

## Knowing God: *Can I Know God and Keep Sinning? (Part 2)*

1 John 3:4-10

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn to HCC on October 13, 2013

### Introduction

- ❖ The story goes that Thomas Jefferson sat down one day with his Bible – not to study it but to cut it. He famously took a razor and literally cut out portions of the New Testament and pasted them together to create his own Bible. He cut out what he thought was the essence of Jesus' life and moral teaching, and he purposely left out most mentions of the supernatural, any claims of Jesus' divinity, and all the miracles of Jesus including the Resurrection.
  - ▶ He was left with a Bible that made complete sense to him, a Bible that had nothing in it to make him uncomfortable, nothing to make him cringe. He had a Bible that would not and could not challenge his life choices or contradict his lifestyle. He had a Bible that contained nothing hard to accept.
  
- ❖ Now we may find it silly for Jefferson to think he could just avoid all the passages of Scripture that he finds difficult and only focus on the ones he accepts, but if we're honest, Christians do that all the time. I doubt any of us would use a razor on a Bible, but there is still a strong tendency in each of us to just focus on the passages of Scripture we find acceptable – the ones we find easy to understand, easy to obey – and we just ignore the ones we find hard.
  - ▶ This morning's passage would be a prime example. It's a passage I think many Christians would rather cut out of their Bibles and ignore. Because it's hard. In the first place, it's hard to interpret, and even after you get it – it's hard to swallow. This is a hard passage. It's 1 John chapter 3:4-10.
  
- ❖ Last Sunday we began chapter 3 and looked at the first three verses. There we considered the greatness of the Father's love that he would lavish it on sinners and actually call us his children. And we talked about how children always resemble their parents in some way, shape, or form, and we stressed how John was applying this principle of nature to spiritual children of God. **That is, if Christians are the children of God then there ought to be a resemblance. Christians ought to look like their Heavenly Father.**
  - ▶ Now that statement alone may not trouble you. It may not sound far fetched to say that Christians should reflect God's likeness. But then John goes and gets difficult when he says in vv4-10, that a Christian's resemblance to the Father should be of such a degree that we cannot keep on sinning. He uses those words in vv6 and 9.
    - Look at **v6**, "*No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him.*" Now look at **v9**, "*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.*"
  
- ❖ That's pretty straightforward. **A Christian cannot keep on sinning because he/she has been born of God.** If you do keep on sinning, then it means you've never seen God or known him. If you make a practice of sinning, then you're not born of God – you're not a Christian.
  - ▶ *Do you see why this passage is so hard?* Because the reality is that all of us still sin. No matter how long we've been Christians, there are always certain sins we particularly struggle with. Now by God's grace, we confess them. We repent of them. We seek accountability. But we still fall short. We still sin.

- ❖ **So how do we, as Christians, interpret the daily experience of our sinfulness in light of a verse that says no one born of God makes a practice of sinning?** Can we ever be assured of our salvation – that we’re born of God – if the expectations are that high?
  - ▶ I believe the answer is ‘Yes’. Remember, John said in chapter 5:13 that his goal is to offer Christians the assurance of salvation. But to get there, we’ll have to first get a handle on this difficult passage. So I want us to consider John's premise, namely that a child of God cannot keep on sinning, and I want to give three reasons why this is so.

### Because of What Sin Is

- ❖ **The first reason why a child of God cannot keep on sinning is 1) Because of what sin is.** Once we understand how the Bible defines sin, it’ll make sense that no one born of God could continue in such a practice. We’re going to see John define the nature of sin in **v4**, and in **v8** he explains its origin.
  - ❖ Look at **v4** again. “*Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.*” So here John is defining **sin as lawlessness**, but what does that mean?
    - ▶ I think we often equate sin to simply the breaking of God’s law. That’s lawlessness. But this particular word is used in the New Testament (and LXX) to convey something deeper than just the breaking of a law. **Lawlessness is used in the Bible to describe a heart of rebellion against God and his Law – an inward rebellion expressed by outward sin.** That’s why older translations have used the word ‘iniquity’ or ‘wickedness’.
      - So when John says, “*sin is lawlessness*”, he means that sin is the wicked inner desire to spurn God in order to become a law unto ourselves. It’s rebellion.
  - ❖ Notice as well the verb tenses. **V4** literally says, “Everyone who is *doing sin* also is *doing lawlessness*.” John uses the continuous present tense to imply an ongoing action. So he doesn't have in mind a particular act of sin, a specific instance of rebellion. No, he's talking about ongoing practice of sinning in a person’s life, a pattern of rebellion against God.
    - ▶ So when he says in **v9** that, “*No one born of God makes a practice of sinning,*” (same words) he means that no one born of God will continue in an ongoing practice of rebellion against the One they call Father.
  - ❖ To do so would simply prove that – far from being of the Father – you’re actually of the devil. That’s what John says in the first half of **v8**, “*Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning.*”
    - ▶ **Sin is of the devil.** It’s his M.O., his *modus operandi*, his characteristic style. He lives in continued rebellion against God. And those who are characterized by the same M.O. (the same lifestyle) demonstrate that they’re of the devil.
  - ❖ Notice the parallel between **vv4** and **8**. **V4**, “Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also *practices lawlessness*”. **V8**, “Whoever makes a practice of sinning is *of the devil*”. **Practicing lawlessness is paralleled with being of the devil.**

- ▶ In fact, in Scripture, lawlessness often has a satanic association attached to it. That's why Paul calls the antichrist "the man of lawlessness" (2 Thes. 2:3,7). He's not just a man who happens to break God's laws. No, he's a man who stands, in league with the devil, in steady opposition to God and to his Christ. **So to make a practice of sinning (of lawlessness) is to practice continued rebellion against God just like the devil.**
  
- ❖ Why did John stress this point? Because apparently some false teachers in the church were downplaying the seriousness of sinning. They were creating false distinctions between sin and lawlessness, saying things like, "*To err is human. It's okay if Christians practice sinning, just as long as we don't practice lawlessness.*"
  - ▶ So they would agree that lawlessness is incompatible with a child of God. But sin, on the other hand, is acceptable. In fact, it's to be expected. Bottom line, they were teaching that Christians could make a practice of sinning and still consider themselves righteous and born of God.
    - That's why John has to correct them and say, "No, sin is lawlessness. To practice sinning is to practice lawlessness." Sin is not acceptable.
  
- ❖ You have to realize that this tendency to downplay sin as something acceptable for Christians continues in our day. I've told the story before about the time I was at a coffee shop sitting next to this young man who was waxing eloquent about New Age philosophy to a friend. I tried to ignore him, but he got my attention when he started talking about sin.
  - ▶ He was explaining that the word for 'sin' in the Bible meant to 'miss the mark' and was a term used in archery. Then he stated, with confidence, that Christians have long perverted the word by attributing concepts of guilt and punishment. He asked his friend, "What happens in archery when you miss the mark?" You pick up your arrow and try again! No one punishes you for sinning. It's just a mistake. You just missed.
  
- ❖ But what my young friend doesn't realize is that, while the word for sin (*hamartia*) does mean to 'miss the mark' AND it was a term in archery, BUT the biblical authors assigned a greater significance to the word. **According to Scripture, to sin is not just to miss the target you were aiming at. To sin is to point your bow at the face of God and to let the arrow fly. Sin is lawlessness – open rebellion against God.**
  
- ❖ **If sin is understood as just a mistake, then you could argue that Christians *will* keep on sinning. We'll make a practice of it.** John would be wrong and his opponents right. To continue sinning would be acceptable for God's children. Christians will keep making mistakes.
  - ▶ But if sin is lawlessness (rebellion) and if its origin is of the devil, then to say that Christians *cannot* make a practice of sinning makes perfect sense. It means that Christians can no longer continue in league with the devil, in continued open rebellion against the Father they claim to love.

- ❖ **John is saying that THAT kind of rebellious attitude and behavior towards God is incompatible with the children of God.** Do Christians sin? Do we ever rebel? Yes, John already said in chapter 1:8 that, “*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.*”
  - ▶ But he goes on to describe Christians as those who confess their sins, who repent and experience sweet forgiveness (1:9). But those who claim to be children of God *and yet* do not confess, do not repent, but rather make a practice of sinning, of living in open rebellion against God, are fooling themselves into thinking they’re his children.

### **Because of What Christ Appeared to Do**

- ❖ The children of God cannot keep on sinning because of what sin is. The second reason is **2) Because of what Christ appeared to do.** If we understand what Christ came to earth to do, we’ll better understand why no one *in Christ* can make a practice of sinning.
- ❖ **According to v5, Christ appeared to take away sins.** “*You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.*” John doesn’t say exactly how Jesus does this, but I think it’s appropriate to interpret v5 in light of chapter 2:2, where it says that Jesus is “*the propitiation for our sins*”. We explained ‘propitiation’ as a religious term used to describe what lambs in the Old Testament were intended to accomplish by bearing the punishment of God in the place of sinners.
  - ▶ Well Jesus is the propitiation, the spotless Lamb of God, in whom *there is no sin*. And on the cross, he took away sins by putting them on his shoulders and bearing the punishment of God in our place. That’s what he appeared to do.
- ❖ Now just as v4 paralleled the first half of v8, v5 parallels the second half of v8, which says **Christ appeared to destroy the devil’s work.** Look at **v8b**, “*The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work.*” Again John doesn’t go into specifics and tell us what the devil’s work consists of, but we know the from Scripture that the devil’s primary work is to tempt people to sin and then if he succeeds, he’ll accuse you for it.
  - ▶ But by becoming our propitiation, by bearing sin’s penalty and thus taking it away, Jesus took away the devil’s only means of accusation. That’s how he destroyed the devil’s work. He has nothing if our sins are completely forgiven in Christ.
- ❖ **So if this is what Christ appeared to do, then it makes sense that a genuine Christian will not keep on sinning in continued rebellion.** Look at John’s train of thought from v5 to v6. He starts in v5 with what you know. *If you know* that Christ appeared to take away sins and *if you know* that in him is no sin, then **v6** is no surprise. “*No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him.*”
- ❖ **If Jesus is sinless, then it makes sense to say that no one who abides in the Sinless One will keep on sinning.** Jesus and sin are incompatible. So if you keep on sinning in continued open rebellion against God you’re contradicting everything Jesus appeared to do.

- ❖ Commenting on this verse, John Calvin argued that a person cannot abide in sin if he's in Christ and Christ is in him. *Why? "For Christ is never dormant where he reigns."* He meant that Christ will not abide with sin on the throne of your heart. If Jesus is in your heart, he demands the throne. Sin is no longer allowed to rule.
  - ▶ Calvin says, "*He puts sin to flight, not otherwise than as the sun drives away darkness by its own brightness.*" So anyone who makes a practice of sinning, who refuses to confess his or her sin, who lives in continued rebellion, is demonstrating that they have never seen the brightness of Christ or known him in a saving way because he appeared for the purpose of taking sin away and liberating us from its rule.

### Because of What Our New Birth Implies

- ❖ That's why a Christian cannot keep on sinning – because of what sin is, because of what Christ appeared to do, and **3) Because of what our new birth implies.**
  - ▶ Once we understand the implications of being born again in Christ, this passage will become easier to understand and easier to accept. There are two points to make here.
- ❖ **1) Our new birth *does not* imply you'll never sin again.** I'm confident John doesn't believe that. I mentioned earlier that he already taught in chapter 1 that it's never appropriate to claim to be without sin (v8) or to say you've never sinned (v10). Those who do so are deceiving themselves and calling God a liar. God's word (his truth) is not in them. So if John were teaching in chapter 3 that a Christian will never sin again, he would be totally contradicting what he wrote earlier in chapter 1.
- ❖ I think the reason why John uses such bold language ("you *cannot* keep on sinning!") is because he was responding to bold teaching – false teaching that claimed you can be righteous and yet make a practice of sinning. These false teachers (Gnostics) were saying that our bodies are simply shells, vessels entrapping the soul. They had a negative view our our bodies, which explains why they deny that Christ came in the flesh (4:2-3).
  - ▶ Just think about the moral implications of this kind of teaching. If our bodies don't matter in the end, if the soul is what really matters, then they reasoned that the sinful deeds committed in body don't really matter. So you could be righteous in spirit while your flesh dabbles in unrighteousness. Bottom line, they taught that you could practice sinning and still be considered righteous.
- ❖ So John has to say in v7, "*Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous.*" So if you practice sinning, you're fooling yourself to think you're righteousness, much less a child of God. This is bold language, but the boldness of the false teaching warranted such language, even at the risk of sounding like your teaching that a Christian will never sin again. But again, that's not what John's saying.

- ❖ *So if our new birth in Christ does not imply we'll never sin again, then what does it imply? 2) Our new birth does imply that you won't persist in a practice of sinning.* Notice in v9 that John says a Christian “cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God.” It is because of our new birth, because we’re now in God's family, that we cannot persist in sin.
- ❖ When you were growing up, did your mom or dad ever say to you, “*We don't do that in this family*”? You probably broke a family rule (e.g. you pulled your sister’s hair), and your father would say, “*We don't do that in this family.*” Now you could be a smart aleck and reply, “*Well I just did, didn't I?*” But you knew what he meant. He wasn't talking about the theoretical impossibility of you ever doing ‘that’. His emphasis was not on ‘doing that’ but on the fact that you're ‘in this family’.
  - ▶ He’s saying your status as a member of this family makes such actions incompatible to your identity and impossible for you to continue doing. **In other words, if you’re really a part of this family, you don’t do that anymore.**
    - I think John is saying something similar. If we really are born of God, part of his family, we don’t do that anymore. *We don't keep on sinning in this family!*
- ❖ *But why?* John tells us why in v9, “*No one born of God makes a practice of sinning for God's seed abides in him.*” Now what John meant by ‘**God’s seed**’ is an interpretive challenge. St. Augustine and Martin Luther thought it as the **Word or Gospel message** in us (cf. 2:24). John Calvin thought it referred to the **Holy Spirit** in us (cf. 2:27). But others have suggested God’s seed is **the new nature** imparted to us when we’re born again.
  - ▶ I think all three are true, though I do lean towards seeing the ‘seed’ as our new nature. If you’re in Christ, you’re a new creation: the old has gone, the new has come (2 Cor. 5:17). If you’ve been born a second time, then something of God is in you. You’ve been changed from the inside, so that you will no longer make a practice of sinning.
- ❖ St. Augustine has a helpful way of putting it.<sup>1</sup> He once explained that there are four stages of humanity: Pre-Fall Man, Fallen Man, Reborn Man, and Glorified Man. He described Pre-Fall Man as not perfected but **'able to not sin'**. Yet after Genesis 3, Fallen Man is **'unable to not sin'**. We became slaves to sin, so that making a practice of sinning was to be expected.
  - ▶ **But through the gift of a new birth in Christ, Reborn Man is given a new nature so that we return to the garden state of being able to not sin.** We can now say “No” to sin and ungodliness (Tit. 2:12). Making a practice of sinning is now incompatible with our nature.
    - But this is important: Now we are Reborn Man, but what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when Jesus appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is (3:2). On that day, we shall become Glorified Man that is actually **'unable to sin'**.

<sup>1</sup> Augustine on the Four Stages of Humanity:

Pre-Fall Man	Fallen Man	Reborn Man	Glorified Man
able to not sin	unable to not sin	able to not sin	unable to sin

- ❖ But sadly, on this side of heaven, the children of God will commit particular acts of sin, but the point is that we will not persist in a practice of sinning against the Father. **No Christian can remain in a settled disposition towards sin. In other words, no child of God can live at peace with sin.**
  - ▶ Because they have a new nature, because the Holy Spirit dwells in them, because the message of the Gospel abides in their hearts, the children of God will always be brought to conviction and led to repentance. **A true child of God will actually make a practice of repenting – a practice of turning away from sin and turning towards God in obedience.**
    - The children of God cannot keep on sinning – because of what sin is, because of what Christ appeared to do, and because of our new birth and the fundamental change that has been wrought in us.

### Telling The Children Apart

- ❖ *So what now?* How do we apply this truth? **John tells us how in v10. He says now we have a way to tell apart the children of God from the children of the devil.** Read v10, *“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.”*
- ❖ ***Friends, if you claim to be a child of the Righteous One, are you doing what is right?*** Are you practicing righteousness? By doing what is right, you are imitating your Heavenly Father who is righteous. But if you persist in a practice of sinning, then you are imitating another father – the devil who has been sinning from the beginning (v8).
  - ▶ Notice how there is no middle ground. If you’re not a child of God, you’re a child of the devil. No one can claim neutrality. You’re either of God or of the devil.
- ❖ **Now if you are not a Christian, I understand this passage is hard to hear and probably offensive.** I realize I just said you’re of the devil. Let me be clear, I don’t think you worship the devil. If you’re not a Christian, you probably don’t even believe in the devil.
  - ▶ But this idea of being “of the devil” is a biblical concept. It’s biblical language, and it applies to you if you’re not a child of God. According to John, a child of the devil is anyone who has joined the devil (whether consciously or not) in open rebellion to God’s rule. If God doesn’t have rule over your life, then you’re in the same boat as the devil. You’re of him.
- ❖ I hope you realize I say this out of love. I say this because I want you to know that even though you have a father in the devil, God the Father stands ready to receive you as His child if you receive His Only Begotten Son. The Apostle John wrote in his Gospel that *to all who did receive [Jesus], who believed in his name, [God] gave the right to become [his] children* (Jn. 1:12). You can have God as your Father today if you receive Jesus by believing in him as your Lord and Savior.

- ❖ **Now if you're someone who does claim the name of "Christian" but you're currently practicing sin** – you're persisting in open rebellion to God by not turning away from sin and towards him in obedience – then I hope this passage was particularly hard for you to hear. I hope the heaviness of this passage weighs on your conscience and drives you to repentance and to reconsider the direction of your life.
  - ▶ Take John's warning seriously. Do not presume to be a child of God if you are making a practice of sinning. Instead, confess those sins to God, and find sweet rest in knowing that, "*he is faithful and just and to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*" (1:9).
  
- ❖ **But then how do you know if you're really a child of God?** Where's our assurance of salvation? Well what would John say? First, he'd ask if you're making a practice of repentance and then he'd ask if you're making a practice of doing what is right. Are you practicing righteousness? *By this it is evident who are the children of God.*
  
- ❖ And in our context, John says "practicing righteousness" would come down to loving your brother – your brothers and sisters in Christ. He'll go on in chapter 3 to emphasize how love for fellow believers is a defining characteristic of a child of God.
  - ▶ **So how are you loving your brothers and sisters in this church?** Not just in word or talk but in deed and in truth (3:18). Are you welcoming each other into your homes? Are you ministering to each another? Are you discipling each other or helping disciple each other's children? Are you giving of yourself and your resources?
    - *What can you do this week to prove your love for your brothers and sisters, and thus prove your claim to be a child of the Most High God?*