

Walking With due Care and Attention

1Jn 4:1-6

I. Intro:

John's first epistle guides us how we should walk before God in this life and how, as we walk, we should map out our lives in a wise, God-pleasing way. He does this not by giving believers detailed instructions for every circumstance of life, but by providing broad principles that they have to learn to apply as they journey to the Celestial City. Our walk encompasses our whole way of life: our direction and decisions, attitudes and actions – virtually everything about us. Our walk before God is so important that it requires our constant attention as believers, which is why Paul says: “Look carefully how you walk – not as unwise but as wise...(Eph 5:15); and “walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (Eph 4:1) (ESV).

Incidentally, notice that in these verses, the NIV translates the word ‘walk’ as ‘live.’ This is fine, but the NIV is not consistent in its translation, for in chapter one of 1 John, it has “walk in the light...” And that is the same Greek word, which means ‘to walk.’ It's what gives us the little-used English word ‘peripatetic’ or ‘walking about.’ This is one reason that the NIV is not as helpful for Bible studies as the more literal ESV when you are doing a word study, for in the NIV, the same Greek word may have different translations for no apparent reason.

We need to take care how we walk spiritually just as we do physically, because walking can be hazardous to your health if you are not alert. Recently, I was saddened to hear that a Philippine Christian who attended my church and my Bible study was tragically killed in Bangkok as he crossed a busy road. Bangkok is definitely hazardous for pedestrians.

And there are other hazards apart from traffic that we need to be careful of. Nowadays, with the huge popularity of mobile phones, people are having more accidents, so I am reliably informed, because, being distracted, they keep bumping into things. And in Thailand, I've noticed after lengthy observation that Thais tend to walk a little differently to farang. For instance, I have often seen Thais walking in one direction and looking in another direction at something that has caught their eye. That is not typical of farang, who tend to stop and look. Walking in one direction but looking in another can be dangerous, as you don't know who or what you will bump into. It is equally dangerous in the spiritual realm. It is much safer if we keep our eyes fixed on where we are headed.

In his epistle, John warns believers to be alert to the danger of false teaching affecting their walk. He talks about those who have left the church because of this teaching. Typically, this teaching denied that Jesus had come in the flesh. It was an early form of Gnosticism, a teaching that added all kinds of myths and distorted teaching to the gospel. For instance, Cerinthus, a leading false teacher, in the first century, held that Jesus was not God and man in one person but simply a man who was inhabited by the Son of God and the Son left him

before he died on the Cross. Such teaching needed a warning label, and John supplies it, telling the believers “not to believe every spirit” but to test the spirits to see whether they come from God. They are not to accept whatever they hear from the pulpit but test it rigorously to determine its validity.

John goes further in our text and says such teaching is that of the “anti-Christ,” the spirit that inspires such teachers and seeks to undermine the pure gospel of the grace of God. In other words, we don’t have to worry so much about the numbers “666” appearing but about distorted teaching and practice regarding the gospel and the trinity.

Now, it may be that you and I are not in direct danger of such teaching today as John’s readers were. However, distorted teaching is all around us and we still need to take care. This is in line with Paul’s teaching in Eph 4, where he tells us not to be blown about by every “wind of doctrine....” (Eph 4:14). In addition, we must be aware that people can both add to and take away from the Word of God (Rev 22). This can happen through neglect and it can happen through ignorance. So we must always be alert.

II Beware of the Dogs

I’ve noticed that a man who takes a daily walk around my estate always carries a big stick. That’s to fend off any unfriendly dogs that might be around. There is a spiritual application for this, for Paul warns Christians in Corinth to “beware of the dogs; beware of evil workers.” (Phil 3:2). Who were the dogs that needed to be fended off? The circumcision party in the Church, those who insisted that the Gentiles needed to be circumcised and follow Jewish practice based on the Mosaic law to be Christians. In Paul’s eyes, such teaching directly opposed and undermined the gospel of the grace of God. The teachers of this doctrine were the “dogs.”

But do we need to beware of such dogs today? Perhaps not, but we do need to beware of what they stand for, which is any form of Christianity that veers away from salvation through the grace and forgiveness of Christ and introduces the idea of works and merit. Christianity is a unique religion because salvation is entirely God-given (Eph 2:8), with nothing that the believer needs to do except repent and believe the gospel. We must remember that all other major religions require the believer to do certain things. They have to follow certain practices and perform various meritorious rites and deeds to attain salvation. For example, they have to pray in a certain way and at certain times; or they have to cleanse themselves with water, offer sacrifices, abstain from certain foods, go on a pilgrimage, or fast, etc. The emphasis is on gaining merit or acceptance through so-called good works and certain religious rites.

The word ‘merit’ seems a harmless enough word in itself and Paul says that all the pious practices related to it have an appearance of “wisdom” (Col 2:23). But appearances can be deceptive, for in fact ‘merit’ represents all that is diametrically opposite to the gospel; it’s a word that has satanic approval, for it totally opposes the free grace of God offered through Jesus. It sets up man as the source of salvation. Merit is a tool in the tool bag of the antichrist.

Are you and I under attack from works-based teaching? Maybe not directly, but we do have to constantly struggle against the majority view in the world; we are in a contra-flow lane, with all other religions heading in the other direction. And we have to struggle against our own inherent tendency to fall back on our own and doing certain things as the basis of our salvation.

III Beware of the Sink Hole

Another hazard for walkers is holes, which appear in all kinds of places and sizes. The other day, I saw on the news a VDO clip of a woman walking along a pavement who suddenly found herself falling into a large sink hole that opened up beneath her feet. Fortunately, she was soon pulled out. Sink holes seem to be more common recently, swallowing up cars and houses. Pedestrians have to keep well clear of such areas.

In the spiritual realm, it seems to me that there is a sink hole that poses a great hazard to one's faith and life and spiritual pilgrimage. This is the diminishing in the contemporary Church of the doctrine of God. It seems to me that in the modern Church at large, there is a tendency to tone down and diminish what the NT teaches us about God and aspects of his character.

I hope you will agree that for our understanding of God, we need to be as close to the NT as possible; the NT is our standard and foundation. So, if we omit or diminish what the NT teaches about God -- Father, Son, and HS -- then we are not being true to it, which will have serious consequences.

One thing that seems to me to be less emphasized in the Church is the glory of God. In Ephesians one, Paul gives this a clear emphasis, noting three times that all of God's salvation and our lives as believers are to be to 'the praise of his glory.' The great Westminster Confession reflects simply but beautifully this when it states that the whole purpose of man and his life on earth is to "Glorify God and enjoy him forever." What is your purpose and mine on earth? It is to live to God's glory, making sure that he is the end and measure of all that we do and that we submit ourselves to his gracious will as his children.

Our faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior is paramount, of course, but as much as we uplift the Savior, we must remember that in the plan of salvation, it is the Father who sent him to die for us and he raised him up. Our praise for our salvation is therefore always to be directed to the Father through the Son, as our intermediary. All salvation is for the "praise of his glory."

This truth in the Church is I suggest given less prominence than it should be. Cf self But it should not be sidelined; rather, it should saturate all our worship and motivate all that we think and do. As we uplift God in all his glory, majesty, and greatness, so we ourselves will be lifted up to the heights

Another truth about God that appears to be less prominent in the Church at large than it should is that of God as judge. It appears that modern secular man has a great aversion to any talk about God judging anyone for his sin. This is seen as old-fashioned, religious talk that is irrelevant to life today. People do not like the idea of a holy God judging them; they see it as

negative and threatening, and many psychologists tell us that people must not be threatened, coerced, or made to fear. And so, in presenting the gospel, there has been a general downplaying of the idea that God is judge. Talk of judgment and God's wrath is seen as putting people off rather than attracting them to the gospel, and so one very rarely hears mention of the doctrine of judgment in churches – at least, this is my observation. It is not that the Church has ceased to believe in God as judge, but the truth tends to be downplayed and not given prominence.

But uncomfortable as it may be for our modern minds, the judgment of God is all too clear in the NT. Let me read you some verses from Romans that show this. Note that Paul is giving a detailed presentation of the gospel. Here is what he says in 1:18ff and 2:5ff. He says that God's judgment on sin is taking place against sin in this present life and this process will culminate in the final judgment, when everyone will have to give an account of his or her life before God. God's condemnation of sin is unavoidable. Man is made in the image of God and is meant to be like him, not marred by sin, so judgment must fall.

Now these dark clouds of judgment are the necessary backdrop for the presentation of God's salvation through Jesus Christ. It is as these dark clouds are seen as getting nearer and nearer that the gospel is to be preached. Jn 3:16 tells us as much. First the dark clouds of judgment, then the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. That is the order. And we must not diminish or downplay the first because it seems unpalatable or unfashionable.

And one can go further, for along with a downplaying of the judgment of God, one can observe an absence of the Bible's teaching on hell. It is fine to talk about heaven and the blessings of life in the presence of God, but hell seems to have fallen off the radar in the Church. This is understandable. Hell, a place of eternal punishment, is not a pleasant subject; people, even Christians, don't relish it. In fact, there are some Christians who are so-called annihilationists. They accept that heaven is a reality but deny hell, holding that there is no punishment for the unrighteous but mere annihilation, which is a cessation of existence.

Of course, no one likes the idea of eternal punishment and we would all prefer it not to be necessary. But it is clearly taught in the NT. We don't have time to examine this in detail, so let me simply refer to what Jesus taught in Matt 5: 22; 30. The point is that a holy God must judge sin in his creatures. This judgment will be totally just. No one will be in hell who does not deserve to be there. If there is a heaven, there will surely be a hell. We must not be afraid to tell non-believers that this is their dire end without Christ.

Brethren, let us avoid any diminishing of what the Bible tells us about God in our thinking, even when it seems hard to understand and contrary to our own views.

IV Beware of the Slippery Slope

A very well-known hazard if you are out walking is a slippery slope, especially in winter if you live in a cold climate, as I know to my cost. But even wet slopes in a hot climate can cause us to lose our balance.

A slippery slope to beware of in our Christian walk is an inclination in the Church to lessen the cost of discipleship. German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was shot by the Nazis for his alleged involvement in a plot to kill Hitler, called the Church's attention to this in his book the *Cost of Discipleship*, published in 1937. He coined the term "cheap grace." Cheap grace, he said is: "the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline. Communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ." His words still resonate in our days of 'easy-believism.' Because of human weakness, there is always a tendency to go easy on the demands of the Christian life and play up the benefits. One can find a lot of stress in the Church on people's needs being met so they can be self-fulfilled and empowered as people. There is also a stress on becoming successful and wealthy, according to the 'believe and prosper' gospel. Such an emphasis will naturally come at the expense of the call to true discipleship. This is a slippery slope leading us away from the call Jesus gives all his disciples when he says: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me: (Lk 9:23). The call to believers from Jesus is not to success, well-being, self-fulfillment, and material prosperity. The Christian life is not so much about what we gain, but about what we give to the Lord – which is our very selves, all of our being.

As a PR message, Jesus' call is a disaster – it seems to put people off becoming Christians. Who wants to deny themselves and take up a cross? But there is no such thing as cheap grace in the kingdom of God. Grace is costly. It cost the life of the Son of God and it will cost us our very selves.

Let us keep well away from this slippery slope of the Evil One.

V Conclusion

The Bible exhorts us as believers to be constantly on the alert as we make our way to, what Bunyan called, the Celestial City. This is because all around us, there is a great deal that would trip us up, make us fall, and divert us from that which God has for us in this life and beyond. 'Watch out' is a necessary warning.

Brethren, watch out for the "dogs" of works-based religion and any teaching that runs counter to the gospel of grace. Beware of the "sink hole" of a diminished view of God and his attributes. Mind the "slippery slope" of cheap grace and any lowering of the cost of discipleship.

To do this, we must be a "wise as serpents but harmless as doves." We must not be gullible or naïve, but test the spirits, judging everything by God's Word and not being deceived by someone just because he has a charming manner, a big smile, and a Bible in his hand. Much is at stake – the knowledge of God and the gospel itself.

Brethren, look carefully how you walk!