

# 1 JOHN 1:1-10

SERIES ON 1 JOHN  
MT ALBERT BAPTIST CHURCH

A SERMON BY STUART MCGREGOR

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Over the next few weeks we are going to looking at 1 John. It's a book that has some pretty difficult things to say, so we'll probably get a bit heavy with it at times.

The book is full of stark contrasts and extreme statements that when read on the surface can lead to a terribly condemning understanding of our faith. I first read this book in 1992 when I was embarking on my first experience of full-time Christian ministry and I never felt so bad about myself after reading the bible.

The first rule of thumb when reading anything written by John, which are his letters, his gospel and the Revelation is to remember that he is very clever. There are often several layers underlying the things he says which makes it extremely rich reading. For example when we read of the blind man being healed in chapter 9 of John's Gospel, we can see that the miracle is not so much that he could see physical things but that he could see spiritually as well. His proclamation about Jesus gives witness to that.

I first read this book when I was embarking on my first experience of full-time Christian ministry and I never felt so bad about myself after reading the bible. Simply because I read it in ignorance of this rule of thumb. John needs to be read in chunks not verses, which is probably applicable to all the bible really.

Usually when I read the bible I have such a high expectation for it to say something meaningful to me that I gloss over the parts that don't jump out. I don't take read and try to understand the whole thing in its entirety. The problem with this is that I can get a really subjective perspective on things, my understanding of the bible is limited by little wow verses and can end up very shallow and quite incorrect.

One of the wow verses for me, and I suspect that it would stand out for anyone who was feeling terrible about who they were as a Christian is verse 6.

That is just the worst piece of scripture for someone who thinks they are not doing very well. It would strike me on the side of the head and I wouldn't take in much else after that. So I'm reeling in this kind of dazed doubt of whether or not I am saved. And it ripped me apart!

Think about it! If I say I have fellowship with him, but am still walking in darkness then I am a liar! In other words it would seem that if I say I am a Christian and carry on sinning I am a liar!

And this troubled me. I am so acutely aware of my own failings as a Christian, of my own sin, of my own selfishness (just ask my wife!) that this kind of thinking seems to imply that I am walking in darkness. If that is the case, then I'm not really a Christian. But as we look at the context of the verse we see that this perspective is quite skewed.

What I want to say tonight is that **the Christian walk holds in tension the reality of our sin with the reality Jesus' forgiveness.** One without the other doesn't work and is not the life that God expects of us.

I heard a preacher telling a congregation that the standard for God is perfection, we are called to be holy as God is holy. And so his conclusion is that we should be living morally excellent lives because that is the only standard that will do for God. But I am not convinced that that is the Good News that Jesus was telling us about because it sets us up to fail because we can never live too long without sinning because it is so much a part of our lives.

Sin, it's not a popular word in Auckland. It implies failure and nastiness, it implies that there is dirtiness and badness, it implies that there are morally superior people who make the decision about what is and isn't sin.

It is a word that many people avoid and dismiss, joke about and try to make into nothing. It is a word that many don't want to identify with. And there is no denying the fact that it is a religious word and so one that breeds guilt and God-resentment. It is a negative word and ugly word because it is all our ugliness in three letters.

But the interesting thing about sin is this. Everyone believes in it.

All through history humanity has had to come to terms with the problem of evil. Any evil act that is performed by a human being is called sin. An evil act is usually defined as something that is not good. But the interesting thing here is that because good can be defined by an individual to mean what they want mean, the idea of Good becomes flaky and meaningless.

We are living in a world where the absolute, the black and whites and the clear cut definitions are challenged and watered down. And this is happening with the words good, evil and sin. We can see that even good

deeds can be evilly motivated, and evil deeds be performed out of the best intentions.

Who is to know in the scheme of things how good or bad the ideas of good and bad really are? So how good is good? And how bad is bad?

Sometimes it's easy. Sometimes it's hard. Take an easy moral that most people would agree with. "Thou shalt not kill." That's an excellent rule.

So you take the war in Iraq and start applying this command or law. The Americans must be sinning by going to war and killing Iraqi soldiers. Um . . . but what about how it's been reported that Saddam Hussein killed thousands of his own people? He's sinning too isn't he.

So a numbers game starts, if Saddam kills ten thousand per year and America kills two thousand in one war, then America must be the goodies because they are ultimately saving thousands of lives. But they can't do it by not killing. You have to break a few eggs to make an omelette.

Perhaps, but that won't be acceptable to the child of the soldier who just died for his country. Or will it? Maybe it will! Who knows. Who knows the answers to such complex questions, but nevertheless we can see that the simple command "thou shalt not kill" is not as simple as that after all.

At the end of the day, we are faced with the possibility of deconstructing every moral guideline and absolute. At the end of the day, we as a society have found it difficult to justify calling anything good or bad. So where then does that put sin? Everybody knows that it's there, but no-one wants to define it. We seem to be living in crazy times.

But this problem is not as recent as we might think. John is facing this very issue in his letter. He is talking to an age where religious ideas were free to be believed no matter how whacky and obscure they might be.

One of the ideas was this. That everything that we see, touch and taste is an evil version of another totally good version of it's self that exists in a parallel but other place. So if I was holding an apple that had a bruise on it, in another parallel existence would be the same apple but without the bruise, and that apple could never end up being bruised because it is a spiritual apple. This apple here is evil, the other spiritual one is good. The strength of this belief is that it acknowledges that the world is basically not right in every way. That it is broken. The weakness is that it cannot be redeemed. It can't be made good again. In fact only when we die do we become released into the other and perfect existence of the spiritual realm.

There is a sense where we as Christians will hold this to be true. We all believe that when we get to heaven it will all be made ok. We will be living in

the spiritual existence in harmony with God. Yay! We could all live in paradise! Yay! And it is tempting to think that we might as well just commit suicide and go straight there isn't it! Yay!

Except for one thing. God hasn't finished with us here yet. There were people in John's day who were saying if everything that is in this world experience is evil and irredeemable then we may as well not care and just live as we choose. So they would. And because everything was evil anyway then there could be no sin. Morality and goodness had no meaning. It was a great way to justify living an extraordinarily selfish and obnoxious life. They could still be Christians in the 'other' sphere, but they would just live evilly in this one.

These are the people that John is condemning. These are described by him as people who claim to be Christians and yet are walking in the darkness. He is saying that their philosophy might not be able to be disproved, because we can't experience their spiritual realm in this life, but it is wrong and out of kilter with the message of Jesus.

And here is the crunch. People who are Christians are more than just saved in some other realm. They are more than just rubber stamped as eligible for heaven. They are people who confess their sins and accept that Jesus will forgive them and more than that, they will become people who are good for others.

And that is the difference in our kiwi society today. Our faith is not a philosophical choice that we can package away into one way of making ourselves better. Our faith is fundamentally about tangible changes in our life. We are transformed *for the benefit of others*, not just ourselves, but for others. Look at what is being said here by John. He continually uses the phrase, 'fellowship'. Christianity is not **only** about a restored relationship with God but also about a restored relationship with others. This is not an optional and internal faith system that is good for 'me', the point is that it is good for others.

Sometimes philosophy is easy. It is easier to think about things than to act. It is easier to find the 'right' way of thinking about God than it is to act on that.

So what John is condemning is the outright denial that a transformation must take place in the here and now, in the immediate and physical realm. He is condemning outright those people who use the Christian tag as a philosophical label but are otherwise unmoved and disengaged from it.

John identifies that there are those that say they have no sin. They say that now we are Christians we are saved and so there is no reason why we should bundle guilt upon ourselves by confessing our sins all the time. They will say that Jesus has died for our sins once and for all so continually reminding ourselves of how bad we are diminishes the power of the cross. In effect 'We no longer have any sin'. They are afraid of what some people call cheap grace. Where we sin and get forgiven, sin and get forgiven, sin and get forgiven without any transformation taking place.

So as Christians we have two choices, sin no more, or simply ignore and justify our sin.

Ignoring and justifying our sin is only one step away from the idea that maybe we haven't ever sinned after all. Maybe sin is just some kind of human construct that we have.

And that view is more prevalent today than we might think. The idea that definitions of evil are fluid and graded means that some people will make statements like "that was a white lie", or "that was a little lie." "At least I'm not like those rapists in jail—they are the real evil ones. I just smoked some weed!"

Evil and sin then are relegated to the darkest corners of society while the rest of us live in this other 'normal' world where "you can do what you want as long as you don't hurt anyone else." This is coupled with "it's your choice how you feel and respond."

Guy meets girl. Guy falls in love with girl, girl falls in love with guy. They start to go out with each other. He dumps her because she doesn't fulfil all his fantasies in bed which means he can't express who he really is in order to be true to himself. She's hurt. He says she's just so insecure so it's not his problem. If she wants to be all emotional about things well that's her choice.

He somehow escapes without having sinned, because his worldview demanded she do things his way and when she didn't it was her problem. He also somehow escapes without having hurt anyone because it's her that has the problem.

"You can do what you want as long as you don't hurt anyone else." "It's your choice how you feel and respond."

If we hold these two things together we absolve ourselves of any responsibility. So anything goes. Sin is only stuff that hurts someone else, and since you can easily write off someone else's hurt as a product of their own insecurity, we can't do anything wrong!

It's all a bit complex, but this is the world we live in, and encounter every day. You must have seen it. But a world that has no sin, is a selfish world and it is an unredeemable world because it's someone else's problem to work out.

So John is combating this thinking. He is saying basically that those who belittle sin are liars and counterfeit. If we say we have not sinned then we are accusing Jesus of being meaningless because he illustrated how all are sinners when they were about to stone the woman caught in adultery. "Let the person who has not sinned cast the first stone . . ."

Sin is all around us. We have all sinned. Don't for a moment think that you are exempt. Why? Because the Gospel is not open to redefinition. The Gospel is this. God created us to love. To love him and love others. He restores his relationship with us so that we can restore our relationships with others. We are created to love.

Now the interesting thing about love is that it is anti-selfishness. It puts others before the individual. It seeks restoration instead of self gain. Putting others before ourselves is the fellowship of Jesus. This is what is so subversive about it. That other people come first. It is not open to redefinition or watering down on a philosophical level, because love is not internalised and suppressed. It is explosive.

And love transforms this world. I'm thinking that the antithesis or opposite of sin is not doing good things, but being loving.

At the age of 22 I identified whole heartedly with the one who walks in darkness while claiming light. And when I read 1 John I felt unable to come to Jesus because my sin was too great. Surely my sin must exclude me, I thought, God won't be happy with me. But there is one thing that I needed to come to terms with.

God loves me. God thinks I'm ok. God really, really, really, really likes Stu McGregor. And there is nothing I can do to change that because that's just how God is! And he has proved that.

In spite of me then and in spite of me now, I am loved by God. And I confess my sins, not because God is counting them against me, but because I am counting them against myself. And every act of confession is a reminder of how much God loves me! Because every time I confess my sin I acknowledge that Jesus has forgiven me. Every time I acknowledge that I have screwed up, I am reminded of how much God loves me in spite of my selfishness.

Nothing stops God loving us. Which is why he wants to redeem us and make us whole. Which is why he wants to embrace us and forgive us.

All we have to do is accept it and believe.

Our aim is not to live morally righteous lives. Our aim is not to sin no more. Our aim is to be people who love God and love others. The rest flows from that.

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We need to hold in tension the reality that we sin with the reality of Jesus' forgiveness. Because through being aware of our sin and the forgiveness of Jesus we see the ultimate demonstration of his love for us.

So if you are a Christian that has doubts about how you stand in God's eyes, hear these words:

You've sinned. Don't recoil away in shame, but be blown away by Jesus' love.

Be frustrated that you've done it again, but be soothed by the power of Jesus' grace.

We are not failures if we accept his forgiveness.

Aim then not to be perfect, but to love God and love people.