

Wrong Answers to the Right Question

Scripture: 1 John 3:4–10

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What does saving faith look like? Does it produce a life marked by increasing righteousness, holiness, and good fruit? Or is salvation a momentary event that has no lasting impact in the life of a Christian?

We've been considering those and other important questions in the face of popular theological trends that drive a wedge between salvation and sanctification. The heart of the issue is determining the biblical marks of authentic faith—how does a saved person live his or her life? To that end, we've focused our thoughts on the book of 1 John—specifically 1 John 3:4-10.

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.

Right away, some key statements jump out at us. The first is found in verse 6, where the apostle John writes that “no one who abides in Him sins.” This theme echoes throughout the passage, and John expands on it in verse 9 with the words “because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin.” At face value, it appears John is saying that sin is *impossible* for believers.

Those are astounding statements, especially considering 1 John 1:8. There he writes, “If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.” And again in verse 10, he writes, “If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us.” In the short space of a couple chapters, John makes what seem to be very contradictory statements about the existence of sin in a believer's life.

There have been several theological attempts to harmonize John's apparent contradiction. Some make the case that the sin John refers to in chapter 3 is only *mortal* sin. In fact, that's the view of the Catholic Church, which differentiates between venial (forgivable) and mortal sins. But that's a false, unbiblical dichotomy. All sin carries with it the same consequences (Romans 6:23).

Others argue that John is only referring to willful, deliberate sin. The idea is that Christians don't *actively* commit sin; they merely *suffer* it. But the New Testament never depicts believers as helpless victims of iniquity. On the contrary, it teaches that believers sin because they choose to yield to

temptation (James 1:14-15).

At one extreme end of the discussion, perfectionists would assert that believers can gradually overcome sin until they become completely sinless. In that system, the Christian lives in a constant struggle with sin, regularly losing and gaining ground against its influence, until he eventually reaches sinless perfection or loses his salvation altogether.

At the opposite end of the debate you'll find the antinomian view. The term *antinomian* comes from the Greek word for law (*nomos*), and it refers to people who live without regard for the law of God. Antinomians believe that sin in the life of the believer simply doesn't matter, since every aspect of his or her life is covered by grace. That corrupt view—which Paul taught against in Romans 6:12-18—is still popular today.

Modern proponents of cheap grace and easy-believism have their own means of explaining of John's apparent contradiction. Some say the apostle was exhorting lawless, misbehaving Christians to rededicate their lives to the Lord and move from immature, carnal behavior to spirituality. With that interpretation, they attempt to tone down the letter and make it less definitive or harsh. But their arguments cannot account for John's clear purpose for writing the letter—"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). The dichotomy John presents is not *mature* faith versus *immature* faith, but rather a saving faith versus a non-saving one.

Still others miss the meaning and application of the passage due to a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of saving faith. They incorrectly believe that repentance is nothing more than a synonym for faith, and therefore does not refer to turning from sin. Turning from sin, they say, is unnecessary for salvation. Saving faith, then, is nothing more than mere intellectual assent to the facts of the gospel. Pleading with sinners to repent from sin is tantamount to asking them to contribute works to their own salvation. Hence, they accept that salvation may make no change at all in a person's doctrine or behavior. Even a lifelong state of carnality is not sufficient reason to doubt someone's salvation.

All those popular views and interpretations attempt to harmonize the apparent contradiction in 1 John. And not one of them gets it right.

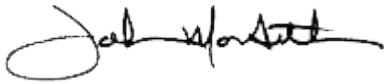
The true key to understanding John's apparent contradiction is Greek grammar. In the passage above, John refers to sin in the present tense, indicating *continuous*, *habitual* action. In other words, John is not referring to *occasional* acts of sin, but to established and continual patterns of sinful behavior. Believers will sometimes sin (Romans 7:14-25)—even willfully—but they will not and cannot sin habitually and persistently as a way of life (cf. Romans 6:4-14; Galatians 5:24; Ephesians 2:10).

When the Holy Spirit draws sinners to God, regenerates them, and grants them eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ, they are recreated (2 Corinthians 5:17). The nature of the new creature in Christ is to obey the Word, follow Christ, reject the temptations of the world, and display the fruits of righteousness in their lives (Romans 8:6; Philippians 3:9; Colossians 3:2). While the old nature is still present, there is a new desire, interest, and capacity to love and obey the Lord that wasn't there before.

John's apparent contradiction is no contradiction at all. In chapter one, he refutes false teachers who claim to have advanced beyond any struggle with sin (1 John 1:8-10). He goes on in chapter two to make it clear that if someone does not obey Christ's commands (1 John 2:3) and live righteously (e.g., demonstrate love [1 John 2:9-10]), he is not a believer. In our passage from chapter three, the apostle reinforces the tests of faith he has already established. In doing so, he further refutes false teachers who minimize or deny the significance of sin. His teaching is just as vital today in the face of similar false teaching. Jesus sacrificed Himself not only to perfect people in the future, but to purify them in the present (Ephesians 5:25-27). Minimizing sin in the church goes against the very work of Christ.

In short, John's point is that a lifestyle of sin is incompatible with true, saving faith. The life of the believer cannot be marked by patterns of unbroken, unrepentant sin. But John doesn't leave us with that simple truth. He goes on in the passage to provide three reasons this reality is critical to understand.

We'll look at the first one next time.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John MacArthur", with a stylized, cursive script.

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

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