

Sermon 5, God Is Light, 1 John 1:5

Proposition: Eternal life begins with the message that God is light.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we gather tonight to look at a bold and startling statement. John has told us that he was an eyewitness of the ministry of Christ on earth. He's told us that he wants us to have fellowship with God, and that when we do, his joy will be complete. But then, as soon as he's finished introducing his letter with the joy of that fellowship, he tells us this: God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. We would think that if he were trying to be a little nicer about his introductions he would start with the truth he's going to bring in later, that God is love. But instead, he starts with this, that God is light. We can learn three things from this tonight. The first thing we'll learn is about John's method: He started with God. The second thing we'll learn is about our God, and specifically what it means that He is light. And the final thing we'll learn is how we can know God, through His Son and through His Son's apostles. What I want to show you tonight is that eternal life begins with the message that God is light.

I. Start with God

Brothers and sisters, when you read a passage of Scripture, how do you go about extracting maximum value from it? John is telling us something by how he begins, and that something is this: Start with God. The passage may have a lot of information on all kinds of subjects, from geography and geology to astronomy and psychology. But the most important information it contains is what it says about God! How do we see this point here? We see it in the fact that John says "This is the message." The message can be summarized in a single sentence, and that sentence is a sentence about God. If you were asked what the main thing Christ taught was, what would you say? Would you say that His main point was that we should love each other? No doubt He said that. In fact, John repeats it more than once in this letter. Was His main point that we should be good, that we should have mercy on those who aren't good, that true religion consists of compassion on the weak rather than of punishing the weak? Surely Jesus said all of

those things. But when John is writing a letter that will tell us how we can know that we know, a letter that will give us the evidence we need to justify our belief that we have actually been saved, he starts with God. He says that the first thing he heard from Christ was a truth about God — not a small truth, but a big truth. The truth is this: God is light.

Now, that sounds amazing. Indeed, it is the answer to every question. And yet it raises lots of questions too. What does it mean to say that God is light? One answer that immediately presents itself is the idea that the “is” here is a perfect equals sign, that it predicates perfect interchangeability in the same sense that “is” has in the sentence “Six is half a dozen.” Of course, if the copula really means perfect equality, that the things on each side of the “is” are really exactly the same thing described in two different ways, then we can say both “God is light” and “Light is God.”

Does that work? Obviously not. We don’t worship the light; we don’t refer to God as “The Light” on a regular basis; we don’t conclude that every photon is a piece of the divine. Rather, in philosophical language we have to conclude that John is telling us that light is a very important property of God. Light is something that belongs to Him, something that characterizes Him, in a central way. In literary terms, we would say that “God is light” is a metaphor rather than a univocal statement. But with every metaphor, we have to ask what the point of comparison is. Failing to do this can lead us very far astray as we get wrapped up in all kinds of things that aren’t the point of comparison. I’m reminded of my college friend, who was genuinely impressed with a girl’s memory, to the point where he said to her, “You remind me of an elephant.” Now, in his metaphorical imagination, the point of comparison was the legendary memory capacity of the elephant, epitomized in the phrase “Elephants never forget.” But she instantly reimagined the metaphor and took the point of comparison as the elephant’s notorious size as the largest land animal on earth. Clearly my friend was not really such a fool as to suppose that any female would take comparison to an elephant in terms of size as a compliment. But he left himself wide open to the charge of having made just such a comparison.

With that in mind, then, we must ask what John’s point of comparison is. When we say that God is light, we are not literally asserting that the material/energy substance we call light is the actual material from which God is made. Indeed, John himself denies that by also telling us that God is a Spirit, while light is very much a physical substance. So if God is not composed of light, what does His being light mean? I think that there are really two major points of comparison here, and I’m largely getting this from John’s immediate opposition of light against darkness. We know what darkness means; indeed, in one sense darkness is easier to interpret because it is not a positive substance. It is a privation, a lack of light. And based on what John says about darkness here and in his gospel, along with what the rest of the Bible says about darkness, we can say with strong confidence that the two points of comparison between God and light are His moral perfection and His all-pervading exposure.

A. He Is Morally Perfect

Darkness is an obvious code for evil. To say that there is no darkness at all in God is to say in other words that there is no evil at all within Him. We say of certain TV shows and films that they are “very dark.” By that we mean that evil runs rampant in them, and perhaps even triumphs at the end. But evil does not run rampant in Him! He is entirely light.

Some commentators begin by calling this light God’s holiness. But I don’t think that’s quite right. As we have talked about before, holiness does not in the first instance mean “moral purity” or even “moral perfection.” Holiness means existing for the special purpose of glorifying and enjoying God. To be holy is to have your existence oriented toward God. Now, there’s no doubt that God is holy. But to say that He is light highlights not so much His existence for Himself as His total and complete moral perfection. He is perfectly righteous. He is perfectly good. He does not have a dark side. He does not have the capacity to join the dark side, or to go dark, or to quench or dim His light. His radiance is absolute; there is not one little tiny particle of sin, wrongdoing, or evil anywhere inside Him, nor any capacity for such to enter Him.

Brothers and sisters, we all know what it’s like to have internal darkness. There are attitudes, habits, and desires in our hearts that we’d rather not think about! Recently, as some of you probably heard, there was an outcry from fans of the hit (and very dark and evil) TV show *Game of Thrones* when a beloved character “went dark” at the end. The outcry was that the ending was unsatisfying — but not that it was unrealistic! No. We humans know ourselves well enough to know that a beloved character doing something shockingly evil is only too plausible, even if hurts like Hell in a very strong sense.

But though you and I know what internal darkness feels like, *God does not*. Jesus says in John’s Gospel, “The prince of this world is coming, *and he has nothing in me.*” There was no point of contact for Satan within the heart of Jesus Christ. There was nothing about evil that appealed to Christ.

I was looking at an LED chip on Amazon recently. This little tiny piece cost about \$10 but had the power of a stadium light. The reviewers spoke of floodlighting fields with it, and warned not to stare into it directly because your eyes would never recover. Brothers and sisters, that is what God is like. You are as likely to find a shadow, a dark spot, on the surface of that little light-emitting diode as you are to find one anywhere in God. He is morally perfect. He cannot be tempted with evil. He cannot sin. He can’t want to sin. He has no attraction for sin, no willingness to sin, no friendliness for sin, anywhere within Himself.

Is that the God you know and worship? Is your God light, with no darkness in Him at all? That is the God that Jesus proclaimed. This message about God being light is the message that John heard from Jesus Himself. And so think about whether your God is morally pure like this.

B. He Exposes All

But even as we can say for sure that God is light in Himself, with no darkness, so we have to consider what that means for everything and everyone around Him. God’s light is not hidden or

veiled under a cloak. He does not pose as Jehovah the Grey, wrapping Himself in old rags to conceal His real splendor.

Rather, in His absolute and perfect illumination, He radiates out light that exposes whatever is around Him. God is light, which means that anything or anyone that gets close to Him will be exposed.

1. He Is Relationally Unhindered in Himself

The first Persons that's true of are His Son and His Spirit. They have perfect fellowship with each other; they are perfectly open to one another; there are no secrets, no shadowed areas, no places of darkness that they're not allowed to talk about, look at, or think about. God is light, which means that the Spirit sees all things, even the deep things of God. No one knows the Father except the Son, who sees perfectly in perfect illumination everything that is in His Father.

Have you ever tried to do something delicate in the dark? Maybe read small print, or assemble a lego set, or change a diaper? It's amazing how much easier it gets when you bring that work into the light. Well, so it is with the persons of the Trinity. They are not in darkness to each other; they are each and all equally illuminated by the divine light and equally and fully visible to one another. Though no man has seen God at any time, the Son and the Spirit see God at every time!

If you've ever had a relationship with a no-go zone (and all of us have), you know that it limits fellowship. If there are certain things you can't bring up, certain topics you can't broach, certain places or ideas that are off-limits, you know that these things put a real crimp in your friendship. You are relationally hindered. Now, maybe you don't want to talk to your parents about their sex life. That's not the kind of relational "dark space" I'm thinking of. I'm thinking of your in-laws not being willing to talk to you about their religious views and experiences; I'm thinking of your best friend not being willing to talk about his porn problem; I'm thinking of not knowing how to talk to your children about their political views. These are people you know, people you love, people you want to be close to, who simply refuse to open up on certain points and instead keep themselves and their thoughts in deep darkness. But that is not true of the Father, His Son, and their Spirit. They all know each other perfectly and love each other perfectly.

2. He Is Not Hidden in Darkness

But to say that God is light and that light exposes, brings out what was there all the time unbeknownst to you, is to further say that God is not hidden in darkness. God is not infinitely remote, living behind the black curtain of the edge of the universe that marks the limits of our sight. He rather lives in the light, indicating that He is not hiding, but can be known, seen, and loved. God is not hidden from His Son and Spirit — nor from you! He is relationally unhindered to others.

John has just been saying that he wants you to have fellowship with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ, just as John and the rest of the apostles do. And so he begins the letter body with this statement that God is light. That means that you can have fellowship with Him;

you can see Him; you can know Him. He isn't hiding in the dark; He isn't hopelessly veiled in impenetrable fog. He is a God you can see. Now, this doesn't mean that everything you think you know about the invisibility of God is wrong. Rather, it means that *in principle* the way to seeing God is open. If there's a problem, it's with your eyes, not with His visibility. He is not hiding, so if you can't see Him it's because the darkness within you has blinded your eyes.

So John is writing that you might have fellowship with the Father and His Son through the Holy Spirit. That fellowship is possible because the Father and His Son dwell in unapproachable light.

3. He Lays Bare Everything in You

But the negative side of this, if there is a negative side to it, is that God's pure light lays bare whatever is around Him. In the Son and Spirit, this a good thing, a blessing beyond all comparison. In the abstract, too, we rejoice that God dwells in the light, that Heaven is not the seat of the Kingdom of Darkness but rather the capital city of the Kingdom of Light! But brothers and sisters, what this means is that God's light can and will expose you the moment you get close to Him. In the dark, no one can see your blemishes. No one can see your imperfections. And you and I like it that way. I've mentioned many times before that fancy restaurants are very dim inside. Why? Because people look better in the dark! Soft lighting does good things for hair and makeup, makes the blemishes harder to see, and generally casts a romantic glow over everything. Direct sunlight in the New Mexico desert on a July afternoon doesn't do any favors for anyone's skin or laugh lines. And if this is true in the physical realm, how much more true is it in the moral realm? I have plenty of sins that I'd rather keep out of the limelight, away from public view, in a dark storage unit somewhere in the back alleys, in what Yeats called "the rag and bone shop of the heart." And I know you do too. We love keeping these rag and bone shops out of sight, curtains drawn, lights off. That ultra-bright LED chip would not be welcome in such a place. But brothers and sisters, you can't shut down or keep out the light of God. When He comes close to you, His light exposes everything that you are. And that's why John is instantly going to move into the question of sin. How can we, with so many dark deeds, dark attitudes, and dark thoughts packed away in the corners of our hearts — how can we have fellowship with unapproachable light? Won't the light destroy what we hold dear? The answer, thank God, is yes it will, and it will simultaneously change us so that we no longer hold it dear. When we walk in the light, the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.

So don't worry about approaching the Light; run to Him, and He will expose your iniquities but purge them too. He is light; that means that He has no sin, and that His very presence exposes all your sin and mine. Brothers and sisters, that's the whole point of our confession of sin within our worship service! We know that in worship we draw near to God, or better, that He draws near to us. We know that His light shines on our sin and exposes it — so what do we do? We confess it! And when we confess it, He is faithful and just to forgive it. He takes the darkness right out of us and replaces it with His light. Won't you let Him do that? Better, won't you ask Him to do that?

II. Know God Through Christ

John is speaking in terms of light and life rather than in terms of Jesus and forgiveness, at least in this verse. But his point is still abundantly clear; notice the sequence that we see over and over in Scripture and especially in John: From the Father, through the Son, to the apostles, to the church, to us. The message that God is a light is a message that came from Christ and then to the apostles, and then from the apostles to you. The message is transferred; it is not direct, but rather from the Father through the Son to the church to us. That means, in turn, that we don't know the Father in an unmediated way. We know Him through Christ the mediator, who is the "bottleneck" through whom all that the Father is and has for us passes. You can't know God as light without Christ telling it to you! And you can't actually believe it without the power of the Spirit making it real to you.

III. Know Christ Through the Apostles

But the second movement here is equally important: the apostles passed on what they heard from Christ. You and I need to know Christ through the apostles. We have to listen to the apostolic teaching in the word as expounded and lived out in the church in order to know Christ and thus the Father. Christianity is not a "me and God" species of mysticism. Christianity is a mediated faith, at the center of which is a Mediator, Jesus Christ the righteous.

Well, John applies this truth about God being light to how we deal with our sin. We'll see over the next month of Sundays that there is no fellowship for the sinful, and that we need to walk in the light. We'll also see three different methods for dealing with sin. But that's all to come. What is the takeaway from this sermon?

1. Worship the God who is light. Brothers and sisters, if the moral purity and grandeur of God doesn't move you to worship, then you are a sorry excuse for a Christian. We all genuinely dislike and despise the moral corruption of our earthly leaders. But God is not morally corrupt. There is darkness in every politician in America because there is darkness in every citizen of America. But God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all. Praise Him for that, won't you?
2. Willingly let yourself be exposed by the light. We'll talk about this more in weeks to come; for now, recognize that it means confession and repentance. In order to truly reckon with the pure illumination of God, you and I need to let Him expose us and then joyfully let Him burn away our sins.
3. Finally, start with God. The most important thing is not your felt needs but the character of the Almighty. So when you are looking for spiritual depth, when you're looking for moral improvement, when you're looking for a way to address your needs and problems, start with God.

And I'll see you with the saints in light. Amen.