

Like Father, Like Son

1 John 3:4-10

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You don't have to be around a church very long before you begin to deal with troubling questions. How about this one, "So-and-so goes to your church? I would never have guessed he went to church." Or, "Did you hear what so-and-so did? And he calls himself a Christian?" Or, "So-and-so grew up in the church but has no interest in religion anymore; is she going to heaven?" These kinds of questions circle through the church underground. It's easy to shrug our shoulders, as long as it's not someone close to us. Inevitably, it will be someone close to us, or worse, it might be us.

So what about it? Is so-and-so going to heaven? Can so-and-so still be a Christian having done such-and-such? God's Word brings us to the relationship between Christians and sin. It's a question not as easily answered as you may think.

I had the privilege recently of spending some time with a well-known radio Bible teacher. When he heard I was preaching through 1 John, he immediately wanted to talk about the interpretation of the text before us today. Of all the verses in the letter, to him understanding these verses was most important.

It is a little longer section of Scripture than normal and one that is definitely more difficult. If you will hang in there for the explanation, the application will be worth it.

Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God. By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother. (1 John 3:4-11 ESV)

The key verse here is verse 9, *No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God.* Let's start with this one and let it unlock the meaning of the rest of it. *No one born of God makes a practice of sinning.* Remember that the chapter began with, *See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we would be called children of God.* (1 John 3:1) This verse celebrates the extent of God's love, not simply to save us from sin and judgment, but to take it to the astonishing level of adopting us into his family. Christians are also God's children. He is our heavenly Father. We relate to him, not as judge, but as Father—*Dada*.

Beyond the amazement of being God's children, John says that this relationship is one in which God's seed abides in us. *Seed* there is the ancient word for the contribution of a father in reproduction. So what does it mean here? How is God's "seed" in us?

There are three possibilities. It may mean the gospel/Word of God. It could mean the Holy Spirit, who he just referred to verses before. The best option is a combination of these and the new life and nature in us that result. The Christian life begins by the hearing of God's Word and gospel about Jesus. The Holy Spirit works within us to produce faith and new birth. The result is that what is birthed is a new nature—a spiritual nature that's alive; the very life of God by his Spirit created within us.

- *And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. (Ezekiel 36:26)*
- *He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit. (Titus 3:5)*
- *If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you. (Romans 8:11)*

I mentioned last week that my wife and I have been attending birthing classes. I have been assured by many that the trauma we felt as we watched the videos would subside at the miracle of holding our own baby in our hands. The birth means a new life.

Spiritually, the same is true. We were spiritually dead and the only nature we had was our sin nature. Because of common grace and the remnants of bearing God's image, man is capable of doing good and noble things. But our bent and our delight are toward that which is carnal. By nature and by action we are sinners from birth.

But grace comes. Then the gospel comes. Then the love of God comes. Then the Spirit births in us new life. We are miracle children of Almighty God (Needham). His DNA is in us. This new nature powerfully creates new desires and capacities for love to God and obedience that we never had by nature before. This is regeneration.

Have you ever noticed how much sons look and act like their dads? It can be any number of things like physical appearance: tall, short, wide, skinny; hair, no hair. It could be the sound of their voice; their inflections. Maybe the way the son walks is like his dad. It can be personality—quiet or not; outgoing or not. It could be interests—dad's a hunter, so is his son. Dad loves the Cubs, so does his son. The summary statement we have for this basic disposition of resemblance is, "like father, like son." The nature of the father is in the son. That nature shapes who the son is and what he becomes and results in a strong resemblance to dad.

That is what John writes. God's seed is in us. His DNA. His nature. God birthed it there by the Spirit. We will be like our Father.

What Does it Mean That a Christian "Cannot Keep on Sinning"?

No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God. (1 John 3:9)

Here is the challenging part of this passage. The grammar does not give safe harbor for any one interpretation and all of them have problems. We can eliminate a few possibilities: it doesn't mean that Christians don't sin. John makes that clear in 1:8 and 1:10. *If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves.* (1 John 1:8) There is no perfection while we live in this

sinful body. Another suggestion is that this puts out an ideal we should aspire to. Other interpretations are that the Christian doesn't sin in his spiritual nature but only in his sinful nature.

I'll tell you what I think. I think John is answering the claims of the false teachers who claimed sinlessness but it was plain to all that morally this was not the case. They downgraded what sin was to upgrade their spiritual status. Lower the bar far enough and everyone's a high jumper.

This is why he says in verse 4, *Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.*

Sin – *the failure to live according to God's holy character and law.*

Lawlessness – *active rebellion against God and his law.*

For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. (Romans 8:7)

Sin is lawlessness. Hostility toward God is resident in the heart. Sin is the expression of it. I've told the story before of my brother Scott who was mischievous to say the least; naughty to say it better. He's now a pastor, so look out all of you given to malfeasance; it is a sure path into the ministry. We had a few horses and they were kept with electric fences. When my dad put them up, he made a point to take 4- or 5-year-old Scott and say, "If you touch this fence, it will hurt." My parents walked away and my dad said, "Watch this." They no more got around the corner and Scott screamed out in pain.

What happened there? Theology happened. In slow motion, Scott stood in front of that wire. The law was given. *Don't touch.* The lawgivers walked away. There Scott stood. Staring, feeling overwhelmed with desire. Before the law was given, he would not have necessarily even noticed the electric wire. With the law, everything in him suddenly wanted to touch that wire. Why? The sin nature is lawless and rebels against any constraint. The sin nature is lawless or law-hating. *I must and I will touch the wire!*

He grabbed the wire. If my brother's soul could speak in that moment it would have screamed, *Look at me! I'm grabbing the wire! You cannot limit me! I am free! I am god!* Instead all you heard was, *Ooowww!!!*

What did Scott need? He needed a new nature, one that delighted in the law and loved the lawgiver.

*No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot **keep on sinning** because he has been born of God.*

Christians may and will sin but it's no longer our nature to do so. We have a new nature, and by that nature we will not continue in what some call "habitual and reckless" sin.

It's like the difference between sheep and pigs.¹ Sheep and pigs get muddy and dirty. However, they view and experience it much differently. Sheep get muddy and dirty, but I

¹ *"There is a great difference between a sheep that by weakness falls into the mire, and a swine that delights to wallow in the mire." (Thomas Brooks, Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices, p. 175)*

don't think they like to. Their nature is different from the pig. The pig loves to get dirty and loves the mud. The pig is occasionally clean but prefers to be muddy. The sheep is occasionally muddy but wants to be clean. A pig will be happy to stay perpetually in mud. A sheep won't. A sheep won't stay in the mud. It's not his nature to do so.

Now imagine that on the farm it rained for days and the pen outside the barn was a muddy mess. The mud was so thick and deep that one of your animals was stuck in the mud. Completely covered in mud, you actually couldn't tell what kind of animal it was. It was just a pile of mud with eyes looking out. Days pass and you don't know what to do. The animal is still in the mud. So you call the veterinarian and you say, "Doc, I have an animal encased in mud in the pen outside the barn. Can you help me identify it?"

He asks, "What kinds of animals do you have there at your farm?"

You say, "I have sheep and I have pigs."

The doctor asks, "How long has this animal stayed in the mud?"

You say, "He's been there for a week."

"Well sir," the doctor says, "I can tell you, it's a pig."

"But," you say, "I talked with the animal and he told me that he was a sheep."

The doctor says, "He can say what he wants, but if he's been in that mud that long, there's no way he's a sheep no matter what he says."

No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God. By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother. (1 John 3:9-10)

Can I translate it this way? *No sheep makes a practice of staying in the mud; he's a sheep and cannot stay in the mud because he was born a sheep. By this it is evident who are sheep and who are pigs—whichever stays in the mud is a pig.*

Christians are children born again by the Spirit of God who produces a new nature in us and which changes the way we experience sin. We used to be under the dominion of sin. We were enslaved to sin. We loved it. It had a draw and power to us that we were incapable of overcoming.

Regeneration is the birth of a new nature with a new set of desires. The very spiritual DNA of God. Now we prefer to be clean.² We prefer to please our heavenly Father. Our new nature celebrates holiness. Our flesh is still with us and we still sin against God. But we don't stay there. As John says, we don't continue to sin because God's DNA of purity is in us. Like Father, like son. Sheep not pigs. This is how Jesus can say, *You will recognize them by their fruits.* (Matthew 7:16)

"The apostle asserts with absolute clarity that those who live in habitual sin have not seen Christ and do not know Christ. This is the same as saying they do not have a saving relationship with Christ. On the other hand, those who abide in him live a life marked by habitual righteousness and purity instead of lawlessness (rebellion) and disobedience. While the unbeliever lives in sin and has not seen or known Christ, the believer has terminated a life of sin for a life of abiding in him. The child of God has experienced a decisive break with sin. Sin no longer controls his life." (Daniel Akin, 1 John, p. 144)

² "Sin is a burden that afflicts us rather than a pleasure that delights us." (Jerry Bridges, *The Discipline of Grace*, p. 71)

Four Reasons Christians Will NOT Continue in “Reckless and Habitual” Sin

God’s spiritual DNA and life is in them

That is John’s point in 1 John 2:29, 3:6, 3:9, and 3:10. There’s no bragging or earning of salvation here. We are not God’s children if we act a certain way; we act a certain way because we are God’s children. If you are a Christian, you are a child of the Holy God. His imprint is upon your soul. His nature is in you. Sons will resemble their fathers, though not perfectly. Sons will obey their fathers, but not perfectly. Overtime adult children are shocked, *We’re becoming our parents!*

Spiritually, the same thing is true. We are becoming more and more like our heavenly Father. If we aren’t and if the resemblance is increasingly dissonant with God, are we actually children of God?

The Holy Spirit is in us with the divine goal of making us more like Christ

We underestimate the significance of God in us. Why is the Spirit in us? What is he doing? Is he lazy? Is he vacationing? No. He is sanctifying us. He is stoking righteous desires in us. Convicting us of sin. Conforming us to the likeness of Jesus.

God lovingly disciplines us

It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. (Hebrews 12:7-8)

Listen, God is more committed to your salvation than you are. He loves you. He loves you enough to bring a little rain into your life, a little hurt here or sorrow there, or other forms of discipline, which wean us off the world and ourselves and sin. He won’t let us continue in sin. He loves us too much to let that happen.

God works through means to keep us from ongoing bondage to sin

Scripture. Prayer. Meditation. Preaching. Worship. Fellowship with other Christians. The church. Life’s circumstances. How about this one—accountability and even church discipline. Do you have anyone who will be honest enough with you to tell you when you are messing up? One of the best means God uses is another brother to tell us when we are being stupid; when we are acting more like a pig than a sheep. Matthew 18 describes how to lovingly confront each other when we see a sin dominating another Christian’s life. It is one way God keeps us from bondage to sin.

So what about so-and-so who claims to be a Christian and yet did such-and-such? If all genuine Christians will NOT continue in habitual sin, when so-and-so gets involved in such-and-such, time will tell. We all get sucked into such-and-such occasionally. In that we must not excuse it when it happens or think, *“All Christians sin, so who cares?”* Sin is a destroyer. Sin is a cancer. Jesus shed his blood for that sin I am choosing. But then we come to our spiritual senses and we confess that sin and make things right and restore our testimony and go on for God.

But when someone who claims to be a Christian sets their mind to continue in sin (*No, I will not change course. I love this sin too much. I must remain in the mud*), even when godly friends protest and confront—over time, as the sinner refuses to leave the mud, his true

nature is revealed. He is not a child of God but a child of the one who loves the immoral mud and wants as many there with him as he can. *Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning.* (1 John 3:8)

So friends, if you are in the mud, get out. If you've been in the mud a long time, look inside and ask, *Am I child of God?* If not, believe in the one who got in the mud for your sake, and died to make you clean. Believe in Jesus. Trust in him. Enjoy being a clean sheep.

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