

Series: 1 John

Title:The Problem We All Have

Text: 1 John 3:7-10

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Verse 7

In verse 7, John warned his readers about a sinister deception that was plaguing churches in Asia Minor. He said, “Children, let no one deceive you. The one who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous” (1 John 3:7). The verbiage of the Greek word translated “deceive” implied that John’s readers were in the process of being duped. His words could have been translated “let no one keep on leading you astray.”¹ What was the heresy by which John’s readers were being deceived? It seems the Gnostics promoted erroneous doctrine concerning sin. They claimed certain deeds of unrighteousness were permissible for believers. Their supposed super-spiritual, special knowledge exempted them, in their minds, from the need for practical righteousness. John addressed their error earlier in his letter. In 1 John 2:6, he said, “The one who says he remains in him should walk just as he walked.”

John wanted his readers to know the truth. Believers are called to live in righteousness. To magnify that truth, John spoke of “the one who does what is right.” The Greek word translated “right” is one that referred to that which was correct or upright. It spoke of behavior that was right before God – the right behavior God requires.² In the original language, the verbs portrayed one continually performing righteous deeds. The verse gives the idea of one who “keeps on doing righteousness.”

The apostle wanted his readers to know that true believers are called to live holy lives. Those who espoused a form of liberty that made space for depraved acts were living a lie. Neither their creed nor conduct was in alignment with the truth of Jesus. John’s readership should have been aware of Jesus’ teaching. He had told His disciples to “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you” (Matthew 6:33). John’s point was that true Christ followers shouldn’t make exception and excuses for flagrant sin. The Christian life involves an ongoing pursuit of righteousness. John’s doctrine was in agreement with that of Paul. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul described how righteousness should be a target of every believer – “put on, the new self, the one created according to God’s likeness in righteousness and purity of the truth” (Ephesians 4:24).

John’s readers needed to know that flagrant immorality had no place within the church, or within a believer’s life. He grounded his point in the gospel in the second part of verse 7 by saying, “The one who does what is right is righteous.” What did John mean? Some may see his words as saying the practice of righteousness earns one a righteous standing before God. John’s point seemed to be the opposite. The words “is righteous” seem to have been a reference to the righteous positional standing one receives through salvation. When one places his or her faith in Christ, that individual is cleaned of all unrighteousness. Before God, such a person is regarded as being as spotless of sin as God’s Son. In his letter to the Romans, Paul spoke of how “the righteousness of God is through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe, since there is no distinction” (Romans 3:22).

John’s argument was simple – when one is made positionally righteous because of Christ, he or she will desire to live a righteous type of life, to some degree or another. By his or her fruits, one will give evidence of salvation (Matthew 7:15-16). Outward displays of righteousness in the life of a believer are proof of an inward reality. They show that one has been made

¹ Robertson, [CD-Rom].

² Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 596.

righteous by the gospel. Commenting on this truth, Calvin has said, “Newness of life is testified by good works...many would gladly persuade themselves that they have this righteousness in their hearts, while iniquity evidently occupies their feet, and hands, and tongue and eyes.”³

Such realities should have been obvious for John’s readers. The prevalence of sin and false doctrine, however, had made things unclear for even the most sincere believers. The Gnostics were so strong in their dismissal of the apostle’s teaching that some of the faithful had perhaps begun to doubt. John wanted his readers to be wise. The heretics were simply using their erroneous teaching as a coverup for their lusts. They failed to see the truth of Christ. They did not see their need for the true righteousness of Christ (Romans 10:1-3). They persisted in hard-hearted sin.

If the false teachers had really known all they claimed they knew, they would have known to shun unrighteousness. Their immorality gave evidence they knew little about Jesus. If they had truly known Him, as they professed (1 John 2:4), they would have known that “...he is righteous.” The sinlessness of Jesus was perhaps the best argument against the Gnostics’ sinful lifestyle. John fell back on that doctrine on numerous occasions in his rebuttals against his opponents (1 John 2:1, 2:29, and 3:5). He did so again in our current verse. His rationale was simple. If Jesus lived a righteous life, His followers should aim to live similarly. True salvation will lead one to have a change of perspective regarding sin and unrighteousness.

Verse 8

John continued his discussion about sin in verse 8 by saying, “The one who commits sin is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God was revealed for this purpose: to destroy the devil’s works” (1 John 3:8). The apostle’s words would likely seem inflammatory to most modern ears. To assert that one is under the sway of Satan is strong charge. John felt that such a strong pronouncement was necessary, considering the deceptive nature of the gnostic heresy.

The language that spoke of “one who commits sin” should not be regarded as speaking of someone who slips into sin or has momentary lapses from time to time. John was not even talking about the daily sin that sometimes entangles or besets believers. He was addressing a flagrant pattern of sin in a person’s life.⁴ The original language of the text used present tense verbs; thus, they referred to one who lived in a lifestyle of sin. John was dealing with the practice of sin, with an individual who had no remorse or repentance regarding gross immorality. The language depicted one who “keeps on doing sin.”⁵

In John’s estimation, one who lived in such a way was “of the devil.” Such an accusation may have seemed a little harsh or over-the-top. However, if one would have considered the origin and nature of sin, such a claim would not have seemed too extreme. John explained that “the devil has sinned from the beginning.” Sin started with Satan. It was birthed from His wicked schemes. The Devil aimed to hijack God’s original intent for humanity through an enticement to sin. One has rightly said that sin is the “career of the Devil.”⁶

In a similar way, the Gnostics were trying to undermine the Lord’s intention for the church in Asia Minor. By propagating sensual sin, they sided with Lucifer (Luke 10:18). They made themselves like the serpent of old by functioning as an adversary and accuser of God’s people.

³ Calvin, 210.

⁴ Rogers, 595.

⁵ Robertson, [CD-Rom].

⁶ Robertson, [CD-Rom].

Sin and deceit were Satan's modus operandi from the beginning, and the Gnostics followed suit. As mentioned earlier in John's gospel, everyone has a spiritual father, either Jesus (1 John 3:1-3) or Satan (1 John 3:8). One has rightly said, "When one acts like the Devil he shows that he is not a true child of God."⁷ In living for sin, the Gnostics showed a family resemblance to the Devil. They revealed they had been deceived (2 Corinthians 11:14) and blinded (2 Corinthians 4:4) by the father of lies (John 8:44). They had fallen prey to the one who tirelessly works to rob God of glory by deceiving mankind (Job 1:7).

If John's assertion seemed tough and calloused, one should have considered the teaching of Jesus. In John 8:44, our Lord told Jews who challenged Him, "You are of your father the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires." Perhaps John had Jesus' words in mind as he wrote the words of 1 John 3:8. He wanted the genuine believers at Asia Minor to not be unnerved by their religious adversaries. Jesus had critics as well. Instead of giving in to dismay, the church needed to remember that Satan was at work behind the scenes. He was prompting and promoting the gnostic heresy, just as he fueled the Pharisees who resisted Jesus.

In the last part of verse 8, John sought to give his readers hope concerning the circumstances they faced. He said, "The Son of God was revealed for this purpose: to destroy the devil's works." According to John, the destruction of Satan was a part of the reason why Jesus came to earth. The incarnation was intended to deal a death blow to Satan. God the Father had promised such from the beginning of time, telling Satan in the Garden of Eden, "I will put hostility between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel" (Genesis 3:15). Jesus remarked on the way in which He came to earth to defeat Satan, saying, "Now is the judgment of this world. Now the ruler of this world will be cast out" (John 12:31). In the book of Revelation, John similarly told of Satan's destruction:

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven holding the key to the abyss and a great chain in his hand. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the abyss, closed it, and put a seal on it so that he would no longer deceive the nations until the thousand years were completed. After that, he must be released for a short time (Revelation 20:1-3).

Though they were surrounded by Satanically-inspired adversaries, John's readers could take heart. Through Christ and Calvary, Satan had been defeated. The believers in Asia Minor had power to stand strong. John would later say, "You are from God, little children, and you have conquered them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world" (1 John 4:4).

Verse 9

In verse 9, John further sought to encourage his readers by reminding them of the personal power they had over sin. He said, "Everyone who has been born of God does not sin, because his seed remains in him; he is not able to sin, because he has been born of God" (1 John 3:9). The phrase "who has been born of God" contained a perfect, passive verb in the original language of the text. It depicted a permanent change. The child of God is one who has experienced a life-transforming renewal. Through the new birth (John 3:3-6), Christians have a spiritual capacity to overcome sin. Regeneration results in Divine power over Satan and the flesh (1 John 2:16).

As a result, Christians can effectively wage war against sin. John said, "Everyone who has been born of God *does not sin*." Obviously, Christians can sin. Previously in his letter, the apostle

⁷ Robertson, [CD-Rom].

asserted, "If we say, 'We have no sin,' we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). The presence of sin is not removed at salvation, but its power is. God's people may have instances in which they transgress God's commands, but they don't always transgress.

The difference between real Christians and non-Christians is one of continuance. Genuine believers don't have sin as a habit of life. When they stumble, they show remorse and repentance. A lifestyle of sin is impossible for the child of God, according to John, "because his seed remains in him." John's references to God's "seed" is a clear reference to the Holy Spirit. At salvation, the Spirit of God permanently inhabits the soul of the redeemed (1 Corinthians 6:19 and Galatians 3:2).

Because of the Spirit's presence, patterns of ongoing and unrepentant sin are impossible. Indeed, John went as far as to say the Christian "is not able to sin." Some take the apostle's words the wrong way, assuming true Christians can't commit any sin. As a result, some are compelled to redefine sin in order to explain the occurrences of sin in their lives. Others, on account of John's words, regard any act of sin as a disqualifying one for salvation. If one stumbles in sin, the thinking goes, one may lose his or her salvation.

John by no means meant to espouse a doctrine of sinless perfectionism, nor did he mean to convey that one sin could make a person lose his or her salvation. His concern was with false believers who engaged in flagrant immorality while claiming to be Christ followers. John's words were aimed at unrepentant sinners who professed a form of godliness. He wanted the true Christians in Asia Minor to know that such individuals were not true believers.

If one is really in Christ, he "is not able to sin, because he has been born of God." John used perfect tense verbiage in the last part of verse 9. With the word translated "born," he intended to convey the abiding results of regeneration. One has said it "marks not only the single act of the birth, but the continual presence of its efficacy."⁸ Because of the change wrought by conversion, believers are unable to persist in continual sin. The Holy Spirit will not allow such rebellion. He serves as a governor to convict and correct. Born-again Christians cannot live an ongoing life of sin.

Verse 10

All John said up to the current point in his letter was intended to bring his readers to a certain conclusion. He wanted them to see the obvious difference between the real believers and the unbelievers in the church. One group practiced sin; the other practiced righteousness. One was dominated by hate; the other exhibited love. One group lived in darkness; the other lived in light. One group had the Lord as their Father; the other had Satan as their father. John concluded his theme of differentiating between the two groups in verse 10 by saying, "This is how God's children and the devil's children become obvious. Whoever does not do what is right is not of God, especially the one who does not love his brother or sister."

The word translated "obvious" is one that spoke of something being revealed or made evident. See 2 Corinthians 5:10 for a similar usage of the term. As used in our text, the word described how people within the church could discern who the "God's children" were and who "the devil's children" were. Very simply, one could discern who belonged to whom by examining the lifestyle choices of each one. Such examining and judging may not seem like the Christian thing to do because of modern sentiments. Many take Jesus' commands concerning not judging to an unhealthy extreme (Matthew 7:1). They assume Jesus meant to say Christians are to never make judgments on others. Our Lord never meant we can't pass judgment on anyone. He only meant to prohibit the self-righteous, sinful type of judging that typified the Pharisees. In fact, Jesus actually encouraged His disciples to pass judgment on others in a healthy way (John 7:24).

⁸ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 596.

John knew Jesus espoused healthy forms of judgment. He had once heard his master say, “So you’ll recognize them by their fruit” (Matthew 7:20). Consequently, he encouraged his readers to exercise vigilance. He wanted them to be discerning and to make distinctions. He spoke of some who did “not do what is right.” John used present tense verbiage to depict a lifestyle of unrighteousness. He boldly said that such people were “not of God.” their habitual rejection of God’s Law revealed that they were unregenerate.

The apostle also pointed out the one who did “not love his brother or sister.” Those who were given over to continual hate and a lack of love were “especially” guilty. They definitely were “not of God.” Since Jesus said love was the defining Christian virtue (Matthew 22:37-40), and since the apostles taught likewise (Romans 13:9 and 1 Corinthians 13:13), those who opposed love apparently didn’t know Jesus. In addition, the Holy Spirit of God was known to produce love in the hearts of God’s children (Romans 5:5 and Galatians 5:22); as a result, those who were really born again should have exhibited some degree of love.

All in all, John meant to show that righteousness and love are defining traits of true Christians. If one’s life was hostile to those two virtues, his or her salvation was suspect. One has said, “A failure to perform righteousness and failure to love one’s brother can never be traced to God.”⁹ There should be an obvious and stark difference between the lifestyle of Christians and non-Christians. John’s readers needed to see the heretics in their midst for what they were. They needed to be on guard and stand up for the faith delivered by Jesus and the apostles.

The modern church should hear John’s words. A failure to identify the marks of true Christian living has in some cases made the church anemic and ineffective in its mission. One has said we live in “an age that wishes to remove all distinctions between Christians and the world.” When the church is like the world, and when the church tolerates ungodly worldliness in its midst, spiritual disaster will follow. Faithful churches don’t judge in a sinful way, but they do make holy distinctions. They uphold a standard of humble and holy conduct, and they stand against the blatant and wanton unrighteousness that sullies the reputation of Christ and His church.

⁹ Walvoord and Zuck, 895.