

First Baptist Church Merritt Island

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So That Your Joy May Be Complete – a study of First John

Do Not Practice Sin

1 John 3:4-10

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Last week, we focused on the fact that everyone who places their faith and trust in Jesus receives a new identity and a new destiny. Our new identity is that we are children of God. Our new destiny is that God will make us just like Jesus when Jesus comes again. That's the hope we have through faith in Jesus. We don't earn them, we receive them as gifts of God's grace by simply trusting Jesus as our Lord and Savior.

But even though we don't earn our new identity and destiny by the way we live, the way we live is evidence that we have a new identity and a new destiny.

And that's the focus of our text for today. John is going to show us that sin is completely incompatible with who we are as God's children and the work He is doing to make us more and more like Jesus.

1 John 3:4-10

Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. 5 You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. 6 No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. 7 Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. 8 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. 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. 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.

The book of 1 John has a much-needed word for our world today. We are living in a world that has systematically minimized the seriousness of sin to the point of completely normalizing it. And it's not just the world at-large. Many so-called Christians are embracing lifestyles that are completely opposed to what the Bible says is God's design and desire for our lives. Sexual promiscuity is rampant among professing Christians of all ages. Studies show that 78% of men in our culture view pornography. And when those studies focus on Christian men, that number is barely different at 75%. Greed and materialism are considered part of a healthy ambition to pursue the American Dream. Pride masquerades as spiritual maturity in those who compare themselves to others and feel a sense of superiority. Complaining and criticizing are commonplace, especially at Sunday lunch conversations where gossip and gluttony go hand in hand.

The truth is those dynamics are not unique to our day and age. They were all present in the First Century culture John lived in when he wrote this letter. And his words in our text are some of the strongest in the Bible regarding the relationship followers of Jesus should have with sin.

- In verse 6, John says no one who abides in Christ keeps on sinning. He says no one who keeps on sinning knows God.
- In verse 8, he goes even further and says whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil.
- Verse 9 says anyone who is born of God cannot keep on sinning.

These words should land with serious impact on our hearts. Sin is not to be minimized or normalized in the life of a follower of Jesus. It's right that we should feel a weightiness to this text.

At the same time, the weight of this text isn't meant to make our hearts sink into despair. Don't rip these verses out of the context of everything else John has been teaching under the inspiration of God's Spirit, and all that God has to say in the rest of the Bible.

For instance, we know John isn't saying our lives will be sinless or perfect.

- *1 John 1:8 If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.*
- *1 John 2:1 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.*

John isn't talking about sinless perfection as though anytime we commit a sin; we are no longer saved. He isn't saying that we won't struggle with certain sins or temptations throughout our entire life. He actually says that if we claim to be perfect, we are self-deceived and don't know the truth. Followers of Jesus are in for a life-long battle against their own sin.

Even more, *John isn't saying we have to achieve a certain level of morality to earn our standing with God.* That's why we need Jesus. We talked a lot about this last week. Our standing with God is completely determined by the work of Jesus. He lived a perfect life and died a sacrificial death in our place to pay for all our sin. And when we trust in Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we have a new standing with God. We are forgiven of all our sin and made into new creations by God's grace through faith in Jesus. We are children of God who have eternal life that will never end or be taken away from us. And that new identity comes with a new destiny – all of God's children will be made into the image of God's Son, Jesus. That's a work God does by His power as we trust in Jesus.

So, what is John saying? He's saying that a lifestyle of sin is incompatible with our new life as children of God.

BIG IDEA: A LIFESTYLE OF SIN IS INCOMPATIBLE WITH OUR NEW LIFE AS CHILDREN OF GOD.

A lifestyle of Sin

John is really specific in the way he describes the patterns of sin in this text. The way the English Standard Version conveys his language is through words like "practice sinning" or "keep on sinning." Those phrases translate a Greek verb form that represents a continuing, progressive action, not an isolated event. Those phrases occur 8 times in our text in reference to sin. John is talking about an unrepentant, continual, willful, habitual, progressive activity. That's why we use the word lifestyle.

Our text says "practice." It's similar to what we mean when we say someone practices medicine or practices law. A lawyer is someone who has devoted his or her life to knowing and engaging our legal system. Their identity is a lawyer and that identity is connected to an active lifestyle – practicing law. Something wouldn't sound right about someone who says, "I'm a doctor so I practice law." You'd naturally want to hear an explanation because that identity doesn't correspond to that activity.

And the point that John is making in our text is that a lifestyle of willful, habitual sin is incompatible with our identity as children of God and followers of Jesus.

As a matter of fact, John gives at least 4 reasons why a lifestyle of sin is incompatible with our new life in Jesus.

1. Sin is rebellion against God.

1 John 3:4

Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness

John says that sin is lawlessness. The word that's translated "sin" in this verse is an ancient archery term that means "to miss the mark." If you aim at a bullseye and don't hit it, that's missing the mark. It's a failure to achieve the right standard. And the right standard is the moral goodness, or holiness, of God.

So, any failure to live up to the moral goodness of God is sin, or unrighteousness. For instance, God is truth and there is nothing false or deceptive about Him. So, lying is a sin – it's a failure to hit the bullseye of truth and honesty.

Romans 3:23

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

All of us have failed to hit the mark of God's glory and holiness. All of us have sinned.

But John says that there's more to sin than just missing the mark. He says sin is also lawlessness. Lawless means "no law, or without law." Essentially, it's a complete and utter disregard for the laws of God. Have you ever known someone who was so rebellious that they basically lived like no one was going to tell them what to do? The people who cut in line at amusement parks. The people who don't wait to merge on the highway but go over in the gravel and speed past everyone who is following the rules. That's the idea behind lawlessness.

Several years ago, we set up a big, wooden target in our backyard. My kids and I enjoy throwing knives. When I was first teaching them, we had to lay down the ground rules for how to do it safely. You never throw a knife anywhere but at the target. Period. You never throw a knife without making sure everyone is standing behind you. Sometimes, the kids would have friends over and we'd break out the knives. And we would go over the rules. Only throw at the target and you don't throw unless you are sure everyone is behind you. Those are the rules, or the laws.

It's a lot of fun. But it's really hard. You can stand 10 feet away from the target and not only miss the bullseye but miss the target entirely. Most people take a while just to be able to get the knives to stick into the wood. It's really hard. And it's almost impossible to be perfect.

And a lot of us think about sin like that. It's missing the mark. It's not being perfect. It's failing to be as good as God. And, if that's all we know about sin, it can make us think God is just a petty tyrant. Like all of us are kids at His house and that we aren't as good as Him at something that is inherently hard to do – like being perfect. That's why John says there is more to sin than just missing the mark. The reason we miss the mark is because we refuse to aim at the right target. That's how the first sin entered the world. Rather than pursue the glory and worship of God as the center of all things, Adam and Eve chose an entirely different target. They wanted to be gods for themselves. They missed the mark because they willfully aimed at the wrong target. They lived like God didn't have the right to tell them how to live...they were lawless.

Sin is rebellion against God. And that's why a lifestyle of sin is incompatible with our new life in Jesus. You can't simultaneously say you love and worship God and willfully choose a lifestyle of rebellion against how He says life works best.

2. Sin is of the devil.

1 John 3:8

Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning.

Sin didn't begin with Adam and Eve. Sin began with the rebellion of Satan against God. He is the author of sin and is leading the forces of darkness in an all-out assault against the rule of God.

Ephesians 6:12

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Satan is the head of a spiritual realm that is very real and very much at work in our world today. And when we choose to rebel against God in sin we are choosing to align our lives with the agenda of God's enemy. John is saying that people who genuinely love God and trust in Jesus don't willfully choose a lifestyle that sides with the enemy of God.

3. Sin is opposed to the work of Jesus.

1 John 3:5

You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.

1 John 3:8

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.

The reason Jesus came into this world was to destroy the works of the devil (which is sin) and to take away sins from those who would trust in Him.

What does it mean for Jesus to "take away sins" and "destroy the works of the devil." John is referring to a couple of things here.

First, Jesus takes away the penalty for our sin. In *John 1:29*, when John the Baptist saw Jesus, he said, "*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*" Jesus is the Lamb of God who was offered as a sacrifice for our sin. At the cross of Jesus, an exchange took place. God took our sin and placed it on Jesus. In that way, Jesus died as a substitute in our place. That's how we can be forgiven by God. He doesn't just ignore our sin, He punishes it at the cross of Jesus. All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, so Jesus came to take away sin by taking away the penalty of sin for those who trust in Him.

Second, Jesus takes away the power of our sin. When John says that Jesus destroys the work of the devil, the word "destroy" translates a word that means "loosed." Think of an animal that is caught in a trap. If you come and destroy the trap, you've loosed the animal. And that's what Jesus came to do for those who trust in Him. He breaks us free from the power of sin by releasing us from bondage to the devil.

Romans 6 says that when we place our faith and trust in Jesus, we are united to Christ. We are united to His death. His death becomes our death. And we are united to His resurrection life, a life of victory over sin and Satan and death itself. In Christ, we are forgiven from the penalty of sin and freed from the power of sin.

That's the work Jesus came to do for us and in us. And it ties really closely with the last thing John says in our text.

4. Sin is inconsistent with our new nature.

1 John 3:9

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. 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.

These last two verses contain some of the most shocking language in the entire bible. John says the predominant lifestyle of a person is evidence for whose child that person is. And there are only two categories. He says we are either a child of God or a child of the devil. We are not all God's children. In our natural state, we are children of the devil. He isn't saying that the devil created us and he isn't discounting that we are made in God's image. What he is emphasizing in this text is that we share the nature of the devil, a nature that is in rebellion against God and bent toward sin. That's what the Bible refers to as our "flesh." That's the part of us that has been distorted by the patterns of our sin.

By nature, we desire sin. We want to be our own gods and do life our own way. That doesn't mean unbelieving people can't do good things, but it does mean that even those good things are tainted by sin. For instance, they may give to the poor, but their giving might come from a heart of self-righteousness (thinking it makes them a better person than greedy people) or pride (hoping someone finds out and celebrates their generosity). Even more, it isn't done from a heart of faith for the glory of God. So, those good works are tainted with sin. They are done in the flesh. The natural state of man shares the nature of sin and rebellion with God's enemy.

But, when we come to faith in Jesus, verse 9 says we are born of God as His children. And that new birth is accompanied by something miraculous. We get a new nature. God places His life within us by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are united to the life of Jesus. That's what John means when he says God's seed abides in us.

And that puts this passage in a whole new light. John isn't saying we will live a lifestyle of righteousness by our own power and righteousness. He is saying God's Spirit in us will act like a seed in us. His power will sprout and grow over time and eventually bear fruit that will be on display in our lives.

The reason true believers won't keep on living a lifestyle of unrepentant sin is because God's work in them will overpower the old nature.

The other day, I was walking down a sidewalk that was lined with oak trees. And I came to a big section of concrete that was broken up and pushed out of the way. There was a big opening right in the middle of the sidewalk. And you probably know what was in that opening. It was a big, old oak root. As I kept walking, I couldn't stop thinking about that section of sidewalk. I can't imagine how heavy it was. Years ago, when it was first poured, it must have seemed like an immovable fixture in front of that house. It was hard as stone and heavier than any of us could lift. It wasn't going anywhere...or so it seemed. But at some point in time, a tiny acorn had been planted in that soil. And over time, it grew and grew. And that massive, immovable fixture started to move and give way. Sidewalks are no match for mighty oak trees.

And that's what John is saying is true for everyone who places their faith and trust in Jesus. God plants something infinitely stronger than an oak tree in us. He plants Himself in us in the person of the Holy Spirit. And something begins to happen. It starts under the surface. Things begin to change. Our desires begin to shift. We begin to want what God wants. We begin to hate what God hates. Our hearts begin to change, and we no longer find satisfaction in sin. And over time those massive places in our lives that seemed unmovable, the places of sin and rebellion, begin to shift and break up.

What that means is that even when we sin, we grow to hate our sin and choose to fight against our sin. Our lifestyle is a lifestyle of pursuing righteousness and fighting the sins of our flesh and being repentant and turning to Jesus when we do sin.

Sin is no match for the mighty power of God in us. Ultimately, sin gives way to righteousness by the power of God's life in us, and we become more and more like Jesus. That's why John says what I think is the most shocking thing in this entire text – we cannot keep on in a lifestyle of sin. The power of God in us will not be stopped. That doesn't mean we will ever have sinless perfection in this life. But it does mean we will have breakthrough. He will do it in us as we trust in Him.

Philippians 2:12–13

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Brothers and sisters, if you are trusting in Jesus then God Himself is at work in you. He is at work changing and strengthening your will, your desires and your longings. And He is at work in your works, conforming them to His good pleasure. He is doing it.

And that changes everything about the way we should read this text. John isn't trying to make us fearful of paranoid about our sin. He is compelling us to be hopeful and confident in our Savior. He will finish what He started in us. If you are trusting in Jesus, sin will not win in you. Satan will not prevail over you. Jesus has overcome and He will overcome in you. That promise is so strong that John says it cannot be otherwise.

So, take hope in Jesus today.

So, FIGHT SIN! As you are in a fight against sin, don't despair over your stumbles, you have an advocate with the Father who is working on your behalf. Don't give in when you feel like there are areas of your life that feel hard as stone and immovable as a mountain. The very fact that you hate sin and want to be more like Jesus is evidence that you are God's child and He has planted His desires in you. Keep fighting against sin. Keep pursuing righteousness through the power of Christ in you. And REMAIN CONFIDENT IN HIM because the work that He has begun is a work He has promised to complete.