

Why True Christians Have Great Reasons to Hope
1 John 2:1-6

Pastor Tom Anderst
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I believe God called me to Himself and saved me when I was 7 years old. It was December 26 – Boxing Day – A relaxed day. On that morning, my Mom and Dad were not up yet. But I got up and ended up in my sister's room. She is 12 years older than me. So we had kind of a unique brother/sister relationship. She didn't come and share her dating challenges with me when she was 16 and I was 4. Nor did she come into our sand box and join me in making heavy machinery sounds while I pushed my toys up and down the sand.

But we did have a good relationship which we enjoy to this day. We have drawn closer through sickness and death of first my father and then my mother. Betty has influenced me in many positive ways. On this morning when she saw me wandering around, despite my nickname for her of evil Betty, she invited me into her room. She asked me the question – “Tommy, have you ever received Jesus into your life as your Savior and Lord?” I had to think about that. I'd grown up going to church. We prayed at meals. I kind of prayed before bed. But had I ever prayed and asked Jesus in? No. So on that day, she explained to me why I needed to do that. She used something called the good news glove. It had five fingers and each one was a different color.

Yellow stood for God and His light. Black stood for my sin and darkness. Red stood for Jesus' blood that paid for my sin. White stood for a life washed clean by Christ. Green symbolized a new life in Christ. Betty explained that I needed to receive Christ for that cleansing and start the green life – life in Christ. So I did or more accurately God did. He saved me and called me to Himself and applied all the benefits of salvation to my life.

Thus began my journey as a follower of Christ. One of my early struggles came with the question of assurance. Was I really a Christian? Did God hear my prayer that day? I still sinned so maybe I lost what I gained on that Boxing Day? So I kept on asking Jesus into my life over and over again – just to be sure. Years passed. We had a strong youth group and college/career in our church. So I found my primary peer group there. Many greatly influenced me in positive ways.

By the time I was 20 and in University, I would describe my Christian walk as over-confident and judgmental. I thought that if I believed the right things and did the right things that proved I was a true Christian. But there's a danger when you think that all you know and do is right. Everyone else not like you or your peers is wrong. I said I was a Christian. I acted like a Christian sometimes. And any other way was wrong. There was little or no love in my life for

those outside my peer group and especially Christians who didn't think or act like we did. I was very judgmental and self-assured in my faith.

But for the last 30 years, the Lord has worked on me. In the area of love I needed to and still need to grow dramatically. He's taught me that I had and still have a lot to learn when it comes to believing right things. Doing right things – well when you add thinking, motives and speech – you realize there's more to cleanse. The Lord has been teaching me that assurance of my faith; assurance that I am a true Christian must ultimately depend on Him and what He's done. When I depend on Him, it shows up in ways that indicate I am one of His.

If you claim to be a Christian, how do you know you are one? When you sin, have you disqualified yourself from faith? Where do you turn for assurance? What can you point to that indicates that Jesus Christ truly is Lord of your life?

Today, I have good news for true Christians and potentially good news for those who are not yet Christians.

True Christians have great reasons for assurance and hope. But to discover these reasons, we must first face some discomfort before we get the assurance. These ugly, hard truths will help us to grasp why these reasons for assurance are so marvelous. It's like we must face the ugliness of a disease and the uncomfortable treatment necessary to fight it before we can enjoy renewed health. But don't worry. We are going to go on this journey together led by Jesus who inspired John to write, and there's good news. If you follow, I pray we can come out the other side celebrating these great reasons for assurance and walking forward in light of them. Our text is 1 John 2:1-6.

1 My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. 2 He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. 3 And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. 4 Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, 5 but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: 6 whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.

We briefly touched the beginning of this passage last week. We saw John's startling statement in verse 1. "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin." John wants to ensure that people reading verses 6-10 of chapter 1 don't conclude that all we have to do with sin is acknowledge it and confess it. No the aim is for us not to sin. That is God's call on our lives. That is God's purpose – to shape us into the likeness of Jesus. So we are called to not sin.

Well, what is sin? Not some arbitrary list of moral rules put together by strict people from a bygone age. Not something the church came up with in an attempt to control people. Sin is falling short of the glory of God; failing to live, think or speak in a way that glorifies God.

To help us see different ways sin shows up in our lives, John constantly points to three tests of authenticity of our faith. Or you could call them 3 areas in which we sin. True Christians pass each test – They are like 3 legs of a 3 legged stool. .

I've listed the three areas on the little chart on your insert. I am indebted to Robert Yarborough, a New Testament scholar from Scotland who now teaches at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. If I had this when I was 20, I might have become more aware of how short I fell of God's call especially in the area of love (and how much I needed to depend on Him).

The first test comes in the area of unbelief or belief. Unbelief involves refusing to believe Jesus' word and the apostle's message, holding inauthentic or wrong doctrine and having a deficient knowledge of God. John will talk about those who sin by not believing. A true Christian is one who has moved from unbelief to belief. Those who believe, hold right doctrine and have a right knowledge of God. This is one indicator of authentic faith. But right belief is not enough to prove our faith.

John also talks about the test of obedience. This concerns our morality, behavior and lifestyle. This one is probably the most obvious. If someone knows God's law and Jesus' commands, yet goes against them they sin. But the one with authentic faith would obey God's commands and do good works. A true Christian is one who moves from disobedience to obedience. But having right belief and right obedience still does not prove one is an authentic Christian just like a 3 legged stool cannot stand up with just 2 legs.

The third test comes in the area of love. We sin by not loving God and others. We demonstrate true Christian faith when we love God and love others. So a true Christian moves from absent love to warm, authentic love for God and others.

So from this little diagram, people fall into four groups. As we go through them, see if any of these describe you or someone in your life. The first group is the 0 out of 3's. They would fail to pass any of John's tests. They do not

believe in Christ. They have no intention to obey any moral law and they live life basically for themselves. They would not identify themselves as Christians at all.

The next group I'd call the 1 out of 3's. They seem to have one area right out of the three John identifies. Some have authentic appearing love. But they don't believe in Christ nor would they submit themselves to obey any moral law of Christ. These people would say something like "I do the most loving thing according to the situation." The definition of what's most loving is up to them or maybe popular opinion.

Others have authentic appearing obedience but they don't believe in Christ nor do they love God or others. People in this category live by some sort of moral standard. There are certain things that are right and others are wrong. But they have no belief in Christ. Nor do they show love towards God or others. These folks might come across as judgmental people with no compassion. They are good citizens but are generally critical of anyone not like them.

The other crowd in the 1 out of 3 group has authentic appearing belief but lacks obedience and love. These folks claim to be Christians. But there's some serious lack of obedience in their lives and lack of love. They may come across as authoritarian people of faith who talk a good talk but don't walk the walk at all.

The third group are the 2 out of 3's. These are getting closer to passing all three of John's tests. One set has authentic sounding belief and a semblance of obedience. But they lack love towards God and others. These would say something like "if you get your doctrine right and live right, you're all right." They might justify harshness with statements like "I tell it like it is and people just have to deal with it. They are judgmental, who love their right belief and good moral lives and often look down on others who don't measure up. Some protestant evangelicals would fall into this category.

Another set in the 2 out of 3's have authentic sounding belief and a semblance of love but deficient obedience. They would say "I believe in Jesus and just want to love everyone. When it comes to doctrine, let's not get all bent out of shape. Let's just love." Many protestant liberals would fall into this set. They are big on social justice. They claim to be Christians but may have a low view of Scripture. But right belief is low on the totem pole of priority.

Then the final 2 out of 3 set has an appearance of obedience and love but inauthentic belief. These are the "good" people in our society who are good citizens and love their families and others. But they don't believe in Christ as revealed through the apostles in Scriptures. So this group may include some Mormons, Jehovah Witnesses, Muslims,

Hindus, Buddhists and people of other faiths. They can be good citizens and loving people but they don't believe in Christ.

The final group is the three out of threes. This group authentically believes in Christ and has received Him. They continue to grow in their knowledge and understanding of God. They submit themselves to God's Word and Bible centered teaching to correct wrong doctrine or wrong beliefs in their lives. But people in this group also live lives of obedience to God's Word. They recognize that God's commands are for His people's good. So they take seriously the commandments of God and desire to grow in obeying them. Yet all this is wrapped up in love. A joy and love permeates their existence and interaction with others. They have a growing love for God and others.

Now as you look at this list and these categories 0/3, 1/3, 2/3, 3/3, who might fall into the not a true Christian category and who might be a true Christian? Well I think most of us would agree that the 0 out of 3's are not Christians. The one out of threes are likely not Christians either. But maybe the two out of threes are Christians. The 3 out of 3's are most likely to be Christians. But Yarborough concludes and I think he's got John's message right, only those with 3 out of 3 in their life can have confidence that they're true Christians. A 3 legged stool needs 3 legs to stand on. If we are deficient in one of the 3 areas John talks about, we need to take that very seriously. John is going to hammer home again and again these three tests throughout this letter; the belief test; the obedience test and the love test. Having two out of three is not good enough. Two out of three can be downright dangerous because we can deceive ourselves and others into thinking we've got it.

"Now Tom," you might be thinking, "I thought you were going to give us reasons for assurance. All you've done is rattled our cages." Well, actually it wasn't me. It was John who was inspired by the Lord. You can blame him. But I include all this to emphasize that when John writes for them to not sin, it was much more than a set of rules we are required to keep. He's calling us to realize the pervasiveness, the power of sin upon us. True Christians recognize the command to not sin and the multiple layers of their own sin. We sin in belief, lifestyle, and love. These can only be overcome through robust response to the God of light who has sent His Son. When a true Christian grasps this, they are undone. They are rattled. But that's when the good news becomes really good news.

That's what John gives us in the next two verses (1 & 2). Look at the second half of 1 John 2:1 – But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. Why do true Christians have reason to hope?

We have Jesus Christ the Righteous to advocate for them before the Father. An advocate is like a defense lawyer. An advocate is someone who speaks on behalf of someone in trouble to a third party judge. The advocate speaks to that third party to influence them to look favorably on the one in trouble. Jesus is our advocate in heaven before the Father. We need him to advocate for us for a couple of reasons. We still sin. We stumble. We fail to love perfectly or live rightly or believe correctly. Jesus advocates before the Holy God saying “that one is covered. He or she continues to grow.” We also need Jesus to advocate because Revelation 12:10 tells us Satan accuses us before God day and night. We sometimes give him lots of reasons to accuse. But Jesus advocates on our behalf. Jesus pleads for our defense. God loves to forgive His children. We don’t have to worry that our advocate has some shady side. You remember last week how we talked about God is light and in him there is no darkness at all? There is no darkness in Jesus either. So John says “we have an advocate, Jesus Christ the righteous.” So the righteous son pleads our case before the righteous father. There is no chance that what he urges in God’s presence will be rejected. His advocacy cannot fail to measure up to the standard of the righteous judge, because our intercessor is of the same sterling character. So Christian, you have Jesus Christ the righteous to advocate for you before the Father.

But not only does Jesus argue and advocate for us. He gave His all for us. Why do true Christians have great reason to hope? **True Christians trust Jesus as the propitiation for their sins.** Verse 2 – He (Jesus) is the propitiation for our sins, and not ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.” Now the interpretation of this verse and others like it (Romans 3:25 for example) is a huge and vital question. I want you to look very carefully at how your Bible translates verse 2. Some of your versions may say expiation. Some may say atoning sacrifice. What do all these terms mean and why does it matter?

To propitiate means to turn away wrath by an offering or sacrifice. So Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice to turn away God’s wrath. Jesus went on the cross to receive the wrath of God that we deserved and took it upon Himself. God accepted that sacrifice. So His holy and just wrath was poured out. Based upon that sacrifice, He can forgive those who trust Christ without compromising His justice. So why do we see different words in verse 2 today?

Propitiation was the dominant translation until about 1932. Someone named CH Dodd concluded that a sacrifice turning away wrath could not be what the Greek word meant. When the pagans worshipped, they offered sacrifices to appease their god’s wrath. So you worshipped and danced in an attempt to settle down the gods so they

would be favorable towards you. Dodd believed that propitiation sounded way too pagan. God is not like the pagan gods. So it had to mean something different. He came up with the word expiation which is now translated as sacrifice of atonement. Basically it means to wipe away sin to pay for sin. So Jesus put himself forward as the one who would wipe away our sins.

Now Jesus certainly did that. He cleanses us by his blood. We saw that last week in verse 7. But might “atoning sacrifice” minimize, blur or even deny the reality of God’s wrath? The Translators of the ESV and of the earlier versions say yes. Why is this important? Because you can’t get away from the Biblical concept of God’s wrath. You see it all the way through Romans 1-3. The Old Testament emphasizes the wrath of God 600 times. Nevertheless, the Lord is compassionate and slow to anger. His holiness demands a payment. Yet our God would sacrifice His own son as the payment. Jesus cancels our sin and turns away God’s wrath. Because of this we are reconciled with God and can have great hope of our assurance in Him despite the complex layers of our sin.

Why does accepting the reality of God’s wrath matter? I believe it helps us come face to face with our sin and need for a savior. If we view sin as simply some mistake against a set of rules it’s much less serious and our need for a Savior is much less pressing. But if we have personally offended the Holy God of the universe, and someone stood in our place to take His wrath, that’s amazing.

We have reason to hope because Christ is the propitiation of our sins. And not ours only but the sins of the whole world. This does not mean that everyone will be saved when you take into account the rest of the New Testament. But it does mean that more will be saved than those who claim to have the secret knowledge of salvation. Those who left the churches John wrote to made this claim. But he says no – Jesus is the propitiation for sin – not your secret knowledge.

Maybe the Holy Spirit revealed that you are living as a 0/3, 1/3 or 2/3. If you’re a 0/3 – confess and throw trust and life onto Christ. You will be reconciled with God and begin the journey of a forgiven, growing in holiness, joyful relationship with God. If you’re a 1/3 confess the hardness in your heart – repent. If you’re 2 out of 3, confess the area where you lack most – ask for the Lord Jesus’ advocacy and help. 3/3 – continue – ask Him to reveal to people in your life who think their Christians but are living out one of these other realities that they’re not. Opportunities to bear witness.

