

THE FELLOWSHIP

An Exposition of First John

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CHRISTIAN LITERATURE CRUSADE Fort Washington, Pennsylvania

CHAPTER TWO -

THE PROBLEM OF THE FELLOWSHIP (I John 1:8-2:2)

8 If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is no in us.

9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

10. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

1. My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous:

2. And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.

WE saw last time that the threefold mark of the Fellowship, as a body, is that it is a Fellowship of Life, a Fellowship of Love, and a Fellowship of Light. The three notes of the members, as individuals, are Holiness, Happiness, and Helpfulness. We should, if things are right with us, be possessed of those qualities. This section of our Epistle is concerned with the first of them - holiness. The moment we become desirous of this beautiful Christian characteristic, we are made aware of the opposition, we find ourselves sensitive to sin - this it is that is the believer's problem:

THE NEED FOR CLEANSING

Yes, Christians; for it is to such that the Epistle is written - let them learn that, however advanced in holiness they may become, they will never, down here, pass beyond the need for cleansing. Notice here the series of "**If's**": each introducing some aspect of the sin problem.

Sin as a Root - "**If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us**" (8). We are to be careful to distinguish between the root and the fruit - in this verse we are concerned with the former; and if we were so successful in Christian character and conduct that we had no sinful fruit in our life, we could not truthfully say "**we have no sin**", for the root remains, liable to break into fruit at any time.

There are those who teach that it is possible to get this ugly root completely extracted - "eradicationists", they are called. I cannot personally join their company, for I feel that the New Testament is against them, that we Christians have to suffer this evil entail from the Fall, and that the way to deal with the root is not by eradication, but by counteraction. If we think

otherwise, does not "**we deceive ourselves**" apply - does this not seem to be the HOLY SPIRIT'S teaching, to John here; and to Paul, in Galatians 5:16-17, "**Walk in the SPIRIT, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh . . .?**" The flesh, the old sinful nature, the root, always there: the SPIRIT, the counteracting Divine Agent, for victory.

This evil presence remaining is the reason *why Sin is so Universal*. A jelly-mould gives its pattern to all its children: if you accidentally drop something into it, and chip the pattern, all the subsequent jellies will bear the mark of the fall. All those who come from Adam carry the stigma of his Fall.

This also explains *why Sin is so Attractive*. There is a something in us that answers to the pull of the temptation without. A magnet will have no effect on a pile of wood-shavings - there is nothing there to respond; but how different when the approach is to a pile of steel-filings! There is an element in the steel that finds in the magnet something desirable, and succumbs to its draw. That magnet is like the temptation; and this root in us finds fascination in it, and yields to its invitation.

Here, too, lies the suggestion of *why Sin is so Strong*. This root is like a spy within the castle, in league with the enemy outside, giving increased power to the onslaught, because he knows which doors to leave open. The evil triumvirate of the world, the flesh and the devil is immensely strengthened by the fact that one of them is hiding within the stronghold itself.

In this truth also we have the clue - *Sin is so Usual*. Left to ourselves, we shall always be liable to take the crooked way, and rarely likely to go straight. We are like the "wood" in the game of bowls; its object will be to lie as close as possible to the little white "jack" - yet, except controlled by the man who knows, it will always go awry. The explanation is, of course, that inside the big wooden hall there is a piece of metal, the "bias", which always gives it a crooked tendency. That wrong bent is overcome by the counteraction of the expert bowler.

There it is, then, this problem of indwelling sin (See Romans 7:20).

On the other side we shall lose it; but while we are this side of glory, we shall always have to reckon with it; and we shall never be able truthfully to "**say that we have no sin.**"

Next, we consider

Sinfulness as a Character - "**our sins, and . . . all unrighteousness**" (9). How sadly sinful we are, indeed! We are not sinners because we sin: we sin because we are sinners in character. A dog is not a dog because it barks: it barks because it's a dog. A tree is not a plum tree because it bears plums: it bears plums because it's a plum tree. Actual sins are the symptoms of the deep-seated malady of a sinful character; and it is not merely the spots but the disease that the Great Physician would deal with, as we place ourselves in His hands.

He will get to the root of the matter: there it is again, the root! He will remedy matters by implanting Another Root, the SPIRIT, Ephesians 5:9. He will concern Himself not only with sin's characteristics, but with its character.

Is this not the reason why the beginning of the Christian life is so radical in its nature that it has to be described as a New Birth. To become a Christian a man has to be not just a better man, but actually a different man. **"Except a man be born again... he cannot enter into the kingdom of God"**, John 3:3-5. Suppose a fish wants to become a man he will not accomplish it by being a better fish: except a fish be born again he cannot enter the Kingdom of man! **"Whosoever shall not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child** [that is, by becoming a little child all over again - by being born anew], **he shall not enter therein"**, Mark 10:15. And as 2 Corinthians 5:17 has it **"If any man be in Christ, he is** [not a better creature; though he ought also to be that] **a new creature"** - certainly every bit of a new creation. Thus by another, and a new root, it becomes possible to alter the fruit.

Now let us look at another aspect of this Sin Problem of ours.

Sinning as a Habit. **"If we say that we have not sinned . . . (10).** Here, says Vincent, is "sin regarded as an act"; and that, presumably, not an isolated occasion, but a quite frequent occurrence. We do, we Christians do, often commit deeds of ungodliness, and do omit deeds of godliness. Let it be said specifically that there is no need for this - for, in the Gospel of full salvation, provision is made for the thwarting of such unchristian behaviour. Do you think that we all too often experience failure because we don't expect anything else?

Did the MASTER ever deal imperfectly with the physical ills of men; and shall it be otherwise when He undertakes the salvation from spiritual maladies? Shall not these latter sufferers also be made "perfectly whole"? Not "perfect" yet in the final sense, for the sinful root still remains, but, so far as present practice is concerned, a complete cure. Such perfection we may justifiably anticipate - **"Be ye therefore perfect** [in your sphere], **even as your Father which is in Heaven is perfect** [in His sphere]", (Matthew 5:48). Do you not find this, with the writer, a terribly humbling thought? What we should be, and could be, compared with what we are!

No one, not even the most dastard unbeliever, would dare to call GOD a liar; yet some have ventured to **"make Him a liar"** by professing an immunity from sin which they have not attained. His Word, in Romans 3:22-23 for example, says that **"there is no difference: for all have sinned"**. A difference in degree doubtless, but no difference in fact. In a fever ward, all have the infection but some worse than others. In life, all have the disease of sin - **"there is no difference"** as to the fact; yet the symptoms, the spots, appear worse in some.

That Word of GOD is in the Scriptures, but **"not in us"**, if we deny the truth, and claim to be exempt from the general accusation.

Sin as a Surprise - is next dealt with.

All that the apostle has been saying is penned in order that his readers may see the sin problem stated, in our present quotations, and solved, in our later excerpts - **"that ye sin not"** (2:1). They ought not, they need not - but what if they do? **"If any man sin"** there is in that **"if"** an element of surprise.

If he become guilty of some sin, let it be clearly understood, he is not cast out of the family, but

the fellowship is broken; just as any child knows who has been naughty, that the sun goes in behind a cloud until the sin has been confessed, repented, and forgiven - he has been in the family all the time, but now the fellowship has been restored. **"If any man sin"** - when the sin comes out, the sun goes in: that's it!

In such an event - we repeat, such a surprising event - let it be remembered that we are not abandoned to our own poor self-efforts at restoration: we have got ourselves into this mess, we must get ourselves out of it. NO, no: that would involve us in a helpless, and hopeless, situation. Here is GOD's way - **"we have an Advocate."**

You are familiar enough with the thought, and, I expect, with the attentions of **"your adversary"**, (I Peter 5:8); do we realize sufficiently the boon and blessing of our Advocate - **"righteous"**, in that He Himself has no sin to be dealt with, else He could never have dealt justly and adequately with ours. There He stands in Holy Court, conducting our case before the Righteous JUDGE, (Hebrews 9:24).

We are guilty; He offers no defence; but He puts in a plea for mercy, forgiveness and reinstatement - a plea grounded not on my merit (alas, I have none), but on His own: a prevailing propitiation. We shall deal with its nature when we come to study 4:10. For the moment, we rejoice that it is so gloriously efficacious in settling our case.

What, then, is our wisdom **"if any man sin"**? Well, what is our wisdom if we see a lot of water resting upon our knife. Is it not to dry it off at once? Otherwise, the knife will rust. I recall that, in speaking of ill-gotten gains, James 5:3 says **"the rust of them shall be a witness against you."** Let us, therefore, as soon as we are conscious of any particular sin, deal with it at once - not waiting even for our evening confession and prayer. Let there be no rust remaining, to blunt the keen edge of our Christian life and testimony. **"If any man sin"** - surprised into it - seek to get the stain removed without delay. So, from varying aspects, our passage discloses the need for Cleansing.

Think next of

THE GROUND OF CLEANSING

"The Blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin" (1:7). Indeed it is true to say that **"the precious Blood of Christ"**, (I Peter 1:19), is the ground, the basis, the foundation of all GOD's dealings with man, and all GOD's blessings for man.

Nowadays, it is the fashion, in certain circles, to exclude the word from their theological phraseology and hymnody, since they regard it as too crude and too coarse for our modern ears. Yet, even these will not boggle at speaking of the blood of our warriors shed for us on the battlefield. But GOD didn't hesitate, our Saviour didn't hesitate, Paul didn't hesitate, and now John didn't hesitate - why should you or I hesitate, to speak of it, and that with adoring wonder, with heartfelt gratitude, even with bated breath?

Precious is that Blood to GOD, because it cost Him so much; precious is it to us, because it causes us such blessings. Here, then, is the explanation, and the reason why GOD is able to grant

us the priceless boom of cleansing from sin. Look into the matter more definitely.

"The Blood of Jesus Christ his Son" - so is the cleansing agent described.

- (a) *JESUS - the Human name*. It is real Blood shed: the Blood of Man for the sin of men.
- (b) *CHRIST - the Messianic name*. It is the Blood pictured and predicted by that of the GOD-appointed sacrifices of the old Levitical dispensation. In His Blood all those typical sheddings have been fully and finally fulfilled.
- (c) *His SON - the Divine description*. It is the Blood of Deity, to speak in figure, as we find in Acts 20:28.

No wonder that the shedding is of infinite value; and no wonder that even the old typical sacrificial blood was held sacred - so that, for instance, when the Israelite houses on Passover night, in Egypt, were bloodsprinkled on the lintel and doorposts, Exodus 12:7, none was to be on the door-step: it was too holy a thing to be trodden and trampled under foot. That was only the symbol: what shall be said of the reality? Let us never speak, nor sing, lightly and loosely of the precious Blood - personally, I always write it with a capital "B".

"Cleanseth us" - it may be said that this present tense has a twofold significance.

(1) *The tense of Competence* - the Blood is competent to cleanse, has the property of cleansing. Nothing else can, but this can. You have exactly the same idea in connection with the Old Testament sacrifices. **"It is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul"**, (Leviticus 17:11). So it is the blood that cleanseth, that has this property, this efficacy, which belongs to nothing else in all the wide world. Soap and water can clean the outside; only the Blood can cleanse the heart and conscience within.

(2) *The tense of Continuance* - keeps on cleansing. There is an initial cleansing, when first we **"come"**; and there is a continual cleansing as often as we come; and the medium of cleansing is the same, in both cases.

I have often heard the illustration as in our first chapter, that it is like the watering of the eye, the flow is always there dealing with the impurities that intrude. Personally, I cannot feel that it is as automatic as that; but that there must be, on our part, a continual coming, as often as needs be, in penitence and resolve.

"From all sin" - what a sense of completion is conveyed by that word **"all"**. It is frequently found in the New Testament, and always gives the impression that the matter is complete - there is

- **"all wisdom"**, (Ephesians 1:8), so that we may always know all we ought to know;

- **"all joy"**, (James 1:2), even in the midst of trial and tribulation;

- **"all patience"**, (II Corinthians 12:12), nothing availing to break down our endurance;

- **"all diligence"**, (II Peter 1:5), keeping us always busy in the service of GOD, workers and not

shirkers;

- "**all pleasing**", (Colossians 1:10), not gratifying self, but Him;

- "**all might**", (Colossians 1:11), so that, whatever our task, our temptation, our testing, we shall have a constant supply of power for continuous victory, which "**they which receive . . . shall reign in life**", (Romans 5:17).

Indeed, what fulness is compressed within the narrow compass of those three (two) little letters - *multum in parvo*. And now we have

- "**all sin**", the HOLY SPIRIT has led John to use the word as comprising all the forms and manifestations of the evil principle.

Call sin what you like - evil, corruption, transgression, wickedness, vice, crime, uncleanness, fall, filth, guilt, bondage, iniquity, stain, wrong, misdemeanour, here are fifteen of its many names and aspects: they are covered by this "**all sin**", as a Root, as a Character, as a Habit, as a Surprise.

Now consider

THE RANGE OF CLEANSING

The range is as wide as the need; and so the whole experience and personality of the believer comes under the blessed process. "**clean every whit**" (John 13:10 - is GOD's purpose for His children.

A small boy presents himself at the breakfast table - his knees are clean, his hands are clean, his face is clean, even his neck is clean; but, alas, he is sent upstairs again to complete his ablutions: "You haven't washed behind your ears!" Our Heavenly FATHER is not satisfied unless we are clean through and through - and His purpose is always our possibility.

A Cleansed Heart - comes first. "**If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness**" (9). Take that to pieces.

(a) "**Confess** - to GOD of course, not to a priest. There may be some occasion when it would be right and salutary for someone weighed down with a sense of sin, under deep conviction, to unburden his soul to some understanding person, with great relief and release; but for what is known as auricular confession to a priest I can find no warrant in Holy Scripture. Besides the confession to GOD, there must also be, in some instances, confession, and, where practicable, restitution, to the one we have wronged.

You will remember how Paul insists on this in the case of the runaway slave and thief, Onesimus, whom he has just led to CHRIST. His Master Philemon has, then under the Roman law, absolute power of life or death in such a case - yet Onesimus must take that risk; he must go back now to Colossae, and confess his robbery and desertion to the man he has wronged. This is a matter of real importance.

It may be that some reader of these lines is failing to know peace in his conscience, and power in his service, simply because, while he has confessed to GOD, he has not put it right (so far as he can) with the one against whom he has sinned. For you, my friend, this may entail a distressing interview, the writing of a difficult letter, but if you would have GOD'S best, if you would serve GOD best, it must be done. Are you serious enough, courageous enough, to ask His help and go and do it? It is this confession to a wronged one that James has in mind when he writes "**Confess your faults** [note: not your sins] **one to another**" (5:16). We are, then, to own up to our sinnership, in general, whether we feel it or not, and to our sins, in particular.

Continue to break up our strategic verse.

(b) "**Faithful**" - to His promise He will never break His word, concerning anything He has said, and, just now, this thing that He has so lovingly and graciously undertaken to do. "**There hath not failed one word of all His good promise**", says I Kings 8:56: no, nor never shall.

I always think that His oft-repeated promise of His resurrection on the third day was the strictest test of His fidelity to His word: and I often thrill at the simple allusion of the angel, "**He is risen, as He said**", (Matthew 28:6): He had said so, and of course He did. Yes, of course, for He is ever "**faithful**" to what He has promised.

(c) "**Just**" - to His law. GOD cannot break His own laws; and seeing that sin must be righteously dealt with, and sinners justly punished, Deity, if we may put it so, had to overcome the problem of how justly to save the sinner. Everlasting glory be to GOD that His wisdom evolved a plan wherein His holiness is justified and His love is satisfied "**Christ, the power of God, and the wisdom of God**", (I Corinthians 1:24).

Is His sacrifice in our place a proper transaction? Yes, if the Offering is Faultless - as were the old animals, "**without blemish and without spot**".

- So Pilate says, "**Behold, I bring Him forth to you, that ye may know that I find no fault in Him**", (John 19:4);

- Judas confesses, "**I have betrayed the innocent Blood**", (Matthew 27:4);

- the Thief declares, "**This man hath done nothing amiss**", (Luke 23:41);

- the Centurion testifies, "**Certainly this was a righteous Man**", (Luke 23:47).

If He had had sin of His own, He could not righteously be accepted for ours; but GOD "**hath made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin**", (II Corinthians 5:21).

Just? Yes, if the Sacrifice is Voluntary - "**I lay down my life . . . no man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself**", (John 10:17-18). A willing Victim was He.

Just? Yes, if the Substitution is Adequate - a Man in place of another man, even in place of all other men: is that right and fair? No, but you see although He was really man, He was not merely

man. Deity was conjoined with Humanity, and that gives peculiar significance, and adequate sufficiency. to His acting as Substitute for all. "**If thou be the Son of God**" - said His enemies, at Golgotha, (Matthew 27:40). "**Truly this was the Son of GOD**" - said the soldiers, verse 54. Thus was His atoning death for us a just proceeding: so much so that it would be thoroughly unjust if GOD did not pardon a penitent sinner.

And now, further

(d) "**To forgive. . . and to cleanse**" - these verbs are, in the Greek, in the aorist tense, which indicate that they are implemented definitely and decisively in a specific moment of time. The necessity for any subsequent cleansing will emerge in our next paragraph; but this original and eternal benefit becomes ours the moment we believe.

So, by the infinite mercy and grace of GOD, we receive a cleansed heart

"Oh, for a heart to praise my God,
A heart from sin set free;
A heart that's sprinkled with the Blood
So freely shed for me."

But that does not exhaust the range of this beneficent operation.

A Cleansed Walk - "**These things write I unto you, that ye sin not**" (2:1). Here we are to grasp the difference between Bathing and Rinsing which our LORD taught His disciples by that striking parable in action, in the Upper Room - "**He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet**", (John 13:10). The two words here rendered "**wash**" are different words in the Greek, and speak of "bathing" and "rinsing" respectively, as above.

The bathing represents that original whole cleansing which we received when first we trusted CHRIST, without which "**thou hast no part with [Him]**" (8). At which the impulsive disciple exclaims, "**Not my feet only, but also my hands and my head**" (9). No, no, Peter - that over-all bath needs no repeating: the first and fundamental cleansing suffices for all eternity; but there is necessity for day-to-day purifying from the dust, and dirt, and defilement of the way.

Peter, reader, not your whole being again - but "**[your] feet**", your walk; and by the same blessed agency of "**the Blood**". Seek this blest rinsing at the close of each day, if you have not found need for it even before. So the range of cleansing widens.

A Cleansed Account - "**we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous**" (2:1). GOD has, in His mysterious providence, allowed "**the accuser of our brethren**", (Revelation 12:10), to enter the Court of Heaven against us, as in the case of Job 1:6, and Joshua, the High Priest, Zechariah 3:1; but "**we have an Advocate**", as we considered earlier in this present Study.

Have you come across that beautiful bit of type-history in Nehemiah 11:24, "**Pethahiah... was at the king's hand in all matters concerning the people**"? Artaxerxes, following upon the policy of Darius, had allowed a number of the captive Jews to return to their own land, specially to

build up the broken-down walls of their beloved Jerusalem. He was always interested in them, and concerned for their welfare; and he arranged for Pethahiah, one of themselves, to remain at Court, to be always available for Jewish matters. If His Majesty wanted information relating to the life and circumstances of the people, he could always obtain it first-hand from their representative.

On the other hand, if they had some request, some need, they could always approach the king through their advocate "**in all matters**". What a beautiful picture of our Advocate, one of ourselves, made like unto His brethren, "**now to appear in the presence of God for us**", (Hebrews 9:24). We have a Heavenly Pethahiah; and we can make our supplications, and obtain our supplies thus "**through Jesus Christ our Lord**". He represents us there, and presents our petition - be it for Power, for Purity, for Pleasure, for Plenty, or, as in the instance of our particular passage, for Pardon.

So we may rejoice in a Cleansed Account, through the mediacy and advocacy of Him Who shed His Blood not only to Make but also to Keep us clean. If we may vary the metaphor, in contrast to our financial position at the bank, it is good, in this spiritual record, always to have our account "in the red" - under the Blood. And now, it is full time to close up this present Study with a final brief word about

THE MESSAGE OF CLEANSING

"He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world" (2:2).

The Bible never allows us to forget others. We who know the Joyful News are under strict obligation to pass it on to other needy souls. "**Let the redeemed of the Lord say so**", (Psalm 107:2), still is in force.

Would that we were all like Naaman's little maid, who knew where her leprous master could find cleansing, and who did not - from innate shyness, nor for fear of being ridiculed, nor in sheer indifference - refrain from telling what she knew. "**Would God my lord were with the prophet that is in Samaria! for he would recover him of his leprosy**", (II Kings 5:3).

Be ours, then, the happy privilege of telling those stricken with the dread leprosy of sin of the "**fountain opened . . . for sin and for uncleanness**", (Zechariah 13:1), even from "**these wounds in thine hands**" (verse 6).

"E'er since by faith I saw the stream
Thy flowing wounds supply,
Redeeming love has been my theme,
And shall be till I die."

~ end of chapter 2 ~

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