

Evening service - Rev. Iain Macritchie

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Date: 09 January 2022

Preacher: Rev. Iain MacRitchie

[0 : 0 0] And especially, friends, if we could consider just for a short time this evening the words that we have in verses 1 and 2. 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 a propitiation for our sins, and not only for ours, but also for the sins of the whole world. There's something in our human nature that leads us to like a good trial.

There's something in the heart of men and women that love to see justice done. And we see this particularly in recent history, as many different trials have been televised.

For example, in 1979, some of you may remember this, in America, over 100 million people tuned in to the trial of the accused murderer, Ted Bundy.

There seems to be a real sense of enjoyment to be found in weighing up the evidence and somehow coming to our own particular conclusions about any case. And so we like to listen in. We like to see what people have to say, the evidence that's given. And we like to come to our own conclusions. We like to think that we know what the outcome of a certain case should be.

Dear friends, as we come around verses 1 and 2 of the first letter of John, the second chapter, we find this evening that we see a trial. But this is a different kind of trial, perhaps, to the ones that you have seen on television. Because tonight, instead of us being spectators of a trial, what we find is we find ourselves in a courtroom right there in the very thick of things.

[2 : 2 6] And in fact, more than that, not only do we find ourselves in a courtroom, but all of us gathered in here tonight, myself included, everybody in this whole district of Barvis, and everybody else in this whole world find themselves on trial. And what I'd like us to do is to consider this courtroom scene.

It's a scene that's perhaps not comfortable to us when we find ourselves at the center of it. But as we come to this courtroom scene, I'd like us to hang our thoughts on three headings.

Firstly, the crime that we have committed. Secondly, the courtroom representation. And thirdly, the conclusion of the matter. The crime, the courtroom, and the conclusion.

Firstly then, let's look at the crime. Let's look tonight at why mankind is on trial. Let's look at the crime that we're all guilty of having committed. Now, to really understand where John is coming from here, we first of all need to look at the context of these verses. Who it is John is writing to and why it is he's writing. This is, of course, the same John who wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Gospel of John, and then later on, the revelation that he received from heaven itself. And here we see that John is writing to believers in the very early church. And these were believers who were beginning to see a dangerous error creeping into the church, a particular sin.

What was it? Well, history tells us that this was an error that is known as Gnosticism. Gnosticism, which basically comes from the Greek word knowledge. It's not a word that I'm sure many of us have heard, but this is a word that speaks of a heresy that is so dangerous that so undermines the whole of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Why was that? Well, Gnostics believed that the physical realm was evil, and the spiritual realm was good. But we might say, okay, not everything that's physical is evil.

[5 : 09] We know that, but we can see where these Gnostics are coming from. We can so easily, can we not, make idols out of physical things? And so perhaps that's the tack they're taking. But it's not.

Because in declaring that everything physical was evil, the logical conclusion for Gnostics was that Jesus himself could not be physical. So that instead of being physical, his very presence on earth was an apparition, that it appeared as if Jesus was physical when in fact he wasn't at all.

And so essentially we can see from a process of elimination as to how they were thinking, we can see that Gnostics were denying the humanity of Christ. And to deny the humanity of Christ was to deny the atonement, and you cannot get much more sinful than that. Of course, we know that the reality is that a physical man had to be a physical man had to atone for the sins of the people. Otherwise, divine justice, it simply couldn't and wouldn't ever be satisfied. And so for Jesus not to have been physically man would have been for him not to have been a true sacrificial lamb because he could not experience the true punishment that sin deserved. He couldn't experience the fullness of the pains of hell itself. So we can see at the outset why this was such a dangerous error that was creeping in, not out with the church, but into the church itself. And like many heresies, this heresy had many different offshoots. And one of the offshoots was this, that many people who subscribed to this doctrine, if you like, they used it to their own sinful advantage. They used it as a loophole, if you like. They used it as an excuse to encourage their own sinful behavior.

They said, well, if everything physical is evil and it's only the spiritual realm that counts, it doesn't really matter what we do in the flesh. We can do whatever we want and it's of no consequence.

Everything physical is of no use anyway, so we might as well make the most of it and we can enjoy the spiritual when it comes. That's why John's writing to these believers.

[8 : 02] And we notice that he doesn't highlight this particular sin explicitly. History tells us about it. But instead what he does is he seeks to encourage these believers by time and time emphasizing the person and the work of Jesus Christ. We see that in verse 1 of chapter 1, that which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, which we have touched with our hands concerning the word of life. He was reminding them that they had physically seen the person of Christ.

And so he writes these words to encourage them, but also to warn them, to make them on their guard, to look out for this heresy that if they weren't careful, they themselves could so easily find themselves embroiled in. That's why he starts off this chapter with these words, my little children, these things I write to you so that you may not sin. So that they may not fall into this error, that they might not fall into that which would undermine their whole faith.

And of course, at this point, we would be forgiven for saying, well, that's okay. That was for the Gnostics. That was a particular problem at a particular time. But you said at the beginning that we are all on trial tonight. Why is it that you say we are all on trial tonight if we're not guilty of this particular sin? Well, the fact is we might not be guilty of this particular sin. We might not be modern day antinomians who would say that because we're now under grace, we can sin all we want. There are those who would call themselves Christians today who would say that because we're under grace, we can sin and it's of no consequence. We don't need to worry about sinning. And we can sin as much as we want and that's just fine. And we might say, well, we're not that. We're not Gnostics.

We're not antinomian. But yet if we look carefully, friends, we see, do we not? We see ourselves in this. Because time and time again, what do we find ourselves doing? You and me with you, we find ourselves gravitating towards sin. There's something about sin that pulls us towards it.

It's a battle. Scripture tells us it's a battle. We're warring against the world, the flesh, and the devil. And we will be until we take our last breath on this earth. We are all guilty of committing sin. But John, he's saying no. He's saying no. Let's not have this light view of sin.

[11 : 16] Let's not excuse ourselves, although we wouldn't perhaps put ourselves under any of these labels of heretical teachings. But nonetheless, let's not excuse ourselves and give ourselves that free pass, that free ticket to flirt with our darling sins and to creep back into them time and time again.

Let's not do that. And of course, at this point, we might say, well, what is sin? What exactly do you mean by sin? When I was a primary school teacher, I would often show the children the word sin.

S-I-N. What is the middle letter of the word sin? Well, it is, of course, I. And I think to sum up sin in a nutshell is to say that sin is concerned only with self. When we live only for ourselves and not for God. Even as Christians, perhaps for a time, when we turn our back on Him and we willfully fall into sin, we are living for the lust of the flesh or the pride of life or whatever it is we allow ourselves to do, and it's all for us. I, I, I. Me, me, me. And of course, the greatest sin of all, which most certainly has I at the center of it is the sin of unbelief. I don't need you, God.

I'm quite sufficient to live a life in my own strength using my own resources, and that's fine. And so you are, and me with you, for so long, until trial comes, until tragedy comes, until uncertainty comes, and what then? And of course, we only have to turn to Romans 6, 12, and 15 to be reminded of this. Therefore, do not let sin reign in your mortal body, Paul says, that you should obey it in its lusts. And then in verse 15, what then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not. And so in response to the heresy of the day, John is, he's making it clear that, that casually allowing ourselves to sin should never ever be our default position. And that's a challenge for all of us. That we look lightly upon it. That we see it as that which is of absolutely no consequence. Yes, we know we are sinners. We cannot deny that.

But friends, our challenge tonight and every other day and night is to pick up our cross and to deny ourselves. Why? Is it so that we can become proud of ourselves? Is it so that we can look upon others who are perhaps falling into a sin that we don't fall into and we can proudly point them in a different direction? Is that why we are to seek to stay away from sin? Certainly not.

[14 : 40] The aim of us at all times fleeing from sin is to become more and more conformed to the glorious image of our sin. So that as we resist the devil. So that as we resist the devil, and we need the grace of God to help us to do so. As we resist the devil, we are giving space to the Lord to chip away at us, to mold and fashion us in that process of progressive sanctification as we become more and more like him.

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. Friends, tonight the bar is set very, very high. A bar that if we're being honest, we can never hope to reach. Perhaps as I speak this evening, your heart is sunk. You're reflecting upon yourself and you look within and you say, that's not me. I'm always falling. I'm always succumbing. I'm always returning to that darling sin.

Where am I in all of this? It's a high bar, that is true. And that's why we find ourselves this evening, and this brings us to our second point, in that courtroom. And as we find ourselves in that courtroom, we are in need of representation.

When we look at this, and as we reflect upon how John speaks and continues to speak to these believers, we have much to give thanks for. Because had John just left it there, my little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. Had he left it there, left this statement hanging, and then had gone straight on to the words of verse 3, we would all leave here this evening deflated, discouraged. We would be quite right to say that somehow God has set us all up to fail.

But he doesn't leave it there, does he? And that's why Calvin says that in these verses, verses 1 and 2, that we have the sum of almost all the gospel. Balance is always key in the Christian life. Extremes are never good or healthy. We must always guard against them. And so, in talking about the law of God and seeking to keep the law of God, we can be so one-sided that we do set the bar so high that people feel they can never attain to it, and so they never come out on the side of the Lord. What we have here is the sum of almost all the gospel. This isn't some cold authoritarian demand that we have from John. We can see that from the words that he used. We can see that he here has the voice of a loving pastor. Just look at how he opens this chapter. Just look at how he refers to these believers, to you and to me also, my little children. My little children. And you know, friends, sometimes it's not what we say, but how we say it that's so crucial, so important. We see that John is in no way holding back from the importance of highlighting the necessity of seeking to flee from sin daily, that we should never give up on that.

[18:57] That is true, of doing all that we can to ensure that we don't fall into sin, not allowing ourselves to be in situations where that might be possible. He makes no bones about that. But he does so in a spirit of love, following his Savior in a spirit of love. My little children. How often is advice not heeded, not perhaps because of what the advice is, but because of the tone that it's given in, a condescending tone, a proud tone, an angry tone, an arrogant tone, a tone that doesn't lend itself to be received graciously, because the tone often reflects the heart of the giver. What are we reminded in Colossians 4? To let your speech always be seasoned? Sorry, let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt. It's not what we say. It's how we say it. So when the recipients of this epistle would have read this epistle, they would, this letter, they would no doubt have received it in the spirit that it was given. My little children. This is someone who cares for us. This is someone who desires that which is for our good. This is someone who longs to see us on the right path. But not only that, because as well as showing that the relationship that he has with these believers in Christ, he also reminds them with that pastoral heart. That although this ideal to try and not sin and to try and strive to resist the devil daily so that he will flee from them, although that's what we aim for, John shows us, he shows the early church believers. And he enables us to see that he realizes that we fall so short. We fall so short. Just look at these words. But if anyone does sin. But if anyone does sin. What is that saying to us? Is it saying, well, you're not to sin, you're not to sin, but there's a possibility that you could sin? Is that what it's saying? That could cause all kinds of confusion and discouragement. It would lead us to think that somehow there's a level of sinlessness that we can attain to in this world. And that, of course, in and of itself is a different heresy. But what we see in the Greek is that the Greek verb for this, it conveys the likelihood that this will happen. In other words, this could say, and if anyone sins, and they will, if anyone sins, and they will, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous. In other words, yes, we are to strive to keep the law. That is true. But we're not under the law. We're not governed by the law. And we see that here, and this brings us to our second point, that because of this, we have this courtroom representation. We have an advocate with the Father.

Father. This is the scene. God tonight is the judge. You and I, we are on trial for our sins, whatever they may be. They are numerous in number. The sins of omission, the things that we don't do, that we should do. The sins of commission, the things that we do do, that we shouldn't do. The sins in our thoughts, in our words, in our actions. The sins that even as we've come into this very building tonight, we have undoubtedly committed, we are guilty before a holy God. And so we find ourselves in this courtroom. We're on trial. And the question tonight is, do we stand a chance? Do you stand a chance? Do I stand a chance? Do we come before God Almighty? Well, that depends, does it not? It depends on whether we have, as it were, a suitable defense lawyer. Or if we come representing ourselves.

You see, John here reminds these believers, and you and me, for in Christ tonight, that we're not representing ourselves. This is the gospel. That instead, we have an advocate. Specifically, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous. So here we are in the courtroom. God is a judge. We are on trial. And we have the advocate by our side. What does the word advocate mean?

Well, literally, in the Greek, it means to come alongside. And it's interesting, in Greek law, if you were accused of a crime, what you would do is you would ask your best friend to be your lawyer.

You would ask your best friend to be your advocate. And so the fact that a friend was appearing with you or speaking for you was proof of true and deep friendship. What do we read here? We have an advocate with the Father. And so in layman's terms, John is saying this means that we have a lawyer. We have Jesus Christ, the righteous. He is the one that is pleading our case at the bar of God's divine justice.

[25 : 29] He is the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the friend of sinners. He is the friend that sticks closer than any brother. He is the best friend of every and any believer. And he appears on behalf of each and every one. But we might ask the question, what does he say? What does Jesus Christ say in you and my defense? What can he possibly say to defend us? Well, the reality is there is no defense.

There are no words that could ever possibly satisfy the justice, the divine justice of God. There's nothing that the Lord Jesus Christ could say that would make our sin acceptable in the eyes of a God that is of pure eyes to behold iniquity. And so are we tonight a lost cause? Well, of course not.

that's the action. But we're not. Because actions speak louder than words. And the action in question we see in verse 2, he is the propitiation for our sins. That's the action. He is the propitiation for our sins.

Now, propitiation is a word that is not commonly used in, well, it's never really used in everyday language. But it literally means to appease. I don't know if you've ever upset somebody. I'm sure you have. I know I have plenty times. You've maybe hurt someone. You've angered someone. And you've regretted it.

You'd wished you hadn't done something or said something or acted or reacted in a certain kind of way. And you know that because of your actions, your relationship with that other person has been fractured in some way. But you really want to restore that relationship. You're sorry that you did such a thing. You want to make things better. And so what do you do? Well, you might give a gift. You might give a peace offering, even if it's just in the form of the peace offering of a sincere apology. So that you and that person, when that peace offering is given, you are reconciled. Friends, tonight by nature, not by grace, not by grace, but by nature, we are estranged from God because we are sinners. We know that. That's why we find ourselves in this courthouse tonight. But not only is Jesus Christ our advocate, unlike any lawyer that you'll ever find in this world, he is also our propitiation. He is also our gift offering. He is the one who was given to die so that we might live. And in this gift offering, what has he done? He has appeased the wrath of God towards sinners. That fractured relationship between sinful mankind and sinful mankind and God. It's been fixed, not by us, but by him. The one who is making daily, continual intercession on our behalf. Have you ever wondered exactly what that means, to make continual intercession on our behalf? Well, friends, the reality is that redemption, it's been accomplished on the cross. That is true. But it is continually being applied at the right hand of the Father. That is propitiation. It's being applied on your behalf and mine if we are his. Joel Beakey says this, speaking about the Lord Jesus. He says, in essence, he shows his pierced hands and feet and wounded side and says as it were, Father, I have paid the price of their sin. These marks testify that I have suffered the wrath and judgment that their sin deserved. His very presence is an act of intercession.

[30 : 32] We read in Revelation that John sees a lamb that was slain. Could this be referring to the Lord Jesus Christ? With the wounds on his wrists? Portraying that sacrificial act of love that was wrought for sinners like you and me? Why not? Now, as a side, we must pause. I'm conscious that we're perhaps portraying God the Father in an unhelpful light. We know that God is a God of justice and a God of wrath to unrepentant sinners. That is true. That is fact. We will not gloss over that in any way.

But because of this, again, being mindful and careful of extremes, there's a temptation to think that somehow God the Father grudgingly lets us know him through Jesus Christ. That somehow Jesus has rushed to our defense. He's pleading on our behalf as someone who is almost pathetic.

That a loving son wins over a reluctant father. That's not what Scripture says. We only need to turn to the familiar words of John 3, 16 to remind ourselves of that. What do we read?

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, his only begotten son, so that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. Christ is the Father's gift to the world. He's a peace offering to the world. Which brings us to the last part of verse 2 and our third and very, very brief final point, the conclusion of the matter. He is a propitiation for our sins and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world. What does this mean?

Does this tonight mean that the death of Jesus covered the sins of every single person that has and will ever walk the face of this earth? Is that what it means?

[33 : 14] Well, if it did mean that, it would be a propitiation for everybody. And Christ would be at the right hand of the Father interceding for everybody so that everybody would be saved.

That, of course, is what some believe. That is what is known as the doctrine of universal atonement, another heresy. But that's not what John here means.

He doesn't refer here to a universal belief in Christ as Savior. How we would love to see that.

That is the desire of every minister of the gospel, of every Christian, no doubt, that every man and woman, boy and girl, would come to know the Lord Jesus Christ.

But the reality is they won't. Because they don't want to. The whole world here, it refers to the sacrifice that Christ made, not just for Jews or for this small group of first century believers, but for people who would believe of every tribe, every tongue, and every nation throughout all of time.

[34 : 43] John Murray, Professor John Murray called it the ethnic universalism of the gospel. The ethnic universalism of the gospel.

That the gospel is for everyone. I think I touched on this the last time I was here. It knows no bounds. That those for who Christ died for would be spread throughout the whole of the nations.

That's something. So there you have it. Time is gone. The standard is set.

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. The standard has been set. But so too has the net been set.

That net, dear converted friend, that is there tonight to catch you. To catch you so that when you fall, the conclusion of the matter is this, that you are safe in the arms of Jesus and you need not despair.

[35 : 53] Not as an excuse to fall and to sin. Certainly not. But fall and sin you will and you do and me with you. The net is set.

The net of the righteousness of God in Christ, in whom tonight and every other day and night, if we are his, we have an advocate.

We have that safety and that security that cannot be gained from anything or anyone in this world. And because of this, because of this, and remember this, never forget it.

Nobody, not one, can bring a charge against God's elect. Yes, you might be accused of many different things in this world.

And some of them quite rightly so. But nobody can accuse you in front of God the Father because you have an advocate.

[36 : 57] In Jesus Christ the righteous. You know, the more we reflect on the wonder of this doctrine of propitiation, the more that we will strive, will we not, after that renewed obedience, the more that we will seek to turn our back upon sin.

As we think upon the magnitude of exactly what is taking place and what has taken place on our behalf, we deserve hell.

Eternal hell and damnation is what we all deserve by nature. Not a popular thing to say these days, but it's a truth. Not my words, the words of the Lord himself.

That is what we deserve. But yet through this glorious doctrine of propitiation, that gift offering, we have, do we not, access to the joy of the Lord as being our strength.

Before we close, friends, just allow me to speak. I don't know your hearts tonight. I know some of you. I don't know all of you.

[38 : 13] I don't know who's watching online. There may be some who are yet to call Jesus Father, Friend and Savior.

Can I, in love, challenge you with this question? What is the conclusion of the matter for you?

You're a sinner. That's your crime and mine with you. God is your judge. And no matter what divine justice, it must, it simply must be satisfied.

But tonight, if you were to meet with God, and you could, our communities tell us that every day as we hear the unexpected voice coming into our midst just like that, with no warning.

If you were to meet, and I'm not saying this to frighten anyone, but this is the truth. This is the reality. If you were to meet God face to face, how could you plead your case?

[39 : 31] What could you say to Him? Do you have an advocate tonight? Or are you relying on yourself?

I did this and I did that, and oh, I remember I did the next thing. That won't wash. It won't wash for any of us. We need the Lord Jesus Christ.

And that is the undeniable beauty of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Because unlike most other world religions, religions that do what?

They call us to achieve a certain level. And when we achieve a certain level, then and only then will we be right with God.

And never, ever do people get to that level. That's how the whole Reformation broke out. Never do they get to that level.

[40 : 31] Because it's unattainable. The beauty of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and that's why I commend Christ wholeheartedly to you this evening, is that it's a gospel in which God does not hang us out to dry.

He doesn't leave us to ourselves. He offers to us tonight Christ as our advocate, as our propitiation, as our Father, as our Savior, as our friend.

if you want Him. Do you want Him? Do you want Him?

Do you really and truly want Him? Well, if you do, please, please, please, you come to Him. What's stopping you?

Tell me what in this world could possibly stop you from coming and putting your trust in a Savior. What's stopping you from putting your trust in the only one who can ever, ever stand before you and between you and the justice of God.

[41 : 54] You come to Him tonight. Come to Him even with that prayer that I mentioned earlier. Lord, have mercy upon me, a sinner. And if you come to Him, I promise you, I promise you that if you come to Him and you truly want to know Him as your Savior, you will know Him.

And you will never, ever regret it. Not only for time, but especially for eternity. Let us pray. Lord, our God, we pray that your Holy Spirit might be pleased this evening hour to apply your word.

We confess that we desire so much to see our dear friends come and taste and see that God is good, but you are the God of salvation.

And tonight, Jesus of Nazareth has once again been passing by in the gospel. We pray that you may have stopped in the hearts of even one dear soul who has been gathered around your word, that this would be the night where they too would be brought from that place of bondage and slavery to the world, a world dictating dictating what we should do and what we should like and how we should live.

And that we would know that freedom and that liberty and above all else, that joy that is to be found in being able to call you our Father.

[43 : 33] Go with us then, we pray, and forgive us for Jesus' sake. Amen. Well, friends, we can conclude our time of worship singing to God's praise from Psalm 36.

Again in the Scottish Psalter. Psalm 36, reading at verse 5 of the Psalm. Thy mercy, Lord, is in the heavens.

Thy truth doth reach the clouds. Thy justice is like mountains great. Thy judgments deep as floods. Lord, thou preservest man and beast.

How precious is thy grace. Therefore, in shadow of thy wings, men's sons, their thrust shall place. We'll sing down to the end of the verse, Mark 9, to the praise of God, standing to sing, Thy mercy, Lord, is in the heavens.

Thy mercy, Lord, with the heavens. Thy mercy, Lord, is in the heavens.

[44 : 39] Thy truth doth reach the clouds. Thy justice is like mountains great.

Thy judgments be must pass. Lord, Lord, thou three servants, the heavens, and the heavens, and precious is thy grace.

Therefore, in shadow of thy wings, and suns, and suns, their drops shall miss.

They will, the mountains of thy earth, shall be well satisfied.

From rivers of thy flesh, your star will bring to them provide.

[46 : 10] The cross of life, the covenant you, remains an old regime.

Until the purest light or light, we clearly light shall see.