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THE BELIEVER AND SIN

1 John 3:4-10

By

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1 John Lesson 15

The Believer and Sin
1 John 3:4-10

As I said last week, polls consistently indicate that there is virtually no difference in America between those who claim to be born again Christians and the population at large when it comes to sexual morality, materialism, hedonism, and worldview. Those claiming to be Christians think and act just as the world does. We may *claim* to believe in Jesus and the Bible, but our lives don't back up the claims.

First John is a much-needed antidote to this current form of Christianity. In combating certain heretics who had left the church and who were recruiting others to join them, John gives three tests of authentic Christianity: the moral test (obedience to Christ); the relational test (love for others); and, the doctrinal test (believing the truth about Christ). From 2:28-3:10, John gives the second application of the moral test. He makes it clear that a righteous life is a distinguishing mark of one that truly has been born of God. John's overall theme in 3:4-10 is:

Because sin is serious and it is opposed to the reasons why Christ came, Christians do not and cannot live in sin.

Verses 4-10 fall into two sections: 3:4-7 is parallel to 3:8-10 (adapted from John Stott, *The Epistles of John* [Eerdmans], p. 121).

3:4-7	3:8-10
3:4: Sin is serious because it is rebellion against God.	3:8a: Sin is serious because it originates with the devil.
3:5: Sin is opposed to Christ's appearing to take away sins.	3:8b: Sin is opposed to Christ's appearing to destroy the works of the devil.
3:6: A true Christian does not live in sin.	3:9: A true Christian cannot live in sin.
3:7: A true Christian practices righteousness.	3:10: A true Christian practices righteousness and love.

There is a lot of material here, but I want to cover it in one message because of this structural unity.

1. Because sin is serious rebellion against God and it is totally opposed to Christ, true Christians do not live in sin (3:4-7).

A. Sin is serious rebellion against God (3:4).

Many scholars say that the Greek word translated “lawlessness” has a much wider range of meaning than that in the Greek Old Testament (LXX). Thus John may not have in mind so much the specific breaking of God’s law, but rather, he is saying that the one who practices sin is “in revolt against God” and that “sin is nothing but rebellion against God” (W. Gutbrod, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. by Gerhard Kittel [Eerdmans], IV:1086). In other words, John is hitting at the truth that sin, at its core, is much worse than an outward breaking of a commandment. To practice sin is to be in open rebellion against God Himself.

We may ask, “Why does John begin here with this?” The answer is, as J. C. Ryle points out (*Holiness* [James Clarke & Co.], p. 1), “that a right knowledge of sin lies at the root of all saving Christianity.... If a man does not realize the dangerous nature of his soul’s disease, you cannot wonder if he is content with false or imperfect remedies.”

If you do not have a biblical view of the seriousness of sin, then you do not need anything nearly as radical as a Savior who “appeared in order to take away sins” (3:5). If our need is just for a few tips on how to have a happier life or improve our self esteem, then why all this extreme talk about Christ shedding His blood as the propitiation for our sins (1:7; 2:1)?

The false teachers that John was confronting were no doubt, as many false teachers in our day, minimizing the serious nature of sin. Satan’s strategy has always been to get rebellious man to think more highly of himself than he ought to think: “I may not be perfect, but I’m not a wretched sinner! I’m not a worm!”

At the same time, Satan gets us to pull God down from His absolute holiness: “Surely, a loving God understands that I’m only human. He wouldn’t send someone as good as me to hell! He wouldn’t demand *perfect* righteousness, would He?” The conclusion

is, if God is not so holy and I'm not so sinful, then I don't need anything as radical as the shed blood of a sinless substitute to atone for my "faults"! Thus Satan works to undermine the cross.

B. Sin is totally opposed to Jesus Christ (3:5).

John's readers knew this, but he reminds them of it again. Jesus Christ appeared to take away sins. This is the same verb as when John the Baptist saw Jesus and proclaimed (John 1:29), "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" In 2:28 & 3:2, John used the word "appears" to refer to the second coming of Jesus Christ. Here, he uses it twice (3:5, 8) to refer to His first coming. Jesus Christ did not come to this earth *primarily* to give us moral teaching or an example, although He did those things. His main reason for coming was to take away sins by bearing the penalty that we deserved in His own body on the cross.

The only way that He could do this was to be completely sinless Himself. Thus John adds, "and in Him there is no sin." Jesus' virgin birth through the Holy Spirit preserved Him from original sin (Luke 1:35). He lived in complete obedience to God, so that even His enemies could not convict Him of sin (John 8:46). He offered Himself as a lamb unblemished and spotless (1 Pet. 1:19), the final and complete sacrifice for our sins (Heb. 10:10, 14, 18). If you know these truths, then John's conclusion is inescapable:

C. True Christians do not live in sin (3:6-7).

- (1) Anyone living in sin is not abiding in Christ and has not seen or known Him (3:6).

"Abides" is John's word for fellowship, but we need to understand that in his mind, *every* Christian abides in Christ. The idea that there are two types of Christians, those who abide in Him and do not sin, and those who do not abide and do sin, was foreign to the apostle's thinking. The word *abide* in 3:6 is parallel to *is born of God* in 3:9.

This is further evident by the fact that John adds (3:6), "no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him." The false teachers claimed to have special revelation or knowledge of Christ. John says that their sinful lives betrayed them. His point is that anyone that knows Jesus Christ as the holy, sinless Savior, who came to offer Himself on the cross to forgive our sins, does not live in sin.

If someone lives in sin, it shows that he has not seen Jesus as He revealed Himself, and does not know Him as Savior. Then John draws an application for his "little children":

- (2) Do not be deceived: A true Christian practices righteousness, just as Jesus is righteous (3:7).

Whenever the Bible warns us not to be deceived, we need to perk up and pay attention. Deception is like a fisherman's bait: we think we're going to get what we want (a juicy meal), but we end up getting hooked and becoming the meal! John plainly spells out the truth: "the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous." John Stott observes (p. 124), "The heretics appear to have indulged in the subtly perverse reasoning that somehow you could 'be' righteous without necessarily bothering to 'practise' righteousness. John roundly denies the possibility."

The error that John here warns against is rampant in our day. In part, it is the fruit of those that teach that you may accept Christ as Savior without submitting to Him as Lord. Several years ago, I saw a tragic example of how this bad theology works out in people's lives. We were in a motel (which is the only time I watch such TV shows) and there was a show about an up and coming actress. It clearly portrayed her as a sex symbol. Since then, I have seen her picture in sensual poses on many of the supermarket tabloids and the headlines have told about her marital breakup. But in spite of the overtly sensual portrayal in that program, the actress' father assured the interviewer that she was a devout Christian!

John would say (3:7), "Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous." There should be a period at the end of verse 7, because verse 8 is parallel to verse 4. It begins the second section.

2. Because of the devilish origin of sin and the purpose of Christ's appearing, true Christians cannot live in sin (3:8-10).

Just as 3:4 makes the point that sin is serious because it is rebellion against God, so 3:8 shows the serious nature of sin:

- A. Sin is serious because it originates with the devil (3:8a).

John states, "The one who practices sin is of the devil." Again, John divides all people into two camps: those who practice righteousness (3:7) and those who practice sin (3:8). There is no third camp for those who do not believe in Jesus, but are decent, good people who never hurt anyone. You may protest, "Surely, my grandmother who was sweet towards everyone and who believed in the basic goodness of human nature, was not of the devil!"

The key to understanding John's meaning lies in his next phrase, "for the devil sins [lit.] from the beginning." This points us back to the original fall of Satan. God created Satan and all the angels as good, but Satan sinned against God and led a rebellion of other angels, who became demons. Most scholars believe that Isaiah 14:12-14, which on one level describes a taunt against the king of Babylon (14:4), is also a description of Satan's fall:

How you have fallen from heaven, O star of the morning, son of the dawn! You have been cut down to the earth, you who have weakened the nations! But you said in your heart, "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God, and I will sit on the mount of the assembly in the recesses of the north. I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High."

Notice that five times the devil said, "I will," in opposition to God. He was not content with where God had created him. He wanted his own way. As we saw in verse 4, which is parallel to verse 8, the essence of sin is rebellion against God. The sinner says, "I will! I want my way! I will not submit to the Most High God."

So whenever a person acts in line with his own will, without submitting to God's will, he is committing the original sin of the devil. Whether it manifests itself as the humanly respectable, "I will be nice to others, so that people will think highly of me," or as the reprehensible, "I will kill others to get what I want," it all comes from the same source: the devil. Any action that originates in the human will that is not in submission to God is devilish, even if outwardly it is a nice, humanitarian, seemingly "good" action.

- B. Sin is totally opposed to the purpose of Christ's coming to destroy the works of the devil (3:8b).

This parallels 3:5, where John said that Christ appeared to take away sins. Here the focus is on Christ's coming to destroy Satan's works. This refers mainly to the devil's work of promoting sin in the human race. The word *destroy* is the Greek word, "to loose." It's as if we were bound by sin's chains, but Jesus freed us. He came to pay the penalty for sin that we justly deserved. By so doing, He broke Satan's power to accuse us before God (Rev. 12:10), and He broke sin's power in the lives of believers (Rom. 6:10-13). Thus John is making the point that if we tolerate sin in our lives, we are siding with the devil and against Jesus Christ, who came to destroy the devil's works.

John Stott (p. 125) nicely sums up John's argument thus far:

If the first step to holiness is to recognize the sinfulness of sin, both in its essence as lawlessness and in its diabolical origin, the second step is to see its absolute incompatibility with Christ in His sinless Person and saving work. The more clearly we grasp these facts, the more incongruous will sin appear and the more determined we shall be to be rid of it.

Then John draws a logical conclusion:

C. A true Christian does not and cannot live in sin (3:9-10).

John makes two points:

- (1) A true Christian does not and cannot live in sin because God's seed is in him and he is born of God (3:9).

Verse 9 has generated a lot of confusion and controversy. It's one thing to say that no one who is born of God practices sin, but then John goes farther and states that he is *not able* to sin! I'm sure that my experience is like yours: I feel quite capable of sinning and years of walking with the Lord have not lessened my ability! So what does John mean?

Here are some principles to guide us. First, we must assume that John did not contradict himself or any other New Testament writer. He has said (1:8), "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us." He said that he is writing so that we may not sin, but then he adds (2:1), "and if anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the

righteous." He would not have written those words if believers were incapable of sinning.

Second, John's main concern is not to delve into some deep theological discourse, but rather to be pastorally practical. He does not want his flock to be deceived by the heretics, whose errors lie behind the apostle's words. Verse 10 is crucial to understanding the entire passage: John wants us to be able to identify the children of God and the children of the devil by observing their behavior. To do that, he again paints in black and white, with no gray areas. His point is that those who are truly born of God practice righteousness; those who are of the devil (the only other category) do not practice righteousness.

There have been many different attempts to explain verse 9 (Stott [pp. 130-136] lists seven; these are a few from his list.) Some have said that John means that believers cannot commit terrible sins, such as murder or what the Catholic Church labels "mortal" sins. But, clearly, John does not specify sins, and besides, believers are capable of committing such sins.

Others draw a distinction between the old and new natures of the believer, and argue that the new nature is incapable of sinning. While this may be true, it clearly is not John's meaning here. The heretics could have used this to argue, "I'm not sinning; only my old nature is!" But in verse 10 John says that by observing the person's behavior, we can tell whether he is a child of God or of the devil. He is talking about a whole *person* sinning, not just his nature.

Some holiness teachers think that the verse is teaching the possibility of attaining sinless perfection. They say that if you learn the secret of abiding in Christ, you will live without sin. While that may be so, John does not attribute the believer's not sinning to the abiding life, but to the fact that he has been born of God. This is true of every believer, not just those who have attained it.

Some say that John means that believers cannot sin willfully or deliberately. But, both experience and Scripture show that believers are quite capable of willful, deliberate sin!

The key question in interpreting this verse is whether John is speaking about committing individual acts of sin, or is he talking about sin as a way of life? John uses the present tense throughout

this section, and while the Greek present tense does not necessarily emphasize continuous action, it certainly allows for it. In 3:8, when John says, “the devil has sinned from the beginning,” the verb is present tense. Clearly he means, “From day one and persisting ever since, the devil is characterized by sinning.” Thus when John says that those born of God do not practice sin and that they cannot sin, he means that it is impossible for a child of God to persist in a lifestyle marked by sin.

The reason for this is not only that he has been born of God, but also that God’s seed abides in him. This refers to the new life that God imparts to those He begets as His children. That word picture is helpful in understanding John’s meaning. When you plant a seed in the ground, it does not sprout, grow and bear fruit in a day. It takes time, cultivation, water, and sunshine. Or, to use the human analogy, when a husband’s sperm unites with his wife’s ovum, new life begins. But it takes nine months before birth, and after that it takes years to grow to maturity. But, if life is present, it affects everything. It is impossible for a normal child not to grow.

So John is not talking about sinless perfection, but rather about the direction of the life of a believer. If God has imparted new life to you, so that you have become His child, you *cannot* go on living in sin. When you do fall into sin, you will recognize that you cannot go on in it. God will convict you of it and you will repent and walk in righteousness. A pig and a sheep may fall into the same mud hole, but there is a difference. The pig will love it and wallow in it, because that’s its nature. The sheep will want to get out and avoid that mud hole the next time, because it has a different nature. If God’s seed abides in you, you cannot wallow in the mud. If you like it in the mud and don’t want to get out, you may need to ask whether you truly have been born of God.

- (2) The children of God and the children of the devil are distinguished by the practice of righteousness and love (3:10).

John’s last verse in this section explains and clinches his point: “By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother.” This verse is parallel to John’s warning about deception in 3:7. Don’t be fooled. It’s easy

to say, "I believe in Jesus." But John says, "Look at his life. If he doesn't practice righteousness, if he doesn't live in obedience to God's Word, especially with regard to love, his claim is false." John's final comment shows that true righteousness includes love for your brother and it introduces the relational test (3:11-18).

Conclusion

The modern American church has fallen into serious deception on this crucial matter of sin. The popular view is that there are two options for the Christian life. "Plan A" is for the really committed: you trust Jesus as Savior *and* Lord. This is tough. You have to obey Jesus totally, repenting of all your sins. It means giving up the right to spend your money as you choose, because you yield it to Jesus and manage it as His steward. It means following Jesus as His servant. He may call you to go to the mission field or even die as a martyr. But, you will have rewards in heaven.

If that's too difficult, you may want to try "Plan B." In this option, you accept Jesus as Savior, but you don't need to follow Him as Lord. With this plan, you will go to heaven when you die, but you just don't get as many rewards. But, you can enjoy the pleasures of sin now and at least get in the door of heaven later.

But the truth of the Bible, the truth that John emphasizes here is, "There is no Plan B!" Plan A is the only plan for eternal life. Christ calls you to follow Him as Savior *and* Lord. You cannot do this by your own strength or willpower, but only if He imparts new life to you, causing you to be born of God. If you have been born of God, it will be obvious. The new life in you will produce a life of righteousness. "Little children, make sure no one deceives you!"

Application Questions

1. Why is a right knowledge of sin at the root of all saving Christianity? How does this relate to the user-friendly "gospel"?
2. John says that a child of God *cannot* sin. Does he mean that we will no longer desire to sin or have to struggle against it?
3. How would you counsel a Christian living in sin? Would you give him assurance of salvation? Why/why not?
4. Can a person who tolerates some glaring sin in his life be truly saved? How would you deal with him?

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