

## **SHREDDING THE PAST**

**1 John 1:8-2:2**

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Most all of you remember the story of Bernie Madoff who, literally, “made off” with all of his clients’ money. He was running a Ponzi scheme, a shell game. Collecting money from a lot of folks. Paying back a few folks to fool all folks. And putting a lot of dollars in his pocket.

As the FBI was closing in on his case, Madoff ordered 50 boxes of documents to be taken from his Manhattan offices to a warehouse in Queens, where they were shredded. It was a massive shredding operation.

The FBI agent on the case, Keith Kelly, said apparently Madoff planned to destroy all the evidence.

What was in those 50 boxes? Even the FBI couldn’t put them back together. “We don’t know. We never found out,” said the FBI. In fact, Kelly said this case was so document intensive that, had Bernie shredded more, “the case against him would have been very, very difficult.”

When Madoff confessed to his sons that the financial house of cards was about to fall, he asked his sons to go to the authorities in one week – but first he needed time to tie up some loose ends. Madoff’s sons, however, ignored their father’s request and went immediately to the FBI. The FBI agents arrived on the 17th floor as Madoff’s men were in the midst of a massive shredding operation.

Madoff, at the time, had \$600 million in the bank. (Brian Ross and Rhonda Schwartz, “Exclusive: Bernie Madoff’s Secret Plan to Destroy the Ponzie Evidence,” ABC News Live, 2/4/2016)

Madoff “made off” with all the money, but, because of botched timing by his boys, didn’t get to shred all the evidence.

When someone says “there’s not a shred of evidence” it means that the finger prints can’t be found and there aren’t any cookie crumbs on the kid’s face. There is nothing to tie someone to the crime or cookie.

Which raises the question: Are there any official guidelines for how to shred the evidence so that there is not a shred of evidence left?

HIPAA and other guidelines say that when shredding personal documents, they must be shredded in small enough pieces so that the documents cannot be put back together again. You’ve got to be careful. The confetti at the 2012 Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade in New York was made out of confidential police documents that had been shredded but were not small enough, leading some

people to be able to piece the personal information back together again. In fact, there is even computer software that can be used to put the messages back together when scanning the shredded pieces. (<https://privacyguidance.com/blog/if-theres-a-shred-of-evidence-its-not-shredded/>)

So you'd better check your shredder. I checked the church's shredder this week, and you need one that not only shreds long-ways, but cross-ways as well. Ours does, so that puny pieces cannot be restored.

The California Civil Code, SB 1386 Civil Code Section 1798.81 says "A business shall take all reasonable steps to destroy, or arrange for the destruction of a customer's records within its custody or control containing personal information which is no longer to be retained by the business by (1) shredding, (2) erasing, or (3) otherwise modifying the personal information in those records to make it unreadable through any means." (<https://privacyguidance.com/blog/if-theres-a-shred-of-evidence-its-not-shredded/>)

But how do we get rid of, how do we shred, how do we destroy the record of our past personal failures?

It would be easiest if we had no past to cover up.

- Do no wrong.
- Always and in every way behave flawlessly.
- Say nothing wrong.
- Never lie.
- Never hurt with words the ones we love.
- Never speak before thinking. Perhaps never speak at all.
- Think nothing wrong.
- Keep our thoughts wholesome, our minds upright, and our imaginations unused.
- Commit no offense or transgression.
- Keep the slate clean.
- Keep the hard drive empty.
- Be perfect like your Father in heaven is perfect (Matthew 5:48).

But that, according to John, is not going to happen.

In John's first letter, he says in 1:5-7 that

"...God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and," he adds, "the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin."

In verse 8 he says,

"If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us."

**I. We have all sinned and we have all gone our own way and not God's way.**

As I share the gospel with children in my office, I'll ask them, "What is sin?" And I want to tell you that of all the theological concepts that our children grasp or do not grasp, sin is the most often misunderstood basic theological concept of the children that I deal with. Our children today see themselves as making mistakes, having accidents or misunderstandings, but willfully and outright sinning against God and God's commandments they don't see as part of their lives. They are caught up in the culture of excuses, the culture of denial.

John says it two different ways in this epistle.

First he says, "If we say we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves."

In this first instance, he says we are lying if we say we have no sin. But notice the construction: to have sin.

"To have" is frequently followed by an abstract noun to represent a general quality, like  
"to have fellowship" (1 John 1:3; 1:6-7),  
"to have joy" (John 17:13; 3 John 4);  
"to have confidence" (John 2:28; 3:12),  
"to have life" (John 3:15; John 5:12).

So for our writer, for the Apostle John to use this construction of "to have" and then attach an abstract quality speaks of a generalness about that quality. So when John says if we say we have no sin, he doesn't mean that we have committed specific acts of sin. In this first instance, he means that we, ourselves, are part of the sinful nature of humanity. It's a quality of our being. An act of principle at work in your life and my life that we have, that we are partakers of the sinful nature of Adam.

Paul said that in Adam we all die. Those to whom John was writing, a schism from the church, were saying that sin doesn't matter because material things don't matter. They thought sin was no big deal because spirit was spirit and flesh was flesh. But John is saying we all have this nature to sin, and it makes a difference.

In verse 10 he says it another way. More specific now, he's not talking about the nature but about specific acts of sin. "If we say we have not sinned..."

Someone is about to object. "Why do I need to confess my sins," as he said in verse 9. "I haven't sinned. What have I done?"

But John is saying here that not only do we have a sinful nature, like he has espoused in verse 8, but in verse 10 he is saying we have specific acts of sins – each and every one of us. In verse 8 he says if we say we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. We are self-deceived if we say we don't have Adam's sinful nature. Then he says in verse 10 if we say we have not sinned, then we are making God to be a liar first of all, and second of all His word is not in us.

The idea that sin is universal is an old and broad one.

- It says in 1 Kings 8:46, "...there is no man who does not sin."
- Psalm 14:3 says, "They have all turned aside, together they have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one."
- Proverbs 20:9 says, "Who can say, 'I have cleansed my heart, I am pure from my sin?'" The implication, of course, is that no one can say that.
- Ecclesiastes 7:20 says, "Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins." There is not anybody like that – anybody who doesn't sin.
- Isaiah 53:6 says, "All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way...."
- Perhaps Paul says it best in Romans 3:23, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." There is no distinction in humanity, he says, because everybody has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

We've all sinned. We make God to be a liar when we say we haven't sinned, because God's verdict is that we are all guilty, we have all sinned. And when we claim to be sinless, the gospel, the Word of God, is not in us. The proclamation about the Word – that is, Christ – is not in us.

In one survey, only 57 percent of those questioned believe that all people are sinful, and a full one-third say that they may make mistakes but they, themselves, are not sinful. One respondent put it this way, "The day I die, I should only have to look up at my Maker and say, 'Take me,' not 'Forgive me.'"

There is absolutely one thing I'm certain about and that is this morning I am speaking to thousands of sinners. In fact, let me put it more clearly. I am one sinner speaking to thousands of other sinners.

There is not a person here in this sanctuary who does not know sin. You know the nature of sin, and you know also specific acts of sin. There is not a person listening in their home by way of television (radio) – of the thousands listening there is not a one of you that is not a sinner.

You and I are alike. We participate with all of humanity in saying, as Paul said, "We have all sinned and come short of the glory of God." And if we say we have no sin, the truth is not in us. And we are making God out to be a liar, for God says we have all sinned.

We are all identical. We are all sinners. We all are filled with greed and lust, lies, deception, pride, gluttony, laziness, hate for our brother or sister of humanity. I don't know exactly what your sins are, but I know that among the menu there are those that belong to you, there are those that belong to me. For we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

If you're here this morning and you think you're above the rest of us because you haven't sinned, I'm here to tell you right now that God's word says you're just like we are. You, too, have sinned. There is not anyone in here who can hold their head high, throw their shoulders back, as if somehow they were different than we are. We are all exactly alike. We're sinners talking to sinners. We have all sinned.

**II. Not only have we all sinned, we need to confess our sin.**

1 John 1:9. “If we confess our sin...”

Instead of denying our sin, conversely, we need to be honest. We need to confess our sins. When we confess our sins, John says we bring out two of the attributes of God, two qualities of God’s character.

First of all, His faithfulness. It’s the language that is used for God in His relationship with His covenant people, used in relationship with God in His covenant promises.

The first few verses of Psalm 89 say, “I will sing of the lovingkindness of the Lord forever; to all generations I will make known Thy faithfulness with my mouth. For I have said, ‘Lovingkindness will be built up forever; in the heavens You will establish Your faithfulness.’ ‘I have made a Covenant with My chosen.’”

When we confess our sins, we bring into focus the faithfulness of God. His covenant relationship with His people included the forgiveness of their sins when they broke that covenant relationship. He says in Jeremiah 31:34, “I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

Forgiveness is a part of the faithful nature of God – His nature to continue His relationship with His people. If we confess our sins, we bring into focus God’s faithfulness in continuing His relationship with His people.

Secondly, we bring in to focus His righteousness. God wants to be faithful in His relationship to us, but He also, by His very nature, is righteous. Despite our unrighteousness, the thing from which, at the end of verse 9, God cleanses us, despite our unrighteousness God is righteous.

And Jesus is righteous. Look at the end of 1 John 2:1. “Jesus Christ the righteous.”

God is righteous. Jesus is righteous. We are unrighteous. When we confess our sins we are showing that we are not, but that God the Father and Christ are righteous.

So, first of all, we have all sinned. And second of all, we must confess our sins.

### **III. Through Christ we are cleansed from our sins.**

How is it that God can be faithful, that is continue in His relationship with us, and yet be righteous, that is holy, so other than we are? How can He maintain His righteousness?

If God were to say sin is no big affair, then He would be an unrighteous judge. And God, by His nature, cannot be unrighteous. He cannot sweep our sin under the rug. He must deal with our sin if He wants to stay in relationship with us; He must remove that sin so that we can have a continued covenant relationship with Him.

And the only way is through Jesus Christ, His Son.

John says it all the way back in 1 John 1:7. “The blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.” It’s the language of purification. The blood, of course, represents the cross. It is on the cross that we see the righteousness of God – that is, His repulsion at sin. Our sins are on the back of Christ, the Sinless One. He who knew no sin was made to be sin for us. On the cross we see the greatest love of God. He is righteous, and He is punishing all sin – past and future. But He is faithful, and He is doing so to keep relationship with His people.

The blood of Jesus, His Son, cleanses us from all unrighteousness.

John says it again in verse 9. “If we confess, He cleanses us....” See the language again there in verse 9: “If we confess, He forgives....” So if we confess, He both forgives and cleanses.

In 1 John 2:2-3, he says the same thing over again. Christ is the payment for our sins, the propitiation for our sins. He satisfies the account. “I don’t want you to sin,” he says in chapter 2. “But if you do sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the Righteous.”

First of all, to forgive our sins means to let go. Literally it means to release. It is used for the paying of a debt. For an example, look at Luke 7:43. If we confess our sins, because of the death of Christ on the cross Christ considers our sins paid for. We are released from that sin. The debt has been paid.

But not only has our sin been paid for.

We have been cleansed. It is the language of purification, the language of the removing of a stain.

I don’t know what sin haunts you in the past, but I know that, just like Madoff, you can shred away all you want, but you cannot shred away your sins. They are still there. Like the data file that will never be completely deleted – it can always be reconstituted, even so we, ourselves, are not able to get rid of our sins. They seem always to be glued back together.

I don’t know what sin lingers in your past. Adultery? Pride? Selfishness? Gossip? I don’t know. But God knows. And God says if you confess, He forgives and He cleanses.

What’s weighing you down? Is there an abortion in your past? Something you continue to carry with you? Hear the words of John. If we confess, He forgives and He cleanses, and it’s gone.

I have a hard time getting stains out. In fact, I usually do more damage to the fabric than I do good. And I’ve learned that dry cleaners can’t get stains out either. How many ties do I have that are ruined with spots? You send them to the cleaner. You pay the money. And they send them back just as happy as they can be with the same old stain that you sent them there with in the first place. The stains seemingly are always there. We just spread them out and smear them a little more – but they’re there.

Not so with God. He cleanses us from unrighteousness. He removes the stain.

What stain is in your past? A stain of a broken relationship with a son or a daughter? A stain of hate? A stain of envy? A stain of lust? A stain of greed? A stain of disloyalty to a close friend? A stain of theft – stealing someone’s idea, stealing credit from someone, stealing someone’s property? A stain of jealousy? A stain of envy? A stain of deceit?

Oh, they are all there. But if we don’t deny them, if we confess them, then we have an advocate with the Father – Christ Jesus the righteous one, who stands in our place. And then God forgives. And God cleanses. And it’s gone.

This morning, Satan is trying to weigh some of you down, telling you those sins of your past have made you crippled for life. You are free. You are forgiven. You are cleansed.

Confess and be cleansed in Christ.