



THAT YOU MAY KNOW: A STUDY OF FIRST JOHN

LESSON 9: “Assurance and the Practice of Righteousness”

TEXT: 1 John 3:4–10

By the time the apostle John writes 1 John (around AD 85), sophisticated attempts were being made by quasi-Christian teachers to corrupt the doctrine of Christ, syncretize apostolic teaching with philosophical dualism, lower the standards of Christian morality, and draw believers away from the churches planted by the apostles themselves. These false teachers claimed to have discovered a higher knowledge, and they were aggressive in their efforts to propagate their message.

Understandably, it was easy for genuine Christians living in such a context to wonder whether they believed the correct message. They needed *assurance*—assurance that the message they heard from the beginning was indeed true, and assurance that their own faith was real and not a mirage.

It is this need that the Holy Spirit used to motivate the apostle John to take up his pen to write. In particular, John is motivated to provide *assurance* to his readers that they were indeed saved by the Jesus Christ which the apostles preached: “These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13). To accomplish this purpose, John provides a series of signs in his letter which proved that the members of his audience were genuinely born again. They were to go away from hearing this letter with encouragement and confidence—and with a defense against false teachers.

These signs also serve us well today. First and foremost, they are tests we can use to affirm that the faith within us is genuine. By reading John’s description of each test, and by noticing how these tests resonate with our own hearts, we can draw confidence that we possess eternal life. When we experience those moments of questioning whether God could ever save sinners like us, we are to go to 1 John to find affirmation.

But the signs of 1 John are also helpful in removing hope from those who have no right to it. Jesus Himself taught, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter” (Matthew 7:21). Whether in John’s day or in ours, false professors are a reality. They claim to be enlightened and to walk with God, but they speak falsely—knowingly or unknowingly. The signs of 1 John reveal to them the spurious nature of their faith.

By this time in his letter, John has provided *eight* of these standards by which to draw comfort (or warning):

- 1) **1 John 1:1–4 – “Assurance and the Historicity of Christ”**—*Do you believe that the biblical testimony about Jesus Christ is true?*
- 2) **1 John 1:5–10 – “Assurance and the Confession of Sin”**—*Are you deeply aware of your sin and do you acknowledge it to God?*
- 3) **1 John 2:1–2 – “Assurance and the Sufficiency of Christ”**—*Do you believe that the sacrifice of Christ is sufficient for your sin?*
- 4) **1 John 2:3–6 – “Assurance and the Obedience of God’s Commands”**—*Are you zealous to obey God’s revealed will for your life?*
- 5) **1 John 2:7–11 – “Assurance and the Love of One’s Brother”**—*Do you give yourself sacrificially for the benefit of other believers?*
- 6) **1 John 2:12–17 – “Assurance and the Hatred of Evil”**—*Do you loathe the things that are contrary to God and His ways?*
- 7) **1 John 2:18–27 – “Assurance and the Persistence in Truth”**—*Do you hunger for and persist in the truth of God’s Word?*
- 8) **1 John 2:28–3:3 – “Assurance and the Anticipation of Glory”**—*Do you long for the moment when you will see your Savior face-to-face?*

1 John 3:4–10 – “Assurance and the Practice of Righteousness”

Now in 1 John 3:4–10, we find a ninth sign: “Assurance and the Practice of Righteousness.” John writes,

Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness. You know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin. No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him. Little children, make sure no one deceives you; 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. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. 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. 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. —1 John 3:4–10

The term “sin” is prominent in this passage; John uses it no less than *ten* times—either as a noun (“sin”) or as a verb (“to sin”). In particular, John’s purpose in 3:4–10 is to compare “the practice of sin” with its opposite—“the practice of righteousness.” By doing so, John proves **sin’s utter incompatibility with the Christian life.**

As we examine this passage, we can find **seven observations**—one from each of the passage’s seven sentences—about “the practice of sin” which demonstrate John’s point. A better understanding of these observations yields a two-fold result for genuine Christians. First, it produces a stronger assurance of salvation. As we read from John what the practice of sin is all about, we are appalled once again about the nature of sin, what it represents, and what it delivers. Our aversion to these things should *assure* us. But second, a better understanding of these seven observations also increases our commitment to moral purity. In response to sin’s utter incompatibility with the Christian life, we are resolved to pursue Christlikeness with greater resolve than ever. These seven are as follows:

I. The practice of sin manifests internal rebellion (3:4)

“Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness” (3:4).

John begins with the language of a *universal* truth: “**Everyone.**” Although he is dealing with the specific threat of false teachers and false professors in his day, the assertion he gives is purposely *unlimited*. His focus is on anyone and everyone “**who practices sin.**” The verb “practice” describes a habitual, behavioral pattern, or way of life, while “sin” refers to “missing the target.” But this general word for “sin” in John’s writing (and in the NT in general) does not suggest a passive, trivial “mistake.” Rather, the term describes an active, deliberate deviation from what is right. Thus, “to practice sin” is to be in the habit of actively and deliberately deviating from God’s standard.

John asserts that this lifestyle of habitual sin is a lifestyle of “**lawlessness.**” As one commentary states, “lawlessness” is “the assertion of the individual will against and in defiance of the law of God, the refusal to live in accordance with the revealed standards of right and wrong” (Drummond and Morris, “The Epistles of John,” 1155). In other words, a lifestyle of sin is no small thing. It manifests something more sinister: **a will that is defiant against God and His standard of righteousness**, whether as revealed in special or general revelation. Thus, *to practice sin* manifests the utter disregard for God and His laws that a sinner harbors in his heart. It shows that he is by nature *a rebel.*

II. The practice of sin opposes Christ’s atonement (3:5)

“You know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin” (3:5).

John uses the verb “**appear**” once again to describe the coming of Christ. He used it in 2:28 and 3:2 to describe Christ’s *second* coming, but John uses it here to refer to Christ’s *first* coming—His *incarnation* (see also 1:1–3). John describes the purpose of this first advent concisely: Jesus came “**to take away sins.**”

In other words, Christ came specifically **to atone for or propitiate** each of the individual “**sins**” (notice the *plural* noun) of His people (John 1:29; 1 John 2:2; 4:9–10; also Isaiah 53). But His purpose in His suffering on the cross was also “to take away sins” by freeing His people from sin’s enslavement. John then adds, “**and in Him there is no sin.**” In other words, the Savior Himself was able to atone for sin and rescue sinners from sin’s tyranny without any personal compromise with it (2 Cor 5:21; 1 Pet 1:18–19; 2:21–22). He remained completely *unstained* in the process.

Thus, the practice of sin is—in a very real sense—an attempt to *annul* what Christ achieved on the cross. As futile as that effort is, it nonetheless demonstrates why sin is so incompatible with the Christian life.

III. The practice of sin indicates spiritual blindness (3:6)

“No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him” (3:6).

With his use of the phrase “**no one**,” John begins to deliver another *universal truth* (see 3:4). This truth is stated in antithetical parallelism. First, John relates this universal truth to *believers*. John describes the believer as one “**who abides in Him**”—that is, “in Christ.” As we have already seen, this verb “abides” describes a relationship of continual and intentional dependency and communion (see 2:6, 28; and especially John 15:4–10). It summarizes the nature of true discipleship. As such, John contends that “no one” belonging to this category of men “**sins**.” By this John does not mean that every true disciple is *sinless* or *perfect* (remember what John taught in 1 John 1:8–10 and 2:1–2). Rather, John refers here once again to the *practice of sin*—the habitual pursuit and enjoyment of sin that arises out of an inherent desire to rebel.

As the other half of this universal truth, John then describes *unbelievers*. “**No one who sins**”—that is, no one who *practices sin*—“**has seen Him or knows Him**.” John is not speaking here of “seeing” Christ with one’s actual eyes, since very few people had this privilege (see 1:1). Rather, John is speaking of *spiritual sight*—having “seen” Christ for who He is as Savior and Lord. Moreover, John is not speaking here of “knowing” Christ in terms of historical facts. Even the demons know such facts (see James 2:19). Rather, John is speaking of a personal, relationship knowledge—having “come to know” Christ as Savior and Lord.

Ultimately, John asserts that there is a direct antithesis between the sincerely knowing Christ and sincerely practicing of sin. The presence of the one automatically negates the presence of the other. We are not capable of serving two masters.

IV. The practice of sin furthers diabolical deception (3:7–8a)

“Little children, make sure no one deceives you; 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” (3:7–8a).

By using the address “**little children**,” John once again communicates to his audience both pastoral care and spiritual confidence (see 2:1, 12, 28). Indeed, he will now immediately warn them of impending danger, but he does so by expressing assurance in their status as true children of God.

His warning is that “**no one deceives you**.” The threat to John’s audience was not only to *spiritual unity* (e.g., 2:19) and to *doctrine* (e.g., 2:26); it was also to *morality* (3:7–8a). The false teachers were pushing for moral compromises among the Christians. As F. F. Bruce states, “The false teachers with their sophistry were capable not merely of condoning sin, but of making it seem virtuous.”

In response, John reiterates what he has already explained: “**The one who practices righteousness**”—that is, the one who engages in habitual righteousness”—“**is righteous**.” Behavior that reflects God’s standard of rightness reveals an internal quality—righteousness. One’s external fruit reveals one’s internal state, and all this is a further reflection of the archetype of righteousness: “**just as He is righteous**” (see 1 John 2:29).

But the reverse is also true: “**The one who practices sin**”—that is, the one who engages in habitual sin—“**is of the devil**.” John here identifies the ultimate source and influence of sin: ὁ διάβολος (*ho diabolos*), “the devil, the adversary”—the title from which we get *diabolical*. And the one who sins manifests and advanced this influence, for “**the devil has sinned from the beginning**” (see Genesis 3; John 8:44; 2 Cor 4:4; 11:3, 14).

V. The practice of sin challenges Christ’s mission (3:8b)

“The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil” (3:8b).

Parallel with 3:5, John describes another purpose for Christ's first coming: "to destroy the works of the devil." In addition to atoning for the sins of His people and freeing them from sin's enslavement, Christ—here notably called "**the Son of God**"—came to obliterate the devil's influence over His people—including the devil's works of temptation, hindering, deceiving, oppressing, and accusing. The one who practices sin directly challenges this mission of the Son of God.

VI. The practice of sin disproves spiritual rebirth (3:9)

"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" (3:9).

John gives a third *universal truth* in the paragraph, this time stated in *chiastic form*. The emphasis in a chiasm typically falls on the middle element, which here is "**because His seed abides in him.**"

In the context of speaking of spiritual birth ("regeneration," see 1 John 2:29; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18; also John 1:12–13; 3:3–8), John highlights the presence of something uniquely influential in the life of every true believer. John uses the same verb "**abide**" to describe the personal and enduring nature of this influence. This influence is "**His seed.**" To what does this "seed" refer? Although it could refer to the truth of *the word of God* (see Luke 8:11–15; 1 Pet 1:23), it is best to understand it as a reference to the *Holy Spirit* (see 1 John 2:27; John 3:5–8). **The Holy Spirit is not only the Agent of the believer's new birth, He is not only his abiding Teacher, but He is his Restrainer from sin.** Because of the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, the born-again Christian cannot continue to practice sin as he did prior to his new birth.

The Chiasm of 3:9

- A. No one who is born of God
- B. practices sin,
- C. because His seed abides in him;
- B¹. and he cannot sin,
- A¹. because he is born of God

VII. The practice of sin earns definitive condemnation (3:10)

"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" (3:10).

John brings his treatment of this topic to a close with a succinct summary, particularly of vv. 7–9. Ultimately, John contends that one's true spiritual identity will be made visible through one's *practice*. As such, those who "practice sin" can be definitively condemned as those who do not belong to God. As Jesus Himself stated, "So then, you will know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:20).

For Discussion

1. Read through each of the seven observations above, together with each observation's corresponding sentence from the passage in 1 John. Provide an explanation of each observation in your own words.
2. To which texts can we turn in 1 John (two of which we have already studied) to demonstrate that John is not teaching that true believers are those who have achieved *sinless perfection* in this life?
3. How can these observations about the practice of sin bring a believer assurance of salvation?
4. Review each of the seven observations. Record a sentence or two about how each one motivates you to pursue greater holiness.

For Further Study

1. **Memorize** 1 John 3:10, Matthew 7:20, and Romans 8:13
2. **Listen to** the three-part sermon series preached by John MacArthur on 1 John 3:4–10, entitled, "The Christian's Incompatibility with Sin," Parts 1–3," preached in early 2003, and accessible at www.gty.org.

Audio, video, and handouts for this session are available at www.gracechurch.org/motw.

Next meeting: January 21, 7pm – "The Pillars of Marriage: Pillar 3" (Chris Hamilton)