

Pastor Tom Mortenson

Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York

October 31, 2021

The Games We Play

1 John 1:1-10

Prayer: Father, we just again, we thank you for your goodness, we thank you for your grace, we thank you that you are indeed worthy. And so, Lord, this morning again this is part of the gifts that you've given to us, this is the part where we can open up the gift of your word, part where we pray for the presence of your Holy Spirit, that you would guide us, give us the ability to listen and to hear and to make this of permanent value. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, we've been looking at the epistle of John and for the last few weeks we've been discussing this whole idea of choice. And our first challenge was that of choosing joy even when circumstances were anything but joyful. We talked about that scripture that's found in Hebrews that warns us that such choices are actually binary. We can either choose grace from God or bitterness from the enemy when we're confronted with the challenge.

So our first choice was one of grace from God regardless of

circumstance. Our second choice had to do with actually listening to God when he tells you something you might not want to hear. We spoke about sanctification which is a process that begins the moment that you become a believer in Christ and God from that moment on is committed to shaping and molding you uniquely into the image of his Son. Again the wonder of that process is that God has chosen before the foundation of the world to make us holy and blameless in his sight and that he chose us in him while we were still sinners.

Well another choice that I'd like to speak to this morning is the choice to listen to God rather than to the enemy of our souls. This is someone who wants nothing more than to diminish or remove our ability to hear what God is telling us. Now I have a dear friend who has gone off the pathway of truth and is now following a false teacher. I sent my friend a two-and-a-half-hour podcast that systematically took apart this person's teaching and it compared them to scripture and it showed how deeply embodied in error this false teacher was. My friend and I had a discussion about the podcast, I had asked him ahead of time if I could send it to him and he agreed. I was astounded, first of all, that he was willing to listen to it. That was the good news. The bad news was that he literally dismissed out of hand every bit of evidence that this person was preaching a false Christ, and then he claimed that his

false teacher and the podcaster who was exposing him both believed in the exact same thing and that just they were expressing it slightly differently. I mean you have to realize how off this teacher was to realize how amazing a statement that was. I was just astounded at that reaction. And I realized that as open and as willing to listen as my friend was, he was still unwilling to hear. You see, there's a huge difference between listening and hearing and the grave danger that I've mentioned before is that the more you refuse to listen, the more your ability to hear becomes diminished. Jesus responded to that refusal to listen by speaking in stories that nobody could understand. I mean he told stories about sowing seeds in different kinds of soils or about a man of wealth investing in individuals and then returning, expecting a return. He told stories about vineyards run by wicked people, refusing to honor the person who established it. And there are all kinds of stories that had these very deep spiritual meanings that oftentimes made absolutely no sense whatsoever to the people who were hearing them, and that included his disciples. They made no sense because Jesus simply told the story without any accompanying explanation of what it stood for or what the secondary meaning was. I mean, he would oftentimes just tell a story and then leave.

Like when he told the story of the sower and the soils, he was speaking to a crowd that was so huge that he had to speak from a

boat out on a lake. And so he comes to this huge crowd and he winds up giving them a lecture on farming to folks who were largely farmers in the first place and the lecture made no sense. And he ended the lecture by saying in *Matthew 13:9*: "*Whoever has ears, let them hear.*" Just imagine the response of the disciples who set up this engagement to these huge crowds and everybody's mystified, including the disciples. I mean they just, they hear a story about rocky, weedy and good soil that makes literally no sense whatsoever spiritually. And the scripture even acknowledges the disciples' response. This is verse 10 of *Matthew 13*. It says: *The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?"* I mean time and again the disciples beg Jesus to clue them in about what he was talking about because they had no idea. Well it was actually a mercy to those who were refusing to listen. I mean, Jesus began to make even listening impossible so that the crowd wouldn't be guilty of an even greater sense of rejection. There's a principle involved here. Jesus once said in *Luke 12*, he said: "*From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.*" And so as a result he told stories that only those who were willing to hear could understand, and oftentimes they could only understand because they sought out Jesus afterwards and then he explained to them the story.

I mean listen to how Jesus describes this whole process happening in *Matthew 13*. It says: *Then the disciples came and said to him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" And he answered them, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away."* Understand the principle that Jesus is speaking about here and how dangerous this is for those who refuse to listen. Jesus is saying even their capacity to hear is going to be diminished. In verse 13 he says: *"This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says: "'You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive." For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.'* But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it."

I mean, have you ever stopped to consider those last words of

Jesus? I mean, do you realize what a privilege it is to see what your eyes see and to hear what your ears hear? I'm not speaking about myself as the source of what you see and hear, I'm talking about God's word and the privilege we have of having it make sense to us. Well it seems to make little or no sense to that world right outside our doors. Jesus is quite clear in telling us why that is, and our culture is no exception. I mean, after repeated exposure to the gospel through every possible means, from print to TV, to the Internet, we are literally surrounded by the gospel being presented and we refuse to listen. And so the result is our collective heart has grown dull, our collective ears can barely hear and our collective eyes have closed. When it comes to the gospel, we literally and figuratively just don't want to hear it. I think I can safely assume that most of you who are sitting here are primarily here because you do want to hear it, and I'm telling you flat out that that is a privilege and a grace you can't possibly fully comprehend. Just try to let Jesus's words sink in when it comes to that privilege. Again, let me just repeat what he says. *"For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it."* You see, if you love Jesus, it's because God has done an incredible mighty work in your heart and soul. It's almost indescribable.

Paul once attempted to explain this process. He was giving testimony, in this case he was giving testimony to a king, King Agrippa. So Paul's trying to lay out to the king and he's passionately explaining that Christ was God in the flesh, that he had come to live a perfect life, and then offer his life up on the cross in exchange for our sin and that he died and that he actually rose from the dead. So he's explaining. This is what Paul said. This is Acts 26. He says: *"To this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come -- that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles."* Paul then goes on to describe to Agrippa his own confrontation with the living Christ and he quotes exactly what Jesus had called him to do for folks like you and me, and this is what he said: *"To open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me."* Paul's presenting his case so passionately that Agrippa makes a statement that has been repeated over and over again down through the years to represent not only the privilege that all of us here have of hearing but the terrible cost to those who don't have that privilege. This is what Acts 26:28 says: *Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian."* Sad to say

but "almost persuaded" is a phrase that we can apply to everyone we've shared the gospel with who hasn't fully accepted it, and that's the vast majority of people at least that I know. And those who love Jesus love him because they have become fully persuaded not by their own individual wisdom or intelligence but by a sovereign act of God who chooses according to his good pleasure. I mean *Ephesians 2:8* says: *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.*

Well last week we spoke about a threat to those who have received this gift of God and it has to do with the privilege of ears to hear and eyes to see, and it all comes down to that little word "choice." You see, God gives us the ability to choose how well or how poorly we wish to grow into a unique image of Christ, a unique image that God has prepared uniquely for you. And I say "unique" because God himself has pre-selected each individual pathway that we are to take. The very next verse in *Ephesians 2* says: *For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*

Well, what marks out a pathway forward in our relationship with Christ is a willingness not just to listen but to actually hear what the Holy Spirit is saying. I mean it's God's Holy Spirit is

about the business of sanctifying us, shaping and molding us into the unique image of God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. As I said the last time, no one can represent the uniqueness of Christ like you can or I can. Every one of us individually paints a picture as unique as any snowflake of the glory of Christ as we live out our Christian lives, and sanctification is the process that God uses to shape and mold us into that image of his Son and it starts out the day that we're saved and it doesn't end until our last day here on earth. And the key to that process, the key to the process of being sanctified or set apart for God's use is the ability to be open and honest with God and especially with his Holy Spirit as he seeks to guide and shape us into the image of his Son. The threat to our sanctification lies not just in the temptations we see all around us but in our ability to play games with ourselves, in our own ability to hide from the truth and deceive ourselves about what is good and bad and needing to be cleaned up as we move towards Christ-likeness.

I mentioned last week this whole idea of peeling an onion. I said our souls are kind of like an onion and you find this layer that's dinged and dirty and ugly and God systematically starts peeling it away and you're left with a bright, shiny, new and clean level only to find out that God has every intention to clean up that one and the next one and the next one because God has seen every single

layer of our fallenness and sinfulness right from the beginning, and for some reason he still decided to fix his love on us. And we describe that by saying there are two key facts that help in our sanctification. One is knowing how deeply loved of God we are right from the beginning, and the other is knowing how full of it we are. "It" being the Greek term that Paul uses is that word "skubalon." And I defined that word last week. Skubalon is the excrement of animals, offscourings, rubbish, dregs of things worthless and detestable, nasty stuff for sure. See, when God looks at us, he sees us in all of our skubalonic glory. And for reasons known to God and God alone, he chooses to fix his love on us in spite of that. And again, the two critical truths that we need to hold simultaneously in order to truly become sanctified is that God does indeed love us and we are indeed full of it. And that last part of being full of it is where the danger lies, it's where the temptation comes to actually start believing our own stuff. To refuse to hear God's Holy Spirit as he speaks in that still small voice pointing out to us yet another layer of onion that needs to go. And that's where our scripture takes us this morning.

We ended up last week focusing in on those scriptures that John lays out about self-deception. This is what he says in *1 John 1:6-8*. He says: *If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and*

walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. I said, can we say we have fellowship with him and still walk in the darkness? Yes. Can we lie and fail to practice the truth? Yes, again. The good news is that walking in the light as Jesus is the light, while walking in fellowship with one another like we're doing right here, right now, brings us face to face with the way, the truth, and the life who is at work actively cleansing us from all the sin in our lives. And he cleanses us by changing our very desires to match his. And again it all comes down to choice. We get to choose to be slaves of righteousness or slaves of sin. And his path of righteousness will inevitably show us how full of it we are, and that's not something that we usually appreciate. I mean the last verse that we looked at, verse 8, actually serves as a prelude of the text that we're looking at this morning. It says: *If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.* It's just a scriptural way of saying if we really don't believe that we're full of it, well, that attitude makes it next to impossible to hear God's Holy Spirit and have any growth whatsoever. As I said, the only way to proceed is to understand the danger of self-deception and move forward. Listen to what God says next. He says: *If we*

confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Now there's an awful lot going on in this verse. So much of it is critical to our understanding of how we grow in sanctification. You notice the verse starts out, it starts out with a conditional clause. It says if we do something, then God will do something. In other words there are conditions to God forgiving our sin. The number one condition is we have to confess it. This may bring up memories as it does for me of going to a church that has confessionals and priests and rituals associated with it. The whole idea of confessing here is not necessarily the idea of confession and penance and saying the right prayers and getting absolution. You have to look at the actual word "confess." The actual word "confess" is a combination of two different Greek words that I've spoken of many times. It's the word "homo" which means "same" and the word "logeio" which means "to speak." "Homologeo" means "to same speak." It means to be in agreement with God about the sin that we are confessing. And it sounds extremely simple, I mean, God's saying if we agree with him about our sin, he's faithful and just to forgive us our sin. The problem that we have as believers in Christ is that we oftentimes have moved on from the obvious sins that are easily recognizable to sins that we have a much easier time just dismissing, doing exactly what John says when he says, if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves.

I mean, when I was a brand new believer, my sins, they all centered around sex, drugs and rock and roll, all those sorts of things that were open and obvious, so confessing those sins was no problem at all. I mean they represented the opening layers of the onion. For me, they were ugly, they were tattered, they were so easy to recognize. There was a great sense of relief that God gave me the power to forsake those sins. But what lurked underneath those sins was a whole other layer of sins that were far, far more subtle. God even speaks about those different types of sin in *1 Timothy 5*. He says: *Some men's sins are clearly evident, preceding them to judgment, but those of some men follow later.* I don't want to minimize the sins that many of us came into the kingdom thinking they were the biggest sins we could ever commit, it's just that drugs and drug addiction and sexual sins and the like are sins that are oftentimes just clearly evident, they're right there in front of you. You can see them easily. God oftentimes takes care of them first, literally changing our likes and our dislikes so the things we used to love become things that we now want nothing to do with.

I oftentimes quote the Old Testament promise of God to change our hearts and minds and desires when we come to Christ. This is what God promised in *Ezekiel 36*. He says: *Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all*

your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. You see, when God transplants in our spirit his new heart and new spirit, we become very different people than we once were, and it's at that point that the subtle layers of the onion start to become an issue. And God is determined to tackle each and every layer. And where it starts to get difficult is in those more subtle sins. You know, getting into a drunken brawl and stealing something, that's not something that's easily dismissed. It's the more subtle sins that we need to concern ourselves with. I mean, being prideful, arrogant and lusting after someone, they can all be redefined in your mind as being self-assured, self-confident and appreciating the beauty of God's creation. Not a problem. But that's the problem. *If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves.*

You see, the whole idea of confession centers around our willingness to call sin, sin. And this is a much bigger deal than we think. You see when you actually call sin, sin you then acknowledge that the only appropriate response is to repent of it, forsake it, and ask God for the grace to reject it. That requires getting on the same page with God's Holy Spirit. And I've been

around long enough to realize how easy it is to play games here, and the game centers around refusing to recognize the sin that God is convicting me of. This is what God says, he says: *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.*

So how do I know if I'm playing games with God? How do I know how this whole thing works? You want a quick test, just get into a fight with your spouse. It's real simple. I mean for me that often leads to a discussion with the Holy Spirit about whose fault it was, what I'm supposed to do to make it right. And that leads to my next point about this whole matter of confession. You see, it's the Holy Spirit's job to convict us of sin but I think it's important to go over again just what that entails. See, I've maintained all along that there's a huge difference between the Holy Spirit's conviction of sin and the pseudo conviction that the devil loves to employ in order to attack God's people. You see, when the Holy Spirit convicts you there's a degree of specificity involved. When the devil tries to convict us to use it as a weapon, it almost always lacks that quality. I've said before the way the devil convicts you is to tell you that you're useless, worthless, evil, not worth redeeming. And you notice all of those items, they all lack specificity. They're just generic and there's

nothing you can do to fix them. With the Holy Spirit's conviction, you see specifics. It would be along the lines of saying, you know that argument that you got into with your spouse last night? You were unkind, you were impatient, you need to apologize, you need to make it right. You see the difference between the Holy Spirit's conviction and the devil's? One is pointed, directed and easily addressed. The other is debilitating, generic and unable to be addressed. The Holy Spirit's conviction is designed to help you conquer sin and lift you up. The enemy's conviction is designed to defeat you and bring you down. The Holy Spirit's conviction is centered on getting us to agree with God that sin is sin and to refuse to excuse it without playing games. You know that prayer concern that you shared about a brother in Christ? The Holy Spirit may be telling you that that wasn't a prayer concern, that was gossip. And the hard part is whether or not you're willing to agree with God or whether you're still going to play games about it. You see, actually agreeing with God that gossip is gossip is agreeing with him that it's a sin that needs to be addressed, perhaps even requiring that you ask forgiveness from someone, and that involves a lot more than simply agreeing with a statement. So when God says if we confess our sins, he is saying once you finally come into agreement with my Holy Spirit about a particular sin that he's convicting you of, once that has happened and you bring it to me as sin, I'm faithful and just to forgive you that sin and

cleanse you from all unrighteousness. The alternative is to risk slandering the Holy Spirit, diminishing the ability to hear. *If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.*

And this brings to mind another aspect of confessing our sins to God. I mean God says two things about his response to sin and our confession of it. He says he is faithful and he says he is just to forgive us our sin. Well that's an incredibly important statement to grapple with. There are a lot of folks who think that Christ's death on the cross is not quite enough to pay for their sin. They feel the need to add to their efforts in order to fully believe that the sin is paid for. They feel a certain measure of guilt and depression or anxiety is necessary in order to seal the deal and make the confession truly permanent. Can you see how that insults God? I mean the blood of Christ, God's perfect Son shed on the cross on behalf of you is not enough? When God says he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, he's making a statement about his justice with regard to Christ's payment for sin. He's telling us that God cared so much about his justice that he sent his Son to die for it and somehow or other I have to add to that?

You might say what about the actual ability of confessing, I mean, if confession is an incredibly important part of this conditional

clause that God lays out for forgiveness, he does say "if we confess our sins," well doesn't that make confessing your sins absolutely critical and what about the sins I forget? Well let's go back to the moment you committed your life to Christ. See, God says at that very moment you were what he calls justified. Now that's a biblical term that you find often in the New Testament. You see it all over the New Testament. Speaking of sinners in 1 Corinthians 6, Paul said: *And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.* Romans 5:9: *Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!* Galatians 3:24 says: *So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith.*

And so we ask, okay, what is that word, what is that term, what is justification? And I know I'm dating myself when I say this but justification used to be a banking term that was used to make sure that your checking account was actually balanced. I mean, in the old days -- nobody balances their checkbooks any more, but we used to do it once a month and we would make sure that the money we deposited matched the money that we withdrew. And when the credits and the debits evenly matched, our account was said to be -- quote -- "justified." That just means that full payment for your

checks is in your checking account. Well, spiritually speaking, we incur a debit or a debt against us every time we sin. God tells us the wages of sin is death and every time we sin and refuse to repent, that debt continues to grow. *Romans 2:5* says: *But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. God "will repay each person according to what they have done."* Well there are two different ways to pay that debt. You can pay yourself and it will take you all of eternity in hell, or you can pay by clinging to the cross of Christ, and then on the basis of your faith in his death, you have his righteousness substituted for your sin. And those who have fully met Christ have opted for that latter payment. See, God justifies us the moment we come to Christ by declaring that on the basis of Christ's finished work on the cross the just demands of the law have been fully met. All of our sins represent the debit and Christ's perfect righteous life represents the credit, and God publicly declares that our spiritual balance is justified in Christ the moment he becomes your Lord and Savior.

Now you might suspect that justification is a once-and-for-all deal. I mean, God doesn't just declare we're justified up till this moment then we're on our own for the future. Justification means our debt is paid in full and that's a done deal. Then why

should we worry about confessing our sins if our sins are already paid for, I mean, why not take advantage of our justification? Why? Because lovers of God hate offending him. As the scripture says, *we love because he first loved us*. If we've truly come to Christ, we truly love him. We now have God's Holy Spirit living inside us growing that love. We are now temples of the Holy Spirit and our hearts are literally being transformed, our goals, our desires, and our aspirations are now being shaped by God's Holy Spirit. They're being shaped to match those of Christ's in whose image we are being shaped. Our thinking becomes Christ's thinking. So the whole idea of taking advantage of our sins being paid for, well it flies in the face of what it means to truly love the God who died for me. As Paul says in *Romans 6: What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?*

I've actually heard of people planning for future sins, I mean, suggesting that since they've been justified, they no longer need to worry about the consequences of such sins. I actually read an extreme example about a person who claimed to be a Christian who got arrested and convicted of taking out a contract to murder her husband. And somebody pointed out to her that she was supposed to be a Christian and how could she possibly entertain this great,

great sin? She said she didn't worry about that because she knew her future sins were forgiven so she could plan for a future murder. She clearly had no idea what the gospel is. This is not someone who has died to sin. This is someone who is living in it still and thinking she can cut a bargain, play a game by pretending that her salvation was real. Justification is a once-and-for-all act in which God on the basis of Christ's death on the cross declares that we've been made righteous not because of our goodness but because of his. And furthermore we are adopted at that moment into God's family as literal brothers of Christ and sons of God. It's a relationship that exists from that moment forward through all of time. So when we sin, we don't sever the relationship that we have with God and then somehow or other hope to start a new one. Rather, we sense that we put a distance between a holy God and our sometimes unholy selves by that sin. It becomes something that we want removed.

Just think of what happens in your own family, I mean, when one of my kids messes up, he doesn't cease or she doesn't cease being my kid. It's a relationship that you have forever. There's no way I can un-son my sons or un-daughter my daughters. Sin can clearly strain a relationship but nothing can undo the fact that my children are still my children. And I know for a fact that when I sin, I am breaking my relationship with my Lord and I feel that in

my spirit, I feel that brokenness. I want nothing more than to confess that sin, get cleansed by the Holy Spirit and move forward. It's knowing that yet another layer of the onion God is removing. Our goal is to grow more and more into the image of God's Son and that sanctification is a lifelong project.

And finally, the good news is that it is God who's at work here, and his grace is there for all of us to access but it's there for us only if. *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* Let's pray.

Father, I just, I thank you for your gift. I thank you for the Holy Spirit who indwells us. I thank you for the Holy Spirit who convicts us, and I confess many is a time I played games with your Holy Spirit. I don't want to confess, I don't want to same speak with you because then I have to deal with the sin I've redefined as basically no big deal. Lord, you're just continuing to shape and mold and refine us into the image of your Son. And so it gets easier and easier to dismiss those sins. And so I pray, Lord, as they get more and more subtle, we get more and more tuned in to who you are and what your Holy Spirit is asking of us and that we be willing even in the subtle sins to same speak with your Holy Spirit and to confess those sins that you will forgive. And we pray these

things in Jesus' name. Amen.