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Scripture Text: 1 John 1:5-10

Sermon Title: *True Believers: People of the Light*

Manuscript written and sermon preached by Roger Roberts

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Sources cited in this manuscript are listed at the end.

For additional information regarding this manuscript, contact Roger.Roberts@ibcbrussels.org.

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True Believers: People of the Light

Introduction:

Today we continue our series from 1 John which we began with the introductory verses last Sunday. In the introductory words, John reveals his pastoral heart for the churches, to encourage and exhort them to have a heart for others, which is like that of the Lord Jesus, the eternal Word and Son of God. It is this heart for others that motivated John to write this letter, which is designed to help his fellow believers examine the validity of their faith and to gain assurance of their salvation. The apostle will give the tests we must all continue to give ourselves—the tests of right belief in and obedience to Christ and genuine love for our fellow believers.

The text for today begins with verse 5, which expresses perhaps “the main burden of the epistle: the character of God” (Yarbrough, 46). John uses the metaphor of light to describe God’s purity, moral excellence and holiness, a metaphor used for God in the Old Testament and used by John in the introduction to his Gospel (1:4f; 7ff) and by Jesus in his claim to be the Light of the World (8:12; 9:5; 12:46). The point that John will make throughout his first letter is that because God is light, the light that

shone from his Son Jesus, we as his children are called to live in and by that light, reflecting his character by our purity, holiness, integrity and love. Follow as I read these verses about true believers as people of the Light:

Read 1 John 1:5-10.

A week ago this past Friday, on January 13th, the luxury cruise ship, Costa Concordia, carrying 4,200 passengers and crew members, struck a rock that tore into the hull, causing the ship to list to its side and sink into the cold waters off the shore of the Italian island of Giglio. The ship's captain, Francesco Schettino, had evidently deviated from safe passage and ignored signs of dangerous rocks as he skirted the ship close to the island. And when the ship began to take on water and list to its side, he jumped to safety and abandoned his ship and desperate passengers. 11 are known dead and dozens more are still missing, and Schettino faces charges of manslaughter and abandoning the ship http://edition.cnn.com/2012/01/17/travel/cruise-ship-passenger-safety/index.html?hpt=hp_c1. The captain's un-captain-like and even cowardly behavior raises the question: Is Schettino really a captain simply because he's called a captain and wears a captain's uniform? Obviously he "jumped through all the hoops" to become a ship's captain, and he was officially registered as a licensed captain, but does he have the heart of a captain? Certainly in this tragic incident he didn't act like a captain, and he's likely to lose his rank and role as a captain.

John gets to the very heart of his letter by describing the conditions for true discipleship (Smalley, 17). A genuine believer and follower of Jesus Christ is one who reflects the character of God, who is described as pure light, without any darkness at all (5). The apostle alludes to those who have made a false profession of faith in Christ yet who prove to be apostates who have abandoned the true faith. These were evidently Gnostics, who prided themselves as having received some special type of knowledge, and even esoteric spiritual experiences, but who denied the full deity and humanity of Jesus Christ and abandoned the fellowship of the church. Their specious reasoning and godless teaching allowed them to practice "blatant antinomianism," i.e. gross immorality, while claiming spiritual superiority (Stott, 74).

Francesco Schettino may say he's a ship's captain but his actions belie his claim, just as some people, such as those John alludes to, may say they are followers of Jesus, and even spiritually superior to the average, yet their actions say otherwise.

As the great 19th Century London pastor Spurgeon said: "The apostle warns us against *saying* more than we have made our own by experience. He hints at the solemn difference between empty profession and gracious reality. To have fellowship with God is a great matter; but merely to say that we have fellowship with him is a totally different thing. John warns us that if we say that which our characters do not support, we lie. He leaves it just so, without a word of softening or excuse.

Between saying and being, between saying and doing, there may be all the difference in the world” (553).

As a pastor who is careful to detect and rebuke error, warn against false teachers, and exhort his people to take a careful look at the quality of their faith, John gives this description of true believers as people of the light. True believers, first of all...

Have seen the Light

No statement could be more comprehensive than for John to say that the Gospel message is “God is light” (Stott, 70). Light represents God’s absolute holiness and also his complete self-revelation in his Son, Jesus, who came to shed this light as the Light of the World, revealing the perfect character of God. The light of God is the opposite of the spiritual darkness of the false teachings and undisciplined living of those John warns (Comfort, 2141). True believers, on the other hand, have seen the light of God through...

The Light of the World

True believers have by faith seen Jesus Christ, the Light of the World (8:12; 9:5; 12:46). John wrote in his Gospel introduction that John the Baptist, great as he was, was not the light, but came only as a witness to the light (1:8). In fact, later he wrote that John the Baptist was a lamp that momentarily burned and gave for a light as a witness to the true light of Christ (5:35).

Jesus is the light who shows us the very nature and character of the invisible God and has made known to us all that we need to know about God’s holiness and love. And through his sacrificial suffering and death on the cross the light of Christ shone most vividly to impress on us the love of God for us sinners. As Hebrews tells us,

“The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being....” (1:3).

When Jesus revealed himself as the Light of the World he illustrated his claims by giving sight to the physically blind (John 8:12; 9:1ff). He then denounced the willful blindness of those who refused to acknowledge their spiritual blindness and look to him for spiritual sight (9:35-41). Those who belong to the darkness naturally resist the light and prefer, even love the darkness, because their deeds are evil (3:19).

But John knew that true believers are those who have seen the light through the eyes of faith, having trusted Christ as the light of God...

That shines in our hearts

Unlike those who simply gave lip service to the faith and yet whose lives denied true conversion, John knew that the light of God had shone into the hearts of his people,

bringing about a radical and everlasting change. The Apostle Paul corroborated this supernatural experience of faith when he referred to God's creation of physical light as a harbinger of the creation of spiritual light that brings saving faith:

“For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6).

We were dead in our transgressions and sins and were lost in our spiritual blindness (Ephesians 2:1) until God graciously took the initiative toward us. He gave us grace to turn from self and sin and to place our trust in Christ and to begin to follow him as Lord. It's the light of God...

That shows the way of salvation

The way of salvation begins with the awareness of our spiritual lost-ness and blindness and that we by ourselves cannot find our way. This seems to have been the missing element among those false “professors of faith” that separated them from the true possessors of faith—the lack of true repentance of sin and a turning of their lives to God in heartfelt trust and obedience. These Gnostics denied the full deity and humanity of Jesus and trusted in their intellect to give some kind of special knowledge that would get them to “heaven.”

Even so today we have those, inside and outside the church, who rely on their own efforts and their own good works and special knowledge to gain for themselves everlasting life. They simply cannot believe that they depend on a crucified Savior to give them eternal life and a relationship with God.

But the light of God first shows us our spiritual lost-ness and blindness and then shows us our sinfulness. We may not be as sinful as we can possibly be, but we realize that we have in some way failed to live up to God's standard of perfect righteousness. Before a God of perfect holiness and love and before the Savior who died for us on a cross, we realize we are sinners, condemned and deserving only of God's wrath. The Holy Spirit is the one who speaks this to us, and convicts of our sin, God's perfect righteousness and our deserved judgment (John 16:5-11).

God the Light shows us our need and his loving, undeserved provision for our forgiveness, for the total removal of our guilt made possible by Christ's death for us (Hebrews 9, 1 Peter 3:18). We sinners are made clean in the eyes of holy God through the blood of Christ, shed upon the cross for us. By grace alone are we given faith to believe in Christ and trust him for eternal life (Ephesians 2:8f).

Evidently there were those false believers who relied on something other than the message and the light of Christ and God the light. They relied on their own knowledge and insight, but could not see their own spiritual darkness and blindness. Such false belief could never result in true fellowship with God.

There's a vital difference between having knowledge about God and have fellowship with God, which is possible only through a true conversion which comes through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. True believers experience a true conversion that's not just a one-time experience. In fact, as our text tells us, true believers...

Keep walking in the Light

John contrasts those who walk in darkness with the true believers who walk in the light. Darkness is descriptive of spiritual ignorance and moral evil, just as light symbolizes true enlightened understanding (Holy Spirit-enlightened) and moral and ethical purity and integrity. True believers, who have had a life-changing encounter with Christ and have been born of the Spirit and are indwelt by the Spirit, continue to walk in the light ("keep on walking in the light": Robertson, 207), i.e. with the awareness of God's presence and in consistency with his Word and will.

Charles Wesley penned words that express how that, when we see the light, we have a new desire to keep walking in the light as we follow Jesus as Lord:

"Long my imprisoned spirit lay
 Fast bound in sin and nature's night.
 Thine eye diffused a quickening ray:
 I woke—the dungeon flamed with light!
 My chains fell off, my heart was free,
 I rose, went forth, and followed Thee" (from "And Can It Be?" quoted in Boice, 42).

To walk in the light means to live in order to please God, which means...

Enjoying fellowship with God and others

John implies that those who make false claims to their special "salvation" apart from a true relationship with the living God are bereft of true fellowship with God and also are separated from fellowship with God's people. Light has no fellowship with darkness, as Paul writes (2 Corinthians 6:14f). But God's people have a personal love relationship with God and with his people called "koinonia," sharing. We share the life of God within us. The Christ who lives in us naturally and irresistibly loves the Christ in each one of his "little brothers and sisters."

Certainly we are not in this life sinlessly perfect, an idea that John adamantly rejects as heretical. Some of the Gnostic heretics made such claims, even though they often lived in open immorality. Because they separated in their minds the body from the soul, they reasoned that if the soul was saved they were free to do anything they wished in the body, which they erroneously thought was inherently and hopelessly evil (Barker, 311). Even though their lives gave evidence to the contrary, they claimed to be without sin and guilt. John says that such a denial of sin contradicts God himself, in all that he says throughout the Word about the fall and inherent

sinfulness of humankind. Such heretical thinking, John says, accuses God of being a liar, the ultimate sacrilege against God (Yarbrough, 66).

That mindset is shamelessly reflected among some evangelical Christians who have a false sense of security based on a decision they made some years ago. They think their souls are saved, i.e. heaven-bound, because they prayed the ‘sinner’s prayer,’ even though there’s no present evidence of saving grace. Grace that saves is also grace that changes us and brings us into a relationship with Jesus as Lord of our lives. The Holy Spirit who gives rebirth remains within us to transform us more into Christ’s likeness day after day and causes us to love God and love God’s people.

These false pretenders to the faith were without genuine fellowship with God, despite their claims, and thus naturally eschewed fellowship with true believers. That’s why I say that some who claim to be Christians would not enjoy heaven, even if they were permitted into the renewed heaven and earth. They don’t yearn to be with God’s people now, and certainly wouldn’t enjoy an eternity with them, unless their hearts could be changed by grace through their repentance and faith.

The reason true believers enjoy fellowship with God and his people is that we are, by God’s grace...

Enjoying freedom from sin’s power and condemnation

True believers understand that, although we are given new and eternal life in Christ, we still remain in these old, sin-prone bodies and must, till the day we die, contend against our fallen, sinful condition, which Paul often describes as the warring “body of death” (Romans 7:7-25). We don’t fear losing our saving relationship with Christ, but we must guard against the interruption of our sweet fellowship with him. The solution to this interrupted fellowship with Christ and his people is living “in accordance with the Spirit,” being “controlled by the Spirit” (Romans 8:1-11).

John gives us this great assurance of unbroken fellowship if we practice the necessary regular act of confessing our sins to our holy, loving, faithful and just God (9). True believers have a new nature, with a desire to please God through holy, obedient living, and our hearts are disturbed within us when we grieve the Holy Spirit within us (Ephesians 4:30). If we ever become comfortable with sin, e.g. living outside the will of God and the directives of his Word, it’s time to examine ourselves to be sure we’re truly in the faith (2 Corinthians 13:5) and have not simply “tasted the heavenly gift” (Hebrews 6:4ff) by a spurious profession of faith. Evidently, these false teachers that John alludes to had made an initial declaration of faith but had obviously fallen away (2:19) because there was no lasting work of grace in their lives.

Our assurance of this saving relationship with Christ is because our God is faithful and just, that is, absolutely faithful to his promises and always acts on the basis of

his perfect justice (Verse 9, Comfort, 2141). God's faithfulness and justice are "virtually a single concept," indicating that God responds to his confessing people "in accordance with his nature and his gracious commitment to his people" (Burdick, 1908). God has through the cross of Christ dealt with our sin and removed forever the guilt of those who repent and trust in Christ; thus God is faithful to the covenant established through the cross of Christ, by which he himself paid our sin penalty. Because of the blood (suffering, death and sacrifice) of Christ shed for us, our penalty for sin has been forever paid (Hebrews 9:11-28). Through the cross, God was just in his judgment of sin) and also is the justifier of all who believe in Jesus (Romans 3:26). The promise of God's faithfulness and justice points to the cross (Stott, 77f), and is also a way of reminding us "that God is light and love" (Burdick, 312).

God's forgiveness is faithful, free and absolutely assured, but it's not cheap and we must receive it with gratitude when we humbly repent, that is, agree with God about our sin, and "say the same thing" about our sin that God says through the Word and the Spirit (Wiersbe, 38). When we confess our sin and receive God's gracious forgiveness we then desire to gain victory over the power of sin in our lives. Just as the cross of Christ frees us from sin's condemnation, the cross and the resurrection of Christ give us power to live the cruciform life in victory and holiness (Romans 6:4; 2 Corinthians 5:17). Just as the old, unconverted sinful nature shuns the light in favor of spiritual darkness (John 3:19f), the true believer enjoys and rejoices in fellowship with God and his people that comes through his forgiveness and cleansing.

True believers, who have fallen into sin and have lost the joy of salvation by interrupted fellowship, have a deep longing to be restored. And, as an old friend of mine used to say, when in that condition we're never farther from God's fellowship than 1 John 1:9. We simply agree with God, ask for ("keep on confessing," Robertson, 208) and receive his faithful forgiveness.

Jesus symbolized this ongoing need for regular forgiveness when he washed the disciples' feet. As Jesus told Peter, we are already clean and don't need a bath, that is, another conversion, which is a one-time experience. We need only the washing of our feet, i.e. cleansing of the sin that has disturbed our peace and fellowship (John 13:1-17, esp. 10; Yarbrough, 67). In the Model Prayer Jesus gave his disciples he taught us to pray, "Forgive us our sins" (Matthew 6:12, Luke 11:14, *NLT*), knowing we would need the daily cleansing of our sins.

True believers know how to guide the ship's course and avoid the perilous rocks, sins, that threaten to cause spiritual shipwreck (1 Timothy 1:19), and also how to keep on the right course of faithful living, avoiding spiritual harm to ourselves and others. And our text certainly implies that we continue walking in the light as we are engaged in...

Enlarging the sphere of the Light

“According to John Jesus identified himself as the light of the world (Jn. 8:12; 9:5; cf. 12:35f, 46), and Matthew tells us how he commanded his disciples to take up the same role” (Marshall, 109). True believers will reflect the light so others may see. This was obviously John’s purpose in our text. He writes that the message (aggelia) he received he now “messages” (anagellomen), or declares, to us (5, Robertson, 206). Knowing the light necessarily involves reflecting that light in a world of darkness. True believers are ready, willing and hopefully eager to share the light through life and words at every opportunity the Lord gives us.

We hear often about the spiritual darkness of Belgium. But the light shines brightest and is most evident in the deepest darkness, and that includes the darkness of your family, among your friends, in your workplace, classroom, or village and neighborhood.

“A picture of this comes from Robert Louis Stevenson, the author of *Treasure Island*, who lived in 19th century Scotland. As a boy, his family lived on a hillside overlooking a small town. Robert was intrigued by the work of the old lamplighters who went about with a ladder and a torch, lighting the street lights for the night. One evening, as Robert stood watching with fascination, his parents asked him ‘Robert, what in the world are you looking at out there? With great excitement he exclaimed: ‘Look at that man! He’s punching holes in the darkness!’” Justin Holcomb continues: “With that one statement, Robert Louis Stevenson summed up Jesus’ miracle and teaching on spiritual blindness. Jesus came into this world and accomplished many great and miraculous wonders, yet his primary purpose was to punch great gaping holes in the darkness that shrouds us. He came to be the light to the entire world—he came to punch holes in our darkness”

<http://theresurgence.com/2010/01/13/punching-holes-in-the-darkness>

But we too are the light of the world, and we’re called to join Christ in punching holes in the darkness around us. Together, as God’s people, his missional church, we’re called to enlarge the sphere of light around us as we individually and together punch holes in the darkness.

Conclusion:

True believers are people of the light, who have seen the light and continue to walk in the light. Our IBC vision is to glorify God by fulfilling the Great Commandment to love God and others and the Great Commission, to make disciples at home and beyond. This means we answer the call to be true believers, who’ve seen the light and who keep on walking in the light.

May the world never see us veering from God's course given us by the Word and the Spirit, endangering our lives as well as those on board with us. May we prove, by our actions and not by empty, cheap and hypocritical words, that we are true believers, that we have met the supreme Admiral and Lord of the ship of faith and have been trained by him and are steering the ship with his hand upon us.

We pray for Captain Schettino, that his life, by a just confrontation with the evidence against him and a sincere desire to somehow express his regret and even repentance, might be redeemed and possibly even eventually be restored to the command of a ship someday. By the grace of God he might be forgiven, restored and become a true captain, not just in name but in function and in truth.

At the close of his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns against the danger of relying on empty words and even outward, impressive deeds to pass the judgment of God. The only and the essential requirement for entering the Kingdom is a life-changing relationship with Christ that transforms our character to reflect God's character of light (Matthew 7:15-23).

May every one of us here today, by the grace of God, become true people of God, his being saved people of the light.

Today I challenge you to examine yourself before God and to make your calling and election sure, to "work hard to prove that you really are among those God has called and chosen" (2 Peter 1:10, *NLT*). We demonstrate we belong to the light by reflecting the character of the light, through true holiness and love for God and his people. We're not perfect but we are people who have seen the light, are being transformed by the light, and are walking in step with the light, who can be seen in us and whose Word can be heard from us.

Before we rise to sing, let's spend some quiet time before the Lord, asking him to search us and reveal to us the true condition of our hearts (Psalm 139:23f), whether or not we are his true believers. The other elders and I will be available to pray with you before you leave this worship center today. I pray we will all be able to leave this place knowing we are all, by his grace, God's people of the light,

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. What do you think is symbolized by the metaphor of light as a description of the character of God?
2. Conversely, what do you think the symbol of darkness represents?

3. What do you think is meant by having fellowship with God? With his people? What would you say John thinks is necessary in order to have this fellowship with God and with his people?
4. What is the difference between fellowship with God and a relationship with God? Would you agree that your fellowship with God can be interrupted by sin but that your relationship with God is eternal? Explain.
5. Hebrews 6:4ff indicates the possibility of having a spiritual experience that does not result in an eternal relationship with God, which seems to describe the false teachers John is addressing. What is the basis of assurance of a saving relationship with Christ?
6. What is your calling to share and spread the sphere of God's light, according to Matthew 5:14-16?
7. Spend some time in personal reflection about your relationship with Christ, and whether there is a need to restore your fellowship with God and to renew your commitment to let the light of Christ shine through you.

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