

Sin and the Work of the Spirit

Scripture: 1 John 3:9–10

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There is colossal confusion about what it means to be a Christian. Through mass communication the culture receives conflicting messages about what defines authentic Christianity. Cults, charismatic speakers, and criminally convicted church leaders only muddle the confusion on a grand scale.

What's perhaps worse than confusing the culture is giving false confidence to professing Christians and false doubts to true believers. False confidence comes from a gospel of cheap grace where one can believe without any cost to themselves (contrary to Jesus' words in Mark 8:34-38). False doubts rise out of accusations of legalism and works-righteousness.

These problems are not new. Nearly as soon as the church began, counterfeit Christians brought confusion. The longest living apostle who witnessed counterfeits of every kind addressed these very issues under the inspiration of the Spirit.

The book of 1 John is about testing the authenticity of your faith. It's about knowing what a true Christian's life ought to look like, and carefully evaluating yourself according to the standard the apostle John spells out for his readers.

John's portrait of true faith highlights the conflict between sin and saving faith. Over and over, he makes clear that true believers cannot and will not continue to live in open, unrepentant sin after salvation. That's particularly clear in the verses we've been discussing over the last few weeks (1 John 3:4-10).

And as we come to the end of this passage, John presents us with one more reason that sin and saving faith are incompatible. The first two focused on the nature of sin and the work of Christ; today we focus on the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer.

Old Sin Versus New Birth

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 3:9-10)

The new birth—what John calls being “born of God”—epitomizes the work of the Holy Spirit (cf. John 3:3-8). The Spirit implants in those He regenerates the essence of His divine life, which John pictures as a “seed.” Just as a human birth results from an implanted seed that grows into new physical life, so also spiritual life begins when, at the moment of regeneration, the divine seed is implanted by the

Spirit within the one who believes.

The instrument by which the Spirit gives new birth to sinners is the Word of God. As the apostle Peter explained to the readers of his first letter,

You have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God. For, “All flesh is like grass, and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls off, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” And this is the word which was preached to you. (1 Peter 1:23-25)

The new birth is from imperishable seed, securing the believer’s salvation for eternity. It enlightens the mind so one can discern spiritual realities (1 Corinthians 2:10, 13-14). It gives believers the mind of Christ so they can understand the thoughts of God (1 Corinthians 2:16). It liberates and energizes the enslaved will, previously unable to obey God but now freely able and willing to do so (John 6:44, 65; Colossians 2:13).

The new birth signals the end of the sinner’s old life. Those who were hopelessly corrupt become new creatures in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17), buried with Him and raised unto a new life of righteousness (Romans 6:4; Ephesians 4:24). Therefore he states again that believers cannot practice sin because they are born of God.

God’s Work or My Work?

The new birth is also a *monergistic* operation, which means God’s Spirit alone accomplishes it (as opposed to *synergistic*, which means that human effort participates in the process). Paul’s language in Ephesians 2:4-6 is unmistakably clear in this regard:

God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

Because unregenerate people are spiritually dead, they are unable to respond to divine truth. This doctrine of total depravity—better understood as the doctrine of total inability—does not mean that the unredeemed are as sinful as they could possibly be. Rather, it means that the fallen, sinful nature affects every area of life and renders them incapable of saving themselves. Thus the spiritually dead person needs to be made alive by God alone, through His Spirit. That same power energizes every aspect of Christian living (Ephesians 1:19-20; Colossians 2:12-13).

The Spirit-Empowered Result of Salvation

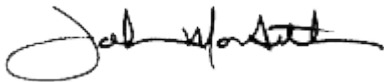
John concludes our passage with the summary statement of verse 10: “By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother.”

There are only two groups of people in the world: “the children of God and the children of the devil.” The first exhibits God’s righteous character through obeying His law; the second exhibits Satan’s sinful character by disregarding the Word and habitually sinning. No matter what people may

profess, or what past religious ritual or experience they may point to, the true nature of their faith ultimately shows itself in how they live.

The popular gospel today has no time for that truth. It only wants to drum up an emotional moment and affirm people's salvation on the basis of that moment rather than on the evidence of a transformed life. But a no-repentance, no-holiness, no-submission, no-transformation gospel is the devil's lie to give false security to damned people.

If you truly love the Lord, your life will evidence the authority of His Word, the righteousness of His Son, and the manifest work of His Spirit. If it doesn't, then you have good reason to question whether you truly belong to Him.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John MacArthur". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

(Adapted from [*The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1-3 John*](#).)

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