

You Can't Keep on Like That 1 John 3:4-10

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1 John 3:6 (NKJV) *Whoever abides in Him does not sin. Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him.*

1 John 3:9 (NKJV) *Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God.*

Friends, I first read those verses when I was in junior high and I was petrified. Then, like now, I believed the Bible was the word of God. I took what it said very seriously. I thought, if a genuine, born again Christian cannot sin, it logically follows that if I sinned I must not be a Christian, I must not be saved. Now, back then I really didn't grasp the depth of my depravity. I was kind of like the fellow who prayed, "Lord, I have sinned, but I have some excellent excuses." Yet, I certainly could not pretend I had never sinned. I knew I had told a few lies, was sometimes mean to my brothers, and did not always honor my parents. I knew I was a sinner, and I found that troubling.

So what did I do? First, I tried to ignore those verses and pretend they didn't exist. I think many folks do that with parts of the Bible which make them uncomfortable. However, I knew all of the Bible, from Genesis and Revelation, was God's word and that included 1 John 3. I knew that what the Bible said was true, whether I liked it or not. So, then I tried to comfort myself with the fact I was not alone. If sinning meant I was not a Christian, then the vast majority of people I knew were not either. I knew that even my pastor sinned sometimes. I consoled myself by thinking we were all in trouble together. I told my Sunday school teacher what I thought that text meant, and she said it could not mean that, and that was the extent of her explanation. I am very grateful that a few years later I heard a sermon that helped me understand what these verses really mean and brought great relief to my soul.

Friends, this morning our journey through 1 John brings us to chapter 3:4-10, which includes verses 6 and 9. First we will look at what the passage doesn't mean, which may alleviate some concerns for those of you who know you are sinners. Then we will explore the important things that God is saying to us in this text. Let's pause and pray the Lord will enable us to understand and obey His word today.

Sometimes pastors give the impression that if one knows Greek, the language in which the New Testament was originally written, all the problems of interpreting the Bible are solved. That is not the case. When a Greek word has three or four different meanings, or a Greek sentence is unclear as to which adjective modifies which noun, being a fluent Greek reader doesn't help in those situations. However, in this passage, knowing Greek, even a little bit like I do, is beneficial. Those who read Greek notice that the key verbs in this text are in the present tense. Thus, it is probably more accurate to translate those two verses like the ESV does. Listen. **3:6** *No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him.* And **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.* In his commentary, John Stott, The great British Bible scholar, writes, "*The thought being conveyed is not that one born of God will never commit a sinful act, but that he will not persist in sin.*" In other words, the Apostle John is saying someone who is a genuine Christian cannot be continually practicing sinful actions and harboring sinful attitudes. At the beginning of his letter, John makes it clear that no Christian ever reaches a point of never sinning. According to John, the person who says, "I never do anything really wrong," is a liar, which, of course, is wrong in itself. So friends, we can breathe a sigh of relief. The fact you sinned this past week doesn't mean you are not a Christian. The absolute perfection God demands can never be fulfilled by what we do, but only by what the Lord Jesus has done for us through His life, death and resurrection.

Yet, what exactly does it mean that a genuine Christian will not keep on sinning? A few weeks ago we talked about a "test" which can help someone determine if he or she, or a particular teacher, is a genuine Christian. The test focused on whether or not someone obeys God. This passage provides a similar test. The basic question is the same. Do you obey the Lord? A few weeks ago, as we talked about scoring this kind of test, we noted that God doesn't grade on the curve. He doesn't care whether or not you obey Him more than other people do. Whether

you are in the 98th percentile, or the 20th percentile is irrelevant. I also said, the issue is not the quantity of obedience. There is no standard where 70% obedience is passing, while 69% obedience means failing. Rather, the key is desire, a genuine desire to obey God. Whether someone has been a Christian for six hours or six decades, if he or she has zero desire to obey God, experiences no pain or regret when the Lord is dishonored, has no real love for God, this is an indication that individual is spiritually dead, not born of God, and not a genuine Christian.

In our text today, John seems to raise the standard. He does not focus on just a desire to avoid sin, but actual freedom from continuing a sinful lifestyle. Obedience to God is one mark which identifies a Christian and is evidence of real spiritual life. Consider these verses. **3:7, 8** *Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. 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.* And also, **3:10** *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.* Let me read that from the NLT **3:10** *So now we can tell who are children of God and who are children of the devil. Anyone who does not live righteously and does not love other believers does not belong to God.*

John paints things in a very black and white manner. “If you do what is right, you are a Christian. If you do not, you are a child of the devil.” That does seem a little over-simplified, but John is making an important point. What a person is like on the inside, in this case whether or not he or she is really born of God, will be exhibited on the outside. The way people live, their actions, is one way that happens. Oh, sure even the finest Christians sometimes lose their tempers or act selfishly. And there were probably occasions when Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin helped little old ladies cross the street. Yet, John says if we look at the overall pattern of people’s lives, it is probably going to be obvious who is living righteously and who is not. When a person is truly born of God, changes really do occur on the inside. Those may not immediately lead to changes which are evident on the outside, but eventually and inevitably there will be outward

indications that there really has been an inward change.

Folks, if I plant an apple tree, there may not be apples the next day, the next month, or the next year. Yet, if it is really an apple tree, a live apple tree, there will someday be apples. A tree produces fruit consistent with its nature. A Christian also produces fruit consistent with his or her nature. Yes, there will be some fruit from the sinful nature that still haunts each one of us. We are all still sinners who sin. Yet, as Christians we have a new nature. We have been born of God, born again. Because of this our lives will be characterized by seeking to please and obey the Lord. Thus, true Christians will usually be honest in their business dealings, faithful in their marriage vows, forgiving toward those who wrong them, and committed to their local church.

So why does John want us to know this? Well, the reason is not so we can take the church directory, go down the list and decide who is a genuine Christian and who is not.

One reason John gives this test is to help us distinguish between true and false teachers. In John’s day, like ours, there were many different teachers with a lot of different ideas. People often asked, “How do we know which ones to believe?” John answers, “Believe the ones who obey God. Don’t just read their lips. Don’t just listen to what they say, watch how they live.” It is no coincidence that the personal lives of leaders of non-Christian cults are often characterized by sexual immorality and greed. The fact someone’s personal life is in shambles doesn’t make his or her teaching wrong, but it does mean the teacher has lost credibility. Teachers and pastors are human. We are not perfect. We make mistakes. We sin. The issue is not whether God forgives us for those sins. 1 John 1:9 applies to pastors just as much as it does to anyone else. If I confess my sin to the Lord, He will forgive and cleanse me through what Jesus Christ has done for me. Yet, even though a pastor has experienced God’s forgiveness, it does not mean his credibility and authority as a teacher are restored.

A couple of months ago, a man in Tallahassee, Florida came home to his apartment and found his wife in bed with their pastor, Reverend O. Jermain Simmons. The pastor quickly fled the apartment, without any clothes on, and was pursued by the husband who was

carrying a gun. Eventually the police intervened and gave Simmons a blanket and a ride to his home. That next Sunday, at Jacob's Chapel in Tallahassee, Pastor Simmons told his congregation, "You cannot defend sin, but I am only human. We all sin and I have asked God to forgive me." At that point the congregation gave Simmons a standing ovation. Later that morning the church board voted to have him remain as their pastor. Folks, that was wrong. Again, Pastor Simmons might preach wonderful sermons, full of biblical truth. He might have indeed confessed his sins and experienced God's forgiveness. But his actions mean he is not a credible teacher. He should not be in that pulpit, preaching to the people of that congregation.

In 1 Timothy 3, the Apostle Paul tells us that overseers or pastors need to be "above reproach," and have a good reputation in the community. It is not always easy to know if that standard is being met, but I think it is clear Pastor Simmons fails to do so. And John indicates that any pastor whose life is characterized by sinful practices doesn't meet that standard either.

A second reason John gives us this test is so we can apply it not to other people, but to ourselves. I need to ask myself: "Is my life characterized by obedience to God?" So, what happens if you cannot honestly say, "I am a person who obeys God?" Well, there should be some red lights flashing in your head. This is a sign of a spiritual problem which demands attention. You need to examine yourself to make sure you are really trusting in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord. If, however, you say, "Yes, I really am trusting in Jesus Christ" it may mean you are like a tree which is alive, but not yet producing fruit. On the other hand, if you are not obeying God, it could mean that though you are a nice person, even a religious person, you are not really trusting in the Lord Jesus, and not really a Christian.

Friends, when I read these verses from John, I am reminded of a most important fact. It is possible to sit in a church pew almost every Sunday morning, to be baptized, to be a church member, to walk down an aisle during an altar call, but still never genuinely turn to Jesus Christ and put your faith in Him. Oh, it is not my job to try to separate the sheep from the goats, to decide who is really a Christian and who is not. But I implore you, beg you, if you are habitually disobeying God's commands, look in the mirror,

examine your life, and make certain you are trusting in Jesus Christ and have experienced the salvation which only He can provide.

Third, John provides this test to encourage genuine Christians that they will indeed obey the Lord. In verse 9, John does not say a Christian has the ability to avoid continual sinning. Rather, he says that a Christian is unable to continue in sin. That is a radical statement. Yet, it fits with the idea that a good tree will produce good fruit. Just like it is impossible for an apple tree to produce oranges, it is impossible for a true Christian to live in continual sin. The Holy Spirit who indwells every believer in Christ guarantees that. Yes, there will be times when we slip, stumble, or fall, but we always get up.

Folks, this is a reminder that God is at work in our lives, making us who He wants us to be. Yes, we need to read the Bible, pray, go to church and seek to obey God's word. Yet, what really enables us to find freedom from sin in our lives is God's Spirit at work inside of us, changing our nature, and giving us a desire to obey. Though we must not be complacent or content with our lack of holiness, we must always remember it is God's grace which will make us the people He has called us to be. Friend, you may be discouraged because you feel you are always stumbling. For example, maybe you have a bad habit of frequently taking God's name in vain, something specifically forbidden in the Ten Commandments. If so, cheer up. If you are a genuine believer in Jesus, God promises you cannot continue in that sin. It will likely take some time, but God will enable you to overcome your sinful addiction.

Friends, knowing we will not continually sin gives us security. "Pastor Dan if I just give up on Christianity and forget about God and church, and live an immoral lifestyle, what will happen to me?" John's answer to that question seems pretty simple. "That will not happen." As a child of God, you will not totally and permanently turn away from the Lord. Yes, you could do that, but as a believer in Jesus your new nature guarantees that you will not do those things. When I go to a restaurant, I could order liver and onions if that was on the menu, yet my taste buds, my nature, makes it certain I will not. Friend, I think the Bible is clear. The Holy Spirit will keep us from totally and permanently falling away from God. That doesn't mean it is easy to obey the Lord, but God's Spirit will give us the grace to keep trusting

and following Him until He brings us to our heavenly home. There we will find it easy to constantly obey, worship and serve our Lord.

Friends, a goal of this sermon, and I believe the goal of the Apostle John, in both this passage and the entire letter, is to tear down false assurance, and build up true assurance. I want to close with a couple of examples of how this works in real life. The first is an example of what not to do. One of my family members—I will call him “Joe” has been involved in sexual sin. This fall, he confessed that he had been unfaithful to his wife and had numerous affairs over the years. During this whole time he had been outwardly professing to trust, follow and serve the Lord Jesus. Over the past few months, Joe has focused on restoring his relationships with God, his wife, and his adult children. The last two involved a long road, but he seems committed to do whatever he can to make that happen. Joe recently met with a pastor for counseling, who said, “Joe, I really don’t believe you are a Christian, and until I see evidence of repentance over a longer period of time, I am not going to be convinced your faith in Jesus is real.”

Friends, that is an example of bad counsel. First, that pastor seems to be forgetting that we don’t earn God’s salvation either by avoiding sin or repenting of sin. Our salvation is never about what we do, but about what Jesus has done for us through His life, death and resurrection. Second, it is not our job to determine whether or not someone’s profession of faith in Jesus is genuine or not. That is God’s job. Now, if Joe was continuing to live an immoral lifestyle it would give that pastor a reason to question whether or not Joe’s profession of faith is genuine. That is the Apostle John’s point in our text. However, since Joe is expressing both faith in Jesus and a desire to obey Him, then I think the pastor should be reminding Joe of the truth found in **1 John 1:9** *If we confess our sins, God is faithful and right to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* And friend, if you are truly trusting in the Lord Jesus, it is my privilege to build up truth assurances and tell you that

your salvation is eternally secure, because you are a child of God. By His grace you have been born again, received the righteousness of Jesus as your own, are now indwelt by His Spirit, and there is nothing that can ever separate you from God’s love that is our through Jesus Christ.

The second story comes from my friend Pastor Dave Sowers in Sioux City, Iowa. He was leading a Sunday evening Bible study through 1 John when they came to a verse we explored a few weeks ago, **2:4** *The one who says, “I have come to know Him, yet doesn’t keep His commands, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.”* Very similar to **3:6** *No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him.* Anyway, when they read that verse, one fellow in the group, Jeff, said, “I am sorry Pastor, I don’t agree with that. If that is true, then I am not a Christian, because I don’t have any desire to obey God.” After a bit of discussion, the Bible study ended. The next morning, Jeff’s wife called Pastor Dave in a panic. “I don’t know what to do. Jeff didn’t come home last night. When he left, he told me he was going out to get drunk and find a prostitute. He said if he wasn’t going to heaven, he might as well really live it up.” Dave felt terrible, but two days later, Jeff walked into his office, and said, “Pastor, help. Even though I have gone to church for years, I know I am not really a Christian. But I know I need Jesus in my life. What do I need to do to become a true Christian?” That day, Jeff became a child of God, through faith in Jesus Christ. The words of 1 John popped his bubble of false assurance and helped him see his need to turn to the Lord Jesus.

Friend, maybe, just maybe, you are like Jeff. You are someone whose bubble of false assurance has been popped. You know that even though you may have been coming to church for years, you are not really a Christian. If so, I urge you to turn to Jesus Christ today, trust in Him, and receive Him as Savior and Lord. If you are not sure what that means talk to Pastor Mark or myself.