**Sin** 5/1/20

Read: 2Corinthians 5,1John 3

Text: 1John 3:4-10

Psalms: 25:1-7, 51:1-9,130,117

‘If we would be loyal to his first coming and be ready for his second coming we must purify ourselves as he is pure. By so doing we shall give evidence of our birth of God’- so writes John Stott by way of linking verses 4-10 with the preceding verses. You may recall that those verses focussed on the future appearing of Christ as this truth affects how we live in this world. John spoke of having confidence at his coming or appearance (2:28). Such confidence comes not only from knowing we are saved by grace alone through faith alone, but from practicing righteousness, from purifying ourselves just as he, Jesus, is righteous and pure (3:3).

In the verses before us the focus turns to the past appearing of Jesus, the time when he was ‘manifested to take away our sins’ (3:5, 8). The passage is packed with theological truths. John’s letter is very compact- maybe he was short of paper! At the same time he repeats things a lot, or puts matters both negatively and positively, just to make sure we have not missed what he says. What he writes is just as important for us today as it was for the first century church. You will notice that John has a lot to say about sin in this passage- hence our title. He contrasts sin and righteousness; he contrasts Christ, whom he now calls the Son of God, with the devil (3:8). He also continues speaking about the new birth, about being born of God (3:9).

Before we start to unpack these verses, and hopefully discover the truths they contain, we will try to discern some structure in the passage. We have seen the words ‘little children’ often mark a new section but this does not seem to be the case here. What we have is two verses, 4 and 8, that speak about committing sin. In the first he says, ‘sin is lawlessness’ and in the second, ‘he who sins is of the devil’. Our two main subheading are: firstly, sinning is not compatible with being a child of God’ and secondly, ‘sinning is compatible with being a child of Satan’.

**1. Sinning not compatible with being a child of God**

I checked that the word ‘sin’ is still in the dictionary. It was, but my dictionary is rather old. We do not hear the word ‘sin’ on the streets, in the press, or even in preaching these days. I read of one church where the preacher, after a long time, mentioned sin in his sermon and half his congregation left. What we hear are euphemisms for sin; people ‘mess up’, ‘make a mistake’, ‘had a lapse of judgment’, or ‘were not really themselves’. Even if people admit to sin they think it is no big deal because, ‘everyone is doing it’, or because, ‘it is God’s job to forgive’.

Everything is relative to people of the world but this is not the case for the people of God. God is absolute and his commands are absolute; they are black and white, not grey. My dictionary defines sin as, ‘transgressing against divine law or morality, especially one consciously committed’. Not bad! Our Shorter Catechism defines sin as, ‘Any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God (SC Q 14). This definition includes sins of omission. There is also what we call original sin.

John defines sin as lawlessness (3:4). God gave Moses laws for his people to obey, including the Ten Commandments. But sin was around before Moses, and sin extends beyond the people of God to all people and every individual. Whenever you judge someone, and do the same things, you sin (Rom 2:3). John’s focus is upon the law of God. Moreover, lawlessness is not just breaking the law; it is a state of mind, a mind in rebellion again God. Have you noticed that as soon as you make a rule people are determined to break it. With some people it is better to tell them not to do what you want them to do. This is rebellion. This is lawlessness. This the nature of the sinful human heart. ‘O wretched man that I am, who will deliver me?’ exclaimed Paul the apostle (Rom 7:24).

The false teachers trying to deceive John’s ‘little children’ made no such confession. Like so many today, including many in the church, breaking God’s commands is no big deal. Some Gnostics regarded themselves as beyond sin; they thought special knowledge made them perfect. Others thought sin no longer mattered because the body no longer mattered. The first group were blind to sin, and the second indifferent to the seriousness of sin. Liberal theologians teach much the same things, as do many populist preachers of our day. Again, just listen to how often they mention sin in their preaching.

If sin is no big deal them why did Jesus have to die on the cross? Some are not sure that he did have to die! Some see the cross more as political statement than a salvation imperative. What does the apostle John say? ‘You know that He was manifested to take away our sins’ (3:5). Since we are all born in sin, and we all commit sin, this is great news. Is it news that you have heard and that you know? When John says, ‘You know’ he means, ‘you have heard, understand and believe’.

In order for Jesus to take away our sin he had to be without sin (3:5). If Jesus was a sinner like us he would have died for his own sin; death comes to us because of our sin. On the cross, the sinless Son of God took our sin upon himself, suffered the penalty, namely death, so that we might be set free from this penalty. ‘God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him’ (2Cor 5:21). Because of Christ’s imputed righteousness we can enter into the presence of the holy God. In Christ we become the children of God; we are born again of the Spirit of God.

John goes beyond this act of justification and new birth, to the process of sanctification, of abiding in Christ and of practicing righteousness. ‘Whoever abides in Him does not sin. Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known him’ (3:6). And in the next verse, ‘He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous’ (3:7, cf.2:29). False teachers were trying to deceive believers regarding this truth. They mocked at sin and at ‘practicing righteousness’. ‘The cross is so crude’ they might have said, ‘we have moved beyond the idea of sacrifice for sin’; ‘we have special knowledge; we are super-Christians’.

But for John there was no dispensing with the cross of Jesus Christ. There was no moving away from abiding in Christ and of living a righteous life. God’s law has not changed and human nature has not changed. Sin is still sin, as defined by lawlessness. When we are born again we are given the Spirit of God. With the indwelling Spirit of Christ and the word of God, we can walk in the Spirit and not in sin; we can and we must. If we continue to sin it shows we are not born again and do not know Christ. To continue in sin, or to walk in sin, is not compatible with being a child of God. This is what ‘does not sin’ in verse 6 and 9 means. John cannot be saying in one breath, ‘If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves’ and in the next saying, ‘we do not sin’ or ‘we cannot sin’ and meaning it is no longer possible for a believer to sin (1:8, 3:6,9).

**2. Sinning is compatible with being a child of Satan**

‘He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning’ (3:8). The ESV translates, ‘Whoever makes a practice of sinning’ but the NIV gives the most literal translation, ‘He who does what is sin’. ‘Why drag the devil into this matter of sin’, you might ask; ‘It is bad enough talking to people about sin let alone talking about the devil’. But the devil appeared in the Garden of Eden to tempt Eve. The devil delights in sin and in tempting men, women and children to sin. Eve could have said no to the devil but her children, us, cannot say no, not without God’s help.

God’s help is based upon his Son defeating the devil, as he did in the cross and the resurrection, as foretold in Genesis 3:15. Jesus had no original sin by virtue of his virgin birth, and he committed no sin. He resisted the devil and did not sin. In his resurrection he defeated death destroying him who has the power of death, that is the devil (3:8, Heb 2:14). John uses the word ‘loosed’ rather than ‘destroy’ here at the end of verse 8. ‘Loosed’ has the sense of freeing us from the clutches of the devil. John’s concern is for the children of God.

Sin originated with Satan. Satan rebelled against his creator in the beginning, obviously before the creation of Adam and Eve. John calls him ‘*diabolis’* meaning ‘slanderer’ or ‘accuser of the brethren’ (Rev 12:10). He is the father of lies, a liar and murderer from the beginning (John 8:44). Jesus told Jews who refused to believe him that they were children of the devil. Anyone who refuses to take sin seriously cannot be a child of God, but they can be a child of the devil. John deals in black and white, truth and lies, sin and righteousness, the Son of God and Satan- just like Jesus spoke of sheep and goats. You, dear friend, are either a child of God or a child of Satan. There is no third option. ‘He who does sin’, as in habitually sin, ‘is of the devil’ (3:8).

Jesus told Nicodemus, ‘You must be born again’ (John 3:7). He, like all of us, was born of a woman or born of the flesh. As such he was born in sin and a child of Satan (Ps 51:5). To be born again means to be born of the Spirit (John 3:8), or born of God (3:9). When the Spirit quickens our dead hearts, leading us to confess our sin and believe in Jesus, we become a new creation in Christ Jesus. Do you know what I am talking about? Do you know what it means to be born again? If John had asked the false teachers they wouldn’t have known what he was talking about. Some in the church today wouldn’t know what you were talking about if you asked them if they were born again. But you don’t have to ask them. According to John, you can see it from the life they lead: ‘whoever has been born of God does not sin’ (3:9).

Being born in the flesh we inherit traits from our parents. Our life begins when a sperm unites with an ovum and we become a human being. John uses the same language in saying, ‘His seed remains in him’ (3:9- seed is ‘*sperm*’ in Greek). Here the word ‘seed’ means ‘the principal of life imparted by the Spirit of God’. It refers to the new nature implanted in us when we receive the Holy Spirit (2Peter 1:4). The new nature overrules the old nature that ruled in our old life of sin: ‘the old has gone, the new has come!’ (2Cor 5:17 NIV). This being the case, we ‘cannot sin’ or ‘cannot go on sinning’; the present infinitive of the verb signifies ‘he is not able to sin habitually’ (Stott).

Our new nature is sensitive to sin and hates sin. A man recently visited me and as he entered my house he used a couple of swear words. I must have shown some disgust because he stopped, even before I told him I was a preacher of the gospel! I am sure as child of God you react in the same way when confronted with foul and blasphemous language. As a child of God we will habitually speak the truth, habitually love one another, habitually do good when we can, and habitually praise and worship God. Satan does not cease tempting us but it takes him a while to find a door of vulnerability if, in the power of the Spirit, we keep locking the door to the devil.

Our closing verse, verse 10, could well be included in the next section of this letter because it returns to one of the tests to be used on false teachers, namely, ‘does not love his brother’ (cf.2:10). John will go on to further explain this test. But this verse is also a summary of what John has just been teaching about being a child of God or a child of the devil. We could have taken from 2:28 to 23:10 as one section, calling it ‘John’s further explanation of the test of righteousness or obedience’ (cf. 2:4).

In closing, note again the word ‘whoever’. John insists that what he says about sin applies to everyone without exception. No matter how we try to deny sin, or how we try to dress it up, it remains as sin, and the penalty for sin remains. The only way to escape the penalty of sin is to confess it to God, who is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1:9). We must then keep filling our cleansed heart with truth from the word of God and allow the Holy Spirit to keep filling our heart at the same time.