



1 John 3:4-15
Can A Christian Sin?

I love to garden, it's a hobby. I'm thankful I don't have to feed my family with my efforts, but I'm amazed by the process of taking a little seed, putting it into the ground and watching as days tick by into weeks until eventually, a little tip of green appears above the dirt. The tip grows higher and higher and leaves begin to unfurl and the plant begins to take shape, and as a few more weeks go by, you see flowers appear. Flowers give way to fruit, which we also call vegetables.

The fruit is small at first, but it grows and grows over time until it becomes ready to harvest. Then you remove it from the plant, put it into your body, and it gives you energy and sustains your life. You start with a tiny little seed, and it grows into a plant that is maybe eight feet tall, and it produces 20 or 30 pounds of fruit - but there's no hole in the ground! It didn't just take a bunch of dirt below the ground and create a plant above the ground - no, all of this vegetative material has appeared almost out of thin air.

So, I love gardening. And last spring I was getting ready to plant my small garden. I had sketched out where each plant would go - you need to rotate your crops - it's not good to plant tomatoes and some other plants in the same spot two years in a row - so I had planned where each plant would go. I had determined which plants I needed and how many of them I had room for, and then I went down and bought them - I grow a few things from seeds, but some things from transplants as well. And so I bought determinate tomatoes and indeterminate tomatoes, cherry tomatoes, yellow tomatoes, roma tomatoes, some heirloom tomatoes, Early Girl and Better Boy, along with several types of chilis and some squash and I set all these tiny plants out in my garden bed until I had the chance to actually put them where I wanted them to be in the ground.

Well, sometime after I left them there, my wonderful little daughter went missing.

We looked all over the house and couldn't find her.

It was one of those moments when you as a parent start to get seriously worried, not just bothered. And so we went outside and started calling for her and looking all over the yard, and that's when Madeleine found her - in the garden, with a little shovel, planting all my new plants.

She was having a blast, but my plans for the garden were ruined. You see, she had taken all the little stakes out of the plants when she planted them - the ones that tell you what kind of tomato this particular plant is - and those things were important to me because different tomatoes grow to different sizes and need to be planted in different spaces so they don't crowd out the things planted next to them or grow too big and cast too much shade.

Now, you can tell some things apart if you know what you're looking for – you can tell the difference between cucumber leaves and tomato leaves and chili pepper leaves - they're each a different shape. But there's no way, at least to my eye, to tell the difference between a determinate variety of tomato – one that's going to grow short and compact, and an indeterminate variety – one that is going to grow long vines. The only thing to do is to re-plant them, let time go by, and see what they produce. Sooner or later, the plant will reveal its true identity by the fruit it produces.

And here's why I'm telling you that story: the Bible says the same thing about us – you can tell what kind of person we are spiritually by what we produce with our lives. If God has planted His seed in your soul, you will produce spiritual fruit, and if not... well, you won't.

Read with me here, starting in 1 John 3 – we'll back up to verse 1 to get the context of what's going on:

1 Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. 2 Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. 3 And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.

We talked about all of that two weeks ago – we talked about the love that the Father has bestowed on us, and how it has a purifying affect on us, it makes us want to be more and more like him. Well, now John continues by contrasting those who have had this love bestowed on them and those who have not:

4 Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness. 5 And you know that He was manifested to take away our sins, and in Him there is no sin. 6 Whoever abides in Him does not sin. Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him. 7 Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous. 8 He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil. 9 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.

Now, I know that can be kind of confusing on the first pass. But here's what John is saying, it's the same message he's been sending in this letter all along: there are only two teams spiritually speaking, and you're either on one or the other. You're either righteous because you belong to God or you're sinning as you follow the devil. And just like my tomato plants, over time you produce fruit that reveals your true identity no matter what you look like in the beginning.

So let's talk a little bit more about some of the things John is saying here because he's making some very strong statements.

The first thing we need to do is clarify what John means when he writes (vs 9): “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.”

Does that really mean that Christians cannot sin – that it’s impossible for them to do? No. If you have a study Bible, it probably has a note here that explains this because there’s not a lot debate over what John means. All the authorities agree – the verbs in this verse are grammatically present and continuous; in other words, they describe an ongoing habit of sin, not individual acts of sin. The ESV translation has it this way: **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.**

So John is NOT saying that a Christian is someone who will never sin.

And that’s important for you to know, because there is some misunderstanding out there on this subject. There are some churches and ministries and denominations that are very concerned about the pursuit of Christian holiness and what is called the doctrine of “perfectionism.” They’ve got strict lists of what you can and can’t do and how you should and shouldn’t do it. And they’ll teach you that it’s possible to live a sinless life here on this earth if you just try hard enough and want it bad enough. And they put all the burden back on you.

If you talk to people who are caught up in that, they usually say one of two things – they’re either trying really hard to get it right, or they’re totally bummed out and defeated because they’ve tried and tried to get it right and they find they still sin in some way and when they do, they feel like they’re right back to square one and left to build this all up on their own again.

But that’s not the view God wants us to have. After all, John just told us back in Chapter One:

1 John 1:8 If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. **9** If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

God knows we will slip, He knows we will stumble. Every Christian has moments when we fail to abide in Christ, when we forget or willfully reject His presence in us. But for the true Christian sin represents moments of defeat in our lives, it’s not the norm, it’s not the standard, it’s not who we really want to be, and in the aftermath God brings conviction and shows us the way of restoration, IF we are in Christ.

So again, John is NOT saying that a Christian is someone who can never and will never sin.

But what he IS saying is, if sin is habitual, continual, and characteristic in your life – if people would use your sin to describe you, if you would describe yourself and your preferences and lifestyle that way, then no – you’re probably not a Christian.

You may agree with some Christian thoughts, you might like to read a Christian book or listen to a Christian radio station, or even go to something called a church – but if you’re not producing godly fruit in your life – if you’re producing chili peppers instead of tomatoes, it doesn’t matter what you call yourself or where you’re planted in the garden. You’re going to bear fruit that reveals which seed is in your soul.

This is a point of tremendous conflict today between the Church and the culture. We in the West have created a society that is entirely fixated on self – what I want to do, what are my goals, what are my preferences and what is my identity, what do I think?

One of the best symbols of this is the ‘comment box.’ Whether it’s at a restaurant or in some government office or at the bottom of a website – we want to know what *you* think because *you* are important. And we have exalted the individual above everything else – we’re constantly trying to create new ways for you to express yourself and tear down barriers that keep you from being who you feel you really are.

Unfortunately, that customer service mentality has crept into some corners of the church so that now you drive by some congregations and they’re waving a flag outside that indicates a sexual preference. “If you have this preference, you’re welcome here.” Well let’s get something straight – anyone and everyone is welcome in the church – God doesn’t tell anyone, “You can’t come in here.” People are welcome to come into the church. You can come in here wearing a suit, or faded jeans, or a hijab for that matter. Come in here high or sober, queer or straight, suicidal or high on life. You’re welcome just as you are – but God won’t let you stay that way. He says some things you want to do are sin, and He will not tolerate them in the lives of people who claim to be His.

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

1 John 3:9 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.

Again, this is talking about persistent, life dominating, personality defining sin. At some point it all comes down to this: you don’t bring your identity to God and wave your flag outside His church, you come to God and let Him shape your identity. We don’t just add a little Jesus to our lives; He comes in and demands to be King – He’ll take all of you or have none of you.

But listen – this is about WAY more than just the sin of a single sexual lifestyle – it’s about all of us. It doesn’t matter what your sin is – God isn’t here to make your life a little bit better, or to help you express yourself individually. He’s here to change you fundamentally – to plant a different seed in your soul that will change the core of what you are forever.

You see, you don't become a Christian by simply deciding to live a better life, or do the things your parents are telling you to, it's not just about adopting certain morals and standards and principles and trying hard to live up to them. The point is not simply to be a good person and live a good life – all of this flows out of the fact that God has done something real in the Christian – He has bestowed His love and placed a seed in the Christian's soul that was not there before, and that seed, if it is real, must grow and produce fruit – it's what seeds do.

This seed is the presence of God – both the Word of God and the Spirit of God in the Christian's life and over time seeds naturally grow and produce fruit.

So, either it is there in your soul or it is not, and one of the easiest places to look for evidence of it's existence is to examine the desires of your heart, the words of your mouth, and the actions of your hands and feet – what fruit is growing in your life?

John keeps repeating this theme – if we're really saved, there will be evidence of it in our lives. So ask yourself: is there evidence? What about me has God changed?

Because, remember when John says we cannot sin, he doesn't mean we won't ever stumble or fall, he doesn't mean that we won't be tempted or that we won't have desires - he means that our lives won't be characterized by sinful habits and conduct. He means that people won't know us by our sin; they'll know us by our fruit.

So, have you asked God to do this for you? Have you told you want to be changed? Have you told God that you want, not just to be reformed, but to be transformed? Have you asked Him to do something new in you?

That's what He sent Jesus to do. Look with me at verse 5:

1 John 3:5 And you know that He (Jesus) was manifested to take away our sins, and in Him there is no sin.

Sometimes we think sin is something light and trivial or that it doesn't matter that much, but then you have to stop and realize: this is how God responded to sin – He sent His own Son to take it away. God has used all kinds of men and women throughout the years as kings and priests and prophets and missionaries and teachers and lawyers and scientists and servants and none of them was able to do what Jesus did. God uses normal human beings to do a lot of things, but He didn't use any of them to conquer sin – only His Son could do that.

Think about that sometime and let it soak in: Sin was so severe that only God could deal with it. And then think about the sin you find in your own life and realize – God isn't asking you to deal with it on your own, He wants to be your strength and shield and your salvation. Verse eight also tells us Jesus came to destroy the works of the devil.

And here's the way all of this connects: Jesus came the first time to 'to take away our sins' and to 'destroy the devil's work.' And the Bible says He will come again and 'we shall see Him' and 'we shall be like Him' – if all of this is true, how can we possibly go on living a life that is in love with our sin?

Knowing and loving Christ MUST have a purifying affect on our lives – there must be growing proof that we have met Him, that He has planted something inside of us, and that it is bearing fruit.

As we jump back into the text John makes his point one more time, and says even if all is well between us and Christ, don't expect it to go well with the world around us.

10 In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother. 11 For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, 12 not as Cain *who* was of the wicked one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his works were evil and his brother's righteous.

13 Do not marvel, my brethren, if the world hates you. 14 We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love *his* brother abides in death. 15 Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

It's almost like John is saying the same thing all over again... because, he is. One more time, John says there are only two teams to be on spiritually, and there are no independents or free agents. You are either of God or of the devil. And the two teams don't get along well.

Christians are told to let their love for one another define them. Cain, on the other hand, murdered his brother instead of loving him. Why? Because Cain cared about himself instead of his brother.

But here's something important to know: Cain thought of himself as a worshipper, not an atheist. But when God accepted Abel's worship and rejected Cain's – Cain grew angry and lashed out.

And Christian, here's what that means for you: it means this world doesn't really love you. The Bible tells us time and time again this world is not our home. Abel did the right thing and it didn't go too well for him immediately. So, don't expect the world to be friendly to you, especially if you are growing in Christlikeness. They'll like you sometimes, on the surface, but when they get down to what you really believe, sooner or later, it will become divisive.

Everybody loved Jesus when He was feeding them, but when He started teaching them they walked away.

Friends, once again, not everyone who calls himself or herself a Christian is. Not every church is a good church. God doesn't accept all types of worship.

And some people don't like to hear that. Cain didn't like to hear that. He wanted to be a "spiritual person" and have God accept him the way he was, but God had standards. God had rules. We can't demand that God accommodate us, we must come to Him as beggars in search of bread, as criminals in search of mercy. And we must ask Him to give us forgiveness and new life. We must ask Him to give us new lines of programming code for our souls so that we produce new results.

So, what do we do with all of this we've seen this morning? I suggest we seriously consider it all. God is communicating to us clearly. That doesn't mean you like what you hear – but there's no missing the message: there are only two teams – one following God through Christ and the other following Satan and focusing on self. Which one are you on?

Friend, there's sin in your life – there's sin in ALL of our lives. But are you OK with your sin or do you hate it? Do you tolerate it or do you abhor it? Does it define you, or defy you?

Has God truly planted a seed in your soul that is growing, and maturing, and producing fruit? Because, sooner or later the fruit in our lives will reveal the seed in our soul.

Take a few moments this morning as we close with a song and examine yourself before God. Listen to the voice of His Holy Spirit speaking words of encouragement, correction, or rebuke. And take action. The pastors are here and available for you if you have any questions or concerns.