

1 John 3:4-10: “Practicing Righteousness vs. Practicing Sin”¹
By Rev. Brian T. Cochran

Introduction

I once had a conversation about the Christian faith with a relative who was raised in a Christian church. And his understanding of the Christian faith was that he could live however he wanted because God would forgive him. And so he had no problem with living in sin. For him it was a perfect relationship, “I like to sin, God likes to forgive.” Perhaps you have known someone with such views? Or perhaps you know someone who won’t say such things but the way they live their life demonstrates that this is what they believe deep down. Well there is nothing new under the sun. This has been a common misunderstanding of the Christian faith since the days of the apostles. Paul dealt with this misunderstanding in Romans 6 when he said, Rom. 6:1 What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? 2 By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Paul emphatically denies this understanding of the Christian faith. And John does as well in our passage this morning.

In our passage we see once again the test of obedience. As I have said before, John was confronting false teachers in his day who were denying the reality of Christ’s incarnation and trying to deceive the people of God with their lies. But John counters their claims by laying out various ways in which it is evidenced who the children of God are. The children of God are characterized by their confession that Jesus is the Christ, the incarnate Son of God, and by their obedience to God and love for one another. These are the fruits of all true believers.

And this week he continues with his thought from last week. Last week we saw that God’s children abide in Christ and look forward to his return. They look forward to it because they have already been clothed in Christ’s righteousness and need not fear the judgment. When God’s children are resurrected on that day they will be resurrected with glorified bodies and they will be fully conformed to the image of Christ. Thus, it is not a day that God’s children dread it is a day that God’s children long for. And the practical implication of these things as we learned is that God’s children long to be pure even now. And this brings us to the thought of our passage this morning. If we will be able to identify the children of God on the day when Christ returns as those who will be fully conformed to the image of Christ, how then can we identify them now? This is the theme which connects this passage and next weeks passage. Notice the key verse in 3:10: 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. John contrasts two types of children and their two corresponding lifestyles. The children of God practice righteousness and love, and the children of the devil practice sin and hate. By these tests we know who the children of God and the children of the devil are. And so notice with me this week the first contrast:

Theme: Practicing Righteousness vs. Practicing Sin

- 1. The Seriousness of Sin**
- 2. The Purpose of Christ’s Coming**
- 3. The Practical Implications for God’s Children**

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1. The Seriousness of Sin

In order to grasp John's argument we first need to see how serious sin is. Sin is no small thing. It is a detestable and repulsive thing when we consider its nature and its origin. John speaks of its nature in v. 4: 1John 3:4 Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.

Sin at its root is transgression of God's holy law and rebellion against the Most High God. This is what sin was in the first place with Adam and Eve when they ate the forbidden fruit. They thought they would overthrow God's authority and be a law unto themselves. And thus they plunged themselves and all of their posterity into a life of sin and death. If you want to know how serious that choice was, just look around at all the suffering and curse that we experience in this world as a result of the fall. Sin is not only repugnant at its core, in that it is an affront to Almighty God, it is also to be abhorred because of its consequences.

Women experience pain in child bearing because of sin, husbands and wives argue and fight because of sin, our work comes through much pain and sweat and frustration. Sin has brought curse upon this world. And the worst part of it all is that sin has earned us death and eternal separation from God. Sin is destructive and detestable. And no matter how small you might think that some sins are, every sin, whether private or public, is lawlessness and worthy of eternal death. Thus not only are we called as God's children to love God and love one another, we are also called to hate sin. Friendship with sin is eternal suicide.

And John goes on in v. 8 to show again how serious sin is. Not only is it detestable in its nature it is diabolical in its origins. John says, 8 Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. You see there are two fathers of us all and two types of children. Those who make a practice of sinning are of their father the devil. Jesus said to the Jews who rejected him: John 8:44 You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. To practice sin is to do the will of the devil.

And so, the next time you are tempted to sin, remember just how serious sin is. Sometimes we can deceive ourselves, thinking it's really no big deal if we sin, especially if no one will know about it. But we must remember that sin is lawlessness and sin is of the devil, and we must always flee from it at all costs. Furthermore, we must remember the suffering on the cross that Christ had to go through to redeem us from sin. The cross shows us just how serious sin is to God and brings with it conviction and comfort for sinners who believe that Christ has come to save them from their sins. And so notice with me The Purpose of Christ's Coming.

2. The Purpose of Christ's Coming

Last week John looked forward to the second coming of Christ and how it should affect the way we live now. This week he looks back to the first coming of Christ and shows how it should affect the way that we live now. And his main point is this: The one who makes a practice of sinning denies the purpose of Christ's first coming. This was just another subtle way in which

the gnostic false teachers were denying the incarnation. They denied it confessionally and they denied it through their immoral lifestyles.

But John says, 5 You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. . .8 The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. You see Christ came on a mission. He came to conquer your sin and he came to conquer the devil. And he conquered your sin and the devil by not sinning. This is why John stresses in him there is no sin. It was absolutely necessary that he remain spotless and undefiled by sin. You needed a Savior who would keep the law to save you from your lawlessness.

J. Gresham Machen, who founded Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia, when he was dying on his death bed and had only a few words left in him said, “I am so thankful for the active obedience of Christ. No hope without it.” Beloved you should be so thankful that Christ kept the law and never once sinned. Without being obedient he would never have been able to save you from your disobedience and take away your sins (Rom. 5:18-19). But because he did obey, when he died on the cross, he removed the guilt of sin from those who look to him by faith. The Psalmist joyfully sings, “Psa. 103:12 as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.” Because he conquered sin, he can remove your sins.

And because he conquered the devil, you no longer have to serve your former evil father. Jesus resisted the devil in the wilderness where he proved to be the second Adam and the true Israel (Matt. 4:1-11). Where Adam and Israel failed, Christ succeeded.

And he ultimately triumphed over sin and the devil on the cross. In the garden it appeared that the devil had thwarted God’s plan through the sin and fall of Adam and Eve, but God promised that from Eve’s offspring would come a Savior. The offspring of the devil would try to stamp out the offspring of Eve, so that the Savior could not come, but at some point in history the Savior would come. And the serpent would strike the heel of the Savior, but the Savior would crush the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15).

Children: Have you ever been bitten by a mosquito or some bug? It doesn’t feel good does it? Well, have you ever squashed a bug that bit you as pay back? This is what happened when Jesus died on the cross. The devil bit him, but Jesus squashed the devil. And children, Jesus is coming again to finish the job and the devil cannot harm you if you trust in Jesus.

Beloved you can take comfort in the fact that Jesus came to take away sins and to destroy the works of the devil. The one who makes a practice of sin denies the purpose of Christ’s first coming and the work that he accomplished. Furthermore, the one who practices sin denies the power that Christ has given to God’s children to resist the devil and flee from sin. Notice with me then the practical implications of Christ’s coming for God’s children.

3. The Practical Implications for God’s Children

John says, 6 No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. . .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. These are verses that have often been misunderstood. They have historically been the verses used to support an

erroneous view of sanctification called “entire sanctification.” Entire sanctification is the notion that genuine Christians experience sinless perfection in this life.

And part of what has led to this false interpretation is that some English translations have given poor translations of v. 9. This doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t trust your English Bible’s. There are several very reliable English translations, but every once in a while we have to dig deeper and look at the original Greek or Hebrew. And this is a passage where it definitely helps to know some Greek.

Notice first how our pew Bibles (ESV) translate v. 9: No one born of God makes a practice of sin. . .he cannot keep on sinning. This is a good translation and I am glad that we have the ESV for this reason. But some of you may have other translations such as the Revised Standard Version (RSV), the New International Version (NIV), or the New American Standard Version (NASB). Listen to how these versions translate v. 9:

RSV--No one born of God commits sin (?). . . he cannot sin (?)

NIV--No one who is born of God will continue to sin. . .he cannot go on sinning (that sounds better).

NASB--No one who is born of God practices sin (good). . .he cannot sin (?)

So the RSV allows for a perfectionist interpretation, the NIV and ESV clearly do not and the NASB is ambiguous.

Well what are we to make of these translations? What is the best translation of these verse? In the first place, you should always remember the number one rule for interpreting the Bible: Scripture is the best interpreter of Scripture. You have two options here: either John is saying that God’s children do not commit sin and cannot sin or he saying that God’s children cannot practice sin and keep on sinning. In order to decide which is correct, think about what we have already covered in 1 John? Remember this is a letter and it is meant to be read in one sitting and not broken up into isolated passages.

And so remember that John has already said in 1John 1:8: 8 If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. . .10 If we say we have not sinned we make [God] a liar and, and his word is not in us. We cannot deny our sin nature and we cannot deny that we commit sin. John goes on in 2:1 and reveals one of the purposes of his letter: 1 My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. BUT IF ANYONE DOES SIN, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. 2 He is the propitiation for our sins.

These verses inform how we should interpret John’s words in our passage this morning. And clearly they are pointing us in the direction of the NIV and ESV translations. There is no way that John is teaching sinless perfection here. Instead, what John is saying is that the children of God cannot be characterized by a lifestyle of sin. Rather they are characterized by the fruit of righteousness. The children of the devil on the other hand are characterized by a lifestyle of sin.

The original Greek also supports this view. I won't explain the Greek entirely because I wouldn't want to bore you with the details, but it is important to note that John goes out of his way to use a present tense verb which communicates continuous action. The Greek would have expected an aorist tense which communicates one time action. But since John uses an unexpected present tense verb it shows that he was carefully crafting his language to communicate that Christians, although they commit sin, they are not content to live in it.²

John says the one who is content to live in sin and makes a practice of sinning has neither seen him or known him [Christ] (v. 6). Furthermore, he is a child of the devil (v. 10). On the other hand the one who practices righteousness shows evidence of being righteous as Christ is righteous (v. 7) and that he or she is a child of God (v. 10). This is a very simple test for determining who the children of God and who the children of the devil are. Jesus said the same thing in Matt. 7. Matt. 7:17 So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. 18 A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

The righteousness that we practice in no way earns our salvation. Christ is the one who earned our salvation. But the righteousness that we practice is fruit and evidence that we are in fact abiding in Christ and are born of God. By faith, we are ingrafted into Christ by the Spirit and are attached to Him like the branches of vine. John also tells us that the reason we cannot practice sin is because 9 God's seed abides in us. As I said last week, we not only are adopted as God's children in a legal sense, we also are God's children in a transformative sense and we all share family traits. Just as children look like their parents and their siblings, so too do we resemble each other as part of God's family no matter what our earthly families or nationalities look like. This is one of the blessings of meeting other Christians from around the world. We all share the same love for our Triune God and each other.

Now I can imagine at least two reactions to this passage. Some of you are hearing what John is saying and are encouraged. You are thinking, this is so encouraging because this means that my desire to be free from the sin in my life (even though I struggle and fall at times) is a genuine evidence that I am a child of God. If this is what you have taken from this passage then good. John would want you to be encouraged by these words if you genuinely hate sin and fight against it. He wrote this epistle to give assurance to God's children. And you can be encouraged that God's seed abides in you and that Phil. 1:6 he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

On the other hand some of you are hearing what John is saying and are discouraged. You are discouraged because you think, "I struggle so much with sin." If this is your reaction to John's words, I want to encourage you that one of the marks of a Christian is struggle with sin. John is not speaking against those who struggle with sin. He is speaking against those who don't struggle with sin because they could care less about sin. Our Belgic Confession of Faith Article 29 describes the members of the Church and how they may be known by the marks of a Christians: "namely, by faith, and when, having received Jesus Christ the only Savior, they avoid

² S.M. Baugh, *A First John Reader: Intermediate Greek Reading Notes and Grammar*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1999), 50-52.

sin, follow after righteousness, love the true God and their neighbor, neither turn aside to the right or left and crucify the flesh with the works thereof. BUT this is not to be understood as if there did not remain in them GREAT infirmities; BUT they fight against it through the Spirit all the days of their life, CONTINUALLY taking their refuge in the blood, death, passion, and obedience of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom they have remission of sins, through faith in Him.”

This is the type of Christian that John is describing in our passage: One who is NOT PERFECT, but also one who is NOT CONTENT to remain in sin. And so if you are discouraged by the struggles in your life, take heart because it is evidence that you have been given the Spirit of Christ which wages war on your old nature. Jesus Christ came and worked for you and he is working in you by His Spirit so that you more and more die to sin and live for him. And so, take refuge in Him and live out of the truth that your sins are completely forgiven in Him and walk in the strength of His Spirit.

Paul said, Phil. 3:12 Not that I have already obtained [the resurrection] or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But ONE THING I DO: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus

If you are discouraged with what lies behind, don't look back at your own life, look back at the life of Christ and look forward to Christ's return where you will be made like him (1Jn. 3:2). Our greatest source of assurance is looking to Jesus Christ. In Christ we see that God is for us and not against us. And as we look to Jesus Christ, the Spirit is transforming us more into his image so that we more and more bear the fruit of righteousness.

Conclusion

Beloved, this is the contrast between practicing righteousness and practicing sin. Let us never forget the seriousness of sin and let us always look to Jesus Christ who appeared to take away sin and to destroy the works of the devil. Thanks be to God that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, who came in the flesh. Amen!

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³ This bibliography represents the regular works consulted throughout this series though not always quoted in every sermon. Stott's commentary I highly recommend as the best balance between technical and pastoral commentary.