

“SIN, RIGHTEOUSNESS, AND THE BELIEVER”
1 JOHN 3:4-10

I was in college the first time I remember reading 1 John seriously. I’m sure I read the book before my college years; but it was in my freshman year that I really began to grow in Christ in a significant way. I joyfully and excitedly read my Bible on my own. Between classes I would go to my car and listen to J. Vernon McGee and John MacArthur. I was excited about the Word of God.

And then somewhere in that year I read 1 John and I got to chapter three and I read the verses that are before us this morning:

- ✓ No one who abides in Him sins (v. 6)
- ✓ No one who sins has seen Him or knows Him (v. 6)
- ✓ The one who practices sin is of the devil (v. 8)
- ✓ No one who is born of God practices sin (v. 9)
- ✓ (The believer) cannot sin (v. 9)

In those days, I knew two things — I loved Jesus, but I also sinned. And for too-long a period of time, those two contradictory realities left me conflicted. If I sinned, what did that say about my spiritual condition? I wish I had known then what I know now, because the message of this passage may appear to be discouraging for the believer who is battling against the flesh and remaining sin. Yet in actuality there is great hope in these verses. My problem then was that I didn’t understand what John was saying about sin, and I didn’t understand what God had provided in my battle against sin.

So guiding this passage are two important realities that serve as the theme of these verses:

SIN AND THE BELIEVER ARE INCONGRUOUS.
GOD HAS GIVEN EVERYTHING WE NEED NOT TO SIN.

And because sin and the believer are incongruous and because Christ has given us what we need not to sin, in these seven verses, John provides eight reasons why believers should not (and don’t have to) live in perpetual and habitual sin:

- 1. Do Not Practice Sin Because of What Sin Is (v. 4)**
- 2. Do Not Practice Sin Because Christ SATISFIED God’s Wrath Against Sin (v. 5)**
- 3. Do Not Practice Sin Because of Your FELLOWSHIP with Christ (v. 6)**
- 4. Do Not Practice Sin Because Christ is RIGHTEOUS (v. 7)**

- 5. Do Not Practice Sin Because Sin is from THE DEVIL (v. 8a)**
- 6. Do Not Practice Sin Because Christ DESTROYED the Devil's Works (v. 8b)**
- 7. Do Not Practice Sin Because God's Children CANNOT Perpetually Sin (v. 9)**
- 8. What You DO Reveals Whose You ARE (v. 10)**

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CONTEXT:

- At first reading, these verses seem to suggest that the believer in Christ never sins, and in fact, he is incapable of sinning (v. 9). Yet in other places in this letter, John has already affirmed that believers, in fact, *do* sin: 1:7, 8, 10; 2:1. So how will we resolve this seeming contradiction?
- As you read this section, it is also important to understand the context in which John is writing. Heretical teachers had arisen in the church and said that there was an inherent dichotomy between their bodies and their spiritual being and that led to two false conclusions:
 - ✓ “Because I am a believer, I no longer sin.” (which is the error John was addressing in chs. 1-2)
 - ✓ “Because I am a believer, what I do with my body doesn’t matter; I can sin as much as I want.” (which is the error that John was addressing in ch. 3)
- So there is no contradiction between what John says in chapter 1 and what he says here; he is addressing different implications from the teaching of the heretics who had left the church but were still trying to influence the church members (2:19, 22).
- Remember also that John is writing to give assurance to those who were believers (5:13). And at the same time he was writing to undermine the false assurance of the false believers. So be careful about thinking, “I sinned today; I must not be a believer.” And also be careful about thinking, “I intentionally sinned a great many times today, but God doesn’t care about what I do with my life.”
- One more item to notice about what John says:
 - ✓ In 3:4-10, there are 31 verbs. Of those 30 verbs, 22 are in the present tense and five more have the sense of something that has previously happened but still is going on presently. So effectively 27 of the 31 verbs have the force of a present tense.
 - ✓ Now what does that mean? It means that John is not talking about individual sins, but he is talking about *patterns* of sin — a habitual lifestyle of sin. So ***everyone who practices sin*** (v. 4) is talking about those who habitually practice things that are rebellious against God...
- So even as we begin examining this passage there is hope and encouragement for us —
 - ✓ We will still sin, but we don’t have to live in perpetual sin.
 - ✓ We can know that in spite of our sin we are redeemed and saved by Christ.
 - ✓ Christ has given us everything we need so that we don’t have to sin. And that’s why John can repeatedly say, “do not practice sin” — because Christ has made it possible for us not to sin.

1. Do Not Practice Sin Because of What Sin Is (v. 4)

- The things that John says about believers and unbelievers in these verses are true of all people: there are no exceptions for anyone: **everyone** and **no one** (vv. 4, 6 [2x], 9, 10).
- So the truth about everyone who **sins** continually is that they are continually practicing lawlessness.
 - ✓ The word for sin is the familiar one meaning, “to miss the mark.” Yet, it doesn’t just mean, “I accidentally missed, but it doesn’t matter; I’ll try harder next time.” The word also means that the miss was deliberate; in an act of rebellion against God, the sinner willfully does not do what God has commanded to do. And that action means that this is not only “sin,” but **lawlessness**.
 - ✓ This not only means that the individual acts as if there is no law, but that he is acting *against* the law of God. He has set himself up as the standard of what is acceptable and he does not care about what God has decreed. He will intentionally do the opposite of what is righteous and flaunt his defiance against God. This is, in fact, *The Long War Against God* — the desire of unrighteous men to remove the authority of God from their lives so that they can engage in any sin without guilt or impunity.
 - ✓ When John says that sin is lawlessness, it is his way to enhance the seriousness and wickedness of sin. So Ralph Venning has said about sin (outline quote):

“Nothing is so evil as sin; nothing is evil but sin. As the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us, so neither the sufferings of this life nor of that to come are worthy to be compared as evil with the evil of sin. No evil is displeasing to God or destructive to man but the evil of sin. Sin is worse than affliction, than death, than Devil, than Hell. Affliction is not so afflictive, death is not so deadly, the Devil not so devilish, Hell not so hellish as sin is.”

[The Sinfulness of Sin]

- This is a complete contradiction to what John has said about the believer in v. 3 — those who have the confidence of salvation through Christ purify themselves in the same way that Christ is pure.
- And that is why the believer should always work to purify himself and always work to mortify sin — not because avoiding sin makes God like us more, but because sin is an act of rebellion against the One whom we claim to love. Do not practice sin because of what sin is.

2. Do Not Practice Sin Because Christ REMOVED the POWER of Sin (v. 5)

- Sin is antithetical to the believer because of what we know about sin and about Christ’s purpose.
- Christ **appeared in order to take away sin**. (Notice that John says Christ **appeared**, not that Christ was created or was born — he is subtly affirming the eternality of Christ in contrast to the heretics.)

- ✓ This verse reiterates the same thing John the Baptist said of Jesus — Jn. 1:29. Christ has removed and eliminated sin from the life of the believer. And the reason He can do this is that ***in Him there is no sin***. As the perfect Man, He can stand in our place and as the perfect God He can absorb the wrath of God for our sin without spending eternity in Hell. Only the infinitely perfect God-Man could do this. And He has.
- ✓ When Christ died on the cross, the wrath of God against sin was satisfied and believers were declared righteous. And when He died, He also made sure the confidence that at the end of time and in Heaven, sin will finally and fully be eradicated. Those two truths are justification and glorification. And in the middle of those two truths is the reality that Christ's death makes those who believe in Christ new creatures, so that the power of sin is removed from our lives. Sin has no authority over Christ. He has all authority over sin. And because we are united to Christ in His death (remember Gal. 2:20?) we also have power over sin. W/out Christ we could do nothing but sin, but with Christ there is power not to sin (2:1; 1 Pt. 2:24).
- Christ appeared on earth and went to the cross and endured God's wrath and was placed in the tomb and was resurrected so that we would be freed from sin, not so that we could indulge it more.

3. Do Not Practice Sin Because of Your FELLOWSHIP with Christ (v. 6)

- Because Christ came to remove sin, John draws the conclusion in verse 6 that ***no one who abides in Him sins***. That is, no one who has his life in Christ will live in a continual pattern of sin. "By living in Him, in His sinlessness, one can expect conformity to His righteousness." [*Expositor's*]
- Again, John doesn't mean, "the Christian never ever sins again," but he does mean, the follower of Christ does not live in unrepentant sin; the Christian doesn't continue in an ongoing pattern of sin.
- And notice the reason that the believer does not sin — He is abiding in Christ — He is in fellowship and unity with Christ and because of that ongoing fellowship, he cannot live in ongoing sin. (And that means that one of the ways to fight against sin is to maintain fellowship with Christ; you can't sin and read and pray and evangelize in the power of the Spirit at the same time...)

"The important question, in the light of the cross, then becomes, 'Have my sins been taken away?' Verse 6 tells that the answer lies in our present experience. Do I keep on sinning, or is my life distinctively different? 'Look at your lifestyle,' is John's message.... 'Do you keep on sinning?' The person who does has not yet seen or known Christ...If Jesus was sinless and came to this world expressly to take away our sins, how can sin be cherished by anyone who is really living in Christ?" [Jackman, 88.]

- Notice again the extent and inclusiveness of John's statement — ***no one*** (twice!).
 - ✓ If we are in Christ, we will not remain in sin.
 - ✓ If we are in sin, we are not in Christ — we haven't ***seen Him*** by faith and we don't know Him. We may call Him by name, but we don't know Him (Mt. 7:21).
 - ✓ The first group has a continuing relationship with Christ, the second a continuing relationship with sin; the first group does not practice sin and the second group does not know Christ.
- Two implications of this verse:
 - ✓ Claiming Christ and embracing sin means you are not in Christ. ***No one***. That's the kind of clear statement that makes many people so uncomfortable with this letter. You cannot have your sin and Christ also. You cannot live in the darkness and be in the light. You cannot be adopted by God into His family and have the devil for your father. So if you are living a life of sin, embracing it and loving it, this text is asking and warning you to repent. You cannot stay in sin and have a good end (Gal. 5:21). If that is you, will you please give up your sin, ask God to forgive you and ask Him to take away the power of sin so that you can live righteously (v. 5)?
 - ✓ A second implication of this verse is that while believers don't live in habitual sin, they do still sin. The difference between their sin and the sin of the unbeliever is "sin may enter his experience as an exception which calls for immediate confession and cleansing..." [Hiebert, 143.] If you are a believer, keep fighting against the temptation to sin and keep coming back to God for the forgiving cleansing of sin when you fall into it (1:9).

4. Do Not Practice Sin Because Christ is RIGHTEOUS (v. 7)

- There were ***deceivers*** in the churches in Asia Minor who were attempting to confuse believers about sin and the believer. These are men who taught that one could be righteous without also practicing righteousness. John exhorts the readers to constantly be on guard against them (still necessary).
- If someone ***is righteous*** — has been justified and saved by God — then He will ***practice righteousness***. He does not do righteous acts to become righteous, but because he has been declared righteous by God he is able to do righteous things — and he does them.
 - ✓ His righteous acts are regular (habitual and continual), not occasional.
 - ✓ His righteous acts are a result of the new birth (2:29; 3:9-10; Mt. 7:16).
 - ✓ His righteous acts correspond to (***just as***), though are not equal to, Christ's righteousness.

- Because Christ is righteous and Christ is our groom and our preeminent brother and our Savior and our friend and our Shepherd, and because we have been created to be conformed to Him, then we also do the things that are righteous.
- There is no such person as an unrighteous believer. He may be immature; he will still commit isolated acts of unrighteousness; but the character of his life cannot be identified as being unrighteous.

CONCLUSION:

- This is a hard section. The realities are clear and unwavering.
 - ✓ A righteous life (and that includes repentance from sin) is the result of the life-giving work of God. He does life-giving things because he is alive.
 - ✓ Unrighteousness is the result of a lack of the life of God in the soul of a man. He does dead and deadly things because he is dead.
- So here are some implications:
 - ✓ Is your life characterized by unrepentant, ongoing, willful, rebellious sin? Then this passage says that you are from the devil and your end is hopeless. And yet, your end has not yet been finalized. There is hope for you if you go to God and ask God for forgiveness and transformation. Your hope is not that you will ever do enough good things to satisfy God. You will not and cannot satisfy God. Your only hope is that someone else could satisfy God and absorb God's infinite wrath for you; and that is exactly what Christ did (3:5; 2:1-2). Repent of your sin and ask God to change you from a rebel against God to a friend of God who loves Him and loves to obey Him.
 - ✓ Do you still sin? (The answer for all of us is "yes.") You still sin, but you hate your sin and you long to be rid of it and yet while you sin you also see patterns of righteousness in your life?
 - Give thanks to God because it is only His work in your life that has enabled you to do anything righteous.
 - Whenever you sin, confess and repent of that sin, knowing that God will continue to forgive you of every sin and continue to cleanse you from every act of unrighteousness.
 - ✓ Pray. Evil is exceedingly evil and sin is exceedingly sinful. We do not see the horror of it or we would always run from it. So ask the Lord to open your eyes to its horridness and ask the Lord to give you boldness to speak the truth of the power of Christ to take away sins from the lives of all men.