

**The Christian and Sin**  
**1 John 3:4–10**  
**June 4, 2017**

Deception has been part of human existence since the serpent asked, “Has God said?” With that catastrophic deception in the Garden through which humanity fell into sin, deception continues in every generation. The devil has not changed his tactics. Paul warned the Corinthians about the devil’s deception that would lead them away “from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ” (2 Cor 11:3). He also warned them about the deception that sin is not that big of a deal regarding one’s eternity (1 Cor 6:9). John declares the devil as the arch-deceiver of all who rebel against God (Rev 20:10). So deception can ensnare any of us.

I can trace points of deception that affected me. In my early Christian life, thinking that a profession of Christ guaranteed heaven rather than the certainty of the new birth, kept me from the joy of perseverance in Christ. Deception led me down a path of legalism by which I thought that I found favor with God by my rigid practice. Hearing various theological ideas without anchoring them in the Word deceived me into wrong doctrine that led to sloppy Christian living. By failing to grasp the power of the redemptive work of Christ, deception snared me in long periods of doubt and unbelief. I could go on but simply want to reinforce, deception continues its attempts to blind us to the fullness of Christ.

That’s why John wrote this epistle. Some deceived themselves by thinking they had no sin (1 John 1:8). Others listened to the allurements of false teaching and seemed to be heading down the path of deception (1 John 2:26). Now he warns of deception a third time, using one of the rare imperatives in the letter, “**Little children, make sure no one deceives you**” (3:7). He calls for action in three areas of deception. But we can only act if we understand to some degree how we’re being deceived.

*We must guard against deception concerning Christ’s work and the Christian walk.* John set the stage for teaching on this painfully difficult subject by lifting us into the stratosphere of God’s love for us. He ends that doxology by contemplating how it affects us, “And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.” How does that purity or holiness work out in practice? We’ll look at it in three parts.

### **I. Let no one deceive you concerning the work of Christ (vv. 5, 8)**

With the exhortation to “**let no one deceive you**” set in the middle of this paragraph, it serves as an anchor for exploring how deception snares us. Keep in mind that John wrote to the Ephesian church that a generation earlier had profited from Paul’s three-year stay, and further by Timothy’s faithful ministry. But faithful teachers and good foundation did not make them immune to deception. They, like us, had to be on guard for the enemy’s deceitful tactics. Here it is found concerning Christ’s work.

#### **1. Jesus deals with sins (v. 5)**

So many think that Jesus came to make them happy. Consequently, the epitome of life centers on how they feel rather than who they are before God. Others think that Jesus’ only concern is getting us to heaven, so as long as they believe that’s settled then paying attention to patterns of sin is not an issue. This happens so often in Baptist churches

where there is a distorted understanding of the believer's security. Rather than that security resting upon the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, the deception comes in relying upon an outward profession of faith and baptism. I can't even count the times that I've heard parents and grandparents excuse the sinful practices of their children and grandchildren *because* they rely upon the faulty security of a childhood profession of Christ.

But John could not be clearer: **"You know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin."** John uses **"appeared"** in this case to refer to the coming of God the Son in the Incarnation (cf. 1:2) with the purpose to bear our sins on the cross and be raised from the dead. He uses it as well in other verses to refer to the return of Christ but the context makes clear that he's dealing with the first coming of Christ.

That word capsules the entirety of the redemptive work of Christ. John uses the term to refer to the necessity of the Incarnation and the absolute necessity of His death at the cross, followed by His resurrection. The reason—using a purpose clause—He did that, he writes, was **"in order to take away sins."** Sins could not be taken away, otherwise, by good works, human effort, the sacrificial system, or any other means. Only through Christ coming as the Savior and Sin-Bearer could it happen.

The grammar of this passage is critical. Often biblical writers will mix up their verb tenses for stylistic purposes. But John heaps up the present tense in this passage, referring to continual, ongoing action. Jesus **"appeared,"** so a once for all act, in order *to keep taking away sins* in those that He redeems. Rather than the perfect or once-for-all tense as used in John 1:29, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," pointing to the complete work at the cross, in this context, John continues to explain what he's just written in verses 1–3. Through God's love He sent His Son who redeemed us so that we might be adopted as children of God. The promise of what He's done now in calling us His children has more far-reaching effects of what we'll be when we see Him as He is. As a result, "And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure." No doubt, that's what we're doing in sanctification. We're seeing what Christ has done, we're living in the certainty of His promises, and so we take action in obedience, dying to sin, disciplining ourselves for godliness, and seeking to walk in holiness. *But we do not do that alone.* The effects of Jesus' death and resurrection *continue* to deal with the practice of sin in us. His death secured our pardon but the effect of it is that He keeps on purifying us. He keeps on taking away or removing completely the sins that have trapped us in practice.

And He alone can do that since **"in Him there is no sin."** His sinlessness qualified Him to be the sin bearer. No lawless disposition resided in Him but rather one who was always intent at every moment to do the Father's will and to conform to His law at every point. So the sinless One takes away **"sins"**—plural, indicating His sanctifying work in us. That's why John can make such a striking point about the relationship of true believers to sin. Those who belong to Christ receive the regular sanctifying work of Christ that affects our practice regarding sin.

## 2. Jesus deals with sin's roots (v. 8)

**"The Son of God appeared,"** there's that term again referring to the first coming of Christ Incarnate as Sin-Bearer and resurrected from the dead, **"for this purpose,"**

another purpose clause that gives explanation for why He appeared, **“to destroy the works of the devil.”** This time John doesn’t use the present continuous tense but rather indicates the one act of Christ in His death and resurrection having the consequent effect of breaking Satan’s bonds and destroying his work. We know that evidence of Satan’s works abound but the resurrection declared the certainty that Satan and his works’ days are numbered. But what’s the implication for us in the present?

John has just confirmed, **“the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning.”** Then he makes this declaration concerning the work of Christ destroying the devil’s work. In other words, the hold that Satan has on us remains firmly *until* the work of Jesus is applied in saving power. Then the liberation from Satan’s bonds takes place. Jesus destroyed or loosed those bonds so that the ones held captive by Satan to follow the disposition of sin are now liberated and given a new disposition of righteousness. We live differently because Jesus broke Satan’s hold.

Now, what’s the deception that we must guard against? It’s that the work of Christ is just about getting us to heaven and making us happy. No, my friends, the work of Christ is to liberate us from Satan’s grip and sin’s power and practice. Jesus came, died, rose from the dead, and showed grace in saving us so that we might be a holy people. As Paul put it, “Christ Jesus, . . . gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds” (Titus 2:14). If we fail to see the work of Christ securing a people for Himself whom He makes holy and changes the disposition to live in righteousness, then we’ve been deceived about the gospel. Jesus died and rose from the dead so that we might fight sin and live holy lives.

## **II. Let no one deceive you concerning the practice of the Christian life (vv. 4, 6, 9)**

As we’ve seen in our world religions study on Wednesday nights, Muslims (as well as other people) construe Christianity with being American. That leads to equating their view of Christianity like that found in the movies produced by Hollywood. We know better, of course, but they don’t since they cannot separate nationality from religion. Yet, we must ask, *do we know better?* Many professing Christians misunderstand completely what it means to live as Christians. Evidently, some in Ephesus struggled with this same deception. So John presses the matter of the Christian’s practice in one of the most debated texts in the Word.

### **1. Persistent sin is rooted in a lawless disposition (v. 4)**

The translation brings out the verb tense by the use of **“practices.”** The ESV translates it, “Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness.” **“Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness.”** So the aim is not sin as an act but rather sin as a practice. What’s the difference? Some have construed John’s meaning as some type of sinless perfection required of Christians. We certainly want to aim for perfection! But we don’t arrive until we “see Him just as He is.” The Bible is filled with exhortations for God’s people to fight against sin and to pursue holiness. Yet some have been deceived into thinking that they’ve reached perfection. However, John has already declared, “If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving

ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1:8). He’s reminded us that when we sin “we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” (2:1). So what is his point?

The use of **“lawlessness”** is critical for understanding what he means. We know that the basic meaning of lawless (*anomia*) means “without law.” Consider the last clause. **“And sin is lawlessness.”** What is sin? It is the transgression of the law of God. Sin disregards the law of God; sin feels no constraints by the law of God. If there’s no constraint by God’s law then there’s no consideration of the God whose character is reflected in the law. So the practice of sin, John says, is the ongoing practice of lawlessness or disregarding the law of God, having no sense of restraint by the law of God. In that case, **“lawlessness”** is a disposition of the heart. That’s why he writes, **“anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God.”** In other words, the reason that they do not practice righteousness but practice sin instead, is the disposition of the heart. They are not of God so they have a lawless heart.

## 2. Union with Christ affects practice (v. 6)

John writes, **“No one who abides in Him sins”** [or better, ‘goes on in the practice of sin’]. The ESV translates, “No one who abides in him keeps on sinning.” If he means sinless perfection then we’re all excluded from seeing Christ through the eyes of faith and knowing Him intimately. **“No one who sins has seen Him or knows Him.”** Again, the present tense implies the ongoing practice of sinning, the disposition of lawlessness that offers no restraint by the law against sin. But union with Christ—abiding in Him—alters the practice of sinning.

Now, the danger in consoling ourselves with the present tense verbs is to go light on sin. That’s not what John does. He’s insistent that everyone who fixes his eternal hope on Christ “purifies himself, just as He is pure.” So knowing Christ, being united to Him by faith means that your disposition toward sinning has changed. You may sin but the pattern of sinning is different than when Christ saved you. You sin but you sin less. You sin with grief and regret and the desire to turn from it. Sin feels odd when it used to feel normal. You abide in Him—that is, you live in reliance upon Jesus as your life. You cannot, with the life of Christ dwelling in you, feel comfortable going on in sin. Otherwise, if that’s not the case, then it’s because you have never known Him. John Stott adds, “Sin and Christ are irreconcilably at enmity with each other. Christ in His sinless Person and saving work is fundamentally opposed to it” [TNTC: *The Epistles of John*, 123]. So that means, with abiding in Him, the root of our new disposition is to oppose sin and practice righteousness.

## 3. A new disposition leads to a new practice in life (v. 9)

**“No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.”** The new birth gives us a new disposition. The idea of **“His seed abides in him”** expresses this new disposition or this new heart or this new life implanted firmly so that one lives differently. It’s the new creation language that Paul uses in 2 Corinthians 5:17. It’s the “new self” that Paul refers to in Ephesians 4:24, that “has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.”

We don’t have anything that adequately compares to the new birth. But here are a few thoughts to move us in the right direction. A young man or woman signing up at a military recruiter’s office has one disposition but upon completion of boot camp, he or

she is governed by a totally different disposition. One living in a totalitarian country has one disposition but when liberated and becoming part of a free nation, he has a totally different disposition. While the new birth is instantaneous in its effect to give us new life, the affects of this new disposition through Christ continue to change the way that we practice life. Attitudes of heart, the way that we talk, the way that we conduct relationships, the way that we do our work, the way that we see the world gradually but certainly continues to change. So those in whom **“His seed abides”** take a different view of sin than before. He’s born of God so he cannot go on in the same practice of sin that had characterized him.

Here’s the point: the life of Christ dwelling in us shapes us in the attitude and practice of Christ. If we’re not moving more toward Him in disposition and practice then it may be that we’ve not been born of God. So don’t be deceived by a faulty view of the Christian life. Being a Christian means that we’re growing, maybe sometimes slowly, other times haltingly, but growing surely more in the image and holiness of Christ.

### **III. Let no one deceive you about true Christianity (vv. 7–8, 10)**

Here’s the ultimate danger that John warns might happen. We can enjoy the association with Christians while not being a true Christian. Having said that, here’s yet another danger: we can be so scrupulous about sin and our practice that we doubt relationship to Christ because there still remain sinful attitudes and practices in us. That’s not the apostle’s point. He’s already let us know that we have an Advocate to intercede for us regarding our sins. Rather, he’s looking at the bent of our lives. What direction do we go now that we’ve professed to know Christ?

#### **1. Practice reveals relationship (vv. 7–8)**

**“The one who practices righteousness is righteous,”** and he explains what that means, **“just as He is righteous.”** We cannot think of righteousness without getting our bearings by the law of God. The judicial coloring of the word does not leave us to come up with our own definition of righteousness, such as doing what we think to be right. Leon Morris comments that the New Testament uses the word with the primary conception as forensic or having to do with law and justice [*The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 274]. Righteousness, then, is doing what God has already declared is right. We find that in His law. But further, as Morris notes, this verse “brings the very conception of righteousness into the closest of relationships to the life of the incarnate Lord” [274]. Jesus is the embodiment of righteousness. So to say that Jesus is righteous is to agree that He always did what was pleasing to the Father (John 5:30; 6:38). Jesus came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it (Matt 5:17). What the law intended was to perfectly conform us to the character of God, which Jesus alone did. In the greatest display of love, He went to the cross because we did not perfectly conform to the law, so that He might meet its demands in that judicial act of death on our behalf. As a result, His life abides in us and with that, so does His disposition toward righteousness.

But the reverse is true, too. **“The one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning.”** We live out our nature. If we’re **“of the devil,”** so not born of God, then we naturally, unabashedly go on living in the practice of sin. But if we’re born of God, then our nature has changed, relationship to Christ leads to righteousness in practice.

So let us not get deceived into thinking that being a Christian is just going to church or holding membership or making a profession. It's a life, a relationship that changes our disposition so that the practice of how we live conforms more and more to Christ.

## **2. Reality can be recognized (v. 10)**

So John concludes this paragraph with what he deems obvious: **“By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother.”** While the latter statement introduces the next section, the first conclusion makes plain what he's stated. The new birth is a new life, and that life conforms more and more to God's law as displayed in Christ. He doesn't meant conformity in the way that the Pharisees rigidly held to the law without a drop of grace or humility evident. “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven,” Jesus declared (Matt 5:20). Instead, it's the kind of conformity to the law that we see in Christ who found pleasure in doing the Father's will. We can only do that if Jesus' life dwells in us.

Let no one deceive you about why Jesus Christ came into the world or what He makes us to be through His redeeming work or what clarifies us as genuine Christians.