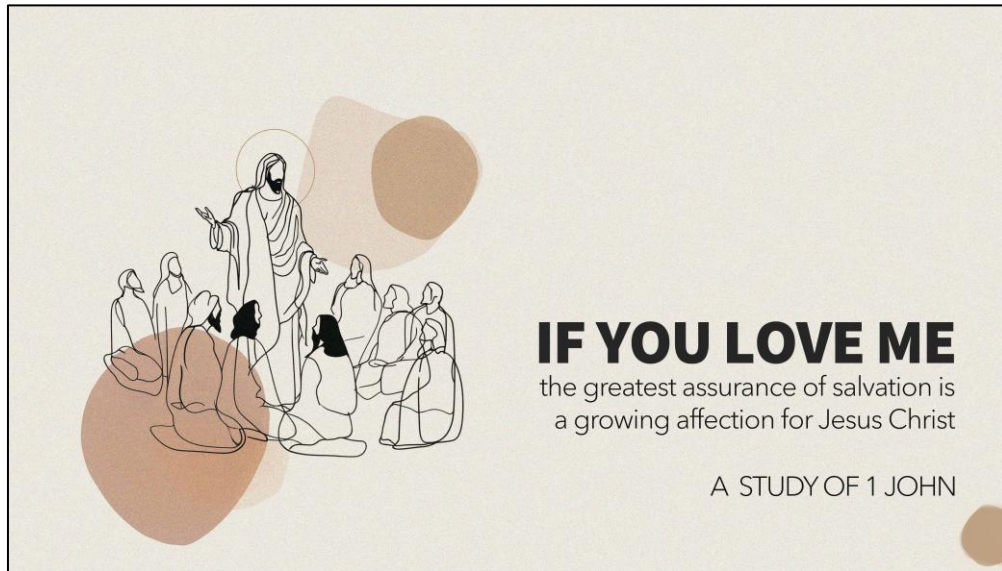




The “S” Word

1 John 1:8-10, 3:6-9

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THE “S” WORD

1 John 1:8-10, 3:6-9

The “C” word is scary. It gets our attention. And we anxiously ask, “How bad is it? ... Is there treatment? ... How long do I have?!” Cancer is not always what happens to other people. Sometimes it happens to us. When our son Adam was 19 and playing college basketball, his annual physical revealed he had bone cancer and we had to face the “C” word. So have many of you. To state the obvious, cancer is serious. It’s the not the same as being diagnosed with the flu. Cancer creates a cause for concern.

But this morning is not about the “C” word, but the “S” word. This morning, we’re going to talk about sin in the life of the Christian.

But not just big sins, like adultery or embezzlement. We’re going to talk about what Jerry Bridges calls “respectable sins.” Bridges wrote a book with that title listing sins we tolerate and writing a chapter about each one. His list of respectable, or acceptable, sins include ... worry, frustration, discontent, ungratefulness, pride, selfishness, impatience, irritability, anger, bitterness, envy, jealousy, worldliness, sins of the tongue, lack of forgiveness, lack of self-control, and being judgmental. Again, these are acceptable sins, subtle sins. And to be honest, we don’t think of them as sinful. Yet, Bridges writes, “It does not matter whether our sin is scandalous or respectable, all sin is sinful ... Whether it is large or small in our eyes, it is heinous in the sight of God.” And Jesus died on the cross for each one. Jesus paid the penalty for each one.

But if we’ve been born again and Christ has given us a new heart, why do we still struggle with sin? Paul declared what is true of every believer, when he said, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20, NAS).¹ Paul said, “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Galatians 5:24, NAS). And Paul said it as clearly and boldly as it can be said, “You have been set free from sin” (Romans 6:18, ESV).

If all that’s true, why do we still struggle with sin? The Apostle John addressed this in a short letter he wrote around 90 AD.

First John is a sequel to the Gospel of John, in which John explained the Gospel to a new generation. He also explained what Jesus meant when He said, “If you love Me ...” John describes what a true Christian looks like. He describes what it looks like to truly believe and to truly love Jesus Christ. And that’s why the theme of 1 John can be summed in this sentence. ***The greatest assurance of salvation is a growing affection for Jesus Christ.***

Christianity is not just theological. It’s not just moral. It’s relational. And having a relationship with Jesus means walking with Him and loving Him. And the more we love Him, the less attractive sin will be. Let me say that again. ***The more we love Him, the less attractive sin will be.*** That’s why loving Jesus is the key to spiritual victory.

ADMIT IT²

Why do we have to keep talking about sin? Because we still sin and we must admit it. John wrote, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us ... If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us” (1 John 1:8, 10, ESV).

One of the reasons John wrote this letter was to expose the heresy of his day. The Gnostics believed that all flesh was evil, yet they also believed that intellectual enlightenment could elevate a person above sin. So, a person’s body could do something immoral, but the soul would not be guilty.³ It was rationalized immorality. But John said, “If we say we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves” (1 John 1:8, NAS).

While it’s true that Christ has conquered sin, and that “those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires,” it’s also true that we are still vulnerable to temptation.⁴

In Romans 7, Paul described his struggle as a Christian. He voiced frustration with himself. This was his personal experience, with which we can easily identify. Paul writes ...

“For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate ... So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing ... Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:15, 17-19, 24, ESV).

Paul admitted to being a walking contradiction.⁵ He wanted to do what’s right but didn’t always do it. We know the feeling. So how are we to understand this? Is it a battle between the good me and the bad me? Do we have an angel on one shoulder and a demon on the other shoulder, each telling us what to do? I don’t think so.

In Galatians 5, Paul said, “For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please” (Galatians 5:17, NAS). The battle is between the flesh and the spirit. Our spirits have been born again, we are new creatures, we possess His divine nature, and that nature, our true selves, desires to love God and obey God. Yet, we still live in this body, and this flesh can still be tempted, aroused, and enticed.⁶

While it’s true that Christ has conquered sin, it’s also true that we are still vulnerable to temptation and the possibility of sin is frustratingly real. And we must admit it.

CONFESS IT⁷

Why do we have to keep talking about sin? Because we still sin and we must be quick to confess it. John wrote, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9, ESV).

In Psalm 103, King David praised God for His grace and forgiveness. “The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness ... He has not dealt with us according to our sins (He did not give us what we deserved) ... (Yet) as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him” (Psalm 103:8, 10, 12-13, NAS).

As the Lord offers compassion and grace, He awaits our confession. The Greek word for “confess” means to agree, to say the same.⁸ When we confess our sins, we agree with God. We say the thing about our sin that He says. We condemn our sins just as He does. In that way, confession reunites our hearts with God’s heart.

David’s confession in Psalm 51 is a worthy template for us to follow. When his adultery with Bathsheba became public, David was broken and convicted, and he poured his heart out to God. Psalm 51 teaches us how David confessed his sin and how we should confess our sin.

- Appeal to God’s grace – “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy” (51:1, ESV).
- Admit your sin – “I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight” (51:3-4, ESV).
- Ask for restoration – “Restore to me the joy of your salvation” (51:12, ESV).
- Approach God in brokenness – “A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (51:17, ESV).

In 2 Corinthians 7, Paul talked about “godly sorrow,” sorrow which moves a person to “repentance.” As Paul described it, when a Christian truly repents of their sin there will be “indignation” for sin, a distaste and disdain for our sin. There will be “fear,” a respect for God’s holiness, a dread of doing anything that would dishonor Him. There will be a “longing,” a fresh desire to please Him. There will be “zeal,” a passion for what is right, and a holy ambition to walk in a manner worthy of His grace.

This “godly sorrow” and this feeling of conviction is rare in our day, and I can prove it by citing how the Puritans prayed and confessed their sins. A classic little book called *The Valley of Vision* is a collection of Puritan prayers from the 1600-1700’s. Listen to how the Puritans confessed their sins.

- “You are good beyond all thought, but I am vile, wretched, and miserable ... I bring my soul to you; break it, wound it, bend it, mold it.”
- “Destroy, O God, the dark guest within whose hidden presence makes my life a hell.”
- “O wretched man that I am! O Lord, I have a wild heart.”
- “Lord Jesus, give me a deeper repentance, a horror of sin, a dread of it.”

- “Lord Jesus, I sin – grant that I may never cease grieving because of it, never be content with myself ... Kill my envy, command my tongue, trample down self ... Deliver me from attachment to things unclean, from wrong associations, from evil passions, from the sugar of sin.”
- “O Lord, no day of my life has passed that has not proved me guilty in your sight ... I am guilty, but pardoned, lost, but saved, wandering, but found, sinning, but cleansed. Give me perpetual broken-heartedness, keep me always clinging to the cross.”

That’s what true conviction sounds like. When we sin, and when God convicts, something deep within us should be upset. Gordon MacDonald refers to guilt as “spiritual pain.”⁹ It’s the soul saying in regret, “Oh why did I do that?” It’s David saying in Psalm 51, “O Lord, I am so sorry for what I have done.”

“If we confess our sins,” John wrote, “he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9, ESV).

Luke 7 records my favorite story about grace. Jesus had been invited to the home of a prominent religious leader, and an unlikely character crashed the party. It was a woman of the street. She made her living selling herself. She represented all that was immoral and ungodly. People thought of her as dirty and so did she. Every time she looked in the mirror guilt looked back and no amount of make-up could cover it up. Her life was a mess, and she couldn’t do anything about it. But earlier that day, she heard Jesus speaking in the streets. His words touched her heart like words never had before. For the first time in her life, she felt true love, true acceptance, true forgiveness. So she dared to enter the home of that religious leader, and she dared to approach Jesus. Her posture and her actions tell us everything we need to know about this woman.

- She knelt. She got down on her knees. She knew she was unworthy.
- She wept. She poured her heart out before Jesus. She poured out years of shame and guilt.
- She wiped His feet with her hair. She kissed His feet.
- She anointed His feet with perfume. As that expensive perfume poured out of the bottle, gratitude poured out of her heart.

Then Jesus turned to the religious leaders in the room, and said, “Those who have been forgiven much, love much, (like this woman), but those who think they have been forgiven little, love little, (like you).”¹⁰ This woman understood grace more than all the religious leaders in the room. Those who have been forgiven much, love much.

DEFEAT IT¹¹

Why do we have to keep talking about sin? Because even though we still sin, through the Holy Spirit who lives in us, we can defeat, conquer, and overcome it.

John wrote, “No one who abides in him keeps on sinning ... 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 3:6, 9, ESV). John was not denying the possibility of sin in a Christian’s life, far from it. He was declaring the incompatibility of sin in a Christian’s life.¹²

John was also saying that habitual, unrepentant sin proves a person does not belong to God. He went on to say, “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, John was admitting that we still sin, but that it shouldn’t be that much! Well, how much? Let me ask it this way, how long can you go without sinning? Not wanting to brag, but I can go eight hours without sinning. When I’m asleep at night! But what about when we’re awake? Can you go an entire day without sinning? Can you go an hour without sinning? Can you go five minutes without sinning? I think it’s foolish to say you can go an entire week without sinning and I think it’s foolish to say you sin every five minutes.

Again, John was not denying the possibility of sin in a Christian’s life. He was declaring the incompatibility of sin in a Christian’s life.

Paul wrote about this as well. To the Colossians, he said. “Put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature – sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry ... You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these – anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips, and do not lie to each other” (Colossians 3:5-9, NIV).

Paul said, “Put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature” (Colossians 3:5, NIV).¹³ That’s an intense, violent command. Paul was saying kill it before it kills you. Kill it before it ruins you.

Paul defined it as “idolatry.” It’s idolatry because it’s loving pleasure and loving self more than loving God. Every time we give in to immorality, impurity, lust, greed, anger, rage, lying, it’s idolatry. It’s loving self more than loving God.

Paul said, “You used to walk in these ways.”¹⁴ This is how you used to live, before you knew Christ, but no longer. “Rid yourselves of such things,” Paul said. Because you’re no longer who you used to be, you should no longer live like you used to live. Christ is in you and has given you a new heart.

We may not struggle with all of these sins, but there’s still sin in us. Back to Jerry Bridges’ respectable sins. Let’s look at just two of them.

First, pride. In Ephesians 4, Paul says, “I urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility” (Ephesians 4:1-2, NAS). But too often, pride gets the best of us. Solomon explained why. Because “every man’s way is right in his own eyes” (Proverbs 21:2, NAS). We can’t help it. We think we’re right, and it’s hard to admit that we could be wrong. That’s why humility is so important. It’s realizing that you’re not always right.

A second respectable sin, selfishness. We want what we want. And most of our arguments are us fighting to get our way. That's why Paul warned in Philippians 2, "Do nothing from selfishness ... (instead) Have an attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:3-5, NAS).

Paraphrasing the Scottish theologian John Murray, who wrote, "When there is sin in the life of a believer, there will be conflict in the heart. There will be tension. Tension between the flesh and the spirit. And we will feel the contradiction. Indeed, the more sanctified a person, the more conformed to the image of Christ, the more he will recoil against that sin in his heart. The deeper his reverence for the majesty of God, the more persistent his yearning for God, the deeper his love for his Savior Jesus Christ, the more conscious he will be of the gravity of sin and he will despise it."¹⁵

Despise it. If we're going to defeat it, conquer it, and overcome it, we must despise it.

In 1 John 5, John writes, "For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? ... We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, but he who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him" (1 John 5:4-5, 18, ESV).

We can defeat, conquer, and overcome temptation and sin.¹⁶ Before Christ, we couldn't help but sin. But now that Christ lives in us, we can say no to sin. As John declared, "Everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world."

CONCLUSION

In this short letter, John describes what a true Christian looks like. While it is true that Jesus has conquered sin, it is also true that we are still vulnerable to temptation and the possibility of sin is frustratingly real. And we must admit it, we must confess it, and through the Holy Spirit who lives in us, we can defeat it, conquer it, and overcome it.

John describes what it looks like to truly believe and to truly love Jesus Christ. And ***the greatest assurance of salvation is a growing affection for Jesus Christ.***

Christianity is not just theological. It's not just moral. It's relational. And having a relationship with Jesus means walking with Him and loving Him. And the more we love Him, the less attractive sin will be. Let me say that again. The more we love Him, the less attractive sin will be. That's why loving Jesus is the key to spiritual victory.

NOTES

¹ Peter said we “share his divine nature” which enables us to “escape the world’s corruption caused by human desires” (2 Peter 1:4, NLT).

² See the section on our freedom from sin in Romans 6 and the section on the reality of sin in Romans 7 in my message “Theology of Sanctification – Temptation – Why Do We Still Sin?” from Romans 6-8, presented at Lake Arrowhead Church, August 6, 2023.

³ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary, 1-3 John* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2007), page 8.

⁴ See Jerry Bridges, *Respectable Sins* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 2007), page 16.

⁵ Theologian William Barclay said it’s as if “two men were inside the one skin, pulling in different directions.” [William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1975), page 98]. Max Lucado calls it a “civil war of the soul.” [Max Lucado, *In the Grip of Grace* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1996), page 142]. Paul admitted to a “waging war” in his soul (Romans 7:24).

⁶ That’s why Paul said in Romans 8 that “we groan for the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:23). We long for the return of Jesus, because until He comes, this conflict will continue. This lifelong process of sanctification will continue until we see Him face to face.

⁷ See my message on confession in *The Lord’s Prayer* series, in my message “Forgive Us Our Sins – A Prayer of Confession – Matthew 6:9-13,” presented at Lake Arrowhead Church, May 16, 2021.

⁸ The Greek word for “confess” is ὁμολογέω (*homologeō*), and means to agree, to say the same.

⁹ Gordon MacDonald, *Restoring Joy to Your Inner World* (New York, NY: Inspirational Press, 1992), page 496. A compilation printing which includes *Rebuilding Your Broken World*.

¹⁰ See Luke 7:47.

¹¹ See the section on victory over sin on Romans 8 in my message “Theology of Sanctification – Temptation – Why Do We Still Sin?” from Romans 6-8, presented at Lake Arrowhead Church, August 6, 2023.

¹² See John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), page 131.

¹³ See Romans 8:13. An older word theologians used was “mortify,” as in John Owen’s classic *The Mortification of Sin*, written in 1656.

¹⁴ In Ephesians 5, Paul wrote, “Therefore do not be partners with them. For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light” (Ephesians 5:7-8, NIV). “But now ...” Now that we are in Christ, our lives are to look distinctively different. We are to look like Him. “You are light in the Lord. Live as children of light.”

¹⁵ Paraphrasing John Murray whom Jerry Bridges quotes from Murray’s book *Redemption-Accomplished and Applied*, [Jerry Bridges, *Growing Your Faith* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 2004) page 55).

¹⁶ We are “more than conquerors,” Paul said (Romans 8:37).