

August 13, 2017
Sunday Evening Service
Series: 1 John
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
© 2017 David J. Whitcomb

**THE DEVIL'S PEOPLE ARE SINNERS;
GOD'S PEOPLE AREN'T
1 John 3:4-10**

I watched a documentary the other day about Hitler's rise to power. As the man became more and more powerful, as he rose from an obscure nationalist to the ruler of Germany, people held differing opinions about him. Some people thought he was an over zealous fool who craved power and attention and who was probably crazy. Other people who felt the sting of an economy in shambles, and who believed the rest of Europe had treated them unfairly after the previous war, hailed Hitler as a Savior.

Then there were people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer who saw through the sham benefits Hitler promised the people, and Martin Niemöller who in a short time also saw through the deception. Those men saw in Hitler the devil incarnate. They tried to warn the citizens of Germany not to trust the man because there were too many inconsistencies and too much evidence that portended his evil nature and wicked plans. Too many people didn't listen. As a result, the nation suffered near total destruction and the world suffered much destruction as well.

Because hindsight is 20-20, we can now say confidently, "No one should have been duped by Hitler because his evil character was so obvious." And many of the people who confidently make that statement are even now being duped by friends and family members whose confession is that they love Jesus but whose lives look like they are friends of the devil.

We need to remember that John did not have Hitler in his gun sights as he unpacked these warnings about sinners. He wrote to professing Christians who were part of the local church in Ephesus.

He was trying to help the people identify those who could rightly be called antichrists. He described people who had been an integral part of the local church but who had abandoned the church. These wayward folks professed that they were followers of Christ as much as anyone in the church was. But in reality, they denied the person of Christ, the work of Christ, the deity of Christ. Therefore, we should not be surprised that their lives were characterized by the sin of the devil, not by the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

In theory, the argument and warning is sound and sensible. But when we try to apply the warning to current circumstances, we run head-on into a disagreement. Someone is going to resist by saying, "What is sin to you is not sin to me." Who determines what is sin? God does. Our text is clear. We are either sinning like the devil or living righteously like Jesus.

That God determines what constitutes sin is also clear and plain, until we try to apply the argument to life in the 21st century. How do we know what Christ said or means? On one hand, there are several lists in the New Testament that contain a total of about 75 clearly stated specific sins in attitude, thought, and action. A large portion of those sins are ignored or tolerated in the modern church.

On the other hand, there is this general principle: "*Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin*" (Romans 14:23). Personal sin can be a matter of opinion. To that end it truly is possible that what is sin to me might not be sin to you.

However, John's argument doesn't seem to flow in that direction. In fact, we cannot help but notice that in the context of the argument John identified sinners as people who do not practice righteousness (a general description), and as people who do not love the brothers (a specific application). That failure to love a fellow Christian constitutes sin is a rather clear and pointed description of sin. In reality, it is not that difficult to determine who is practicing righteousness and who is practicing sin. Generally, we can ask confessing sinners and they will point out the problem.

The big question at the end of the argument is, "Which do I appear to be?" If someone other than God could see what really goes on in my heart, would I be branded "sinner" or "saint"? We will submit ourselves to the Holy Spirit as He teaches us from this text and let Him make the call.

The Truth About Sinners (vv.4-6).

Sin is lawlessness. John warned that *Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness (v.4)*. Some people are practicing sinning. Well, yes, we know that. But is it not true that genuine Christians sin? John already addressed Christians, *If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth (1 John 1:6)*. He already told us that we all are having sin. *If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us (1 John 1:8)*. And he told us that we all have sinned in the past. *If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us (1 John 1:10)*. Therefore, we are all in constant need of confessing our sins. *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9)*. Most of these verbs are present tense which indicates an ongoing problem.

The question is not, “Is it possible for a Christian to sin?” but “Are Christians like sinners who sin habitually?” There is no doubt that Christians fall into sin. However, unlike the person who would be characterized as a habitual sinner, we are not always lusting, always coveting, always lying, always angry, and so forth. To inadvertently lie or be angry or lust is not the same as being characterized by sin.

Yes, but what about Christians who are addicted to sin? Is continual lust, overeating, covetousness, jealousy, or anger not sin? I remember hearing an old preacher from the Holiness group preach many years ago. He declared, “If you beat your wife Monday, and you beat her a week ago Monday, and you beat her two weeks ago Monday, are you not a wife beater?” We all struggle with the definition of “practicing sin.”

Maybe the telling difference is that while a Christian might commit a sin, sinners cannot **NOT** sin. Sinners are dominated by sin. For example, Paul confessed that when Jesus saved him he had been the chief of sinners. Oh, that confession will surely help us identify what sinners do. What kind of sins did Saul the Pharisee practice regularly? We don’t know everything he did. But we do know that Saul was proud, he was unfair, unjust, unkind, and he consented to murder. But most of all, Saul rejected Jesus as his Master. That is an

important point. Sinners live every day with sin having dominion over them instead of Jesus having dominion over them.

A key for identifying what constitutes the practice of sinning is the simple principle that sinners break the law. But what about people who sinned before God gave the law to Moses? There was still sin in the world. Paul taught us that *sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, . . . (Romans 5:13)*. That sin was still sin even before the law is obvious because before the law came the penalty for sin – death – was enacted (Romans 5:14).

That leads us to wonder what law exactly does sin break? The Mosaic Law (to which Paul referred in Romans 5:13) expresses the will and character of God. Sin is thought, attitude, or activity that flows from the spirit of rebellion against that law. But there is also the Moral law of God which was in effect before God gave the law to Moses. The Moral Law of God (found throughout the Bible) expresses the will and character of God. Therefore, sin is all thought, attitude, or activity that flows from the spirit of rebellion against God’s moral law as it is expressed in the Bible.

Therefore, practicing sinners have a spirit of rebellion against God’s person, character, and authority expressed in law in its broadest sense. The most obvious expressions are pride, willfulness against God, self-determination or stubbornness.

Standing in stark contrast to the natural rebellion against God is the fact that saints hate that they break the law. We too can be proud, willful, stubborn against God which leads to any number of other sins. But when it becomes obvious that we break God’s law, we hate it, confess it, and are forgiven. Richard Baxter, a seventeenth century pastor, would ask the families of his parish two specific questions as he catechized them:

1) “Can you truly say, that all the known sins of your past life are the grief of your heart, and that you have felt that everlasting misery is due to you for them; and that, under a sense of this heavy burden, you have felt yourself a lost man, and have gladly entertained the news of a Savior, and cast your soul upon Christ alone, for pardon by His blood?”

2) “Can you truly say, that your heart is so far turned from sin, that you hate the sins which you once have loved, and love that holy life which you had no mind to before; and that you do not now live

in the willful practice of any known sin? Is there no sin which you are not heartily willing to forsake whatever it cost you; and no duty which you are not willing to perform?" (Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*).

Christians respond to sin in their lives in this fashion because we know that Jesus is sinless. *You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin (v.5)*. The last part of this statement reminds us that we already know that Jesus is without sin. He conceded to come to earth, take on human form, and die for our sins because He never rebelled against the Heavenly Father. Listen to His sinless nature when you hear, *"Who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (Philippians 2:6-7)*. Then also, at the point of greatest crisis, the Son never rebelled against the Father's authority. *And he said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will" (Mark 14:36)*.

Then according to the first part of the verse, we know that Jesus' purpose is to take away sin. Jesus took the sins of His people upon Himself. He carried them to the brink of eternity and cast them away, never to be found again. He died to destroy sin's dominion over His people. Therefore, if we die with Christ, what power does sin have over us that we should obey it? Is it not true that *"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20-21)*.

Because Christ was perfectly sinless and came to earth to take away my sin, and because I have already died to self and live through Christ, sin does not dominate the Christian. Here is the larger, but precise argument: *Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present*

yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace (Romans 6:8-14).

Sinners do not have that scenario taking place in their lives. As a result, sinners practice sin because they don't know Jesus. *No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him (v.6)*. The truth of this statement is very plain. No one can abide in Jesus and abide in sin at the same time. That is as Jesus pictured for us in the vine and branches story. God's children remain in Christ like the branch remains in the vine. We draw life from Christ the vine. Christ, who we know is sinless, does not fellowship with sin. Therefore, if there is sin, it breaks the fellowship between branch and vine. Jesus warned, *"If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned" (John 15:6)*.

Sin betrays association with Jesus. A life of sin declares loudly, "I do not know Christ." Knowing Christ is an intimate relationship. In that relationship we are knowledgeable of Christ, that is, knowing truth about Him. But more than that, we are also learning about Christ in our experience with Him. We are learning the full extent of Christ's sinlessness. Because that is true, to live in sin is to say, "I have really never even been introduced to Christ" (*seen him*).

Don't Be Deceived—There is a Difference Between God and the Devil (vv.7-10).

There is a clear and undeniable contrast between God and Satan and, therefore, there must also be a clear contrast between the children of God and the children of the devil. To that end John told us not to be deceived. Jesus' people are to do righteousness like He does. *Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous (v.7)*.

Obviously there is the danger that God's children can be deceived. That is due to the fact that there are many antichrists in the world. They pretend to be for Christ when in fact they are against Christ. They were part of the assembly in Ephesus but eventually

separated. They are part of many local churches throughout the world throughout history. There is a real and present danger is the fact that Satan's workers make themselves appear like messengers of truth (light) in order to lead God's people into sin and error.

We do well to remember that Christ's letters to the seven churches in Asia were full of warnings about deception. In particular, think of the warning Jesus gave to the church in Ephesus, the same church to which John likely wrote this letter. Jesus said, "*But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent*" (Revelation 2:4-5).

There is a genuine and great danger that God's people will be deceived into thinking that Jesus Christ is not opposed to sin. If people in the church are not convicted about sin, they will not be able to grasp the fact that they have broken God's law. If they are not convinced they have broken God's law, they will never see the real need for the Savior. If they do not see the need of the Savior, multitudes of faithful church attenders will spend eternity in hell. That is Satan's plan, desire, and delight.

Just as we should not be deceived into thinking that God's people don't live righteously, we should also not be deceived to think that the devil's people don't sin like he does. *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* (v.8). The devil has been sinning from the beginning. At some point, Lucifer chose to rebel against the Creator. He determined that he knew better and chose to take control of his own existence for his own glory. Wow, that sounds very much like the most natural thing for people to do.

Our Savior Jesus Christ came to earth to destroy Satan's work of rebellion against God. The plain, simple truth is that Jesus Christ is opposed to rebellion against the Father's authority. To exalt the natural human spirit (i.e. power of positive thinking, life is about me, take care of number one) is to oppose Christ's work. People who join in Satan's rebellion are opposed to God regardless of what they claim. Simply put, a proud person is opposed to Christ. Don't be deceived, people who are opposed to Christ do not belong to Christ.

It's a family matter. People born into God's family don't practice sin. *No one born of God makes a practice of sinning* (v.9a). We are either born of God or we are not. If we have experienced the miracle of the new birth through regeneration by the Holy Spirit, we are no longer rebelling against God. If we simply made a religious decision in the past, that will not keep us from sinning. Religious decisions are dependent on a person's determination. A genuine relationship with the Father is the best deterrent to sin.

God's children can't live in sin. No one who is 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* (v.9b). The final argument is non-negotiable. If a person has God's seed within, he or she cannot enjoy or even tolerate sin in life.

We must conclude that the evidence is in. There is a clear difference between God's children and the devil's children. *By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil* (v.10a). It is okay for God's children to spot the difference. It is okay for us to draw a conclusion on the difference. It is okay for you to tell the sinning person that sin is not compatible with being God's child.

There is a difference. And God's children do righteousness—like loving their brothers. *Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother* (v.10b). Failure to practice righteousness proves who we belong to. A most obvious form of righteousness is love for fellow Christians. Jesus taught this new commandment. John keeps bringing it up. It must be important. And yet, is it not true that we modern Christians do not consider love of Christians to be very important? We readily admit that sin like lust (looking at pornography), anger, lying, stealing, cheating, envy, jealousy, covetousness, pride (desire to call attention to ourselves or to be liked), are all sin. We all believe that Christians ought to stay away from that stuff. Yes, but one of the most obvious indications that we are not really Christians is our failure to be concerned for other true believers. Jesus taught us that loving the brothers is what righteousness looks like.

It really does matter that we identify followers of Christ versus non-followers of Christ. It really does matter that we examine ourselves to be sure we are the children of God. Identifying,

confessing, forsaking sin in our own lives is very important. If we cannot hate sin or choose not to hate sin, it is a pretty good indication that we are not born again. How many people will find themselves at the Great White Throne of God wishing they would have applied this simple test?