

1 John 3:4-9

Being Who You Are

We now come to a particular passage of the apostle John's first letter that many have misunderstood. But it can be understood and applied. And it is of great value in understanding all of life. The Word of God reveals to us why life is the way it is. Why are there troubles in the world, why are there unhappy homes, why is there strife and hatred and so many bad things? The answer that the Bible gives to us is sin.

Sin is the cause of every tear, every pain, every sorrow and trouble. But in love and grace God has done something about sin. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ God has provided a means by which the grip of sin can be broken. And instead we can be gripped by the more powerful force of love. In our last study of 1 John, we read from chapter 3 and verse 1. Let's read it again.

Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed
on us, that we should be called children of God!
(1 John 3:1a)

Although we were sinners, God's love reached out to us through Jesus Christ. And when we receive Jesus Christ as our Lord and savior the greatest miracle in the world takes place. We are saved, born again, God's very own life and nature is given to us in the gift of the holy Spirit and we become the children of God. 2 Corinthians 5:17 declares,

if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things
have passed away; behold, all things have become new.

In other words, when you are saved you are radically different than you were before at the very core of your being. How are we radically different? The apostle Peter says that we have become "partakers of the divine nature."¹ There is now a divine, godly life-force and power within us to help us overcome the power of sin and live differently. And what is the ultimate result of our becoming children of God? We have the answer in 1 John 3:2 and 3.

Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has
not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we

¹ 2 Peter 1:4

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.

One day we will be exactly like Christ who is like God. And this reality should motivate us and it does enable us to live righteous and holy and loving lives. Being born again, there is a desire flowing from our new nature to overcome sin. Verse 4 tells us precisely what sin is.

Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness,
and sin is lawlessness.
(1 John 3:4)

Sin is a power that is at work within us. And it is an attitude of lawlessness, not in the sense of breaking a specific moral law. It is rather an attitude of rebellion against God. The definition of lawlessness is simply the desire to live my own way rather God's way. Lawlessness expresses itself in acts of sin from the temper tantrums of a young child, to the rebellion of teenagers, to the sins adults commit. It is living life willfully ignorant of or ignoring God and doing our own thing; thinking our own way. And this leads to acts of sin that lead to hurt, anger, sorrow, heartache and so much more. The Old Testament prophet Isaiah wrote about this lawlessness in his prophecy of Christ in Isaiah 53.

All we like sheep have gone astray;
We have turned, every one, to his own way;
And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.
(Isaiah 53:6)

Our sin nature is an attitude or mind-set of wanting our own way; it is rebellion. It is like the parable of the prodigal son who walked out on his father to live his own way out in the world.² But Jesus Christ lived and died and was raised up from the dead to deliver us from sin.

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

How did Jesus Christ take away our sins? He did it by taking all our sins upon himself and then suffering the wrath of God against sin on our behalf. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says that God,

made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin for us, that we

² Luke 15:11-32

might become the righteousness of God in Him.

We are not saved by good works. We are not saved by minimizing our lawlessness and saying, "Well, I'm not as bad as the other guy." We are saved because Jesus Christ took my lawlessness upon him. He took my punishment for sin. When we come to Jesus Christ by faith we are forever united to him. And we receive a new nature, the gift of the holy Spirit.³ And the Spirit gives us the power to turn from lawlessness to pursue righteousness.

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

Here is where this passage of Scripture can be misunderstood. John wrote that if we abide in Christ, if we are truly united to him, we will not sin. Startling isn't it? Can this be true? Can we say that a Christian never sins? The answer is, no, we cannot. Back in chapter 1, John wrote,

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.
(1 John 1:8, 9)

A Christian can and does sin. But we can understand what the Word of God is really saying to us here in verse 6, when we understand the Greek verbs translated "commits" and "does." These verbs are all in the present continuous tense. Therefore verse 6 means whoever abides in Christ, whoever is born of God, does not continuously live with an attitude of lawlessness. A Christian is not habitually in rebellion against God.

In other words, John is not talking about a particular sinful action, but our character and prevailing habits. The general characteristic of a true child of God is that we desire and strive to live good and holy and righteous lives. And if we do commit a particular sin we are grieved by it and we desire to change. When God promised the new birth, He promised to change us. In Ezekiel 36 He said,

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within
you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and
give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ I will put My Spirit within you
and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will

³ Acts 2:38, 39

keep My judgments and do *them*.
(Ezekiel 36:26, 27)

Being born of God our new nature motivates us and enables us to keep God's Word; to live righteously. Being born of God our heart is not tuned to lawlessness, therefore we cannot go on living continuously in rebellion against God.

Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous.
(1 John 3:7)

When the apostle John warns us not to be deceived we should pay close attention. What John is concerned about is not just what we do, but that we understand what we do in the light of who we are. The man or woman who is truly a child of God will show this by practicing a righteous life. Who we are manifests itself in how we live. As the old saying goes: if it walks like a duck and sounds like a duck, it's a duck! The person who is not a child of God will show who they are by practicing or continually living with an attitude of lawlessness.

Do you remember when I mentioned the prodigal son, earlier? The son had walked away from his father. He rejected his father's authority. He was being lawless. And he went out and lived his life the way he wanted to live it. He lived in such lawlessness that he would end up in a pig pen feeding pigs. And he was so hungry that he would have eaten the pig slop.

But he came to his senses and grieved over his sin and decided to go home. Why did he decide this? The answer is because a pig was not his father. If the son had the nature of a pig he would have stayed in the pig pen. Who we are determines how we live. And were it not for the love of God breaking through the darkness of our lives through Jesus Christ, all of us would be in the pig pen. But now that we are children of God are we living like we are. A child of God makes it a habit to live a godly life, growing more and more like the Lord Jesus Christ.

He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning.
(1 John 3:8a)

The Word of God clearly tells us here that the problem behind all lawlessness is an evil being who is continually subverting humanity. The person who is not a child of God is caught in the grip of the devil. In the last chapter of his letter John writes,

We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies
under the sway of the wicked one.
(1 John 5:19)

Very few people believe this, but it's true. Only two kinds of people exist in the world: children of God and those still trapped under the powerful influence of the wicked one. And this explains why there is so much trouble and hurt in our world. In 1 John 3:4 we were told the nature of sin. It is lawlessness; rebellion. And verse 8 tells us its origin: the devil. The devil sins from the beginning. This is the devil's character, his nature, his habit, his way of living. The Old Testament prophet shows us this character of lawlessness in Satan.

How you are fallen from heaven,
O Lucifer, son of the morning!
How you are cut down to the ground,
You who weakened the nations!
¹³ For you have said in your heart:
'I will ascend into heaven,
I will exalt my throne above the stars of God;
I will also sit on the mount of the congregation
On the farthest sides of the north;
¹⁴ I will ascend above the heights of the clouds,
I will be like the Most High.'
(Isaiah 14:12-14)

Five times the devil said, "I will...I will...I will exalt my throne above the stars of God." This is what sin and lawlessness is. It is acting as though you are a law unto yourself; you determining what is good or bad. The person who continuously practices lawlessness proclaims that he or she has the same nature as the devil—a sin nature. But this person can be saved. He or she can become a child of God.

For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that
He might destroy the works of the devil.
(1 John 3:8b)

Through faith in Jesus Christ every man and woman and boy and girl can escape the tyranny of the devil. Through faith in Christ we are delivered from the power of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of Christ.⁴ Through faith in Christ we become children of God.

Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His

⁴ Colossians 1:13, 14

seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God.
(1 John 3:9)

Since the time of Adam's temptation and sin all of us come into life with a sin nature. And Satan whispers to us all, "You don't need God. You don't have to obey God. He's not the only one who determines right from wrong." And we become assured that we can go our own way and free ourselves from harsh rules and judgment. But sooner or later, like the prodigal we end up in the pig pen.

But in love and mercy God sent a Deliverer to rescue us from the power of sin, Jesus Christ. When we trust him for salvation, God creates the greatest miracle in our lives. We become born of God. And whoever is born of God no longer lives habitually in rebellion against God.

The characteristic of men and women who are not saved is that they continually live in a state of lawlessness. They may not steal or lie, but their lives are characterized by "I will." They want their own way not God's way. But as a child of God, His seed is in you. His life is in you in the gift of the holy Spirit. This is your new nature. Something radical has happened to who you are. Our new heart cries out, "Not my will, but Your will be done, dear Father."

Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God—and we are!
(1 John 3:1)

Let us rejoice in this truth. And let us resolve to live as children of God.