

## “Temporary Insanity” (1 John 3:4-10a)

I want to take a moment to express my gratitude for the privilege of serving as your preaching pastor. It is a joy to open God’s Word with you every Sunday. And several of you have been particularly encouraging since I began my 1 John series. However, others have struggled with heavy eyelids as I have wandered into “extra innings.” In fact, at the end of last Sunday’s service I was in the foyer greeting people when one man paused and said, “Pastor, your sermon was so invigorating, inspiring, and refreshing.” Of course, I broke out in a big smile. But then the man completed his comment by adding, “Why I felt like a new man when I woke up!” Seriously, while some of you have shared this man’s experience you’ve been kind enough to keep your sleeping patterns to yourself. And I thank you for that!

Today, though, I have a sermon that is bound to keep you awake, or at least perturb you in the process. Nevertheless, I make no apologies for what God’s Word says. I hope that through our time together we can be stretched in our understanding of a very difficult and complex passage. Let me begin by posing two questions. 1) How many of you are born-again Christians? 2) How many of you continue to sin? What??? You still sin? Oh no! We have a problem. The passage that we are going to study today seems to say that you are not a Christian if you “practice” sin. Is there a satisfactory explanation? That’s what I hope to present in this study.

John, the beloved disciple, is going to inform us that *all* sin is insane. Yes, that’s right; every time you and I sin we are actually behaving as crazy people. So John says, “Out with the old; in with the new.” John is going to tell us that sin is incompatible with the believer. Furthermore, he will go on to argue that sin is impossible for the believer. If you want to know how I am going to support these statements, turn with me to 1 John 3:4-10a.

**1. Sin is incompatible with the Christian (3:4-8).** Before we begin to break down this passage, we need to recognize that there are two primary ways of interpreting these verses. The first is *the habitual view*, which suggests that John has in mind those who habitually sin. This interpretation is adopted by the NASB translation committee. Thus, in 3:4, 7, 8, and 9 the NASB includes the word “practices.” Yet, there is no Greek word for “practices.” The verbs in these verses are in the present tense, which can suggest ongoing activity. However, the present tense does not require or in this case even suggest such a rendering.<sup>1</sup> Another view is called *the absolute view*, which suggests that John is referring to any single act of sin. An English version that adopts this understanding is the NKJV. So if you are using a NKJV or even a KJV, today, you will have an easier time understanding this passage. If you are using a NASB like I am, I would suggest that you either draw a line through the word “practices” or skip over it in your reading. This will help you to better appreciate what John is attempting to say.

John begins our passage with the straightforward 3:4: **“Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness.”** John suggests that sin is incompatible with the believer because of the nature of sin. He uses a word for “sin” (*hamartia*) that speaks of “missing the mark, failing to hit that at which one aimed.” The word “lawlessness” (*anomia*) refers to a rebellious act.<sup>2</sup> Lawlessness is to purposefully disregard God’s Word. John is saying, “Christians, sin is much more than a mistake. It is open rebellion against the Father.”

In this verse, John is attacking false teachers who claim, “I don’t need to live according to God’s laws. I don’t need to surrender to His lead.” John calls this “lawlessness” or “sin.” Because sin seems inevitable for the human being we like to white-wash it, make light of it, and excuse it. Yet, John wants us to know that any and every sin is just plain wicked. When you and I commit a sin we break the law of God and are treated as a cosmic criminal. We are “lawless.” John is setting forth the *absolute* standard of law in which there is no compromise!

Not only is sin incompatible with the Christian because of the nature of sin, John goes on in 3:5-7 to say that sin is incompatible with the Christian because of the nature of Christ's person and work. In 3:5, John writes, **"You know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin."**<sup>3</sup> Again, John is defying the false teachers who say sin is inconsequential so you might as well enjoy it. John says that line of reasoning is from the pit and smells like smoke. The purpose of Christ's coming was to take away acts of sin (cf. 2:2).<sup>4</sup> For us to continue in our sins after being saved is completely inconsistent with Christ's purpose in coming. To place us into God's army in order to defeat the kingdom of darkness, when we ourselves are walking in darkness, is a contradiction in terms, or at least purposes. It would be like Billy Graham going into business with Larry Flint, or George Bush asking Osama bin Laden to be his running mate. It doesn't compute. It is utterly insane!

We must recognize the importance of discussing sin. If we do not have a biblical view of the seriousness of sin, then we do not need anything nearly as radical as a Savior who "appeared in order to take away sins" (3:5). If our need is just for a few tips on how to have a happier life or improve our self-esteem, Christ did not need to shed His blood as the propitiation for our sins (1:7; 2:1). Until we see our sin, we will not see our need of a Savior. Have you seen your sin for what it really is? Has this instilled in you a great appreciation for the work of Christ?

In 3:6a, John goes on to say, **"No one who abides in Him sins."**<sup>5</sup> Since there is NO sin in Christ (3:5b), when we abide in Him we cannot sin. We must remember that when John uses the term "abide," he is not suggesting that every Christian abides or that every Christian abides to the same degree, with the same consistency. The word "abide" means "to remain, to continue, to persevere in our fellowship with Christ."<sup>6</sup> John argues that when we abide in Christ we are sinless!

Yes, John is talking about sinless perfection. The problem is that sinless perfection is dependent upon abiding. Of course, there is no perpetual abiding. We don't abide 24-7, and we never will in this life (cf. 1:8, 10). However, when we do abide we are sinless. Thus, if we want to pursue a sinless life we must become addicted to abiding. If we are not addicted to Christ we will be addicted to sin. Those are the only choices. There is no alternative. When we are addicted to sin, we will ultimately reap what we sow (Gal 6:7). If we are addicted to Christ, we will be sinless as long as we are abiding. Furthermore, we will have amazing intimacy with Christ. We will sense His presence and He and His Father will make their home with us (see John 14:23).

Tragically, many of us go long periods of time without dealing with our sin. The result is that we have spent long periods of time out of fellowship with God. This means many of us go long periods of time without God's blessing, without answered prayer, without God's guidance, and without a sense of God's presence in our lives...all because we don't treat sin like sin. Yet, John says there is a better life, one that consists of abiding in Christ. As we increase our abiding, we will decrease our sin. The goal is not to fight sin; the goal is to fall in love with the Savior.

In 3:6b, John then offers this problematic statement: **"no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him."** Say what? Does this mean that a person who sins does not have a relationship with God? I sure hope not! If that is the case, I would not be on my way to heaven...and neither would you. The verbs "seen" and "known" are important. "Seeing" Christ refers to seeing Him for who He really is (cf. John 14:9). "Knowing" Christ refers to an intimate and experiential knowledge of God. The believer who abides in Christ has his mind set on the things of God and on his identity as a child of God. So, as believers, if we find ourselves sinning we know that we're not abiding. And in doing so, we have turned away from God. That's what John means when he says the believer who is sinning "has neither seen Him nor known Him." It's not that we have *never* seen or known God. We have. John is saying that in a moment of temptation, in a moment of decision, we chose not to see Him. We chose not to relate to Him. And we acted out like the old man. So, out with the old; in with the new.

I have a pair of black *Reebok* aqua socks.<sup>7</sup> I like these slipper-shoes because I can just slip them on and ride my stationary bike or run to the mailbox. They are simple, no-hassle, all-purpose shoes. They are comfortable and homey. I hardly know that I have them on. I wish all shoes were like my aqua socks. This is a picture of what the Bible means by abiding. It is when we have a comfortable and homey fellowship with Christ.

This past summer, I took my aqua socks on a family trip to Cannon Beach, OR. I wore them on the beach and now sand is lodged in every crevice of my shoes. No matter what I do, I can't seem to remove all the sand. Now when I wear my aqua socks they are uncomfortable. The grains of sand irritate my feet. However, there are solutions to this problem: I can either choose to build up resistance to the sand or I can choose to wear socks. But have you ever seen a grown man wearing black aqua socks with white tube socks? In the end, it is best to put the aqua socks in the washing machine and have them cleansed.

Likewise, in the spiritual life we must rely upon Christ's cleansing work and live in close fellowship with Him. When we do, we will see and know Him. We will experience the intimate and passionate fellowship that He yearns to have with us.

In 3:7, John continues his emphasis upon the person and work of Christ: **“Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous.”** Whenever the Bible warns us not to be deceived, we need to perk up and pay attention. Deception is like a fisherman's bait: we think we're going to get what we want (a juicy meal), but we end up getting hooked and becoming the meal! The deception here is being influenced by anyone who has a wrong definition of sin. John is saying: Don't let anyone encourage you to take sin lightly. If someone comes up and pats you on the back and says, “Its okay, everybody sins.” “Well, nobody's perfect you know.” “There are big sins and there are little sins on earth.” This may indeed be the case from our limited perspective, however, ultimately our perspective doesn't matter—only God's perspective matters. And God says that what we view as a little sin on earth is open scandal in heaven! Jesus says, “You don't need to commit adultery to be guilty of sin; you just need to look at a woman twice. You don't need to commit murder; if you merely wish a person was dead, you're a murderer” (Matt 5:21-30). A lustful thought, an angry response, a white lie can break fellowship with God.

If one of my children steals a piece of candy from a grocery store, I can't say, “Well, everybody steals candy every now and then.” I can't even say, “Well, when I was a child, I stole candy too.” The moment I treat my child's sin lightly, it could eventually lead to more sin! Therefore, I have to treat my child's sin not by the item that he stole but by the fact that he or she sinned.

On a train track there is a small, thin piece of steel. Depending upon which way that little piece of steel lays, a train goes one direction or another. Off of the same central track, depending upon which way the steel is positioned, one train can veer off to San Francisco and another train can veer off to New York. The train's direction will be decided by the position of that little piece of steel that determines which track the train travels on. You don't need big sin to send you in the wrong direction. All you need is a little piece of steel. A little sin turned the wrong way can you take you to spiritual San Francisco when you ought to be joining God in New York. A little sin can detour you. And that's what Satan wants to do. He wants to put you on the wrong track. If he can put you on the wrong track, you're going to end up in the wrong city. Satan is not looking at the little piece of steel; he's looking at the ultimate destination.<sup>8</sup>

Satan wants to render you ineffective. And one of his goals is for Christians to take sin lightly. If he can deceive us into this, he has it made. We must always be aware of his tactics. We must also be prepared to respond with righteous lives. In this verse, John argues that how we live matters. Righteous living proves to the world that we are God's children. So, out with the old; in with the new.

Sin is incompatible with the believer because of the nature of sin (3:4), the nature of Christ's person and work (3:5-7), and the source of sin (3:8). John writes, "**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.**" John is not saying that the person who sins is going to hell. He is merely saying that there are occasions and/or durations of time when Christians can live like the devil and actually support hell's agenda. This is what John means when he writes, "The one who practices sin is of the devil." Christians can actually say with their lives, "Devil, I want you to be my daddy." Once this is recognized as a potential reality, this passage can be more easily reconciled. In Mark 8:33, Jesus said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's." Jesus didn't say this to condemn Peter to hell but to rebuke Peter for his satanic thoughts.

John wants you and me to know that every time we sin not only do we oppose the character of God, we join forces with Satan! Remember John's words in 3:7? Jesus has come to squash the work of Satan. Yet, many of us are helping Satan by sinning. To sin is to help God's archenemy. Yet, John tells us that the purpose of Jesus coming was to "destroy the works of the devil."<sup>9</sup> God wants you to be a destroyer. He wants you to be a warrior! He wants you to always ask the question: Is this action in keeping with God or is it in keeping with Satan? He then wants you to look to Jesus and seek to destroy sin.

[John has been very clear: Sin is incompatible with the believer. But now he will press his point even further and state that...]

**2. Sin is impossible for the Christian (3:9-10).** In 3:9, John is going to tell his readers that the believer cannot sin. He writes, "**No one who is born of God practices [lit. "does"] sin,<sup>10</sup> because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.**" Again, the word "practices" is not in the original text. The words "does" and "sin" are in the present tense. Many well-meaning Christians interpret this verse to mean that true Christians can't sin a lot.<sup>11</sup> However, this verse literally says that the Christian "cannot sin because His seed abides in him," and "he is born of God!"<sup>12</sup>

Of course, the key to this verse is the word "seed." What is God's seed? The word stands for the new life implanted in the believer by God. It's our new, divine nature. It's the new man. When you accepted Jesus Christ, He gave you His nature and there is no sin in His nature (cf. 3:5; Eph 4:24; Col 3:10). Our new nature is perfect. In our redeemed nature we do not sin. When we sin, it is not the "born-of-God" aspect of us that is sinning. So why do we still sin? Because our old nature (our flesh) is still residing within us! The solution is found back in 3:6: We abide in Christ in order to conquer our sin. As we abide in Christ, we begin to deprive the flesh of its desires. Another supernatural resource is to follow the truth of 3:9 and recognize who we are in Christ as born-of-God creatures.

It's like a caterpillar and butterfly. When the cocoon opens, God calls the caterpillar to come out, spread his wings, and fly! Likewise, God has called us to soar. We no longer have any reason to crawl on the ground. God has given us a new nature. Tragically, many Christians do not understand the cataclysmic nature of conversion. We have been born again...we have a new nature. If you are a Christian, you need to recognize and apply this truth. Saved people do not need the power of positive thinking; they need the power of biblical thinking. You have been made brand new (2 Cor 5:17; cf. 3:18).

The reason that we sin is that we frequently fail to think and live according to who we are. If someone says, "A priest cannot commit fornication," one cannot deny that as a man he can commit it; but priests, functioning as priests, do not do those things.<sup>13</sup> If a Christian sins, his sin cannot be an expression of who he really is, because his true life is that of Christ in him.

Our passage closes in 3:10a with a concluding remark. John writes, **“By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious** [lit. “manifest, clear, evident, conspicuous”].” This statement does not refer to what follows, but to what John has already said (3:4-9). John is saying that how we live reveals whose side we’re on. Christians manifest their nature by practicing righteousness (cf. 2:7). Children of the devil display their basic nature by sinning. Believers who sin are not expressing their nature as children of God; instead they are following the devil’s pattern. The distinguishing mark of a Christian is what we do. Salvation is a personal matter between the believer and God; the manifested life of a believer is displayed by working righteousness. Many Christians function as children of the devil because they fail to abide.

As believers, day by day, moment by moment, we choose whose side we’re on. When we are deceived and fall back on the old man we sin and align ourselves with the devil. When we set our minds on who we really are, and when we our minds on the word of God, as applied by the Holy Spirit in our lives, we align ourselves with God, in righteousness. So, out with the old; in with the new.

Many of you know that I enjoy lifting weights. Well, this past Friday I was lifting weights alone, in my neighbor’s garage. I was feeling particularly strong so I decided to do “negatives.” Negatives allow you to continue to perform the negative portion of an exercise when your body gives in. In my case, I was doing pull-ups. I would like to introduce you to what my neighborhood work-out partners call “Keith’s Torture Straps.” After performing a number of sets of pull-ups, my body began to fail. Out of the corner of my eye, I happened to notice this stepladder [display stepladder]. The stepladder allowed me to climb up and then to perform the negative portion of my pull-ups.

- *Learn the Word.* To recognize Satan’s lies, we must focus on God’s truth.
- *Live the Life.* Sin cannot flourish where godliness is cultivated. Our sense of sin will always be in proportion to our nearness to God.
- *Love the Body.* Peter says, “Love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Pet 4:8). To the degree that we love one another, our sins are covered.
- *Lead the World.* Two of our members, Kirk and Kelly Anderson, helped us add the final step to our strategy. It’s easy to be sidetracked by sin if you don’t know where you’re headed. We’re headed up, up, and away! We are seeking to lead the world to Christ.

When we abide in Christ, recognize our new identity, and carry out our church strategy, we can overcome the insanity of sin.

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### **Scripture Reading**

1 John 3:4-10  
Romans 6:1-16; 7:20-25  
2 Corinthians 5:17  
Galatians 2:20  
Ephesians 4:20-24  
Colossians 3:9-10  
2 Peter 1:2-4

### **Study Questions**

1. John states that “sin is lawlessness” (3:4). How have I committed acts of “lawlessness” (i.e., rebellion) since I have been a Christian? What acts of rebellion am I most susceptible to? Do I have a person of the same sex in my life that is holding me accountable to walking with God and avoiding sin? If not, will I make a commitment to find such a person this week?
2. Jesus came for the express purpose of “taking away sins” (3:5). How must He feel when I continue to wallow in sin? How often do I fail to “abide” in Christ (3:6)? Consequently, how often do I sin? After I sin, how do I feel? In what ways do I not “see” or “know” God? How does this affect me? What am I willing to do to ensure that I abide more consistently and experience greater intimacy with Christ?
3. Why is John concerned about me being deceived (3:7)? What do false teachers say about sin? What do many well-meaning Christians say about sin? How do these perspectives contradict what the Bible says about sin? How will I define “sin” as a result of properly understanding this passage?
4. John says that the Christian who sins is “of the devil” (3:8). How does this sobering reality make me feel? How do I consciously or unconsciously cooperate with the agenda of hell on a daily basis? To what degree does this bother me? Is my mentality to justify my behavior by saying, “Well, everyone sins?” Or is my standard to strive for the perfect righteousness of Christ?
5. John states in his typical black-and-white language that no one “born of God” sins (3:9). How does 3:9-10a help me to understand that the Christian and sin are radically opposed? What difference will this theological truth make in my life? How will I encourage a fellow believer this week to walk in his or her new nature?

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> There is nothing inherent in the Greek present tense that tells us this is *continuous* action. For example, Jesus refers to His single act of coming to the earth at His incarnation in the present tense in John 6:33, when He says, “For the bread of God is that which comes [*katabainon*, present active participle] down out of heaven, and gives life to the world.” No one would suggest that the present tense here means *continuous* action, that is, that Jesus is continually coming down from heaven. The present tense *can* mean continuous action, but that is only one of its ten different uses, and it’s a fairly rare usage. There needs to be other indicators in the context of the verb before we conclude that the meaning is *continuous* action.

<sup>2</sup> Strecker notes that *anomia* is frequently used in both Jewish and Christian literature “to describe the activity of Satan against God immediately before the end.” George Stecker, *The Johannine Letters: A Commentary on 1, 2, and 3 John*: Hermeneia: a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1996), 94. This seems to coincide with the eschatological language in 1 John 2:18.

<sup>3</sup> The Greek word order is impressive: “and sin in Him there is not.” Jesus’ virgin birth through the Holy Spirit preserved Him from original sin (Luke 1:35). He lived in complete obedience to God, so that even His enemies could not convict Him of sin (John 8:46). He offered Himself as a lamb, unblemished and spotless (1 Pet 1:19), the final and complete sacrifice for our sins (Heb 10:10, 14, 18).

<sup>4</sup> This language suggests an echo of John 1:29. Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*: WBC series (Waco: Word, 1984), 156.

<sup>5</sup> Hodges writes, “The failure to recognize the logical connection between verses 5 and 6 is the reason that verse 6 has been so often misunderstood. As a result, this misunderstanding carries over into verse 9.” See Zane C. Hodges, *The First Epistle of John* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 134.

<sup>6</sup> Westcott writes, “St. John speaks of ‘abiding’ in Christ and not simply of ‘being’ Christ, because his arguments rest on the efficacy of continuous human effort.” Brook Foss Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 104.

<sup>7</sup> The seed idea for this illustration comes from Ed Underwood, “Live Like a Christian!” (1 John 2:28-3:10a): Unpublished Study Notes from Cannon Beach Christian Conference Center 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Tony Evans, “The Behavior of Fellowship” (1 John 3:1-10).

<sup>9</sup> The word “destroy” (*luo*) means to “reverse the effects” of something—to untie, to loosen, or to release. Jesus came to untie the knot the devil had devised to keep people bound up; He came to undo what Satan had accomplished—to set us free from the devil’s schemes and attacks.

<sup>10</sup> Various versions and paraphrases also opt for the habitual view. See 1 John 3:9a.

- “No one who is born of God practices sin” (NAS95).
- “No one born of God makes a practice of sinning” (ESV).
- “No one who is born of God continues to sin” (NIV).
- “The person who has been born into God’s family does not make a practice of sinning” (TLB).
- “No one born [begotten] of God [deliberately and knowingly] habitually practices sin” (Amplified).

<sup>11</sup> John could hardly have meant that Christ does not sin at all and those who abide in Him sin but not a lot. John’s point is that sin is never an expression of abiding in Christ. When we abide in Christ we do not sin at all. After all, a sinless parent does not beget a child who only sins a little! This is like saying that an absolutely perfect car manufacturing process is proven by the fact that the car only leaks a little oil and throws a rod occasionally. Brad McCoy, *1 John Sermon Notes* (Tanglewood Bible Fellowship: Duncan, OK, 7/6/96).

<sup>12</sup> John draws from the OT picture of God’s putting a new “heart” into believers (“I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees,” Ezek 36:27). This was later picked up in intertestamental literature such as 1 Enoch 5:8 (“And then there shall be bestowed upon the elect wisdom, and they shall live and never again sin.”).

<sup>13</sup> The Bible uses language in a similar way, “A good tree cannot produce bad fruit” (Matt 7:18). Of course a good tree can produce bad fruit, but not as a result of what it really is, a good tree. Also Jesus said, men “cannot” fast while the bridegroom is with them (Mark 2:19). They can fast, but to do so is incongruous and unnatural. Similar notions are found in Pauline thought. Paul says, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me” (Gal. 2:20; cf. Rom 7:20-25).