

“NO ONE BORN OF GOD MAKES A PRACTICE OF SINNING”

In last week's sermon I noted that this passage is the second part of a section in which John is dealing with what we are referring to as the 'test of obedience.' In this section, John returns to a theme he dealt with earlier, saying that a person's profession of faith in Christ is authenticated by his determination to live a righteous life. In the first half of this section, 2:28-3:3, John described the test of obedience in primarily positive terms, saying that the person who has been born of God practices righteousness. That is, God's children can be recognized by the fact that they live upright lives. And now, in the second half of this section, John states the test of obedience in primarily negative terms, saying "No one born of God makes a practice of sinning." That is, God's children can also be recognized by the fact that they do not live sinful lives. By talking about Christian obedience in this way, both in terms of what we should do and in terms of what we should not do, John reminds us that God's law contains both requirements and prohibitions. There are things that God requires of us and things that he forbids. This means we can break God's law in two ways: by failing to do what God requires and by doing what God forbids.

From the very beginning, people have struggled to understand how obedience to God's law is consistent with the gospel's declaration that salvation is by grace alone. Some have fallen into the error of legalism, thinking that their acceptance with God is based upon their performance. And others have fallen into the opposite error of antinomianism, thinking that God's grace makes obedience unnecessary. Well, John is

neither a legalist nor an antinomian. He has already made it clear, back at the beginning of chapter 2, that our acceptance with God is based upon the mediating work of Jesus Christ, so he is clearly no legalist. And in our text today he shows us that the gospel sets Christians free from the enslaving power of sin, so he is clearly no antinomian. It is true that in Christ we have been set free from the condemning power of the law, but the law still serves as the guide for how we should live as God's children. Those who have been born of God are not characterized by lawlessness but by law-keeping.

In this passage, John sets a contrast between two types of people: those who practice righteousness and those who make a practice of sinning. In both cases, a person's true identity is revealed by how he lives. Those who practice righteousness prove themselves to be children of God, while those who keep on sinning prove themselves to be children of the devil. There is no doubt about the main point that John is trying to convey in this passage, even though it is a point that can be misunderstood. *John states this point four times in the span of just four verses: no one who abides in Christ keeps on sinning.*

Our passage begins with John giving us a definition of sin. He says that sin is lawlessness. The essence of sin is disregard for God's law. We see this in the first sin ever committed. Adam and Eve's sin of eating the forbidden fruit came about because they listened to the serpent when he called God's law into question. They decided to do what seemed right in their own eyes rather than do what God had commanded. And the same basic principle is behind all of the sins that we commit. Sin is a refusal to submit to what God says is right. It is our stubborn determination to do things our way.

Jesus was sent into the world to deal with the problem created by our sin. In John's words, "he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin." This reminds us of the words spoken by John the Baptist when he saw Jesus approaching him one day: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" [Jn. 1:29] Jesus was the sinless sacrifice through whom God provided atonement for his people's sin. He came to take away sin. This serves as the basis for John's argument in verse 6: "No one who abides in [Christ] keeps on sinning." John uses the same reasoning that was used by the apostle Paul in Romans 6, where Paul writes:

"How can we who died to sin still live in it?...We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." [Rom. 6:2,4]

To abide in Christ is to be dead to sin and made alive in Christ. It means being born again. And, as John Calvin puts it, "the design of regeneration is to destroy sin." If Jesus came into the world to take away sin, then it follows that those who have been united to him will not keep on sinning.

John develops this further in verses 7-8. Apparently the false teachers who were troubling these Christians were telling them that the practice of righteousness was not all that important. But John confronts this by essentially saying that a tree is known by its fruit. A righteous person is known by his righteous actions, and a sinful person is known

by his sinful actions. Actions reveal character. This is a very important point. You cannot be righteous without practicing righteousness. This is what John means when he says: "Whoever practices righteousness is righteous."

It is important to point out that this is not a contradiction of the Bible's teaching about justification by faith alone, the doctrine that says that when we place our faith in Christ God counts us as righteous on the basis of the fact that Christ's righteousness is imputed to us and our sins are imputed to Christ. Justification is a legal declaration of righteousness. In justification, God declares people who are not themselves righteous to be righteous. It should be obvious, then, that John is not talking about justification when he says "Whoever practices righteousness is righteous." But he is not contradicting what the Bible says about justification either. He is talking about the fruit of justification. He is saying that those who have been justified through faith in Christ will bear the fruit of righteous behavior.

John is telling us that who you are is made known by how you live. You sometimes hear people trying to explain a sin that they have committed by saying, 'I am not really that kind of a person.' And there is sometimes a degree of truth in this. We can all think of situations where a person's actions were what we might describe as 'out of character' for them. But this does not change the fact that, in general, our actions show who we really are. Jesus spoke about this in Matthew 12:34-35, where he said: "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil." We all

have a treasure in our hearts. John Owen explained this by saying that our treasure is the “prevailing inexhaustible principle of all [our] actings and operations.” [*The Grace and Duty of Being Spiritually-Minded*, 33] Our typical ways of thinking, speaking and acting are expressions of the prevailing principle in our hearts. Who we are is revealed by what we do.

In the next part of our passage, John tells us that the two different types of people that he is talking about here derive from two different families with two different heads. Those who make a practice of sinning are children of the devil, while those who practice righteousness are children of God. Ever since the fall of mankind, the human race has been divided into two branches: the line of rebellion and the line of promise. When Adam and Eve chose to listen to the serpent instead of God, they were aligning themselves with Satan in his rebellion against God. But God in his grace refused to give all of humanity over to Satan. Instead, he said to the serpent: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” [Gen. 3:15] In other words, the Lord split up the alliance that was formed between Satan and mankind at the fall. God put enmity, hatred, between the serpent and the woman, and he did this in order that he might establish a line of promise, a line out of which he would provide a Savior for his people. At the same time, a line of rebellion still remained, a line of the human race that remained allied with Satan. This line traces its roots back to Adam and Eve's son Cain. Though Cain was

Eve's biological child, he was the spiritual offspring of Satan. This is why the curse that God pronounced upon the serpent fell upon Cain as well.

The human race is divided into two groups: those who are allied with Satan in rebellion against God and those who by God's grace have been engrafted into Jesus Christ, the head of the new humanity. Because sin originates with the devil, those who make a practice of sinning are proven to belong to the devil. And because righteousness originates with God, those who practice righteousness are proven to belong to God. In the words of a 17th century Scottish minister named Henry Scougal, the Christian life can be described as "the life of God in the soul of man." According to Scougal,

"true religion is a union of the soul with God, a real participation in the Divine nature, the very image of God drawn upon the soul, or, in the apostle's phrase, 'it is Christ formed within us.'" [*The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, 34]

Christ came to destroy the works of the devil, to crush the serpent's head. Therefore, those who have been born of God, those who through faith have come to share in Christ's saving benefits, do not make a practice of sinning.

This teaching can be unsettling for us. We might wonder what exactly John means when he says that "No one who abides in him keeps on sinning," and "No one born of God makes a practice of sinning"? Is he saying that true Christians need to live lives of sinless perfection? It would be easy to think that, at least at first glance. But we know

that John cannot be saying that, or else he would be contradicting the words that he wrote back in chapter 1: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” [1:8] Both the Scriptures and our experience tell us that all Christians continue to sin.

The best way to understand what John is talking about here is to pay careful attention to his grammar. When John speaks about making a practice of sinning in these verses, he is using the Greek present tense. This is significant because, in Greek, the present tense often conveys the sense of an activity that is done continuously. This is conveyed well in the translation provided in the ESV with the phrases “keeps on sinning” and “makes a practice of sinning.” In other words, John is talking about habitual sinful behavior here. He is saying that Christians do not characteristically practice sin. While the Christian can and does still sin, his life is not characterized by the practice of sin but by the practice of righteousness. As one commentator puts it, “Although the believer sometimes sins, yet not sin, but opposition to sin, is the ruling principle of his life.” [Plummer] There is a difference between a momentary lapse into sin and a habitual pattern of sin. Or, to give a more concrete example, there is a difference between an occasional lustful thought and a habitual use of pornography, or a sexually immoral lifestyle. This is not to say that Christians cannot fall into serious, habitual sins. But when this happens, when a professing Christian finds himself ensnared in a pattern of behavior that is clearly sinful, he should be deeply grieved over his sin and turn away from it. Nor is this to say that we do not need to deal seriously with our occasional lapses into sin. The Scriptures make it

very clear that if such things are allowed to go unchecked they will give birth to even more sin.

One of the reasons why Christians cannot keep on living in a habitual pattern of sin is because when a Christian sins, he experiences conviction for his sin. While he may find fleeting pleasure in sin, he will eventually fall into an estate of misery over it. He will not be at peace. He will be deeply troubled over his sin. He will be like David in Psalm 32, where he writes, "For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer." The Christian feels miserable when he sins, not only because of the consequences of his sin, but because he knows that his sin is an offense against God. This is why J. Gresham Machen once wrote,

"although sin is actually found in Christians it does not belong there; it is never to be acquiesced in for one single moment, but is to be treated as a terrible anomaly that simply ought not to be." [*What Is Faith?*, 207]

It is significant that John talks about sin in the way that he does in this passage. He could have spoken with more nuance here. He could have qualified the statements that he makes about how Christians do not keep on sinning. He could have added a few lines that said something like this: 'Of course, we all know that Christians still commit sin. In fact, the Christian life is a lifelong struggle against sin. I am simply saying that a

Christian's life should not be characterized by habitual patterns of sinful behavior.' John could have written something to that effect, but he didn't. The Bible rarely speaks with that kind of a voice. Typically, biblical truth is set forth in extremes, without any qualifications. The Bible speaks in this way because it wants to make sure that we get the point. Yes, it is true that we all have a lifelong battle with sin ahead of us. And it is true that there are many times when believers cry out with the words of the apostle Paul: "Wretched man that I am!" But this does not mean that we can resign ourselves to a life of sinning. The Bible clearly says that those who have been born of God will practice righteousness, because Jesus came to take away sin.

Sin is an ever-present reality in our lives. It is something that we have to deal with each and every day. But it is not to be trifled with. The warning that John Flavel gives about the sin of lust can be applied to any temptation that we may face:

"Oh, stand off from this sin, because it is a pit out of which very few have been recovered that have fallen therein...The longer a man lives in it, the less power he has to leave it. It is not only a damning, but an infatuating sin." [*Impure Lust*, 21]

Sin wants to have you, just as the Lord warned Cain that sin wanted to have him. Do not take a light view of sin. See sin for what it really is. If you have been born of God, then the sin in your life is a contradiction of who you really are. Do not give yourself over to your sin. Do not excuse it or overlook it. Confess it and turn away from it. And look

Sermon on 1 John 3:4-10
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each day to the Son of God in faith, trusting that what he says really is true: he came to destroy the works of the devil; he came to create a people who delight in doing God's will.