

EXEGETICAL PAPER: **1 John 2:1-6**
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Scriptural Text: 1 John 2:1-6 (NIV based)

Main Idea:

A true believer should not sin and should be perfect as God is perfect. However, believers do sin, so Jesus is the advocate between believers and God. And, He is also the sacrifice that cleanses those who believe from all unrighteousness. Obedience to God's commands is the litmus test of belief in Christ, meaning those who obey God are in Him and those who do not obey God are not in Him.

Outline:

- I. Sin in the Christian Life (v.2:1a)
 - a. Believers Should Not Sin
 - b. Believers Do Sin
- II. Jesus Deals with Our Sin (vv.2:1b – 2:2)
 - a. As Advocate
 - b. As Propitiation
- III. Obedience as Litmus Test for Christian Faith (vv.2:3-6)
 - a. Obedience Brings Assurance of Salvation
 - b. Disobedience Shows Unbelief

Background:

The beginning of this letter is devoid of a salutation or address to the readers that would identify who the author is, whom he is writing to, and the situation of the churches he is writing to. Because of this, the answers to these questions come from textual evidence inside of the letter and in comparison to the contents of the Book of John. This letter was most likely written by John the Apostle, who is also the author of the Book of John, to a “group of congregations in a limited area who found themselves in the same situation” (Schnackenburg 5). This writing indicates a specific situation that is broad enough to encompass multiple churches in a small letter.

John's relationship to those he is writing to can be deduced from how he addresses them. He addresses his readers as “little children” four times (Strong's #5040 - vv.2:1,12,28; 4:4) and “beloved” five times (Strong's #0027 - vv.3:2,21; 4:1,7,11). This shows that he possibly knew, and definitely cared for, the congregations he was writing to. John also uses inclusive language that points to him being a part of the congregation, at one point. When he is talking about the “antichrists” that left the congregation, he writes, “they [antichrists] went out from us...” (v.2:19). This seems to indicate that John had ties to the congregation when the split took place.

Finally, John is writing to a group of congregations where “a crisis had arisen in the church due to the rise of teachers who were advocating an understanding of Christianity different from that upheld by John and his colleagues” (Marshall 14). As indicated in 1 John 2:19, these false teachers had split away from the church and were propagating their incorrect theology. A majority of this letter is focused on these false teachers.

Literary Context:

Verses 2:1-6 are at the end of the opening remarks of this letter. A complete thought is presented that begins in verse 1:1 and culminates in verses 2:1-6. In order to fully grasp the meaning and insight of verses 2:1-6, the previous verses must be examined and then the argument in these verses can be fully ascertained.

In his opening paragraph, John attests to the credibility of his message by proclaiming that he personally witnessed Jesus and His teachings. Then in verse 1:5, he explains what message he personally heard from Christ, "This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all." This statement in verse 1:5 is the basis for the arguments that follow:

- A. God is light, in Him there is no darkness. (v.1:5)
- B. Believers cannot fellowship with Him while walking in darkness (sinning). (v.1:6)
- C. If believers walk in the light as God is in the light, they will have fellowship with each other. (v.1:7)
- D. Everyone sins, and those who say that they do not sin deceive themselves. (v.1:8)
- E. Instead of denying the presence of sin, believers should confess sin to God, who will forgive and cleanse them through the blood of Jesus. (v.1:9,7)
- F. Everyone sins, and those who say that they do not - call God a liar. (v.1:10)

To summarize, this line of arguments begins with the holiness of God and shows that believers cannot have fellowship with God while sinning. Instead, believers should live a holy life just as holy as God. The problem is that everyone sins, and denying it is only deceiving one's self and calling God a liar. The solution then is for the believer to confess his/her sins, which will bring forgiveness and cleansing from unrighteousness.

In verses 2:1-6 is the conclusion of this line of arguments about sin in the Christian life. In the verses after this section of text, the discussion moves on to expand on what it looks like to live in the light and obey God's commands - by loving other believers in Christ and not hating them.

Interpretation and Exegesis:

After a very strongly worded section in verses 1:5-10, John pauses for a second in his writing and addresses his readers as "my dear children" in verse 2:1. This changes the tone of this writing, from confrontation and rebuke to loving and caring. This simple statement betrays why this writing is being so harsh with them. Just as a parent disciplines their children, John cares deeply for the people he is writing to and does not want them to fall into false thinking. As discussed earlier, these were probably congregations that he knew personally and cared for deeply.

This small address also serves as a kind of 'in conclusion' marker. It signals that the discussion is going to take a step back and summarize and conclude the argument that was made in the previous five verses. As in any good conclusion, there is restatement and clarification of the purpose for writing, "I write this to you so that you will not sin" (v.2:1). The readers are not to take the previous statements that God will cleanse them of their sins as a "license to sin" (Thatcher 435). The standard of the Christian life is not to sin. This reiterates the previous statement in verse 1:7 that we should "walk in the light as he is in the light". God's holiness is the standard for the life of a true believer.

God is realistic though and He knows that believers continue to sin, and so they are encouraged accordingly, "But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense -- Jesus Christ, the Righteous One" (v.2:1). This is the only place where the Greek word 'parakletos', which means "advocate", is applied to Jesus (Strong's #3875). This word is used five times in the Book of John when Jesus promises the Holy

Spirit. In these instances, the *ESV* translates “parakletos” as “Helper”, the *NIV* translates it as “Counselor”, and other translations render it as “Comforter” or “Advocate”. This raises a problem because it is not clear what “parakletos” really means. The *Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* explains that “the underlying sense of the term is that of ‘one who stands alongside another in order to offer encouragement, and comfort’”, but it can also have a “legal connotation” (Denn 195-196).

The context is what sheds light on the meaning of “parakletos” in verse 2:1. The two points presented previously are being brought together that seem to be in total opposition to one another: God is completely holy (v.1:5); and we cannot have fellowship with him if we sin (v.1:6). The problem is that believers do sin, as stated in the preceding phrase. Clearly stated in verse 1:8, since believers sin, how can they have fellowship with God? The answer is the intermediary and advocacy role of Jesus Christ. He stands in the gap and goes between believers who are still sinful, and God who is completely holy. Jesus can do this because he is completely holy. He is called “Jesus Christ, the Righteous One” (v.2:1).

The second listed work of Jesus that deals with the sin of believers is His work as the propitiation or atoning sacrifice for the sin of believers. “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (v.2:2). The Greek word ‘hilasmos’, which means “propitiation”, is a rare word in the Bible (Zodhiates - Strong’s #2434). “Hilasmos” is used only twice: 1 John 2:2 and 4:10. According to commentator Tom Thatcher in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, “hilasmos” can have two meanings: “Jesus’ death as ‘Righteous One’ expends the anger God feels toward those who confess their sin” or “to perform an act by which defilement [ritual or moral] is removed” (Thatcher 435). The second definition of propitiation fits best with the context and the argument in this section of the Book of 1 John. Christ’s work of propitiation cleanses the believer from all sin or unrighteousness and therefore allows the believer to have fellowship with God just as the advocacy of Jesus allows believers to have fellowship with God. In verses 1:7 and 1:9 is stated that believers are cleansed from sin. This understanding of propitiation fits directly into that line of thought.

This work of propitiation by Christ is expanded from believers to the “sins of the whole world” (v.2:2). This may seem to give the impression that salvation is universal; however that is not the case. The statement here is that Jesus’ death was sufficient for all people, however only those who choose to accept it will receive the benefits. This is supported by the fact that the discussion moves on in verses 2:3-6 to explain how believers know that they have come to know Christ and benefit in His work.

At the end of this conclusion section is the final thought that those persons who obey God’s commands know God and are in Him. This is important in two ways: it gives the readers assurance of their salvation; and it gives the readers a test to see who does not belong to Christ even though some people claim to. These two principles correlate to the goal in this book to combat the false teachers who were affecting the congregations. Colin Kruse points out in his commentary on the Book of 1 John that these false teachers were causing the believers to lose “confidence in the message of the gospel that the community had previously received” (Kruse 16). This encouragement is given to help them to stay confident in their faith: “And” “by” “this” (Strong’s #2532, #1722, #5129 - omitted in *NIV*) “We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands” (v.2:3). This same concept is repeated in verses 2:5b-6, “This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.” In between these two verses is given the way to tell who are not of God, “The man who says, “I know him,”

but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (v.2:4).
Obedience is the test of true faith.

Summary of Conclusions:

In this passage in the Book of 1 John, the discussion focuses on sin in the Christian life. It begins with the basis that there should be no sin in the life of a believer because the standard is the holiness of God. However, believers do sin and this breaks fellowship with God. To fix this break in relationship between believers and God, Jesus works as the advocate for believers to God, and He is the propitiation for their sins. This means that in and through His death on the cross, Jesus cleanses the believer from all unrighteousness. Because of the work of Christ Jesus, believers are able to have fellowship with God. Believers can be secure in the knowledge that they are in Christ, and benefit from that relationship, because of the obedience they should be exhibiting. Inversely, disobedience of those persons who claim to know Christ show that they in fact are lying and do not know Christ.

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