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Welcome to the New Life Podcast, a ministry of New Life Presbyterian Church in Ithaca, New York. Today we have this week's sermon, preached by Tim LaCroix, our senior pastor. Join us for worship each week at 10 o'clock at 950 Danby Road, Ithaca, New York. You can also visit us on our website, www. Now here's this week's sermon.

00:45

A reading from the first epistle of the apostle John, chapter 2, verses 1 through 6. 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. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world. And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says, I know him,

01:11

but does not keep his commandments as a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him. Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

01:31

We live in a time and a place where there is conflicting, conflicting moral principles, conflicting moral ideals. Now if we take the entire landscape of, the entire ethical landscape of our country, it's not so simple that we can draw a line down the middle and say everyone to one side is right and everyone to the other side is wrong.

01:56

There are nuances in play, and I don't have time to make all those nuances at this moment. But the point I want to bring up is, is at the poles, at the extremes of our moral landscape in our society, there's two poles, two extremes. And on the one pole, the one extreme, is the claim, two competing claims, is the claim that there is a God who created the universe,

02:26

a moral code to live by. That's the one side. That's the one claim. The opposite claim is the claim that there is no God. There is no God and therefore there is no purpose, there is no meaning, there is no good, there is no evil, there is no right, there is no wrong. This is the logical conclusion of the denial of God on the other side of our spectrum. Richard Dawkins, who is a prominent neo-atheist in his book,

02:55

River out of Eden, a Darwinian view of life, wrote this, The total amount of suffering per year in the natural world is beyond all decent contemplation. During the minute that it takes me to compose this sentence, thousands of animals are being eaten alive. Many others are running for their lives, whimpering with fear. Others are being slowly devoured from within by rasping parasites. Thousands of all kinds are dying of starvation, thirst, and disease. It must be so. He writes.

03:25

If there is ever a time aplenty, this very fact will automatically lead to an increase in population until the natural state of starvation and misery is restored. In a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason to it or any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties that we should expect if

03:54

there is at bottom no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.

04:08

biologist and neuroscientist at Stanford University, Robert Sapolsky wrote a book, and I talked about this a year and a half ago, but he wrote a book in 2023. And that book surmised that there is no such thing as free will. This scientist, Stanford professor, is a recipient of the MacArthur Foundation Genius Grant.

04:33

He worked for decades as a field primatologist before turning to neuroscience, and he has spent his entire career investigating behavior across the animal kingdom, writing about it in books, etc. In his latest book, called Determined, A Science of Life Without Free Will, Dr. Sapolsky confronts and

refutes the biological and philosophical arguments for free will. He contends that we are not free agents, but that biology, hormones, childhood, and life circumstances coalesce to produce actions

05:01

that we merely feel are ours to choose. It's a provocative claim, he concedes. Yeah, it is. But he would be content if readers simply began to question the belief which is embedded in our cultural conversation, getting rid of free will. He says, quote, completely strikes at our sense of identity and autonomy and where we get meaning from. Dr. Sapolsky said.

05:30

and this makes the idea particularly hard to shake. There are many implications for this, he notes. For sure. Absent free will, he points out, no one should be held responsible for their behavior, good or bad. Sapolsky sees this as liberating for most people, for whom life has been about being blamed and punished and deprived and ignored for things that they have no control over.

05:55

There's no right, there's no wrong, there's no free will, there's no justice. We can't blame anyone for anything that they do because it's just a series of chemical reactions and things that we've been nurtured in in our lives. I saw a video this week, I've mentioned this before, one of the things I like to do in my free time is to scroll, you know, videos, short videos on YouTube because I don't have TikTok. I'm not cool enough.

06:22

But I saw this video this week, and I like to watch videos of Neil deGrasse Tyson. I'm interested in what he has to say. There's another astrophysicist named Brian Cox. I like to hear him talk. And then there's other things that pop up on your thing because of the algorithm. I saw a video this week. It was an on-campus debate. There was a presenter who was presenting the Christian point of view. There were students lining up debating him. So a student came up to the mic, and the presenter said,

06:48

Do you think it was objectively wrong that the Nazis gassed millions of Jews? Student replies, objectively you can't, like when you say it's objectively wrong, you're implying you can derive a truth value from it and I don't think you can, so I don't think you can make a true statement regarding whether something is good or bad. Presenter, got it. So to be clear, the Nazis could have been right in their actions in your view.

07:15

Student, that implies that right is an actual thing. I don't believe you can determine a truth value from a moral claim. Presenter, so the Nazis were not objectively evil? Student, yeah, I said that like four times already. Presenter, what you're saying is very clearly that we look at the Holocaust and it's just a matter of opinion. Student, yeah, that's kind of the problem of being an atheist. You have to bite the bullet.

07:44

These are the options we have. These are the claims of our moral landscape. We have on the one side that there is a God, a creator who gives us a moral code that we are to follow, and on the other side there is no God, there is no meaning, there is no purpose, there is no right or wrong. And the implications for that are ghastly. Not a world that I would want to live in. I don't think you would either.

08:08

But the reality is that most of us don't live at these polls. Most of our, as I talked about last week, most people in our country are not atheists to the, with respect that they're logically and philosophically consistent like that. Most people are somewhere in the middle.

08:23

Most people would agree that there is a God, you know, there must be a God that gives us purpose and meaning, but we're not quite sure who that is or whether that person has given us a moral code, and if he did, if we could know it. There are those who believe in the Christian God who are unsure if the Bible is accurate and the things that it tells us to do or not to do is...

08:42

accurate or maybe if we move a little closer to the the the poll they might say well I'm not quite sure why God says this is right and this is wrong these are these are all the sort of practical questions that people are asking in the middle of the away from the extreme that says there's no right and wrong there's no justice you can't blame anybody for doing anything it's just biology even the homicidal genocidal maniac or the person who's a child sexual abuser it's not their fault

09:11

Most people aren't there. People move away from that spectrum in various kinds of ways. Now in the text today, we don't have these two exact situations as alternatives. The Roman world, the Greco-Roman world that we are, this text of 1 John is situated in, was a very religious time. It was a time that we call enchanted time. People believed in spirits. They believed in demons and angels and all sorts of things.

09:40

And so, there was nobody who wasn't religious. Everybody was religious. In fact, the Christians were called atheists because they only believed in the one God and not the others. That's what atheism was called in the first century. The Christians were called atheists. So nobody was going around saying there is no God, but... the heresy, the false belief that is being perpetrated and taught in the context of Ephesus and the late...

10:09

late first century that John is writing about, has similarities to that view that I just told you. These teachers were saying there is no such thing as sin. There is no such thing as morality. Why were they saying this? Well, their argument was that this world that we live in was created by an evil God, that this world that we live in is meaningless. It's not a world we actually care about. And therefore, what would we do in this world doesn't matter. This is...

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various versions of this that have existed through history, philosophical dualism, where there's a strict division between heaven and earth and what happens on the earth doesn't matter at all, it doesn't have any consequence. These teachers were saying, therefore there is no sin, there is no good, there is no evil, there is no right or wrong. So there's the similarity. What is John's answer to that? John's answer to that is like I just said, there is a God.

11:04

who created all things, as we talked about last week, that God is light and Him there's no darkness at all. We move from the existential claim that if there is a God who created all the universe that we see around us, that we can observe around us, the trillions of stars, the billions of galaxies, the God who created that, whatever entity created that, had to be infinitely powerful, infinitely immense. If the universe is so vast and there's so much power contained within it,

11:34

whoever created it must be that much more powerful, so powerful and so large it borders on infinity if it's not actually infinite. That's the God, that's by consequence, by necessity, what God is like. John also makes a moral claim. John makes the claim that if there's any goodness and beauty in this world, if there's any light, it comes from God. If there's any darkness, it comes from human sin.

12:00

And God is light and in him there's no darkness at all, therefore the moral standard of the universe is God. That's where we start. So we pick up today in chapter 2 verse 1. I'm going to cover two points with the time I have remaining. The first point is this, John presents an ideal. He starts in verse 1. My little children, I'm writing you these things so that you may not sin. This is the ideal. The ideal world is a world without sin.

12:29

This is the first thing that people have to accept and have to believe in order to believe in God and believe in the God of the Bible especially. Now this ideal world that John is referring to, this world where there is no sin, he wrote about before. I believe Revelation was written before 1 John, so I believe that what he writes in Revelation 21 he'd already written.

12:52

This world that he describes where there is no sin is described in Revelation chapter 21. John had a vision. He said he saw a new heavens and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and there was no sea. And then he heard a loud voice, this is verse 3, from the throne saying, Behold the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. So the new heavens and the new earth will have God living with us very intimately.

13:22

And then verse 4 describes a world, a perfect world without suffering. He says, he will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death will be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore for the former things that passed away. Now I would guess that most people would say they would like to live in that world. Most people would say they would like to live in a world where there was no death, no suffering, nor pain, nor crying. Anybody want to sign up for that?

13:52

Anybody want to sign up? I don't think it's that far of a stretch to say that people want to be a part of that world. But John's point here in chapter 2 verse 1 is that the only way that world exists is that there is no sin. Because sin is the source of evil in the world. And that, my friends, is something that people do not necessarily want to accept. Because what John is articulating is that God is a moral standard.

14:19

and that any deviation from that moral standard as we talked about last week is how we define sin. And if we want to live in that perfect world, it's a world without sin. And it's a world without sin as God defines it. And that is where a lot of people will stop and get off the bus. So that's the ideal though. You want this world, this perfect world to live in.

14:43

that world John says is without sin. Now, I want to be clear that what John is not saying is that that we are to be sinless. He doesn't think we can be sinless. He just said this a verse before. He says, if we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar. John knows everyone sins. John knows that no one is perfect. John knows that a part of God's plan is to offer us forgiveness in a way to attain forgiveness when we sin. So what John is saying in verse one is there is an ideal, there is a perfect world

15:13

death and that's because there is no sin. Sin is the source of the misery in our world. That's the idea. The second is the reality. We don't live in that world. We live in a different world. That world is coming that is not yet here. We live in a world where there is sin. So he says in the second half of verse 2, if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father Jesus Christ the righteous. And he goes on to say

15:40

In verse 4, whoever says I know him but does not keep his commandments is a liar But whoever keeps his word in him truly is love of God perfected that we may know we are in him Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked Backing up just a few verses to the end of chapter 1 John says if you say there's no such thing as sin You deceive yourself when the truth is not in you that's verse 8 and then verse 10 if you say you personally don't sin You make God a liar

16:09

and the word is not in us. So John's reality is there is sin. And the reality of a sinful world as people deviate from what God says to do and what he... and not doing what he says to do and doing what he says not to do is his claim is that is the source of sin, that is the source of suffering in this world. Now this is, this reality, this reality is where we struggle and even as Christians we struggle.

16:37

the reality of what the things that God says are right and for wrong and for many of us we have come to the conclusion we accept the fact that God there must be a God that exists but where we really struggle is in the nitty-gritty details of why is this wrong and why does God say that's wrong how come? that's where we really live and those are real questions those are legitimate questions and those are questions that I even ask myself

17:05

I want you to see what John is saying here. As he's not getting into that, those specifics. He's not saying those specifics don't matter. But he's trying to ground us in the truth. The very bedrock principles of our faith. That there is an ideal that God is holding out for us. The ideal world where there is no sin.

17:25

But there's also a reality in which we, sin is in the world and no one, no one, whether you're a Christian or not, no one can be perfect. No one can. Everyone sins. As Paul put it, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. There is no one righteous, not even one. That comes from Romans chapter 3. John has a different way of saying it, but the same principle. No one's perfect. Everyone sins. The Christian is not any better than anyone else in that respect. And so that's the reality.

17:55

We live in a world that has fallen and broken because of our sin. And I've been making this claim ever since I've been here, that the source of evil in the world is the sin of humanity. That's the reality. So we have the ideal, we have the reality, but the third thing we see is the provision, God's provision. This rings so clear in this text. The provision for escaping a world without sin.

18:24

not actually escaping it, but renewing this fallen world. The provision is to defeat sin, to destroy sin itself. And that provision comes through Jesus Christ and His sacrifice on the cross. John says in verse 2, second half of verse 2, if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. I'm going to come back to that.

18:55

And this word, propitiation, it refers to appeasing a deity. The Greek word in the Greco-Roman context means appeasing the wrath of a deity, any deity. If we take this from the Greco-Roman context into the Hebraic context of the Old Testament, which is probably the more appropriate place to situate it, this Greek word is the word that is used in the Greek Old Testament to refer to the mercy seat that is over top of the Ark of the Covenant.

19:25

The covering, the mercy covering, it is also a cognate of this word, related to this word, is the same word used for the word atonement, in the day of atonement, the Hebrew word kapur, you may have heard of yom kapur. This is the same word. This Hebrew conception of atonement, or kapur, is covering, that's literally what the word means. What are we covered with?

19:55

We ourselves are covered with Christ's righteousness. This is how Paul puts it. We are covered with Christ's righteousness as a garment. The result is this. Since we are covered in Christ's righteousness, His blood covers us. When Jesus stands before the Father, He acts as our advocate. Now, this word advocate.

20:19

can have a legal connotation and I think it most likely does, it can also simply mean generically intercessor. But the picture here is that you have God the Father. God the Father is, we've already been told, perfect light, in Him there's no darkness at all. We cannot have fellowship with God unless we do something about the darkness that is within us.

20:39

There's no way, as we saw John arguing last week, there's no way we can have fellowship with God or His people unless we do something about the darkness, the sin within us. So John says, look, we have an advocate, we have a defense attorney, we have someone standing before God, arguing our case consistently, saying, I've covered that one, I've paid for that one, I've covered that one, I've covered him, I've covered her. I love the way that...

21:09

There's a couple of quotes in your bulletin that point this out. John Calvin's quote, it's the second quote from the top on page three. He says, Christ is our advocate, for he appears before God that he may exercise toward us the power and efficacy of his sacrifice. The intercession of Christ is a continual application of his death for our salvation.

21:33

He's continually saying, I died for him, I died for her, I covered her, she's covered, he's covered, you're covered. That's what it means that Christ is our advocate. Continually saying to the God of life, their darkness is covered by my light. Robert Yarbrough is a New Testament commentator that I'm reading as the last quote on page 3. There is no chance that what Jesus urges in God's presence will ever be rejected because it fails to measure up to the standard of the righteous judge, which is perfection.

22:03

Because the intercessor himself is of the same sterling character. Some of you know that not all defense attorneys are made the same. Not all of them have the same quality. Not all of them have the same character. Not all of them who can get you out of a jam, right? Jesus is the best woman there ever was. Why? Because he has the perfect sterling character of the judge. And he says to the judge, I have paid for this. I have covered this. The debt is gone.

22:33

Christ is our advocate and nothing can stand with nothing can stand before that. We are covered in his blood So we have the ideal we have the reality We have the provision of Christ's advocacy and sacrificial death on our behalf. And lastly we have the promise What is the promise a promise of our assurance? the promise of our assurance Just reading through this passage again. He is the propitiation. He is the covering of our sins

23:01

and not for ours only but the sins of the whole world and by this we know that we have come to know him. This is how we know that we belong to God. This is how we know that we have fellowship with God. How do we know?

23:15

if we keep His commandments. Uh-oh. Ha ha. Eh. I don't like that. Oh, man. Let's keep reading. Whoever says I know Him but does not keep His commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in Him. But whoever keeps His word in Him, truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know

that we are in Him. Whoever says he abides in Him ought to walk in the same manner in which he walks.

23:46

We know this from the remainder of John's argument. We don't read this passage isolated from the surrounding letter. We know, as I've already said, that John is not saying that we have to be perfect. He just said, if you say you don't sin, you make God a liar. That means we continue to struggle with sin. He's already said, look, the ideal is no sin, but I know you're going to, so Jesus has provided a way.

24:14

So this doesn't mean that I perfectly keep his commandments, but that I walk in his commandments. Remember Psalm 1. We've talked about Psalm 1 before. I preached on it a couple summers ago. Psalm 1 says, well, I want to just read it instead of just paraphrase it and try to remember it. Psalm... How fast can I turn?

24:40

Psalm 1, Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers, but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on it he meditates day and night.

24:53

This is not a perfect person, but a person who has decided they will walk in the way of the Lord. This is how it concludes in verse 6, Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way. I see an illusion to someone there. The righteous person, the righteous man, the righteous woman, will choose to walk in the commandments of the Lord. It doesn't mean that you're going to perfectly obey them, but it means you're choosing to believe them. You're choosing...

25:19

to follow them even though you will fail and you will need to ask for forgiveness, you'll need to claim Christ's perpetuation for yourself, we choose to follow. The way that we know that we have fellowship with the Father, in other words, is that we believe that truth that John is saying. We believe that truth that there is a God who created this world, this universe, and he has given a moral code and we accept it.

25:46

We may not know why he says do this, do that. We may not know why he says don't do this and don't do that. But we accept it. We acknowledge that he's the creator and we're not. Many of us have had these situations as parents and as children. But a lot of times parents will tell children to do things that children don't like. And hopefully the parent has a really good reason why.

26:13

I remember we made a rule for our kids when they were small, don't go in the street. Do not go in the street. If you do not put even the little tiniest toe on the black pavement of the street. The reason why we told them that should be fairly obvious to most of us. Why? Because the street is dangerous. Because a little child, a toddler, two, three years old, does not have the wisdom, does not have the skill to navigate a street with cars crossing. They're not ready for that. So we tell them don't ever go in the street. And if the kid ever...

26:43

And first of all, what does the kid do then?

26:48

They're going to go in the street because you told them not to, right?

26:53

But there's a good reason for that. And if they did, and I remember one of them did, we'd come back and say, don't go in the street. Now, we weren't going to punish them harshly. But this is for their good. This is for their protection. They don't understand why. But as parents, we know why. Because if they get in that street, they could die. I think this is an analogy for the commandments of God that we don't understand. We don't quite know why.

27:18

We have to acknowledge the fact that God is a creator. He is infinite in knowledge and infinite in wisdom and infinite in holiness. And we, are we that? Are we even close to that? No. We're not even a drop of water in the ocean of His infinitude. We have to trust, John is saying, we have to trust the Creator. We have to trust our Heavenly Father that He knows what is right. And when we choose to walk in His ways, we're saying, look, I may not like it. I may not understand it, but I'm going to trust this God.

27:46

who made all the things that I see and I'm gonna walk in His commandment. And that is the assurance. The assurance is that if we do that we will have fellowship with God and with each other. The way that we can be assured, and this is also in the text, if we pull it out from the rest of it, is that we join ourselves with God's people in the church. Part of walking in His way, walking in His fellowship is not just mentally acknowledging the truth, but also being a part of God's people.

28:16

We see this later in chapter 2 and I'll go through this a little more fully. This is the claim that John is making. There are people who left the church because they're saying we don't need church. Chapter 2 verse 19, they went out from us but they were not from us, they left us. For if they had been of us they would have continued with us, but they went out that they might be complained that they were not of us. But you have been anointed by the Holy Spirit and have knowledge.

28:43

Part of the assurance of belonging to God is not simply saying, I believe in God, I believe in His commandments, but I'm not going to go out from His people. I'm going to be a part of His people. I'm going to join myself with God's people. I'm going to be a part of His church. I'm going to listen to the Word preached in red. I'm going to confess my sins in the context of God's people. I'm going to come to His table to receive the Word and sacrament. And this is how you know that you belong to God, is if you do these things.

29:12

That is the promise of assurance. John is very practical. Like, you're going to be imperfect. How do I know that I belong to God? I'm choosing to follow his ways. I've united myself to God's people, and I'm committed to that. And anyone who does those things should not doubt their assurance in the least bit. Perfection is not required. Complete understanding and...

29:35

Even 100% agreement with all the rules is not required, but a submission to God as Creator, and alignment with Him and His people is.

29:46

At the end of that video that I told you about, it get to an interesting place. The student had just said, you know, he didn't believe there was anything objectively wrong with the Holocaust. And in the

video, you can't hear it, but there must have been audible gasp or maybe even some students protesting. You know, his peers were like, no, no, no, no, we're not going that far. Because the student, he then said, oh, obviously for clarity, I obviously think the Holocaust was wrong.

30:13

He had to defend himself in the midst of his peers. If anyone's questioning, but the presenter said this, it's just your opinion. I believe that it's objectively wrong because it transcends opinion. And this is what the student replied. Yeah, obviously it would be awesome if I had a moral code that everyone had and agreed to follow, if only. If only there was one.

30:42

If only there was a moral code that came from a Creator that everyone agreed to follow. This is essentially what John is saying. God is light, in Him there is no darkness. We're going to have sin. We deal with our sin through confessing our sin. The blood of Christ, our advocate, is applied to us. And we agree to follow in submission of our Creator, in submission of His commandments, in submission of His ways, in fellowship with His people.

31:11

And that is the way to eternal life. That is the way we will abide to eternal life, a place where there will be no more suffering, no more pain, no more death, and no more crying anymore. Let's pray. Thank you for listening to this week's podcast. Please rate and review us on your podcast service and share with anyone who may be interested. The intro and outro music for the New Life podcast is provided by Sandra McCracken with your permission.

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please visit her website at sandra mccracken.com. We'll see you next week.