An Advocate with the Father

Text: 1 John 2:1

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Zechariah 3:1-10; Heb 4:14-16; 1 John 1:1-2:2

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 354, 441, 75, 510, 72

Series: Heidelberg Catechism (LD18)

Theme: Whilst forgiveness for sin in Christ is not a reason to keep on sinning, Christians do have, in the ascended Christ, an Advocate who pleads their case before the throne of God – based on the substitutionary atonement of Christ on behalf of God’s people throughout the world.

Proposition: When you stumble in your battle against sin, be comforted by the support of Jesus, who calls you his friend.

**Introduction**

Have you ever let a close friend down badly? Perhaps you have betrayed them, or been untrustworthy, or not done what you promised to do, or else done what is wrong against them. Have you ever experienced remorse, sadness and guilt because of your carelessness, wilfulness and/or lack of love towards those who are dear to you?

Jesus had counted Peter amongst his friends. He said to the disciples gathered in the upper room after Judas Iscariot had left (John 13:30) **“***No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you*” (John 15:15). After Peter denied Christ not once, but three times following his arrest, he realized the magnitude of his failure and Matthew records that “*he went out and wept bitterly*” (Matt 26:75).

For the Christian, letting Christ down is deeply saddening to us. To do so is to disappoint the One who laid down his life for you and who calls you his friend. To let Jesus down is not to be obedient in following your Lord who said, "*If you love me, you will keep my commandments*” (John 14:15). The Apostle John in his first letter, from which our text is taken, echoes these words of Christ when he writes: **“***If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth*” (1 John 1:6).

If we live lives which are characterised by ongoing sin, then we demonstrate that we do not loveJesus and that we are not counted amongst his friends. But also, if we deny the reality that, even though we have been born again, we continue to sin, we are liars and the truth is not in us (1 John 1:8). John is not suggesting that because of God’s grace we are free to keep on wilfully sinning, but he is writing to give comfort and assurance when, like Peter, we do fail. When we let Jesus down badly.

He’s writing to those whom Jesus calls his friends and he’s dealing in our text with the situation where we have been untrustworthy by disobeying God’s Word. John is writing to encourage faithful followers of Jesus whose lives are not free from sin; people like you and me. He says that ‘*we have an advocate with the Father’* (1 John 2:1). The word ‘advocate’ is translated ‘helper’ when used by John in his gospel to describe the role of the Holy Spirit (14:16; 26; 15:26).

Here, the word is used of a helper in a legal setting, like an attorney in a court of law, pleading before the judge and jury the case of someone who has been arrested and charged with a crime. In our New Zealand judicial system, it is possible for a person to represent themselves in court without engaging a professional lawyer to act on their behalf. However, before the divine heavenly court this is not possible for people like you and me.

We’ll see why in our first point:

1. **Our need**

We all need someone to, in the words of HCLD18 A49 ‘plead our cause’ before God. For a person to represent themselves in court they need to attend a hearing in the presence of the judge and, for some trials, a jury. You and I are not able to enter the royal ‘court room’ of God, who is ‘*the judge of all the earth’* (Gen 18:25).

WhenIsaiah had a vision of the holiness of the Lord he said “*Woe is me! For I am lost*” (Isa 6:5). He naturally had no rightful place in the presence of the Almighty. When Ezekiel had a vision of the throne-chariot of God, coming in glorious judgement upon his own rebellious people, he fell on his face (Eze 1:28). He could not naturally stand in the presence of God. In Zechariah’s vision, Joshua the high priest who represented God’s people was not fit to be in the presence of the Lord, being dressed in ‘*filthy garments*’ (Zech 3:3). The Hebrew word ‘filthy’ is from the same root as the term for human excrement (Deut 23:13; Eze 4:12). The image is graphic and disturbingly distasteful.

Only unsoiled people can come into the presence of God, but we are not naturally clean, no not one of us! Isaiah puts it this way **“***We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment*”. (Isa 64:6)

In the parable which Jesus told of two people going up to the temple to pray, one of them, a tax collector, stood far off and would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast saying ‘*God, be merciful to me, a sinner*’ (Luke 18:9-14). The wise tax collector knew that he had no place in the presence of God. Like Isaiah, Ezekiel, Joshua and the tax collector, you and I cannot stand before God, the Lord whose eyes are too pure to look upon sin (Hab 1:13) and represent ourselves.

But I am a member of the church in good standing you say! But I have worked tirelessly in the Kingdom of God you say! But I am an elder, a deacon, a church musician, a Sunday school teacher, a Bible study leader you say! I am a minister, I might say! All this is not enough, not even close to being enough, because, as John writes “*If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us*” (1 John 1:10). As active sinners who have let Jesus our Lord and Saviour down badly, we all need legal representation in the court room of the Almighty God.

There’s a phrase which quite accurately describes how life often goes in this world: “*It’s not what you know, it’s who you know*”. What this means in the world is that for success, and especially to obtain employment, a person’s knowledge and skills are less useful and less important than his or her network of personal contacts.

There’s another idiom which is used in the English language. This is to have “*friends in high places*”. For example, someone might say: “*She must have friends in high places because she is definitely unqualified for that position to which she has just been appointed*”. Powerful friends are sometimes able to help a person to obtain what they want or need and cannot gain without the help of a person of influence. As an advocate with the Father, Jesus is a ‘friend in a high place’ because he has ascended to heaven.

The ascension of Christ is the subject of HCLD18. A dictionary definition of the noun ‘ascension is ‘the action of rising to an important position or a higher level’. Luke records the ascension of Christ both in his gospel and in the book of Acts: (1:9b-10) **“***as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven*."

The Heidelberg Catechism asks the question “how does Christ’s ascension into heaven benefit us?” The first part of the answer is because we gain advantage due to our Saviour’s qualification. Which brings us to our 2nd point:

1. **Christ’s qualifications**

Imagine that you are guilty of crimes and are due to come before a court of law. You’d want to find the very best lawyer you could obtain so that your case could be put in the most favourable light possible. Jesus is uniquely qualified as a defence attorney, as an ‘advocate’. He knows the law of God better than any other human being. Remember how, at age 12, he sat in the Jerusalem temple among the teachers there ‘*and all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and answers’* (Luke 2:47). He refuted the temptations of Satan in the wilderness by wisely wielding the ‘*sword of the Spirit*’ (Eph 6:17), the Word of God. Jesus Himself is the very fulfilment of the law of God (Matt 5:17).

People like you and me need the most skilled advocate to put our case in the most favourable light possible, before God the Father. However, no matter how skilled a person is in the law, they cannot provide legal representation unless they are admitted into the court room. In order to gain access as an attorney who practices law, a person must pass the ‘bar examination’. We could say that Jesus has been awarded ‘a pass with ultimate distinction’, not so much for his perfect knowledge of God’s law, but for his ability to perfectly keep that law.

In our text, John expresses this truth by referring to Him as ‘*Jesus Christ the righteous*’ (1 John 2:1). There is a man of flesh and blood like us, representing us, brothers and sisters, before God the Father. A man who understands what it is like to experience the brokenness of this fallen world. A man who is God who took on flesh and became part of the groaning creation (Rom 8:22), One who is able to “*sympathize with our weaknesses*”, “*one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin*” (Heb 4:15a).

This perfect man has ascended into the heavenly ‘court’ of God His Father. He has been admitted into the presence of God and he has the most highly honoured status there. As the Scriptures reveal, God ‘*raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places’* (Eph 1:20b). For all whose faith and trust is in Him, Jesus is an exalted ‘friend in a high place’ – the highest of places there is *‘far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named*’ (Eph 1:21).

There is no better advocate to have with the Father than Jesus Christ His only begotten Son. There is no other advocate available to needy people like you and me. Jesus expresses his own uniqueness in these words. "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*” (John 14:6).

The HCLD18, Q&A49 asks the question “how does Christ’s ascension into heaven benefit us?” The first part of the answer given is “*he pleads our cause in heaven in the presence of his Father*”. As we’ve seen, we all need legal representation before the judgement throne of God. Christ is the only advocate there is for this most vital of roles. But we are all guilty before God, so what possible plea can Christ make on our behalf?

To answer this question, let’s turn to our 3rd point:

1. **Christ’s plea**

A plea is a “*formal statement by or on behalf of a defendant or prisoner, stating guilt or innocence in response to a charge*”. The charge against us all is that we have sinned against God. We have ‘missed the mark’ of the standard of his law, in thought, word and deed. By omission – not doing what His perfect law calls us to do – and also by commission – doing what His perfect law forbids us to do.

The charge against us is expressed in Scripture for all who have ears to hear to understand that this charge is against them: **“***for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*” (Rom 3:23). *"None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one*." (Rom 3:10-12, quoting Ps 14:1-3; 53:1-3). Like the people of Old Testament Israel, represented in Zechariah’s vision by Joshua, we are all guilty. Every one of us. Satan, the Accuser brings the charge ‘guilty’ against us so that we might be sentenced to death.

Christ’s plea is not that we are naturally innocent, but that He has removed our guilt. John writes: “*He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world*” (1 John 2:2). Propitiation is the removal of God’s righteous wrath against the sins of guilty people like you and me. Jesus took upon Himself the penalty for the sins of all those for whom He died so that the guilt of all God’s people would be removed.

‘All God’s people’ includes not only John and the believing readers of this epistle, but everyone who has repented of their sins and turned to Christ Jesus in faith all over the world, ‘*from every tribe tongue and nation*’ (Rev 5:9). That is the meaning of the words ‘*not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world’.*

Christ’s plea is that He has done the necessary work to enable us to be acceptable to God and to receive pardon. The Apostle Paul puts it this way: “*Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died- more than that, who was raised- who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us*” (Rom 8:34). Christ pleads, appeals, intercedes on our behalf. That is why we can have confidence, even though we have not yet completely conquered sin in our lives, even though we let Jesus, who calls us his friends, down badly at times.

Beloved brother and sisters in our Lord, when you stumble in your battle against sin, be comforted by the support of Jesus, who calls you his friend, and who is an advocate with the Father, pleading your cause based on His work of receiving God’s wrath on your behalf and transferring His own righteous obedience to your account.

Good legal representation in court is very costly and will not guarantee that you are acquitted of crimes you have committed. In contrast, Christ represents each of God’s people perfectly as their advocate, having been admitted to the Heavenly court room through his ascension, being perfectly qualified to act on our behalf and pleading our cause on the basis of His own innocence, propitiation for our sins and perfect obedience to the law.

Brother and sister in Christ, why has He done so much for you? - because he loves you and calls you his friend. **“***Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need*” (Heb 4:16). Let us give thanks to God that we have an advocate with the Father, the risen, ascended Lord Jesus Christ.

AMEN