

Back to Basics

Christians and Sin

1 John 3:4-10

Introduction

The Apostle John dedicated his letters to helping believers distinguish between authentic Christians and false teachers. His method is to present and examine the truth about Jesus and his teachings. In Chapter 3, John tackles the sin problem and how it relates to Christians. Let's read about it in Chapter 3, beginning with verse 4.

"Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness. And you know that He was manifested to take away our sins, and in Him there is no sin. Whoever abides in Him does not sin. Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him. Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous. He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil. Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God. In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor *is* he who does not love his brother." (1 John 3:4-10 NKJV)

This passage is sometimes considered a problem passage. It is problematic because it seems to contradict other biblical passages or our own experience. I don't know any believer who doesn't have to deal with sin about every day! It seems that the more we grow in Christ, the more we realize how much more sinful we are than we thought! It can cause you to ask yourself, "Am I really a Christian?"

What exactly is John saying to us in this passage? Let's ask some common sense questions to understand what the passage is really saying.

I. Do Christians Sin?

What does the Bible teach about Christians and sin? God is the Author of the Bible, and He doesn't contradict himself. We can often better understand one passage by comparing what other passages teach about the same subject.

In Chapter 2, John says, "My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world." (1 John 2:1-2 NKJV)

The truth is Christians can and do sin! The good news is Jesus' atoning death forgives even Christians if they sin. If John believed that true Christians never sin,

he wouldn't have bothered to say, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us." (1 John 1:8-10 NKJV)

John says anyone who claims they don't sin is self-deceived and a liar. How do we reconcile verse 6, which says, "Whoever abides in Him does not sin. Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him." (1 John 3:6 NKJV)

This ought to tip us off that John means something else. In Romans 7, Paul says, "For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin. For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that *it is* good. But now, *it is* no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but *how* to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will *to do*, I do not do; but the evil I will not *to do*, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not *to do*, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin." (Romans 7:14-25 NKJV)

Paul is agonizing over the ongoing, indwelling sin that is present in his Christian life. James says, "For we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he *is* a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body." (James 3:2 NKJV)

James is addressing true Christians! But he says, "We all stumble in many ways"—including himself. If John doesn't mean that true Christians don't or can't sin, what does he mean? When we take a closer look at this 1 John 3 passage, it is clear that John is talking about something more than Christians simply committing sins. He uses present tenses for "sin" in 3:6 and 9. In the Greek, present tenses describe ongoing action. In his "Letters of John," J.R. Stott writes, "John is saying not that Christians cannot commit sins—but that they cannot live in sin *as a settled character or lifestyle*."

By adding the verb "practice," John makes an even stronger statement. He is describing people who practice sin like the devil practices sin because they intentionally decide to live a life of sin. He says, "No one who practices sin as a lifestyle is born of God." John is describing people who claim to know God but live in sin and intentionally disregard God's laws. John knows these people try to deceive believers into thinking they're ok Christians too.

In verse 7, John says, "Let no one deceive you!" Who might these people be? One of John's purposes for writing this letter was to expose and refute certain false teachers who claimed to know God but were counterfeits.

What did these false teachers teach about sin? John's main point in this passage is not that true Christians can't commit sins. It is that self-proclaimed "Christian" teachers who practice and advocate sin are counterfeits who have been sent by the devil whom they follow.

But John is saying something more than this, which applies to true Christians and is meant to *encourage* us.

II. Don't Christians Belong to God?

John's primary purpose for writing this letter was to assure the believers that they did belong to God. The false teachers had undermined their assurance, and John wanted to restore it. We also need this same assurance. You can't make progress spiritually unless you have Holy Spirit assurance.

The key to knowing that you belong to God is to ask Jesus Christ into your heart and life and entrust your life to him as your Savior. When you receive him this way, God promises that the Holy Spirit will guide you and that Christ gives you eternal life. He can make this promise because he has completely and permanently forgiven you through Jesus' death. If you have received Christ, you need to trust his promise that he is in you, even when you can't feel him.

When Jesus comes to live within you, the Holy Spirit makes his presence known to you. Healthy spiritual development occurs when we are rooted in God's word and enjoy the assurance of Holy Spirit guidance.

John describes several ways we can experience the presence of Jesus, which assures us that we belong to God. One of them is found in this passage. In verse 9, John writes, "Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God." (1 John 3:9)

Because God's "seed" (the Holy Spirit) lives in you when you receive Christ, you still sin—but you can't practice it and enjoy it the way you used to. The Holy Spirit causes your conscience to become spiritually sensitive to God's ways. God's Spirit is righteous, so he imparts a new desire for righteousness and a new sensitivity to sin.

When we are distressed over nagging sin habits, it's a good sign that we're still connected to Christ and belong to God! It shows that God's Spirit has sensitized your conscience so that you long to be free from sin and want to be more like him. The time to be worried is when you can live with sin and not be bothered by it!

In 1 John 2:21, he says, "I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and that no lie is of the truth." (1 John 2:21)

In verse 27, he writes, "But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him." (1 John 2:27)

The "anointing" John refers to is God's Holy Spirit. John isn't saying that the Holy Spirit imparts all spiritual knowledge to us so that we don't need to be taught. He says that God's Spirit enables us to recognize God's Word (the Bible) as the truth.

III. Doesn't the Holy Spirit Lead Us to the Truth?

When we read the Bible, it is the Holy Spirit who makes the words and the message of scripture come alive in us. Of course, this doesn't mean that you suddenly understand everything in the Bible. The New Testament truth is you may have more questions than ever. Why? Because God begins to speak to you through the Bible.

God's revelation of truth can impact you, whether it comes through your reading of scripture or someone else sharing it with you one-on-one or in a group teaching. But the result is that you can feel it illuminating your understanding of God, His Word, and yourself. Verse 14 says, "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love *his* brother abides in death." (1 John 3:14)

When God's Spirit is in you, you sense God's Spirit in others who know Jesus and feel God's love for them. This doesn't mean that you have a spiritual radar that detects people's vibes. It means that you can have another level of sharing and communication with those who know the Lord.

It's a love and appreciation for others who know Jesus. It doesn't mean that you automatically like all other Christians. It means that the Jesus in you recognizes and moves toward the Jesus in other authentic Christians. Sometimes an existing relationship with someone who already knew Christ deepens because you now know Christ. Sometimes you feel the Spirit's tugging to get closer to someone with whom you have nothing in common except Jesus. 1 John 4:15 says, "Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him." (1 John 4:15-16)

Not only do you personally agree from the heart that Jesus is your Savior, but the Holy Spirit also urges you to tell others that you believe this. You probably remember that before you met Jesus, people could say all kinds of negative things about him, and it didn't bother you at all. But after you invited Jesus to become your Lord and Savior, those negative things about Jesus did bother you, and you may have even felt the need (even though I didn't always do this) to defend him.

As your relationship with Christ began to grow, you probably also felt a desire to tell your friends and family members that you now believe in and know Jesus. Even if your Christian life was still a little inconsistent, you weren't embarrassed to let people know you were a Christian.

The Holy Spirit gives us the confidence we need to share our faith with others. Romans 8:16 says, "The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God," ([Romans 8:16](#))

Conclusion

When you receive Jesus, his Spirit comes into your heart and, in a deeply personal way, lets you know that you now have now become a child of God. It's a way of personally experiencing God's love. It can be pretty emotional and dramatic. It can be a quiet yet deep-down feeling you've done the right thing and finally "come home." It's also a sense that God is no longer a distant deity you can only address in formal terms. Now you can talk to him personally and tell him what is really on your heart and mind.

According to H.G. Koenig in an article entitled "Health Benefits of Christian Faith," he states, "In the majority of studies being a Christian correlates with well-being, happiness, life satisfaction, hope and optimism, purpose and meaning in life, a higher self-esteem; better ability to handle bereavement, greater social support and less loneliness, lower rates of depression and faster recovery from depression; lower rates of suicide; less anxiety; less psychosis and fewer psychotic tendencies; lower rates of alcohol and drug abuse; less delinquency and criminal activity; and greater marital stability and satisfaction."

It is the conclusion of the largest literature review, and is endorsed by a former President of the Royal College of Psychiatrists. He laments the lack of attention given to the strong evidence: 'for anything other than religion and spirituality, governments and health providers would be doing their utmost to promote it.'

It is a wonderful thing to experience Jesus' presence in your life, and this track record is super-fortifying in your walk with him. If you have never personally received Christ, why not pray to accept him as your Savior and Lord.