

# Sermon 9, How to Deal with Sin, Pt. 2: The Way of the Word, 1 John 1:10-2:1

If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us. (My little children, I am writing these things to you 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 those of the whole world.

**Proposition:** The Word internalized will keep you from sin, but only if you let it give you a new identity as God's little children.

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## **Introduction**

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we come this morning to the third hypothetical statement that John says we might make. However, we're not going to look yet at its final complement, the hypothetical response beginning "If any man sin, we have a paraclete." We'll reserve that for next week, when we look at our magnificent Messiah and Redeemer. He is the ultimate solution to the problem of sin. John has already identified one solution to the problem of sin; we looked at that last week and called it the way of confession. Today we're going to look at a second solution to the problem of sin. We know that this is a solution, even though it's almost a parenthetical comment the apostle makes: "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin." Yet in that little parenthesis lies another whole approach the problem of sin. Obviously, at the end of the day and in the midst of the Christian life, all three of these approaches work together. We fight sin with the way of confession, the way of the word, and the way of the Paraclete; Heaven knows that sin attacks us in many ways and we need many ways to fight back! So as we talk about the way of the word in struggling

against sin, I hope to show you simply this: The Word internalized will keep you from sin, but only if you let it give you a new identity as God's little children.

### **I. Two Ways to Not Sin**

Once again, John presents us with a hypothetical statement: "We have not sinned." Now, does this statement indicate a different emphasis from the one in v. 8, "We have no sin?" It's hard to tell. Some say that v. 8 is talking about a sinful nature, while v. 10 is talking about sinful actions. Either way, I think it's clear that both statements, whatever difference between them John may have intended, essentially function in a way we all recognize. That way is as a denial of moral culpability. "I didn't do anything wrong. I'm a good person." That's how we like to think of ourselves. And that is the affirmation that John is most concerned to dispute.

#### **A. Lie About It**

Basically, you and I can deal with sin by lying about it. We can claim to be good when we're not. As I said a couple of weeks ago, John is presenting the bald-faced extreme example. Few people will say outright that they have not sinned. But all of us have invented many ways of subtly and not-so-subtly claiming to be morally better than others, from the price of our car to the prestige of our address to the cut of our clothing or the color of our lipstick. Brothers and sisters, insofar as you are attempting to project the "I'm better than you" vibe, you fall under John's condemnation in this passage. In fact, if you lie about the presence of sin in your life, whether in a big way or a small one, you are ultimately doing two things.

#### **1. Make God a Liar**

First, you're making God a liar. As we know, to make someone a liar doesn't mean "forcing someone to make assertions contrary to what he actually believes to be the case." You can't force God to lie in that sense. All you can do is imply that He is a liar because what He says is different from what you say, and what you say is obviously correct. In other words, to make God a liar is to say "God says I'm a sinner, but God is wrong."

Again, we would probably not dare to say this in so many words. You can't come to church and say "God is wrong." Rather, what do we say? "That passage has been misunderstood." "The church has been wrong about that." "Many Christians haven't understood the real thrust of New Testament teaching on that point." Of course, at the end of the day the conclusion is that God was wrong and that now homosexuality is okay, female preachers are okay, abortion is okay, and on and on down the line. Brothers and sisters, to say "The Bible doesn't teach that" when the Bible does teach it is make God a liar. To justify your own sin with the excuse that the Bible doesn't actually forbid the kinds of sin you're sinning is to make God a liar. Ultimately, it is to say that you're right and the Almighty is wrong.

Yes, human interpretation is a real factor that interposes between us and the text. Yes, to disagree with my interpretation is not necessarily to disagree with God. But neither of those admissions changes the fact that it is in fact possible to make God a liar by saying the opposite of what He has said. Many different theological positions make God a liar. Many different moral views make God a liar. How do you know whether a view calls God a liar? Just see if it allows

what He condemns or condemns what He allows. If it does either of those things, then it is making God a liar.

## **2. Expel His Word from Your Life**

And if you are guilty of making God a liar, the next step you'll have to take is to expel His word from your life. "His word is not in us." That ultimately means that Christ is not in you, and the written word and the internalized word are not in you. You're not a Christian if His word isn't in you, because the promise of the New Covenant is that God will write His law on your mind. If that word is AWOL, then you aren't a Christian. And you don't need to be one. Yes, you heard that correctly. You have no need to be a Christian if you have not sinned. If you're free from sin, then you have no need to be forgiven and delivered from sin by Jesus Christ. Why would you be a Christian if you're not a sinner? Christianity is a religion for sinners only. God says everyone has sinned; if you say you haven't, then clearly, you and God have a fundamental disagreement.

### **B. Incorporate His Word into Yourself**

Well, while denial is one way to deal with sin, it's a bogus way, a worthless way. The actual way to deal with sin is the way that John brings forward, both by implication and by direct statement.

By implication, of course, he teaches that if you admit your sin, you admit that God is right, and then His word will abide in you. Notice the direct statement, too. V. 10 refers to God's word and to not sinning; so does 2:1. Each verse has three elements in a row, and two of those elements are the same between verses. Clearly there's a parallel literary structure going on here. And that structure indicates that there's a very close connection between not sinning and the word. The connection lies in this, that the word believed and internalized will keep you from sinning!

### **1. Believe that God Is True**

So the first thing you need to do to deal with your sin is to believe that God is true. Don't make Him a liar; make Him a truth-teller! Say what He said, and then say and show that you agree with it. Make it clear to everyone that what God said and what you believe are one and the same thing.

Now, as a side note, I would caution that there's far more danger here, on the side of agreeing with God, of misinterpreting what He said. If you're going to sin, and then claim that it wasn't a sin, you have very little excuse. The law is written not just on old parchment manuscripts of the Bible, but also on your heart. But if you're going to try to believe everything that God said, and only what God said, you have a lifelong journey of studying and attempting to understand ahead of you. But that's no reason to give up or to claim that we can't know what God said. Even to make such a claim is to say something highly definite about the content of what God said; in other words, that claim is self-contradictory and ridiculous. People disagree; that's the nature of fallen human beings. But God always agrees with Himself and is always right. And the first way to deal with sin is make Him a truth-teller. Say "I did this, and it's wrong." In other words, the first step on the way of the word is the same as the first step on the way of confession.

## **2. Internalize the word as John wrote it**

But the second step on the way of the word is to internalize the word. To make God a liar is to expel His word from your life. To make Him a truth-teller has the opposite result: it internalizes God's word in your life. When you make Him a truth-teller, His word is in you — and if His word is in you, His Spirit is in you too.

Christ dwells in us. We are the Temple of the Holy Spirit. We are the dwelling-places of God Almighty. That should lead us to sing and make melody in our hearts to the Lord, and it should lead us to read Scripture and commit its content to our memory. You should be able instantly to identify every statement anyone can make as a Bible verse or not. You should be able to tell what book of the Bible it's from too. Brothers and sisters, this is not a task for the super-Christian. This is a task for the ordinary Christian. God's word can and should dwell in you richly. If you read it every day, and think about what you read, I promise that it will. It better. Because if it doesn't, you won't be able to deal with sin! John wrote this letter to keep you from sinning. That means that if you don't know its content, you are deprived of a powerful weapon in the struggle against the enemy. Imagine going into battle with a stick when you could have an M-16 and a Huey helicopter. Why would you do that to yourself? And the same is true of all anorexic, unarmed Christians. That's right: if you don't read the word, you're an anorexic. You're not eating what you need to survive as a child of God. If you don't read the word, you're an unarmed Christian soldier, marching as to war without a clue how you're going to actually fight with the enemy. Now, tell me this: How many victories are a bunch of unarmed anorexics going to win? Brothers and sisters, John is writing to keep us from sin. He's showing us the way of the word. But it's a way that you and I can only take by devouring vast quantities of the word and internalizing it until it's an inseparable part of us. When you get dementia, your Bible verses and Psalm lyrics should be the last thing to go.

### **II. One New Identity: Little Children**

But when and how will the word dwell in you so richly? I think John's parenthetical address to his readers gives us a clue.

#### **A. His Word Tells You Who You Are**

God's word tells you who you are. God, not you, defines your spiritual status. You are little children.

That's right. Unless you can become like a little child, you can't receive the kingdom of God.

#### **1. John Is Your Spiritual Father**

But John doesn't just call you "little children." He calls you "my little children." One is almost a disrespectful and patronizing address; the other is incredibly tender and loving. John claims you! He calls you his own. Can you imagine that? An apostle addresses you as his little children.

Parents, is there anything you wouldn't do for your children? Are there any people on earth more important to you than these precious little ones that God has given to you? If your own parents make demands that would make it hard for you to take care of your little ones, what

do you do? You choose to help the little ones first. I once heard a wife ask her husband, “If we have to choose between helping our kids and our parents, which do we choose?” The husband said “At this point, with little kids, it’s simple: We choose the kids, because if we don’t take care of them they will literally die.”

Brothers and sisters, in calling you his little children John is signalling how much he cares about you. He loves you like your own father. You are as important to him as his own children. That’s why he’s taking the time to write to you.

## **2. Little one, you aren’t so Big and Important after all**

But what does he mean to imply by calling us “little children”? He’s saying that we’re not so big and important after all. You aren’t in charge of your own life. You aren’t the final arbiter of everything that’s going to happen around you. You are a mere child.

### **B. Before His word can be in you, you must grow young again!**

In other words, brothers and sisters, childlikeness is an incredibly important part of the Christian life. Jesus had no problem saying that you can’t enter His Kingdom unless you become like a little child. That means that you have a profound trust in Him, and live by faith rather than scheming.

You can’t fight sin unless you grow young again — young enough to listen to and internalize the word of God, such that you let it give you your identity as a little child. You’re not self-sufficient. You’re not good enough to tackle the world on your own. You can’t take care of yourself or live on your own. You need a Heavenly Father. And when you know Him, and His word abides in you, you won’t sin.

How do you reshape your identity? First, bathe in Scripture, as we were just talking about. Second, pray and get in the habit of calling God Father and thinking about Him as such, as the one who provides for you and takes care of you. And finally, every time you catch yourself thinking how grown-up you are, play with a child. Watch the child and say, “Can I become like this to enter the Kingdom?” If you can’t, you’re too proud. Humble yourself enough to learn to play, and in the process you will accidentally learn to not sin.

Let’s pray.