

Sermon Response Guide - January 14, 2024
1 John 1:8-2:6 “Telling the Truth About Ourselves”
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Sermon Overview:

Last week we asked the question: How can we tell the truth about God? How do we discern what God is really like? Today, we are going to ask: How we can tell the truth about ourselves? Today we are going to ask some foundational questions about how we can discover our true identity.

We often define ourselves by our accomplishments, our jobs, our personality traits, or the opinions of others. While these various identity markers have some truth and some value to our sense of self, they also have limitations. These various sources of identity do not tell the deepest truth about who we are.

Our passage today gives us some insight into our true spiritual identity. I notice four shifts we ought to make in our self-understanding. These shifts in self-perception have the capacity to liberate us from the limiting lies we tell about ourselves.

1. From Denial to Honesty

The first shift that needs to take place in our self-perception is a shift from denial to honesty. Our text begins with this declaration: “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.”

Our text names a common human problem. We have a propensity to deceive ourselves - especially regarding the areas in our life that are problematic or need some work. If we are to grow and thrive as human beings we need to begin by being honest about our struggles and our sin. We need to confess our sins, and acknowledge our need for help. Things will not get fixed if we do not acknowledge they are broken.

2. From Shame to Hope

While we need to be honest about our sin, we also need to be honest about God’s grace. The end goal of confession and honesty is not shame. God’s desire is not that we would be stuck in regret and self-hatred.

We can risk honesty because God is ready to receive us in mercy and grace. While we struggle, while we miss the mark, while we come up short, we are also beloved children of God. The writer of 1 John goes on to say, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” In vs. 2:3 we read, “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 reminds us that God has gone to great lengths to draw us back into relationship with him. God offers forgiveness. God advocates for us. God has provided atonement for sins. In Christ, we experience grace, we are freed from the grip of evil, and we are reconciled to God. This is where our true identity is found.

3. From Striving to Abiding

The third shift that this text invites us to have regarding our self-identity deals with the way we experience change. One of the lies that I think we often buy into is that we can't change. Part of the reason we buy into this idea is because we often have a track record of backsliding into old patterns of living.

The writer of 1 John implies that change is possible for us. Our text states, "My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin." At the end of the text, the writer implies that we can grow into people who walk like Jesus walked. "Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did." This is a bold claim. This is a hopeful claim. 1 John implies that God does not simply offer forgiveness, God enables us to live a new kind of life.

If we are to experience change and growth we need to shift our focus from striving to abiding. Notice the use of the phrase "in him." "This is how we know we are in him:⁶ Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.

Our ability to walk as Jesus walked is possible as we abide in Christ, as we live "In him." This is linking back to the gospel of John where we read this. "Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." Change does not emerge from self-effort and striving alone. Apart from God we can do nothing. Instead, change or fruitfulness is the organic and natural result of abiding in the love of God.

Augustine has famously said, "Love, and do as you will." What he means is that what has captured our heart will direct our behavior. If we are authentically captured by and impacted by the love of God, our behavior will follow suit.

4. From Self-centered to Other-centered

Our contemporary conceptions of identity are often centered around our own self and our own needs. We seek out self-help, self-fulfillment, self-actualization. And while it is healthy and right for us to take care of ourselves, and grow in our personal life, our Christian identity is more expansive. We are called to love and serve others.

This outward shift begins is stated in vs 2 of our text. Here we read, that Christ, "is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world." The gospel is good news for us personally but also for the whole world. So as Christians we have a missional identity. This good news is not meant to be hoarded or kept to ourselves, we are meant to be agents of reconciliation and love to those around us.

Indeed, as 1 John 2 goes on, we discover that the litmus test for an authentic spirituality is the care and love of our neighbors and friends. "Whoever says, "I am in the light," while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness."¹⁰ Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling."

The fruit of an authentic life with Christ is not just a personal morality but a social morality. Authentic faith leads to a sacrificial love for our brothers and sisters.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What stood out to you in the text / sermon today?
2. How do you identify yourself with others?
3. How would you define yourself apart from any reference to what have accomplished or currently do?
4. What lies have you bought into about yourself? Where did they come from? How have they affected your life?
5. Of the four shifts in self-perception named in this sermon, which shift do you think you need to most attend to in your life right now?