God.

Making Himself equal with God! Possessing all the characteristics of God! Being God! That's the significance of the phrase "Son of God." It was nothing less than a claim to divinity. The Son of God, simply put, is God the Son.

Jesus is God! O! could I now
But compass earth and sea,
To teach and tell the single truth,
How happy should I be!
O! had I but an angel's voice,
I would proclaim so loud,
Jesus, the good, the beautiful,
Is everlasting God.
(Frederick W. Faber, 1862)

Several years ago, just as I was beginning to nudge my way into published writing, an article of mine appeared in a Christian magazine, and shortly afterward I received a call from a literary agent in New York City. He was with one of the big firms. He told me that he had read my article and felt that I had great promise as a writer and that his agency would like to represent me. He flew

down to Nashville to meet with me, and he told me that he could market my manuscripts to the big publishing houses in New York City. There's just one problem, he said. "You have too much about 'Jesus' in your writings. To appeal to a broader audience, you need to talk less about Jesus and more about positive thinking and religion and attitude and spirituality and any other words you want to use; just less about Jesus and less about the Bible."

Well, I had no interest in doing that. If I did that, I would no longer have a reason to write. I wouldn't have any message. It's all about Jesus. He is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. He is God Himself who became a man and who died on the cross for the sins of the world. He is the Resurrected Savior who rose from the dead to give us eternal life.

Jesus only, Jesus ever,
Jesus all in all we sing,
Savior, Sanctifier, and Healer,
Glorious Lord and coming King!
(A. B. Simpson, 1890)

The most basic fact of Christianity—the deepest core of our message—is: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but should have everlasting life." Our salvation is centered in Jesus.

Our Salvation is Conveyed through Scripture

Notice the second part of the purpose statement at the end of John's Gospel. Our salvation is conveyed through Scripture. And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God....

These things are written.... In the great wisdom of God, He encapsulated everything He wanted us to know within the covers of a book that we can carry with us throughout our entire lives. As I was preparing this message, I took a break and sat out on our back porch. Looking up into the sky I was surprised to see skywriters at work. I had read about skywriting, but had never seen it before.

There were evidently five airplanes involved, although they were so high in the sky as to be invisible to the naked eye. They were in perfect formation, and they were each emitting white smoke in measured sequences so that letters were formed. Scrolled across the sky was an advertisement for a vacuum machine.

It reminded me of a question I once asked myself. Why did not God write His message in the sky? Why did He not write it in human letters in the stars? Of course, the answer was obvious. In ten minutes the vacuum cleaner advertisement, dramatic as it was, had disappeared, blown away with the winds of heaven, the white smoke merging with the clouds and dissipating into the atmosphere as though it had never been there to begin with. But a literal, physical book—one that can be held in our hands and opened on our desk—is a solid and permanent communication, one that can be copied and studied and read and memorized and translated and taken with us to the far corners of the globe, and then passed on to the next generation.

How wise God was to give us the Holy Bible! I've had a New Testament or a Bible since I was old enough to read, and before I was old enough to read, others read it to me.

J. Sidlow Baxter wrote, "The Bible may seem very small against the imposing shelves of many a large library; yet with this one volume in our hand we may stand within the largest library on earth and truthfully say that all the tens of thousands of books therein collected cannot teach us more about the fundamental realities of the universe and of human life than we learn in these Scriptures."^[4]

The Bible says, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God" (2 Timothy 3:16), and it conveys the message of eternal life. John's Gospel is particularly important in that regard, for it has the distinct purpose of telling us that our salvation, which is centered in Christ and communicated in Scripture is claimed by faith, and by faith alone; and that's the third part of John's purpose statement in John 20:30-31: And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.

Our Salvation is Claimed by Faith

This is John's great theme. In fact, when I was in college I took a course on the Gospel of John and the textbook we used by Dr. Merrill C. Tenney was entitled: John: The Gospel of Belief.

Some time ago I read through the Gospel of John just looking for occurrences of those words "belief" and "believe" and "believing." I

couldn't believe how prominent and repetitious these were. Those words occur approximately one hundred times (I found exactly 101 times in which the words belief, believing, believed, or believe pop up in this Gospel (NKJV). I don't have time to trace all 101 occurrences, but by looking at a few of them we can see the preponderance of this theme.

- He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name.—John 1:11-12
- And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.—John 3:14-18
- Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.—John 5:24
- Jesus answered and said to them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent.—John 6:29
- And Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst.”—John 6:35
- And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up on the last day.—John 6:40
- Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life.—John 6:47
- Therefore I say to you that you will die in your sins; for if you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins.—John 8:24
- Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?—John 11:25-26

The most important question we can ever ask is this one: What must I do to be saved? And the answer is: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved” (Acts 16:31). This is the teaching of Scripture. We can never be saved from sin and death and hell on the basis of our own merits. It isn't going to church. It isn't trying to live a good life. It isn't works of righteousness that we do, but according to His mercy has He saved us. The Bible says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). The Bible says, “If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9).

What does it mean to believe in Jesus? It means to acknowledge Christ as Lord and to place your life in His hands.

Years ago, my wife and I were traveling in New Mexico, and I had a friend with me. On Sunday morning we went to a little mission church, and the pastor preached the sermon that morning on being saved by faith. At the end of his sermon, he told a story that I had heard several times before. I thought to myself, “That's such an old story that I can't believe he used it. Could he not find a better one?” But that afternoon, the friend who was with us said, “That was the best illustration I've ever heard of being saved by faith. I've never understood that truth so clearly as I do now.”

So, with apologies to my preacher friend in New Mexico, let me tell you this well-worn story. In the 1850s there was a French daredevil with the stage name of Blodin who made several visits to Niagara Falls where he would thrill the crowds by performing feats on a high-wire stretched over the falls. One of his favorite stunts was to cross the tightrope pushing a wheelbarrow. On one occasion, he stopped at the edge of the falls to chat with the wide-eyed crowds who had gathered to watch him.

“Do you believe I can walk over the falls on this little rope?” he asked.

A man in the crowd said that yes, he certainly could do that.

“Do you believe I can walk over the falls on this little rope pushing a wheelbarrow?”

“Yes, I do believe that!” replied the man.

“Do you believe I can walk over the falls pushing a wheelbarrow with someone in it?”

“Yes,” said the man. “I’ve seen you do it before.”

“Then, kind sir,” daredevil, “Would you mind assisting me by getting into the wheelbarrow?”

To which the man answered: “Not on your life!”

True saving faith means getting into the wheelbarrow. It means that we know the content of the Gospel, we believe it with our minds, and we are committing ourselves to it with our hearts and our lives. I believe the best way to do that is through prayer. When I’m with someone who wants to become a Christian, I lead them in offering a simple prayer expressing their faith. We pray something like this: “Dear God, I confess my sins to You and ask for Your forgiveness. I do believe that Jesus Christ died for my sins and rose again to give me everlasting life. I here and now give Him my life and ask Him to become my Savior and Lord.”

Have you trusted Christ as your Savior and Lord? Salvation is centered in Jesus Christ, conveyed to us in the Scriptures, and claimed by faith alone. Do you believe Are you in the wheelbarrow?

These (things) are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.

2. Our Assurance

1 John 5:13

These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.

John ended his Gospel by telling us that he had written it for one reason—that we might have eternal life. When we turn over toward the end of the New Testament, we find He ended his little letter of 1 John by telling us he had written it for one reason—that we might know we have eternal life. This little letter of 1 John tells us how we can be sure and certain and convinced that we have everlasting life through our Lord Jesus Christ.

As I mentioned earlier, one of the things that bothers some Christians is that they cannot recall the exact moment when they asked Jesus Christ to be their Savior. They don’t have a definite date or a time or a place. But look at this way: Jesus said, “You must be born again.” In other words, being saved is similar to being born. We’re being born a second time, this time into God’s family. Some people are bothered because they cannot recall the exact details of their being born again. But how much do you remember about being born the first time?

Do you recall one moment or any specific incident of being in your mother’s womb? Do you recall the traumatic moment when you first saw the light of day? Do you recall the face of the doctor who delivered you or the nurse who washed you off or the first moments when you were held in your mother’s arms? None of us remember that. What would you think if I went around in a state of depression or despair saying, “I’m not sure I’ve really been born—I can’t recall a thing about it!”?

None of us doubt our birth because we have three pieces of powerful evidence. First, we’re breathing right now—we have air in our lungs. That’s a pretty convincing piece of evidence for our birth. Second, we own a birth certificate. Third, we bear a family likeness.

The same three indications are true for our spiritual birth. How do we know we’ve been born again? How can we be so certain that we’re in God’s family, heirs of His kingdom, possessors of His life?

The Oxygen of the Holy Spirit

First, have the oxygen of the Holy Spirit within us. Look at the last sentence of 1 John, chapter 3: And by this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.

And in the next chapter, 1 John 4:13: By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit.

And in the next chapter, 1 John 5:6b: And it is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth.

This agrees with what we read elsewhere in Scripture. Look at Romans 8:16 for example: The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God (NKJV).

Galatians 4:6 puts it like this: And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!" (NKJV).

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul visited a city named Thessalonica and won many people there to Christ. Writing to them later, he said: "When we brought you the Good News, it was not just meaningless chatter to you; no, you listened with great interest. What we told you produced a powerful effect upon you, for the Holy Spirit gave you great and full assurance that what we said was true" (1 Thessalonians 1:5, TLB).

How do you know you have the Holy Spirit living within you? Do you have an interest in spiritual things? Are you learning to pray? Are you getting involved in church? Do you long to please God? Do you feel a growing love for Jesus Christ? Do you have inner peace? Is the Word of God meaningful to you? All of these are the result of the inward ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Our Birth Certificate

Second, we know that we've been born again because we have a birth certificate. When we are born, our names are recorded in the county of our birth and we are given a birth certificate. Likewise when we are born again, our names are recorded in the heavenly records (which the book of Revelation calls the Lambs Book of Life), and the Word of God becomes our personal birth certificate.[5]

Notice how clearly this is stated in 1 John 5:11-12: And this is the testimony (the facts, the record, the reality, the way it is): that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.

There's an old song that says: "Jesus loves me, this I know; / for the Bible tells me so." Our assurance of salvation is based on the unchanging Word of God.

In his book, *How to Begin the Christian Life*, George Sweeting suggests that doubting our salvation is like a prisoner who has been pardoned by the Governor. A guard brings him the document, and there it is, signed and sealed. Supposed you ask the man, "Have you been pardoned?" he will say, "Yes."

"Do you feel pardoned?" we ask.

"No, I don't. It's all so sudden."

"But if you don't feel pardoned how do you know you are pardoned?"

"Oh," the man replies, "it tells me so right here." [6]

The Bible does not use vague or nonspecific language regarding our salvation. It doesn't use terms like maybe or might or hopes-to-be. It says will and shall and is. And if you have given your life to Jesus Christ yet still struggle with doubts about your salvation, memorize 1 John 5:11-12. Let me read them again: And this is the testimony (the facts, the record, the reality, the way it is): that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.

3. We Have a Family Likeness

There is a third clear indication that we've been truly born: we bear a family likeness. Yesterday I saw a newborn baby, and when I looked from the baby to the mother I saw exactly the same face, just separated by age.

Likewise, when we are born again, we begin to take on the characteristics and the image of Jesus Christ. We begin to grow in our resemblance and likeness to Him. This is one of the great themes of this little book of 1 John. Let me show you some verses on the subject:

- 1 John 1:6 puts this in negative terms: If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. In other words, if we claim to be Christians but there is no change in our attitudes or behavior, we're mistaken.

- 1 John 2:3: Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. If our lives begin to reflect the holiness and righteousness of Jesus Christ, if there are changes in our attitudes and behavior, if there is spiritual growth taking place—then we know that we know Him.
- 1 John 2:5: Whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him.
- 1 John 2:29: If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone who practices righteousness is born of Him.
- 1 John 3:14: We know that we have passed from death to life (that is, we know that we are really children of God, that we have really been saved) because we love the brethren. The Bible teaches that God is love and that He so loved the world that He gave His only Son. As we grow in our Christian life, we begin to learn to love even the unlovely and unlovable. That growing love is proof that we've really been saved.

So how can we know we've really been saved? If we have the Holy Spirit within our spirits like oxygen is within our bodies, if we have our names in the birth certificate of the Word of God, and if we're growing in our family likeness, that we can be certain we're saved.

If those things are not present and if there has been no change in our behavior as a result of giving our lives to Christ, then, frankly, we may not have assurance of salvation; and, in fact, we may not be genuinely saved.

The Apostle Paul wrote these somber words in 2 Corinthians 13:5: "Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you now know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?"

There was a time in my life many years ago when I struggled with this issue. As I said, I was raised in a Christian home and in a godly church, and while that did not make me a Christian, yet I can say that I never knew a time when I wasn't trusting Christ. But one night—I suppose I was ten or eleven years old—we had a revival meeting at our church and the evangelist preached so hard that I questioned whether or not I had ever really been saved. After all, I could not remember a time or place when I had clearly and definitely made the decision. That evening, I slipped quietly into the bathroom, locked the door, and knelt down by the bathtub. I prayed something like this: "Dear Lord, I think that I have received Jesus Christ into my life by faith. If I have really done that, I thank you, Lord, for saving me. But if I have not really done that, then tonight, right here by this bathtub, I receive Him into my life as Lord and Savior."

And I can tell you that from that moment, I've never doubted my salvation. Perhaps you need to make a similar decision tonight.

This is the record: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.

[1] Bill Bright, *How To Be Sure You are a Christian* (Campus Crusade for Christ, 1972), p. 5.

2 R. A. Torrey, *How To Succeed in the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody Press, u.d.), p. 23.

3 J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book: Volume 5* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1966), pp. 292-293.

4 J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book: Volume 3* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1966), p. 131.

5 For portions of this imagery, I am indebted to Willard M. Aldrich in his article entitled "Assurance" in *Bibliotheca Sacra: A quarterly published by Dallas Theological Seminary*. 1996, c1955-1995. Dallas TX: Dallas Theological Seminary.

6 Adapted from George Sweeting, *How to Begin the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1970), p. 106. Sweeting's version is a close rendering to a similar passage in R. A. Torrey's *How To Succeed in the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody Press, u.d.), p.24

1 John 5:14-15 Sermon

This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of Him (1 John 5:14-15)

A couple of weekends ago, I spoke at a retreat in Pigeon Forge for a group of friends from Alabama and Georgia. One of the

participants was an American businessman who has spent years traveling with and doing business in the People's Republic of China. This man and his wife are ardent Christians, and over time they developed a special burden for the country of China and its people. This man was part of a group that started a school in China with twenty young people. Today it's a university of 20,000 students and a hotbed of Christian activity. This man and his wife have also started a leadership development organization that is establishing Chinese-operated primary and secondary schools across China with a Christian emphasis, and they're also working with Chinese businesses to help teach Christian values and ethics to business and factory owners and employees. Some of the stories are remarkable.

They told me of a young Chinese woman who enrolled at the university and began taking English courses, which are taught by Christians. This girl received an English Bible, but she stood it on the shelf alongside her other books and didn't pay much attention to it. For three years she studied English and was instructed by these Christian teachers.

During her final year at the university, she went through a period of deep depression. She was worried about the future and fearful she wouldn't find a job. According to the customs in her area, her parents went to every length to pay for her education on the assumption that after she got out of school, she would support them in their old age.

This girl felt incredible pressure about that, and didn't think she could get a job. The anxiety almost led to a breakdown, and she was even thinking of taking her life. Glancing up, she saw the Bible in the shelf, and she pulled it down and opened it at random. The first words that hit her eyes were in Philippians 4: "DO NOT WORRY ABOUT ANYTHING."

She was stunned. She went running to someone and said, "God has spoken to me. He has really spoken to me!" She began reading more and more of the Bible, and it was through this experience that she prayed to receive Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior.

Well, that young lady learned three very important lessons at the very onset of her Christian experience.

1. God wants to speak to us.
2. He speaks to us through His Word, the Holy Bible.
3. We can, in turn, speak to Him in prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ.

If that is all you know about the Christian faith, you know a great deal. Well, today we are wrapping up a series of messages on this very subject. We've called this series "Listening," and it's all about how we can listen to the Lord in Bible study and how He delights to listen to us in prayer. We're featuring verses number 10-17 in our project of 100 Bible verses. So as we wrap up another segment of verses, let's review these together.

- 2 Timothy 3:16: All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness.
- Joshua 1:8: Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.
- Psalm 119:11: I have hidden Your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.
- Deuteronomy 6:6-7: These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.
- Hebrews 4:12: For the Word of God is living and active. Sharper than any doubled-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.
- Hebrews 4:16: Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

And now we come to today's verses:

- 1 John 5:14-15: This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us – whatever we ask – we know that we have whatever we ask of Him.

1. Prayer is Approaching God

This verse gives us four definitions to prayer. First, prayer is approaching God. It's interesting to me that this is one of the Bible's greatest verses on prayer, and yet the word prayer does not appear in it. John could have said, "This is the confidence we have in praying." He doesn't say that. He uses a phrase that gives us a great definition of prayer: "This is the confidence we have in approaching God." Prayer is approaching God.

This is Old Testament language. In the Old Testament, the presence of the glory of the Lord descended on Mount Sinai, and it was terrifying to behold—lightening, thunder, the trembling of the earth, the blaring of a trumpet. And the Israelites were told that because of the sheer holiness of the power of the glory of the Lord, none of them should approach the mountain or come into the Lord's presence, except for Moses who was given a special waiver to do so.

In the story of the Tabernacle, none of the Israelites could approach the Holy of Holies except for the High Priest.

In the book of Daniel, one like the Son of Man came with the clouds of heaven and approached the Ancient of Days and was led into His presence. In the book of Esther, even the queen herself was afraid to approach the king as he sat on the throne.

To the people of the Old Testament, the presence of a monarch or the presence of the glory of Almighty God was intimidating, threatening, awe-inspiring, and fearful. But when Jesus died and rose again, the way was opened for every believer to approach the throne of God freely and to ask God for whatever we need. Prayer is approaching the very throne of God Himself.

2. Prayer is Approaching God and Asking

But there is another word that begins with "a" in this verse, and it occurs three times: ask. Prayer is approaching God and asking for what we need. The verse says:

This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us – whatever we ask – we know that we have whatever we ask of Him.

Ask is a word that is very frequently used in the Bible in connection with prayer. The word "ask" itself occurs nearly 800 times in the Bible. Many of these are related to prayer. Jesus Himself frequently used it in this connection. He said:

- Your Father knows what you need before you ask Him....
- Ask and it will be given you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened...
- How much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask Him.
- If two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done...
- If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.
- You may ask Me for anything in My Name and I will do it.
- If you abide in Me and My words abide in you, you may ask for whatsoever you will and it will be given you.

This is an invitation that has shaped history, changed lives, and drawn the grace of God into every crevice and corner of life. In his book, *Partners in Prayer*, John Maxwell tells about a plague of grasshoppers that nearly destroyed Minnesota crops in 1876. The next year, the farmers were so worried that the state's agricultural plight came to the attention of Governor John S. Pillsbury. He proclaimed April 26 as a special day of prayer and fasting, and he urged everyone in Minnesota to fight the grasshoppers with the weapon of prayer. Schools, shops, and offices were closed as people took the matter seriously. The next day, temperatures soared and in the unseasonable heat, the grasshopper larvae began wiggling to life. In three days of unusual heat, billions of grasshoppers hatched, and the farmers were devastated. But then on the fourth day, the temperature plunged, and that night a frost covered the earth, killing every one of the pests and sparing the grateful farmers from plague and famine. When God's people are faithful to pray, He is faithful to answer. It cannot be otherwise, because His essential nature is one of utter faithfulness in every season.

No one on earth fully appreciates the fact that as the sun rises in the east each morning, a vast army of thousands of saints – many of them enfeebled, retired, sidelined soldiers who in their golden years have discovered a new ministry on their knees – rise from bed, go to their tables or desks and they spread their prayer lists before the Lord. Millions of prayers ascend upward each new day. Millions of names are called. Millions of problems are addressed before the Throne of Grace. And millions of answers descend in God's timing.

Missionaries are strengthened, children return to the fold, financial needs are met, pastors are empowered for their work, churches are unified, hurts are healed, history is altered, and a million cares are committed into the pierced hands of the Savior.

Prayer is approaching God and Asking.

3. Prayer is Approaching God and Asking with Confidence

But there's more here in this passage. Here's the third thing: Prayer is approaching God and asking with confidence. Notice that first phrase which serves as a preamble to the verse: And this is the confidence we have in approaching God...

The word *παρρησία* (para-see'-a) is found many times in the Greek New Testament, and it usually had to do with boldness or confidence or plainness in speaking to someone. There are two other major times this verse is used in connection with prayer.

- Hebrews 4:16, which is one of our 100 verses, says, "Let us then approach the throne of grace with (*παρρησία*) confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need."
- Ephesians 3:12 says: "In Him and through faith in Him we may approach God with freedom and (*παρρησία*) confidence."
- And here in 1 John 5:14, we read, "This is the (*παρρησία*) confidence we have in approaching God..."

The overriding emphasis of these verses we're studying today has to do with the assurance we place on the medium of prayer. John wants us to know that prayer isn't a hit-or-miss affair. Let me read it for you with the kind of stress that I think John was wanting to convey.

This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us – **WHATEVER WE ASK** – we know that we have whatever we ask of Him.

John wants us to know that prayer isn't a hit-or-miss affair. Notice the pattern of words:

- We have that opening word: Confidence
- We have one occurrence of the word: Anything
- We have two occurrences of the phrase: He Hears Us
- We have two occurrences of the phrase: Whatever We Ask
- We have two occurrences of the phrase: We Know
- We have two occurrences of the phrase: We Have
- And we have three occurrences of that word: Ask

In other words, this verse says: This is the confidence: He hears us... He hears us... Anything... Whatever we ask... Whatever we ask... We know... We know... We have... We have... Ask... ask...ask....

4. Prayer is Approaching God and Asking with Confidence That He Will Answer Wisely

But there is a fourth aspect to the definition of prayer that John gives: Prayer is approaching God and asking with confidence that He will answer wisely. Notice the four words that serve to condition or modify the promise:

This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of Him.

Sometimes after I have prayed earnestly about a certain thing and it has not come to pass, I get discouraged and I say, "God has not answered my prayer." But then I go to the Bible and I notice that some of the greatest men and women of the Bible had the same experience, and it wasn't that God didn't answer their prayer. It's that He knew how to answer wisely.

Ø Abraham earnestly prayed that Ishmael would become the Son of Promise and the heir of his legacy, but God said no. He had something better, a line of descent through the boy Isaac.

Ø Moses earnestly prayed to cross the River Jordan with the children of Israel, but God said no. He had a younger leader named Joshua, and a better Promised Land for the aged Moses.

Ø David prayed earnestly for the joy of building a temple to the Lord, but God said no. He has something better—for David to set the stage and for his son Solomon to do the work.

Ø Jonah prayed earnestly that he would die, but God said no. He has something better—for Jonah to learn the lessons of compassion and write it down a book that would thrill the ages.

Ø The healed demonic in Mark 5 prayed that he could travel around as a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth, but the Lord said no. He has something better—that he go home to his friends and tell them what great things the Lord had done for him and had shown him mercy.

Ø The apostle Paul prayed earnestly to be healed from his disease, which he described as a thorn in the flesh. But God said no. He had something better—for Paul to discover the all-sufficiency of His grace.

Ø Jesus prayed earnestly that the cup of suffering would pass from Him, but God said no. He has something better—that a

fountain would be opened for all the world for the forgiveness of sin.

As I've read the biographies of great Christians and world famous missionaries, I've noticed the same thing. When Francis and Edith Schaeffer were serving in a simple pastorate in Saint Louis, Edith prayed earnestly that God would keep them off the mission field, but God said no. They ended up in Switzerland and there they found their calling to be, as Time Magazine put it, missionaries to the college students and intellectuals of Europe and indeed of all the world.

In the nation of India, there was a great missionary named Amy Carmichael of Dohnavur who became famous for rescuing young Indian girls who had been given over to sexual slavery. One day Amy told of a prayer she had earnestly prayed in childhood. Her mother had told her that God is very good at answering our prayers, and there was one thing that little Amy wanted more than anything. She wanted blue eyes like her mother's. Amy's eyes were brown, but she wanted blue eyes. So one night she prayed earnestly that during the night the Lord would turn her eyes blue, and she went to sleep in simple childlike faith that God would hear and answer. The next morning she jumped out of bed, pushed a chair to the chest of drawers, climbed up, and studied her eyes in the mirror. At first she was confused and bitterly disappointed, and then a thought came to her. Even though she was simply a young child, this thought came to her: "Isn't 'No' an answer?"

Later, when Amy was risking her life to rescue little girls from Hindu temple prostitution, she disguised herself by wrapping herself in Indian dress and sometimes staining her hands brown with coffee. But she couldn't hide her eyes, and if they had been blue she would have been discovered and probably killed in an instant. They had to be brown.

Amy later wrote a little poem about it:

Just a tiny little child
Three years old,
And a mother with a heart
All of gold
Often did that mother say,
"Jesus hears us when we pray,"
For He's never far away;
And He always answers."

Now, that tiny little child
Had brown eyes,
And she wanted blue instead—
Like blue skies.
For her mother's eyes were blue
Like forget-me-nots. She knew
All her mother said was true,
Jesus always answered.

So she prayed for two blue eyes,
Said "Good night,"
Went to sleep in deep content
And delight.
Woke up early, climbed a chair
By a mirror. Where, O where
Could the blue eyes be? Not there!
Jesus hadn't answered.

Hadn't answered her at all!
Never more
Could she pray—her eyes were brown
As before.
Did a little soft wind blow?
Came a whisper soft and low,
"Jesus answered. He said, 'No';
Isn't 'No' an answer?"

(Frank L. Houghton, Amy Carmichael of Dohnavur (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1979), 18.)

But, of course, God doesn't always say, "No." Sometimes He says, "Yes, but not now." And so very often, He says, "Yes, of course. Absolutely. You got it. Thanks for asking."

I believe it was the old evangelist John R. Rice who once said, "Heaven is just full of answers to prayer waiting to be distributed for which no one has bothered to ask." James said, "You have not because you ask not."

Prayer is approaching God and asking with confidence that He will answer wisely. It's the greatest privilege of this life.

This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of Him (1 John 5:14-15)