

“We Have an Advocate” (1 John 2:1–6)

May 7, 2017

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There always have been, and there always will be (well, until Jesus returns), misunderstandings about Christianity. Some people think that Christianity is moralism. It’s all about toeing the line, obeying the rules, and generally having a miserable time. The writer and atheist H. L. Mencken once defined Puritanism as “The haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.”¹ Many people see Christians as dour, “holier than thou” killjoys who talk more about what they’re against than what they’re for. Perhaps atheists, agnostics, and generally irreligious people see Christianity as just another religion, one in which you’re supposed to follow the rules if you want to get to heaven.

Other people see Christianity in a different light. I once met a young man whose pastor was a father. This young man was not a Christian. He said he didn’t think it was fair that a good person, say, a doctor who dedicated his life to going to third-world countries where he would serve the poor, could go to hell because he didn’t follow Jesus. Other people, perhaps people who follow strict religions, think that the idea of grace is a ticket to sin. They don’t think it’s fair that a murderer could be forgiven. And they think that if we’re simply forgiven all our sins, then there’s nothing to keep us from continually sinning.

I suppose those misunderstandings about Christianity exist because of false teachers. There have been some people who have stressed obedience so much that they hardly mention God’s mercy and grace. They have falsely given the impression that Christianity is primarily about obeying a set of rules and striving to be a good person. And I suppose there are others who have falsely taught that God’s grace doesn’t place any demands on us, so we can sin abundantly so grace would abound abundantly. Today, it seems that the false teaching regarding Christianity leans toward universalism. Universalism is the belief that, in the end, everyone will be reconciled to God. In other words, universalism teaches that everyone will be saved, everyone will be with God forever.

The passage that we’re looking at today, 1 John 2:1–6, if misunderstood, could cause someone to think that Christianity is all about not sinning, or that everyone’s sins are paid for.

¹ H. L. Mencken, *A Mencken Chrestomathy: His Own Selection of His Choicest Writings* (New York: Vintage, 1982), 624.

But when rightly understood, this passage speaks against such things. John's letter is so important because it gives us a fuller picture of what it means to be a Christian, and as we study this letter, we'll discuss false versions of Christianity.

So, without further ado, let's read the whole paragraph, and then I'll explain it.

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.²

John begins by telling his readers one of the reasons why he is writing to them. He calls them "little children" because he is an old man, and he probably feels a sense of fatherly love for these Christians. Because he loves them and cares for them, he says that he writes so that they may not sin. If that were all he wrote, it would be easy to misunderstand John's message and think, "So, Christianity *is* all about not sinning!" Well, the truth is that Christians shouldn't sin. They shouldn't want to sin, but not for the reasons that some might think.

You see, John is concerned about three things in this letter. You may say he's concerned about the head, the heart, and the hands. He wants his readers to truly know God. He wants them to have correct beliefs about Jesus. He also wants them to have a right love for God and for others. That love should reflect God's love for us and it should motivate everything that we do. And he wants his readers to live rightly. So, rightly understood, not sinning isn't about trying to earn something from God. It's about trying to live the best life, the one God wants for us. When we sin, we're going against God's design for our lives. Not sinning doesn't mean life will be easy or fun, but when we sin less, we'll naturally experience more of God's blessings. But our desire not to sin shouldn't be motivated by a desire to earn something from God. It should be motivated by love for God and thanks for what God has done for us. We shouldn't want to sin because it is harmful to us and it is displeasing to God.

We don't want to miss the second half of verse 1. John says that if we do sin, "we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." John knows that we're going to sin,

² Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

even though our goal should be to sin less and less. Toward the end of chapter 1, he writes that if we say we don't sin, we're liars (1 John 1:8, 10). Though John's statements about not sinning seem rather strict, I don't think he expects that we're going to reach a level of sinless perfection in this life. And the good news is that if we sin, we have an advocate, a defender. The Greek word is παράκλητος, which is used in John's Gospel to refer to the Holy Spirit. It is sometimes translated "helper" or "comforter." Jesus promised his disciples that "another Helper" would come to them, the "Spirit of truth" (John 14:16–17). The first Helper, our champion, defender, Lord, and Savior, is Jesus himself.

What does it mean for Jesus to be our advocate? A couple of other passages shed light on this issue. Here is Romans 8:33–34:

³³ Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

And here is Hebrews 7:23–27:

²³ The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, ²⁴ but he [Jesus] holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. ²⁵ Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

²⁶ For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. ²⁷ He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself.

These passages state that no one can condemn God's chosen people, true Christians, because Jesus makes intercession for them. He is a forever-priest, never failing to intercede for his people. Unlike the priests of the Old Testament Israel, he will never die, and he has no sins of his own to atone for.

To be our advocate, or to intercede for us, means that Jesus is pleading our case before God the Father. It's as if he is saying to the Father, "Look, I died for them! I took the penalty that they deserve! And, look again, I'm the righteous one! My perfect, sinless life is credited to them. Father, when you consider them, look at what I've done."

Jesus is also praying for us. Perhaps it's best to consider a passage from the Gospels that shows what that looks like. While on earth, Jesus prayed for his disciples. When Jesus tells

Simon Peter that he will betray Jesus, Jesus tells him, “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:31–32). Jesus prayed for Peter. He prayed that his faith wouldn’t fail, even though Satan wanted to sift him like wheat, or remove him from Jesus’ flock. What’s interesting is that the first “you”—“Satan demanded to have you”—is plural. Satan wanted the disciples, not just Peter. And Jesus says he prayed individually for Peter. According to Mark Jones, a pastor and theologian, “There is no Christian alive who has not had Christ mention his or her name to the Father.”³

Think about that: If you have real, abiding faith in Jesus, it is because the Father chose you from before the foundation of the world, and because Jesus died for your sins (Eph. 1:3–10). And Jesus is now—right now!—pleading your case before the Father. And he will always do that. That means if you fail—and you will—Jesus is always pleading your case. He will never give up on you. His sacrificial death on the cross is more than enough to pay for your sins. His righteous life is more than enough to present you acceptable and blameless in God’s eyes. That is great news.

Now, let’s move on to verse 2: “He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.” That word, “propitiation,” is a big one, and it can be translated in different ways. Sometimes, it’s understood as “expiation,” which means extinguishing guilt, or making atonement. Propitiation includes that idea but goes further. It means to gain or regain favor, or to appease. The idea is that Jesus not only wipes away the guilt of the sinners who trust in him, but he also makes the Father favorable toward them. Robert Peterson puts it this way: “Propitiation is directed toward God and expiation is directed toward sin. Propitiation is the turning away of God’s wrath, and expiation is the putting away of sin.”⁴

The idea goes back to the Old Testament sacrifices for sin. Even before God gave Israel the law, it appears that some sacrifices made God favorable once again toward humanity. In the days of Noah, the people on earth were wicked, and God sent a flood to judge the world. He saved only Noah and his family. After the flood waters subsided, Noah offered up a sacrifice. We read this in Genesis 8:20–22:

³ Mark Jones, *Knowing Christ* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2015), 179.

⁴ Robert A. Peterson, *Salvation Accomplished by the Son: The Work of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 85. Propitiation is mentioned also in Rom. 3:25; Heb. 2:17; and 1 John 4:10.

²⁰ Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and took some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. ²¹ And when the LORD smelled the pleasing aroma, the LORD said in his heart, “I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. ²² While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.”

It seems that the smell of the sacrifice pleased God and made him favorable towards humanity. He promised never to curse the ground again and destroy every living creature on earth. This sacrifice seems to have satisfied God’s righteous demand for sin to be punished.⁵

One other Old Testament passage sheds some light on Jesus’ sacrifice. In Leviticus 16, we read about the Day of Atonement. This was one day a year when the sins of Israel would be wiped away and paid for. The high priest first had to offer the sacrifice of a bull for his own sin (Lev. 16:6, 11–14). Then he took two goats. One goat would be killed and the other would be the “scapegoat.” The blood of the goat that was killed would purify the tabernacle and the altar of all the sins of Israel, which corrupted their worship of God (Lev. 16:15–19). The high priest would then place his hands on the live goat, symbolically transferring the sins of Israel to this goat, which would then be released into the wilderness. In Leviticus 16:21–22, we read these instructions concerning Aaron, Moses’s brother and the first high priest:

²¹ And Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins. And he shall put them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness. ²² The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area, and he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness.

In that way, all the sins of Israel were removed.

Of course, these actions didn’t actually accomplish anything. That’s why I said they were symbolic. Hebrews 10:4 says, “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” Animals can never be substitutes for human beings. We need a human being who can step in for us. We also need a human being who is a perfect sacrifice, one who is infinite, who can take on the sins of millions and even billions of people who come to him, one who will never change. There’s only one person who can fulfill that role, and that is Jesus. He takes away the sin

⁵ See also Lev. 1:9; 2:1–2; 3:3, 5; 4:29, 31.

of everyone who is united to him. And he makes God propitious, or favorable, toward us. Paul, borrowing the sacrificial language of the Old Testament, says, “And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph. 5:2). Jesus willingly died for us, and his sacrifice was pleasing to the Father. As 1 Peter 3:18 says, “Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.”

John then also says that Jesus makes propitiation for the whole world. This, again, is verse 2: “He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.” I think this needs some explaining. This may be a verse that attracts universalists. They might say, “Ah, Jesus has taken care of the sin problem of everyone in the world! I don’t think that’s what John means at all. Let’s think through this a bit. First, we should note that in the Greek, it doesn’t say “for the sins of the whole world,” but only “for the whole world.” Now, maybe that doesn’t affect the meaning much, because “sins of” is implied.

But, second, we need to look carefully at how John uses “world” in this letter. One of the ways that we read the Bible well is by paying attention to how an author uses language. We may think we understand a sentence when we’re reading it because we’re reading it the way we would use that language. But what we’re trying to do is understand what John meant. So, look at 1 John 2:15–17:

¹⁵ Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶ For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. ¹⁷ And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

That first sentence seems quite absolute: “Do not love the world or the things in the world.” So, love nothing physical, right? Wrong. Look at how John defines “world” in verse 16: “all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and the pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world.” But, wait a minute! Didn’t God create everything in the world? In 1 Timothy 4:4, Paul writes, “everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving.” So, in this passage, John means that we shouldn’t love “worldly” things, things that take us away from God, things that cause us to covet and to be proud. He doesn’t mean we shouldn’t love each and every “thing” in the world.

Then look at 1 John 5:18–19:

¹⁸ We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, but he who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him.

¹⁹ We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.

John says that those who are “born of God” are protected and the evil one, Satan, cannot touch them. Then he says that “the whole world” lies in the power of Satan. Clearly, “the whole world” cannot include Christians, who are not touched by Satan. So, “the whole world” doesn’t mean everyone in the world, just as “all that is in the world” doesn’t mean every single thing and/or person in the world.

Third, we need to use some basic reasoning. If Jesus indeed was the propitiation for the sins of the whole world, in the sense of “for every single person without exception in the world,” that would mean that everyone’s sins would be removed. God would be favorable toward every single human being. We might wish that were the case. Indeed, it would be nice to think that all human beings will be saved. But that’s not what the Bible says. John 3:36 says, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.” Ephesians 5:6 says, “Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.” God’s wrath will come upon those who reject Jesus. But if Jesus were the propitiation for all the sins of every single person in the world, no one would face God’s wrath.

So, what does John mean? I think he means that Jesus is the only savior. He is not just the savior for first-century Christians living near Ephesus. He is the world’s only savior. There is no one else who can make God favorable toward you and forgive you for ignoring him, rebelling against him, rejecting his word, and doing what is wrong. There is no one else who will plead your case before God. No pastor or priest on earth can do that. No politician can. No celebrity or teacher or professor or employer is qualified to do that. The only one God the Father will listen to without fail is his Son Jesus, the perfect, righteous, great high priest. And Jesus only prays for his disciples. In John 17:9, Jesus told the Father, “I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours.” In short, there is no other savior, and to be reconciled to God, you need to come to Jesus and have a right relationship with him. As much as we would love everyone to be saved, that is not going to happen. Many people simply don’t want to have a relationship with the true God. They want to have a god of their own design, a god they can create and manipulate and control.

But in the end, Jesus will save people of all kinds throughout the world. Revelation 5:9 says to Jesus, “you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.” Jesus died for the sins of his people. The free offer of the gospel should be made to all people, but not all will put their trust in Jesus and follow him.

Obviously, if this is true, then having a relationship with Jesus is of the utmost importance. How do we know that we are united to Jesus? How do we know that we are reconciled to the Father on the basis of Jesus’ works? Look at verses 3–6 again:

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.

One way that we can know that we know Jesus is if we keep his commandments. If we say we know Jesus but we don’t do what he says, we’re liars. But if we keep his word, we can know that we are “in Christ.” If we’re united to Jesus, we should live like he did.

To clarify things a bit, the commandments of Jesus are not only his “red-letter words,” but also the words he delivered through his apostles (see 2 Pet. 3:2). Jesus spoke in the power of the Holy Spirit, and the apostles wrote Scripture in the power of that same Spirit, so we shouldn’t drive a wedge between the two. Paul’s commands are ultimately Jesus’ commands. So are John’s. Generally, we can say that all of these commands can be summed up in loving God and loving others, though we must be careful to pay attention to the specifics of the ethical principles that run through the whole Bible, in particular the commands found in the New Testament.

Does this mean that only those who obey all Jesus’ commands all the time belong to Jesus? Well, John has already told us that everyone has a sin issue, and he assumes that we will sin and therefore continue to need our advocate, Jesus. So, he can’t mean that we must perfectly obey Jesus’ commandments in order to be united to him. He didn’t write, “Little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. For if you sin just once, you will be kicked out of God’s family.”

What John must mean is that true Christians are generally becoming more and more obedient to Jesus. We can’t say we’re Christians and then ignore Jesus and his apostles. People do that, of course, but they’re liars. The truth is not in them. If we know Jesus, we will listen to

his word and do what he says. We may not obey perfectly, all the time, but there will be evidence that we obey.

Some of Jesus' own words, found in John's Gospel, shed light on this reality. In John 10, Jesus describes himself as the "good shepherd," and he calls his people his "sheep." He says, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me" (John 10:14). Then, later, he says, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27). Those who belong to Jesus' flock pay attention to what he says, and then they act.

Later, also in John's Gospel, Jesus says that those who love him obey him. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). "Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me" (John 14:21). "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him" (John 14:23). What about the one who doesn't keep Jesus' words? "Whoever does not love me does not keep my words" (John 14:24).

Those who are united to Jesus trust him, follow him, and love him, even if they do so imperfectly. There is no such thing, according to the Bible, as a person who is reconciled to God apart from Jesus. There is no such thing as a Christian who is not a follower of Jesus. There is no such thing as an obedient Christian who doesn't love Jesus, or someone who loves Jesus but doesn't obey him.

We do what Jesus says not because we're trying to earn something from him. We obey because we love him. We trust our shepherd. We trust that his commandments are for our good. And so, we listen. We love Jesus because he first loved us and gave himself for us. We obey not only out of love, but also out of gratitude. In Christian ethics, motivation matters. Those who obey God trying to gain something from him don't understand the gospel.

What this means is that true Christians continue to grow in obedience. We'll never be perfect in this life, but we should more and more follow the example of Jesus' obedience to the Father. Jesus knew Scripture, and so should we. Jesus prayed to the Father, and so should we. Jesus loved others and had compassion on those who were needy, and so should we. But, of course, Jesus is the God-man, completely perfect. We won't be perfected until we're with Jesus, living in a new creation. But we should aspire to grow.

John Newton, a former slave trader and the author of "Amazing Grace," captured this well when he said, "I am not what I ought to be; but I am not what I once was. And it is by the

grace of God that I am what I am.”⁶ If we’re honest, we must admit that we’re not yet what we ought to be. But if we’re Christians, we should be able to look back at our lives and say, “By the grace of God, I am not what I once was.”

If you are a Christian, start following Jesus. Start with the basics. Read the Bible regularly. Pray regularly. Meet with Christians regularly. Be part of a local church where you serve and are served by others. As you read the Bible and grow in your understanding, live out what you read. Start ordering your home according to Scripture. Husbands, you are the head of your home and should love your wives. Wives, honor and respect your husbands. Parents, raise your children with discipline and instruct them in the things of the Lord. Children, obey and honor your parents. Employees, work hard as if you’re working for God. Be honest. Don’t steal. Don’t covet. Be faithful to your God and your spouse (if you have one). If you’re not married, don’t have sexual contact with others. Love other people. Pay attention to the poor and needy around you. Be generous. Be careful what comes into your eyes and ears. Be careful about what comes out of your mouth.

These are all very basic things, but they’re all important. And we should do these things because they are good for us, because they’re pleasing to God, and because we love him. If you’re a Christian, you need to obey Jesus.

Now, if you’re here today and you’re not following Jesus this way, what are you waiting for? I promise you that there is no ultimate hope outside of Jesus. There is no relationship with God outside of Jesus. There is no deliverance from death and despair outside of Jesus. He is our only hope. If you want to know more about what it means to follow Jesus, I would love to talk to you.

One last word: All that talk of God’s wrath, and of sacrifices, may seem odd to you. I understand. However, that shows that God is serious about justice. God cares more about justice than we do. And living our lives for anything other than God is injustice. Living our lives for something or someone else actually harms us and it destroys God’s world. So, God is right to care about justice.

I want to close with these wonderful words by a theologian named David Jackman:

⁶ Quoted in David Jackman, *The Message of John’s Letters: Living in the Love of God*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 43.

[God's] wrath is neither an emotion nor a petulant fit of temper, but the settled conviction of righteousness in action to destroy both sin and the sinner. The glory of the gospel is that we have an advocate who pleads for mercy on the ground of his own righteous action when he died the death that we deserve to die. Once the penalty has been paid, there cannot be any further demand for the sinner to be punished. God has himself met our debt. He came in person to do so. The cross is not the Father punishing an innocent third party, the Son, for our sins. It is God taking to himself, in the person of the Son, all the punishment that his wrath justly demands, quenching its sword, satisfying its penalty and thus atoning for our sins.⁷

⁷ David Jackman, *The Message of John's Letters: Living in the Love of God*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 46–47.