

That You May Know

*And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments.
(1 John 2:3 ESV)*

*We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers.
(1 John 3:14 ESV)*

*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God,
that you may know that you have eternal life.
(1 John 5:13 ESV)*

Real Believers Renounce Sin

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1 John 3:4-9

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! I hope you brought your Bible with you and that you are able to open it now to 1 John 3:4. I've mentioned a few times now that this whole letter was occasioned by a formal schism within the early church. A whole group of people left the path – they went a different way and they were saying now: We're the real church. We're the real Christians. We are the children of God – and you are not.

And that was very traumatic for these people – very destabilizing. So John wrote this letter to help them identify the right path and to help reassure them that they were indeed walking on it.

Today in the section we are looking at John is saying that the real children of God are renouncing sin. They know that God is LIGHT and they know that they are the children of God and therefore they are waging all-out war on remaining sin. They certainly aren't making peace with it – and they certainly aren't indifferent to it – as it appears that the false teachers were. We remember from a couple of weeks ago F.F. Bruce telling us that:

“These new teachers claimed to have reached such an advanced stage in spiritual experience that they were ‘beyond good and evil’.”¹

¹ F.F. Bruce, *The Gospels & Epistles Of John*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 26.

They were saying that next level Christianity is not really concerned with sin. They are dealing with more significant issues.

But is that true?

No, John says. That can't be true because of what we know about God. God is light. He is holy, holy, holy, he has a settled and unchanging antagonism toward sin and he is our Father – so just like your earthly Father expected you to honour the family values, so too must our heavenly Father expect us to join him in our antagonism and opposition toward sin.

Real believers are renouncing sin – they don't want to have anything to do with it; that's what John is saying. We'll read his argument and then we'll spend some wrestling with the obvious personal and pastoral applications. Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 4 of 1 John chapter 3.

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. (1 John 3:4–9 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

As I said, John's argument here is that real believers renounce sin, first and foremost:

Real Believers Renounce Sin...

1. Because of what sin is

Look at verse 4:

“Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.” (1 John 3:4 ESV)

We’ve got these people over there saying that sin doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter what you do with your body, doesn’t matter who you sleep with, all that matters is what you know about God.

But let’s take a look at that John says. What is sin? Sin is lawlessness. That’s a very unusual phrase. Stephen Smalley says that:

“It implies not merely breaking God’s law, but flagrantly opposing him (in Satanic fashion) by so doing. As such, it is to be renounced by the children of God.”²

Sin is rebellion. Sin is Satanic. Sin is taking sides with the enemies of God.

God is OPPOSED TO SIN – if you know anything about the Gospel you know that. God is so opposed to sin that he sent his Son to deal definitively with it – that’s what John says in the next verse; he says.

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. (1 John 3:5–6 ESV)

The whole mission of Jesus was about DOING AWAY WITH SIN. He was at war with sin. The parallel expression in verse 8 makes that very clear:

The reason the Son of God appeared was **to destroy** the works of the devil. (1 John 3:8 ESV)

So how could anyone in their right mind – how could anyone who really knew the Lord – say that sin doesn’t matter? How could they DO that which Jesus came to DESTROY?

² Stephen S. Smalley, *1,2,3 John* in Word Biblical Commentary Volume 51, (Waco: Word Books Publishers, 1984), 155.

That would be to betray our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. That would be to take sides against the Father and against Jesus.

A real believer would never do that. Real believers are waging war on remaining sin; they're doing that because of what sin is and they're doing that:

2. Because of who they are

That's the second thing that John says here. Look at verses 7-8:

“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.” (1 John 3:7–8 ESV)

Are you seeing that? According to John everyone behaves ultimately like the one to whom they belong. John had already told them this. In John 8 he recorded an extremely tense confrontation between Jesus and the Jewish authorities who were persecuting him.

Jesus said to them, “**If God were your Father**, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me.⁴³ Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word.⁴⁴ **You are of your father the devil**, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.⁴⁵ But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me.⁴⁶ Which one of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me?⁴⁷ Whoever is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.” (John 8:42–47 ESV)

See, in this letter, John isn't saying anything new – he is just reminding them of stuff he's been teaching them for years. I already told you this, John says, people behave like the one to whom they belong.

If you see people who are justifying sin and rebellion against God – then you are looking at the children of the devil. Plain and simple. His spirit is whispering in their ear. His truths are taking over their minds. They belong to him – heart and soul.

But if you see people who are renouncing sin and aligning with God’s judgments and precepts – then you are looking at real believers. You are looking at the children of God. And that is why this turn doesn’t feel right to you. You’ve got too much God in you. You are your Father’s son. You are your Father’s daughter and therefore your heart and your instincts point in a different direction.

That’s what John is saying.

Now, he is not saying that real believers NEVER SIN – in fact he already warned them that anyone who says that is a liar. In chapter 1 he said:

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. (1 John 1:8 ESV)

So, everybody sins, but it doesn’t sit right with the real believer. That’s why the ESV is very careful here, it says:

Whoever **practices righteousness** is righteous, as he is righteous. ⁸ **Whoever makes a practice of sinning** is of the devil ... ⁹ No one born of God **makes a practice of sinning** (1 John 3:7–9 ESV)

The Pillar New Testament Commentary explains that translation saying:

“The author uses a present tense form of the verb ‘to sin’ (*hamartanō*), indicating that it is **sinning as an ongoing action** that he has in mind here as impossible for those born of God.”³

So we’re not talking about stumbling, we’re not talking about the misstep here or there – if you say that never happens to you – you’re a liar John says, because that happens to all of us. But a

³Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 124.

real believer can't CONTINUE IN SIN. They can't MAKE PEACE with sin. They can't MAKE A PRACTICE OF SINNING.

Because of who they are. They will never feel comfortable being somewhere they shouldn't be. They will never feel comfortable doing something they shouldn't do. Because they know whose they are. They know Dad is watching – and he wouldn't approve.

So they fight, scratch, claw and crawl their way out of there. They have to – because of who they are.

They are waging war - they are renouncing sin, because of what it is, because of who they are and most significantly, because of what God has done.

3. Because of what God has done

Look at verse 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. (1 John 3:9 ESV)

Are you hearing that?

Apparently, if you are a real Christian God has EMBEDDED something in you that will not ALLOW you to keep on sinning. Now what is that? What is this SEED of GOD that abides in us? The Word Biblical Commentary provides the best explanation of this that I could find. It says that this expression – the seed of God:

“may be taken to mean the divine seed, or “nature”, which is implanted in the person who is spiritually reborn, and which is responsible for the Christian growth and potentially sinless character of each believer.”⁴

John Stott in the Tyndale NT commentary says something similar, he says:

⁴ Stephen S. Smalley, *1,2,3 John* in Word Biblical Commentary Volume 51, (Waco: Word Books Publishers, 1984), 173.

“the new birth involves the acquisition of a new nature through the implanting within us of the very seed or lifegiving power of God.”⁵

So there is a principle or nature or a life-giving power implanted in the real believer at conversion that is responsible for our future growth and that propels us toward a POTENTIALLY sinless character.

That’s incredible – that’s amazing – in fact I wouldn’t believe that if it were only to be found in the Word Biblical Commentary and the Tyndale NT Commentary. That is a truth so MASSIVE that I would need to see that in the Bible for myself. So let’s do that. Let’s turn in our Bibles to Ezekiel 36:26-27. This is one of the greatest promises in all the Bible. God says to the people of Israel who have lost the path and who have trampled on every rumble strip and bumper rail that God raised in an attempt to keep them on the straight and narrow. Nothing worked. They were rebellious to the CORE – so God promised to give them something AT THE CORE. He said:

“I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and **cause you** to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.” (Ezekiel 36:26–27 ESV)

That’s exactly what John is talking about there.

You can’t jump the bumper rails and follow your friends on this path of ruin. You can’t do it, John says, because of what God has implanted in you.

There’s a guiding principle EMBEDDED IN YOUR SOUL, there is a FORCE OF LIFE, there is a LIVING SPIRIT that reaches out from inside you TOWARD THE PATH OF GOD.

I realize that this is a ridiculously mundane illustration – but everything is mundane compared to this incredible truth – but I can’t not think this. This is what comes to my mind whenever I consider this reality now. Last summer I bought a new car. I bought a Honda Civic like every

⁵John R. W. Stott, *The Letter of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 19 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 130.

other person in Canada. When the salesman took me out for a test drive he showed me how to use all the special safety features, my favourite of which is the Lane Keep Assist.

I love the Lane Keep Assist! There is far less Tim Hortons coffee on the lap of my pants, because of Lane Keep Assist! This thing is a marvel. The sales guy told me that due to some legal restriction they aren't allowed to classify the system as automatic steering – but he said, it can actually steer the car. He said he puts it on and he will go right round full curves and turns on the highway without ever touching the wheel.

But the car wants you to touch the wheel. So every 10 seconds or so – if you are not touching the steering wheel - a warning light will come on which says: “Steering is required”. And they show you a little picture of two hands grabbing the wheel.

But the point is there is this fabulous principle of direction embedded in my new car.

Making it very difficult for me to steer off track.

Sometimes, if I forget to turn it off, it will resist me when I am trying to take the off ramp. It will push back – that is exactly what John is saying here.

You have a principle – that's a metaphor, he's talking about the Holy Spirit – but the Holy Spirit who is a person functions as a power and a principle of guidance within your human core – if you are a real believer. And he will make it VERY HARD FOR YOU to steer off course. That's what John is saying.

And that's why you can't go that way. No real believer can make the turn that those people just made. No real believer could do that. Because of what sin is, because of who they are and most importantly because of what God has put in them. The SEED OF GOD is in you, so you cannot go that way.

Pastoral Application:

Now, last week I told you that John is known in history as THE THEOLOGIAN extraordinaire, and that's true, but he was first and foremost a pastor. He is not just trying to sound smart here. He is not just preaching into the air – he is trying to help these people navigate an actual trauma in a way that will preserve their life and witness as a church. And just as importantly, in a way that will preserve the integrity and reality of their own faith. So this is PASTORAL THEOLOGY – meaning that everything John just said implies certain decisions and actions on their part. The first one I think is very obvious. John is saying:

1. You've got to let them go

I know it will be hard, I know that it will divide families and break hearts and sever relationships; I understand that. But you've got to let them go.

We can never forget the actual context behind all this teaching. This was not merely a theological question for these people – this was a relational crisis. John spoke about that in chapter 2 verse 19. He said:

“They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.” (1 John 2:19 ESV)

So this had to happen, John says. You were unequally yoked. And you can't stay locked together in intimate association with people who are fundamentally different than you are; with people who are DIFFERENT AT THE CORE.

You've got to let them go.

They are locked into a different set of railroad tracks, so if you don't let them go, they're going to pull you off the path of life. So as hard as it will be - you've got to let them go.

Obviously there is an application here to our current situation with the CBOQ. That's a precious, long standing, emotionally significant relationship. But we've got to let them go. Short of a

miracle, short of revival, short of a wholesale repenting and return to the path of life – we’ve got to let them go.

They are drifting away from the authority of God’s Word. They are charging headlong into moral and spiritual ruin. How do I know that? How do I dare to say that?

They are permitting what God forbids – some of them are celebrating what God abhors. And as a group they have for too long refused to renounce sin.

So we’ve got to let them go.

For the health of our church, for the sake of our future – we’ve got to let them go.

And maybe you have some people you need to let go of today. This isn’t ONLY counsel for churches, this is counsel for individuals as well. Jesus was very clear that this MAY BE the cost we have to pay for following him. He said:

“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:26 ESV)

You’ve got to be willing to let loved ones go! If they are children of the devil – and those are the only options. Either you are a child of God through faith in Jesus Christ – or you are a child of the devil. There are only two roads. Only two ways. And everybody is drawn irresistibly towards one of those roads. So if they are children of the devil – if they are heading strong in that direction – then you’ve got to let them go.

Now, not without a fight. Not without an appeal. I’m not saying that you just walk away. We didn’t just walk away from the CBOQ. We fought, we appealed, we made our case for almost 10 years. But now it’s clear to everybody – them as well as us, that we’ve got to let them go.

Listen, let me be your pastor for a second – are you in this place? Are you dating a man or a woman right now and it’s becoming clear to you that whatever God embedded in you has not

been embedded in them? There is no tug toward righteousness in them. No turn toward the Scriptures. No pull towards the cross. Then you've got to let them go. If you've made your case, if you've made your appeal, and they are still pulling in a different direction, then you need to let them go.

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? (2 Corinthians 6:14 ESV)

These are not parallel tracks and if you hold on too tight, you will drift off the path of life and end up in death and ruin.

You've got to let them go.

Second thing that John is saying to these people that he loves dearly is that:

2. You've got to deal with what you see

You asked me, John says, "How can we know if we are on the right path? How can we know if we are really saved?" Well I've told you everything you need to know. I already told you that God is light. I told you that the 3 times Holy God has brought you into his very own family. I told you that – and I told you that if that is really true, if you have the GOD SPARK – the DIVINE SEED – the PRINCIPLE OF LIFE and the POWER TO CHANGE – embedded at the very heart of who you are – then you are going to renounce sin and you are going to move slowly, but surely, toward the image of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

I told you that already – so brother, sister, my child in the faith, are you now going to deal honestly with what you see?

Take a look at yourself.

The Apostle Paul told his people to do this too – this is good pastoring. Paul said:

Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. (2 Corinthians 13:5 ESV)

Take what I've just said and apply it to yourself. What do you see? Do you hate sin? Are you making war on your sin? Are you on God's side? Do you agree with him? Or do you agree with the cultural consensus? What makes more sense to you? What rings true in your soul? How does your heart lean? Toward the Scriptures? Or toward anarchy and chaos of the world?

Where you going?

Where you headed?

Because that tells the truth about who you are.

That's what John says in verse 10. Verse 10 is a hinge, you can put it here or you can deal with it in the next section. It fits either way. John says:

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. (1 John 3:10 ESV)

So look at the evidence of your own life. Assess your trajectory. And deal with what you see.

If your life does not match up well with the truth that John has been teaching here; don't argue with it, deal with it. Meet me today at the foot of the cross. I'll wait for you after the service. You come join me and we'll do business with God. But only come if you are ready to renounce sin and to receive the Divine Seed. Only come if you are ready to change course and to walk in the ways of God.

The third thing, and the last message in terms of pastoral appeal in this passage I think is this:

3. You've got to continue your war against sin

A real Christian never surrenders in the battle against sin. John has drawn the line too starkly to ever permit that. He has left us no middle ground. He has said that a real believer is taking his or her stand beside brother Jesus in the battle against sin.

Jesus came to abolish sin!

Jesus came to DESTROY the work of the devil!

This is our FAMILY VENDETTA and it would be a MASSIVE BETRAYAL for you to take sides against our Lord.

Are you planning on taking Communion next Sunday? Are you going to sit at the Table of the Lord and enjoy family fellowship? Then do not on Monday raise your heel against the Lord. There have been enemies at the table – all the way back to the beginning. At the very first Lord's Supper Jesus prophesied this very thing:

“He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.” (John 13:18 ESV)

The first fulfilment of that came in the person of Judas Iscariot. Do not follow in his footsteps.

Sin is lawlessness. It is rebellion. It is choosing sides against the Lord so continue in your battle against sin. That's the ultimate pastoral PRESS of this passage.

Practically speaking that means never making peace with sin – even the little ones. It means never giving yourself permission to compromise. “I'll just do this for a little while until we can afford to get married.” “I'll just allow myself this one sin, because actually, it is really her fault for being such an awful nag in the first place.” “I'll just allow myself to sin in my mind, as long as I don't actually sin with my body.”

No.

Take the war to every nook and cranny of your soul.

Take every thought captive.

Occupy every square inch of your life and being.

Do it because of what sin is. Do it because of who you are. And do it because of what God has done in Christ – and in you to secure your salvation. This is the path of life, my brothers and sisters, now walk ye in it. Thanks be to God, let's pray together.