

The Man who Ignores Light

by Ray C. Stedman

We have learned from the Apostle John that life without fellowship with God is like being shut away from the light; it is dark and cold, depressing and filled with illusions. God is light. This is the message of the life of our Lord Jesus, John declares. This is what he came to tell us and to show us. As light, he warms, fills, and fulfills us and unveils reality to us by showing up the false.

But, evidently, not to everyone. This is the problem which we now must face. Why is it that some Christians seem to be transformed by contact with Jesus Christ – their lives are perceptibly different – but others are not? Some Christians, even Christians of long standing, seem still to be very much conformed to the world around them, even deformed in their views and outlooks. Yet all of them stoutly assert that they are Christians, that they, too, have been born again by faith in Jesus Christ. It is not strange that the world asks, “What is wrong, why is this condition true?”

The secret, John says, is fellowship. The reason he writes this letter is that we might understand that. Verse 3 tells us,

that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. {1 Jn 1:3 RSV}

So the key is fellowship. We must distinguish and understand very clearly the difference between relationship and fellowship. Relationship is becoming a member of the family of God, by faith in Jesus Christ. It is established by asking him to come into your life and heart. John makes that clear at the end of this letter. “He who has the Son has life [that is relationship]; but he who has not the Son of God has not life [he does not have a relationship],” {1 Jn 5:12 RSV}. The Christian life starts right

there with this matter of relationship. But fellowship is experiencing Christ. Relationship is accepting Christ; fellowship is experiencing him. You can never have fellowship until you have established relationship, but you can certainly have relationship without fellowship. This is what this letter emphasizes for us. Relationship puts us into the family of God, but fellowship permits the life of that family to shine out through us. That is what marks the difference between Christians. Relationship is to be “in the Lord” but fellowship is to be “strong in the Lord and in the power of his might” {Eph 6:10 KJV}, as Paul so beautifully expresses it in his letter to the Ephesians.

Relationship means that all God has is potentially yours, but fellowship means you are actually drawing upon that, and his resources are visible in your experience. Relationship is you possessing God; fellowship is God possessing you. Fellowship, then, is the key to vital Christianity. That is why this letter, which calls us back to fundamental issues, focuses first on that. The important question is, as a Christian, are you enjoying fellowship with the Father and with his Son, experiencing all things in common together?

Now John sees three ways by which Christians miss out on fellowship. If you look at the first chapter of John’s letter, you will see three times he uses the phrase, *if we say*:

Verse 6: “If we say we have fellowship,”

Verse 8: “If we say we have no sin,” and

Verse 10: “If we say we have not sinned.”

Three times a profession is indicated, but the condition or possession that follows belies the profession. We shall spend our time now with that first one, taking these one by one because they are so important.

In this first instance, John says,

If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not live according to 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 cleanses us from all sin. {1 Jn 1:6-7 RSV}

What is the problem here?

This is a very common condition. Perhaps many of us here are suffering from this very condition at the present moment. Here is a Christian, John says, who has established a relationship with God, he has come into the family of God by faith in Christ. Perhaps that relationship has actually been established for years. The man has been a Christian for a long time and he says that he has fellowship with God. That means that he is experiencing the full flow of the life in the Spirit, the life of God. He claims that the life of Jesus Christ is his in experience as well as in potential. "Ah, but," John says, "there is no sign of it in his life." He lies. He does not live in a way that accords with his claim. He does not live according to the truth. His life is harsh, perhaps, and loveless, critical and demanding of others. Or perhaps it is intemperate, frivolous and flippant, lived solely on the surface, shallow and superficial. Or perhaps it is gossipy and sharp-tongued, or resentful and filled with bitterness.

Well, what is wrong?

Nothing is wrong with the relationship. It is no good talking to this person about *becoming* a Christian; he *is* a Christian. He knows what it means to know Jesus Christ. Well, what is wrong? John analyzes it. "The problem is," he says, "he is walking in darkness." Do we not greatly misunderstand this phrase? Most of us mentally read this as though it refers to having fallen into sin, what was once called 'a backslidden condition,' to having turned aside into willfulness, or wickedness. It is the opposite, of course, of walking in the light. The opposite of that would be walking in darkness, that is, not behaving the way we ought. But if we view this phrase that way we are confusing cause with results. The fact is, we sin because we are walking in darkness! Walking in darkness is not an equivalent term to sinning. We are sinning because we walk in darkness. That is the problem.

Well, then, what is darkness?

We must answer that first on the physical level. How would you go about getting this room dark? It is now filled with light. Would you somehow have to scoop out the light and shovel in the darkness? Of course not, we need only to turn off the light. Darkness is simply the absence of light. Wherever there is no light there is darkness, because darkness is the absence of light. That is precisely what John means here. To walk in darkness means to walk as though there were no God, for God is light. It is to be a practical atheist. Not an actual one, of course. We believe there is a God, we know he exists, but we live as though there were none. We do not expose ourselves to him. That is walking in darkness.

This is what John is describing here. It is possible to be a Christian and yet walk in darkness by turning God off. When you turn off the light the darkness comes flooding in, instantly. As I suggested, this is not a rare condition at all. John starts with this problem because it is one of the most wide-spread and commonplace of problems. It is evident on every side. You can miss the benefits of God's presence in your heart and life by ignoring the light. This is the case he brings before us.

How do you do this?

I wish to be very practical about this. I have discovered that sometimes these biblical terms are so familiar to us they fall on our ears without meaning. We really do not know what they describe, and, therefore, it is sometimes very helpful to put them in other ways. How, then, do people actually do this, turn off the light and walk in darkness? Well, there are some very obvious ways in which it is done.

1. Some people stop coming to church. That is one way. The Word of God, if it is proclaimed from a pulpit like this, is a channel of God's light. The Word itself is light. It penetrates and searches, it seeks out our inner life and exposes it to our view. If we stop coming to church we escape the light that way. We are no longer made uncomfortable by the Word. We discover that, if we stay away, we do not experience the pricking of our conscience which the light awakens. The writer of Hebrews warns us that there would be a tendency to do this as we draw near the close of the age. He

says, “Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together, as the manner of some is, and all the more as you see the Day approaching,” {cf, Heb 10:25 KJV}. The delusions of the age are such that they tend to make us want to stay away from the light. It is more comfortable to sit around in the old slippers of the flesh and enjoy oneself at home. That is one way to turn off the light.

2. Another way is to stop reading the Scriptures. There are many who do this. An amazing number of Christians have simply turned off the light by ceasing to read the Scriptures. They seldom open the Bible. They only hear a verse now and then, and are content with what they get in church or Sunday School, but they seldom open it for themselves. Underneath all the excuses that are given for this – no time, lots of pressures, etc., – there is really a desire to escape the light. The Word is light, but we want to walk in darkness. As Mark Twain put it, “It isn’t the parts of Scripture that I don’t understand that bother me, it’s the parts I do!”
3. Now there are other, more subtle ways, to walk in darkness. One is never to take a long look at yourself. Never examine yourself. Nod your head at the right places when the sermon is being expounded, but never apply it, or ask questions of yourself about what is being said. This is an almost certain way of walking in the darkness, and one of the commonest evasions of our day. I would suggest to you that perhaps the greatest cause of weakness among evangelical Christians is this, we seldom stop to examine ourselves. We never ask ourselves searching questions as to where we are in the Christian life. The Apostle Paul says, “Examine yourselves, whether you be in the faith!” {2 Cor 13:5 KJV}. He urges this kind of activity upon us. He says, in effect, don’t go on taking it for granted that because you are hearing the truth you are obeying it, ask yourself, “Where am I?” John says, “try the spirits whether they be of God,” {1 Jn 4:1 KJV}. Examine what

you are listening to and how you are thinking, and lay it alongside the Scriptures. Put to yourself life’s most basic question: “Where am I?” Do it periodically and frequently:

- What kind of Christian am I?
- Am I better than I was six months ago?
- Am I easier to live with?
- Am I a more gracious, compassionate, outgoing kind of person than I was a year ago?

That is walking in the light, and to avoid it is to walk in darkness.

Put on what I call “moral cosmetics.” Did you ever see a lady making up her face? She examines it first, and then she applies a bit of color here and a bit there, a touch of blue here and brown there, pats it and arranges it to make her face up as she would like it to be. This is a rather harmless matter when it occurs only with the physical, for the physical is somewhat remote from us, but the closer we get to the real us the more deadly this kind of a practice becomes. We can not only do it on the physical, but we can do it on the soulish and spiritual level as well. We make ourselves up, when we go out among others, into the kind of image we want them to believe we are. That practice is absolutely guaranteed to halt abruptly all Christian growth:

- If you appear to be mature when you are not, then you cannot be seen as needing anything.
- So, when you are out with other Christians, you must always appear that you already have everything.
 - ◆ You cannot listen,
 - ◆ You cannot really seek for anything yourself,
 - ◆ You cannot admit any need.

If you are already fully grown, of course, you cannot appear to need any food; and so you do not grow. You cannot grow, and you will never grow. This is why the Lord Jesus said,

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled,”
{Matt 5:6 KJV}

This results in what the world likes to call ‘gamemanship’— games people play to keep from telling as little of the truth about themselves as they possibly can. And the great tragedy is that Christians go right along with it and adopt these clever little games, pretending to be something they are not.

Is it not very instructive that the first miracle of judgment in the New Testament occurred shortly after the Day of Pentecost when Ananias and Sapphira were judged for pretending to be what they were not, pretending to have a holiness that they did not actually possess? See how destructive this is. The Holy Spirit is trying to arrest our attention by that dramatic scene when these two fell down dead, thus indicating the deadliness of pretense.

Furthermore, this kind of pretense makes it impossible for you ever to help a younger Christian, even the younger Christians in your own home. They are helped by seeing you overcome the problems of life by the reaction of faith. If you do not admit there are problems, if you never talk about them or never appear to have them, then your image to them is simply one of achieved perfection, and it is the most discouraging thing they can ever run into.

A woman this summer took me aside and for two and a half hours poured into my ear a tragic tale. As a young Christian, she admired another Christian woman. This woman appeared to her to be the acme of Christian perfection. She longed to be like her, but she confessed that whenever she was with her she came away totally depressed. She found the standard apparently set before her was impossible for her to achieve in her immature Christian relationship. But one day she discovered a terribly serious flaw in the other person, who immediately tried to cover it up. All the delusions of years came crashing down around this young woman’s head. She realized that the other had been pretending all the time. It resulted in a terrible crisis in the first person’s experience. She was overwhelmed with feelings of bitterness and resentment, and cried out to me, “Oh, if she had just admitted some need, what a help it would have been to me!”

One of the most serious problems among Christians is that we never admit that anything is going wrong, or that we have problems, or times

when our faith is tested. We never tell anyone about these. Therefore we walk in darkness.

Remember that darkness is the absence of light. To walk in the light is to have everything open, exposed to God, or to anyone else that is interested. But to walk in darkness is to talk about love and joy and power, but to live a lie. It is from fellowship, the sharing of the life of Christ, that there comes strength. To ignore light is to choose weakness.

Now what is the answer?

John says, “walk in the light,” that is the answer. In other words, not behaving perfectly, but examining ourselves, being willing to look at ourselves, listen seriously to what others say about us and ask ourselves how much truth is there in it, and not immediately grow defensive. If we take down our fences and our facades and open up to others, tell them what we are going through and encourage them to open up to us, admit our faults, this is walking in the light. As James puts it, “confess your faults, and pray one for another,” {cf, Jas 5:16 KJV}.

If we share these and ask for prayer about them, well, then what? John says, “you have fellowship one with another,” you and Christ. You immediately have fellowship, that is the important thing, is it not? You immediately discover that when you are willing to look, to listen, and to examine, that the light is shining on you. If you walk in the light it does not matter what your actual condition is, immediately you will have fellowship with the Son of God. You hold everything in common with him. What that can mean in terms of power, love, joy, glory and excitement in your life, you need only to listen to the testimony of those who are experiencing it to know.

But not only that, John says, our fellowship is also with one another. Fellowship with other humans will surely follow. In other words, you become approachable, sympathetic, and uncritical. You lose your blaming, demanding, critical spirit. You give up your perfectionism, your demand that everyone else measure up. You become human, and oh, so much easier to live with.

But that is not all. There is more, and it goes much deeper. Listen to this, “and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.” Why does he put that in there? Is it not extraneous? Is not that introducing some other idea into this? We have been talking about fellowship and now suddenly he

talks about cleansing. Well, of course, it is not out of place. Nothing in God's Word is out of place. This belongs right here because the inevitable accompaniment of evading light is guilt. You cannot walk in darkness without being guilty, feeling guilty. Guilt is the underlying cause of Christian depression; it is the thing that creates that somber, wet-blanket approach that so many Christians demonstrate. It is because they are suffering from suppressed guilt and they are trying to make up for it in a rigid, demanding code to sort of punish themselves for not being what they know they ought to be. And it also results, as we have seen before in other messages, in actual physical afflictions, such as insomnia, obesity, nervous habits, and even in asthma, and ulcers, aphasia, and other afflictions.

You see, to walk in the light means to hide nothing, to defend yourself neither from the light of God nor in any way try to appear something that you are not. It means to come instantly, without defensiveness, to the light and deal with it before God. If you see something wrong, say so. You are not going to lose face. You are not going to lose status. You discover the amazing thing is your friends still love you. In fact, they love you more when you begin to admit there are things wrong. You will discover that you are far more approachable, far more human. Your family begins to be comfortable around you instead of being uncomfortable. And there comes the sweet relief of the cleansing grace of God that always accompanies walking in the light. It is almost automatic. If we walk in the light, the blood of Jesus Christ is continuously cleansing us from all sin. It is the present tense there, it is done instantly, continuously, all the time.

You could walk through a great dark cloud of soot, and if it were dark enough and thick enough you would come out completely covered with black, face, hands, everything, except for two spots that would be clear – your eyeballs. Why? Because your body has a continuous cleansing action that goes on all the time that keeps the eyes clear. And this is the provision God has made in Christ.

If we walk in the light, if we try to deceive ourselves and play games, pretending we are something we are not, the blood of Jesus Christ is continually cleansing us so that the problems of the immediate past as well as the distant past are taken care of in the cleansing, forgiving grace accom-

plished in the death of Jesus Christ, the blood of Christ poured out for us.

Now, many have confessed to me that they have been Christians for years, they knew they were Christians, they knew they had a relationship, but they never experienced fellowship, because they had been walking in darkness. They had been doing some of these things we have talked about. But, oh, I have a long list of memories of those who have come to me and said,

“What joy, what relief, what sheer, dramatic relief it has been to get rid of all this posturing, this pretending, and admit they have problems, and to have people pray for them even though they have been Christians for years, and to feel the burden of pretense roll away so that they are just free to be what they are.”

It is a glorious sense, the cleansing grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, that is the first area, walking in the light. Light, as we saw, is:

1. First, revealing, and then
2. It is a measuring stick by which we can measure and evaluate.
3. And, finally, it is energizing, vitalizing, imparting strength to us.

But it must always be confronted first on that matter of revealing. Let the light shine on you. Listen to the voice of the Spirit. Do not hide, come out into the open with others as well as with God, and the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, will cleanse you from all sin, and you will know the glory of the intended life for a Christian – fellowship, shared life with the Son of God.

Let us bow together in prayer.

Prayer:

Our Father, You who know us so well, know how easy it is for us to pretend. What accomplished hypocrites we are; how practiced we are in these simple arts of deception. We have grown up this way. The

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world around lives on this level, and we have too. But grant to us the faith and the grace to be different, for your name's sake and for your Word's sake, and come to the light pretending nothing, to take down our

fences, and be what we are, and know that in that we become the fulfillment of all that we desire to be. We lose this pretended status and achieve a rightful one. Thank you in Christ's name, Amen.

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