

3. The second section consists of the last three conditional sentences (1:8-10). These are all closely related in that they deal with the issue of *sin*. Once again, the first two form a contrasting pair, just as was the case with the former statements regarding darkness and light. The third and final conditional sentence in this section, then, forms a capstone that closes out the passage. Before considering vv. 8-10 in detail, it's worth noting that this passage has been debated from the early period of church history. The Council of Carthage (418 A.D.) referenced it in its dispute with Pelagian doctrine and the Catholic Church's position regarding sin and concupiscence was thought to find support in John's statements about sin's continuing presence in the Christian's life. Of course, the effect of using this passage as a proof-text was that John's meaning tended to be obscured as later theological notions and formulations were read back into his words. He was made to say what he wasn't saying and his statements were then used as biblical vindication of a particular doctrine. The result is that John's statements are often read through the lens of assumed premises and traditional interpretations (whether Roman Catholic, Reformed, Fundamentalist, etc.); the reader is engaging the text through a pair of glasses he doesn't even know he's wearing. The problem of interpretation is made more difficult by the fact that John seems to later contradict what he says here. Here he states unequivocally that sin continues in a believer's life; in 3:4-6 he insists that the one who abides in Christ does not sin and anyone who does sin does not know God. These apparent contradictions and the absoluteness of John's statements have provided rich fodder to theologians and scholars and have fueled endless debates through the centuries. Once again, the key to deriving John's meaning is the reader inserting himself into John's own context; he must come to the text recognizing that he's reading someone else's mail.

John didn't pen this correspondence to a Medieval or Reformation audience, much less a modern one. He wrote to first century Christians out of concern that influences among them were corrupting the truth of the gospel of Jesus the Messiah and so compromising their faith in Him. He feared that, in the name of following the Messiah as His devoted disciples, some were actually forsaking Him for an idol. These corrupting influences almost certainly included nascent Gnostic ideas together with other philosophical and pagan constructs that formed the Graeco-Roman worldview and gave birth to Gnosticism. The teachings of Cerinthus and the Docetists were already infiltrating the Christian community in the first century and it's not unlikely that John's readers were being exposed to them. This historical context, then, is the lens through which we must consider John's words and his meaning.

- a. John's first statement in this section speaks directly to the matter of ongoing sin: "*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us*" (v. 8). As discussed previously, the Graeco-Roman worldview maintained a fundamental distinction between the material and the immaterial. Even outside of Gnostic doctrine, the common belief was that the human soul is eternal while the physical body is transient and destined for destruction. The soul is the complete reality of the person; the body is just a temporary shell. And so people weren't looking for the resurrection of their body, but their soul's liberation from their body so that they could attain to their ultimate perfection as spiritual creatures free of the constraint and imperfection of physical existence.

This way of thinking resulted in different views concerning “sin,” (understood not simply as wrongful behavior, but deviation from the truth and the perfection associated with it).

- At the one extreme, some believed that what a person does with his body doesn’t touch his spirit, which is his true self. The body and spirit are separate entities, so that “sins of the flesh” only affect the body. And since the body is given over to decay and destined for destruction, its activities and their outcomes are ultimately irrelevant.
- At the other extreme, some believed that the body’s inherent corruption and impermanence are reason to strive to be as free of its influence as possible. The former view encouraged a *libertine* lifestyle (feel free to indulge your fleshly appetites because your spirit remains untouched and uncorrupted); this second view resulted in an *ascetic* one (deny your flesh and its needs and desires to the fullest extent possible).

John may have been addressing one or both of these perspectives (and other variations of them). For those in the first group could have argued that they have no sin because their spirit – their actual self – is not impacted by their deeds in the body. So the latter group might have argued that their rigorous self-denial choked off all exertions of the flesh, leaving them free of sin. It’s also likely there were Christians who believed that new life in Jesus under the power of the Spirit rendered them free of sin. After all, didn’t the apostles teach that Christians have *died* to sin (Romans 5:19-6:11, 8:1-4; 1 Peter 2:24, 4:1; 1 John 3:4-9)? Indeed, various versions of this view have persisted in the Church to the present day.

But, whatever premises and notions might underlie the conviction of sinlessness, John insisted that those who embrace it are self-deceived and rob themselves of the truth. Again, *sin* denotes any human exertion – in thought, attitude, desire, word or deed – that deviates from or falls short of the truth as it exists in God and as He has made it known in His Son. Unless a person can rightly claim – as Jesus did – that to see him is to see the Father, he cannot say “I have no sin.” And no one can make this claim until he is fully conformed, *body* and *spirit*, to the life of the resurrected Messiah (cf. 1 John 3:2-3 with Romans 8:9-25; 1 Corinthians 13).

- b. Christians who claim to be without sin are self-deluded, walking in the darkness as those estranged from the truth. On the other hand, those who know and practice the truth – those who walk in the light as God Himself is in the light – recognize sin’s ongoing presence and influence and address it consciously and purposefully. In John’s words, they *confess* their sins (1:9). Confession is a critically important scriptural concept, but one that is frequently misunderstood. The Greek term is a compound word that literally translates, *speak the same thing*. In scriptural usage, it connotes open agreement with God’s truth – speaking the “word” that He speaks. Confession isn’t admitting to bad behavior, but sharing God’s perspective and giving voice to it. Confession is a person’s *amen* to God’s truth on a matter.

The premise and ground of confession, then, is sharing God's mind. In terms of John's argument in this passage, confession is the natural human expression of fellowship with God; it is a core dimension of "walking in the light" and "practicing the truth." This is the reason that confession solicits forgiveness and cleansing: The confessing person is "one mind" with God (at least with respect to the matter at hand) and this unity of mind reflects the reality of a life "hidden with Christ in God" – a person who shares in God's life and mind by His indwelling and transforming Spirit. Of course God forgives and cleanses that individual; *He is unchangeably committed to completing what He has begun* (cf. Philippians 1:6; 2 Timothy 1:1-12). And so the relationship between confession and forgiveness and cleansing isn't one of cause and effect (confess and then God will forgive), but of the integrity and consistency of God, His truth and His work. The God who has imparted to a person His Son's life and mind – the life and mind that are His own (John 5:1-27) – will surely perfect that work of renewal and transformation. In John's words, God is "*faithful and righteous*" – that is, He is fully committed to that which is right according to His purposes.

- c. John's final conditional statement closes out the passage with a summary observation that moves the argument beyond the professing believer to God Himself: *The one who claims to have not sinned makes God a liar* (v. 10). The truth isn't in him with respect to himself (v. 8), but perhaps more importantly, it isn't in him with respect to God. For the one who holds a distorted image of himself is at odds with the truth as God knows it; he assesses himself differently than God does ("God's word isn't in him"), and so effectively makes Him a liar. The self-deceived person is the one guilty of lying, but by acquitting himself, he points his finger at God, accusing Him of falseness (cf. 2:4, 22, 4:20, 5:10).

Some regard verse 10 as repeating the same idea expressed in 1:8. But John used two different verb tenses, which suggests that he was making a slightly different point. Verse 8 refers to sin as a present reality for Christians, while verse 10 considers it as a past phenomenon. The latter denial is especially problematic, for what Christian ("if we say...") would ever claim to have not sinned? The very reality of faith in Christ is grounded in awareness of personal sin and the need of cleansing and forgiveness. Thus some scholars conclude that John was referring to a claim of sinlessness after becoming a Christian. This interpretation is more reasonable and also fits well with verse 8, where the denial pertains to sin as a present, continuing reality ("we have no sin..."). The second claim, then, enlarges the first one: *There is no sin in my present experience, for my life has been free of sin since I embraced Jesus in faith and was given new life in Him*. Gnostic ideas might have nurtured this sort of conviction regarding sin, but it was also consistent with Jewish thinking during that period, for many Jews believed that the messianic age would see the elimination of all sin and uncleanness. The prophets and other Jewish texts spoke in this way (cf. Isaiah 40:1-2, 43:16-25, 44:21-28, 53:1-6; Jeremiah 31:31-34, 33:1-16; Zechariah 3:1-10, 13:1-2, 14:9-11; esp. Daniel 9:24) and Jesus accomplished this purging. He *did* eradicate sin in terms of its guilt and dominion, but not its existence or influence (so 1 John 2:1).