

THE SIN OF SINNING (I JOHN 3:4-10)

As John seeks to strengthen our confidence in the Lord's return (2:28), he elaborates on the argument from Vs. 3 by emphasising the absolute necessity of purity of life. He approaches it from a different perspective. He does not approach it from our expectation of the Lord's return but from the experience of the Lord's redemption, the purpose of his first manifestation (1:2); to put away sin (3:5 *cf.* Hebrews 9:26).

By dealing with this subject again (*cf.* 1:6ff) John highlights the recurring problem of sin in the life of the professing believer. It is a real issue. The tension between sin and righteousness (Vs. 7 *cf.* 2:29), God and Satan is the fundamental issue here, and how that tension is dealt with. Originating with Satan (Vs. 8) and practiced by men (Vs. 4, 6-10) sin is lawlessness against God (Vs. 4). Christ came to take away sin (Vs. 5) and destroy the work of the devil (Vs. 8). The logical conclusion is that whoever is born of God (Vs. 9) and consequently abides in Him (Vs. 6) does not go on sinning and whoever does go on sinning has not seen God and has not known him (V. 6); he is not of God (Vs. 10). Formulated by the expression "whosoever" (πᾶς ὅς). John lays this out very comprehensively and thoroughly, looking at it from different perspectives (see the tables below).

Positively	Negatively
Whoever commits sin is lawless (Vs. 4)	
Whoever abides in Him does not go on sinning (Vs. 6)	Whoever continues to sin has not seen him nor known Him (Vs. 6)
Whoever is born of God does not go on doing sin (Vs. 9)	Whoever does not do righteousness is not of God (Vs. 10)

Sin in relation to...	Relationship
Itself (Vs. 4b)	The Rebellion of sin
Christ (Vs. 5)	The Destroyer of sin
Man (Vs. 4, 6-10)	The Practitioner of sin
Satan (Vs. 8a)	The Originator of sin

1. SIN IS PROBLEMATIC

It is natural that John should move from the subject of glorification to speak about sin. Those who hold a hope of being 'like him' in glory ought to seek to be 'like him' now. John is not blind to the fact that there are those who are 'deceived' (Vs. 7). There are those who profess this hope of dwelling in purity (Vs. 3) in heaven, but want to live in lawlessness (Vs. 4) on earth. The early disciples lived a life commensurate with an expectation of the coming of the Lord (I John 2:28; 3:2-3; Romans 8:19; Philippians 1:20). John said in Vs. 3 that those who expect to see him will aim to be like him. The hope spoken of in Vs. 3 however, raises a natural and biblical concern; the concern that the hope we hold may not be real, that it may be ill-founded. Are we sure that when the Lord does come back our confidence will not be turned to confusion (Matthew 7:22), because sin has not been dealt with (3:5). Peter says in **II Peter 1:10** "*Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure.*" More specifically with relation to the hope of Christ's return Peter says in **II Peter 3:14** "*Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless.*" These are the exhortations also of Christ in **Matthew 25:13** "*Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh.*" In these passages we are exhorted to have a proper understanding of what sin actually is as it relates to our professed standing in Christ. John then gives a terse definition of sin that cuts right to the heart of the issue.

2. SIN IS LAWLESSNESS

There are a number of words in the New Testament used to speak of sin; **Paraptomah** (παράπτωμα) ("*trespasses*" Ephesians 2:1; "*sins*" Ephesians 2:5) means to deviate from truth, to fall outside the bounds of...). **Adikia** (ἀδικία) means unrighteousness (Romans 1:18). **Hamartia** (ἁμαρτία) means to miss the mark, fall short of the target (Romans 3:9; 5:12). **Anomia** (ἀνομία) means lawlessness, without law. Out of these words John uses two in Vs. 4; *hamartia* (ἁμαρτία) and *anomia* (ἀνομία). The word *is* between them signifies "is equivalent to." John does not say that lawlessness is a sub-category of sin, or that lawlessness is of the nature of sin. Sin is lawlessness; they are co-extensive and equivalent terms. The definition of sin that John gives here is the most profound of all the New Testament definitions (*cf.* Romans 14:23; James 4:17; I John 5:17). The law of God is perfect, absolute, unchangeable and universal. The universal dimension is clearly laid out by John in the uses of his formulating expression

"whosoever" (V's 4, 6, 9, 10 cf. John 3:16). This is the law to which we are all subject.

But which law specifically is John speaking about, The Mosaic Law, judicial, ceremonial or even the moral law in written form? Is he speaking about the law of conscience? The word law here signifies the revelation of the will of God; however that is made, it is therefore all-inclusive. More specifically, but maintaining the breadth of this law we could say that the Law that John speaks of is that which is revealed through Christ, with its full spiritual application. Sin is not just a disregard for God's law, nor is it merely being 'without law', sin is a rebellion against the law of God. For the ungodly there is eternal punishment attached to this (cf. Romans 2:14-15). But for the Christian there is a seriousness attached to this that demands attention.

3. SIN IS SERIOUS

In John's approach to this subject there are four ways in which he emphasises the seriousness of sin; first by contrasting it with righteousness (2:29 cf. 3:4), second by comparing it to other words used for sin (*hamartia*, **ἁμαρτία** and *anomia*, **ἀνομία**), third, by complementing it with an auxiliary verb, "doing sin" (3:4, 9), and fourth by the emphasis of continuity in sin (present tense, active voice, indicative (3:6a, 9) or participle (*sinning*, 3:4, 6b, 8a) or infinitive (3:9b *as a usual practice*) mood). These four aspects of John's analysis carry us deeper into understanding the true seriousness of sin.

If we could take these two words (*hamartia*, **ἁμαρτία** and *anomia*, **ἀνομία**) and see their independent meaning we would see two sides of the one coin. The word sin (*hamartia*, **ἁμαρτία**) in this verse means a falling short or missing the mark (as an arrow would miss the target) and may give the simple idea of infirmity rather than guilt. But John is quick to clarify this in the next phrase; that supposed infirmity is an act of rebellion; it is lawlessness. John goes further and says that sin is not merely lawlessness it is wilful rebelling. He makes a distinction between "sinning" (3:6) and "committing sin" (cf. 3:9). The difference here is between that which is and that which is carried out to completeness, between sin in general and sin specific, deliberate and conscious (cf. 8, 9).