

Pastor's Devotional Sunday, October 8, 2017

Throughout his letter, John communicated with dramatic contrasts. For example, in 1:5 John contrasted “walking in the light” versus “walking in darkness.” At times this style of writing is confusing, for we often find ourselves in grey shadows. Today’s text is especially challenging. In 3:6 John wrote that “No one who lives in [Christ] keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him.” Really?

Does our continued need to confess sins to God and ask forgiveness of people we’ve harmed indicate that we have not been born again? No! The sins that you and I have committed since our conversion are probably examples of what John calls “the sin that does not lead to death” (5:17). In 1:8 John stated that “if we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” Christians recognize their sin and trust that God is gracious and will not give up on us!

John’s intent was to confront false teaching that was leading the early church astray. Previously we learned about false teachers who were influenced by a Greco-Roman pagan religion called Gnosticism. Gnostics had distorted the Gospel message by changing truths about Jesus, including teaching a heresy that claimed that Jesus didn’t come in the flesh, he only “seemed” human.

Another false claim was that the righteousness of Jesus made people spiritually righteous in God’s eyes, yet it didn’t matter how Christians acted in the flesh. One reference to this disconnect between “being” and “doing” was confronted in 3:7, “Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as [Jesus] is righteous.”

Because of this distortion of our faith, John wrote in 3:9, “No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God. This is how we know who the children of God are...” By “continue to sin,” John was referring to people who give Jesus “lip service” but have no desire to turn from sin and become more loving, more like Jesus. The English phrase “continue to sin” is the translation of the “imperfect past tense” of the verb in the original Greek language—it conveys continual action, as if there’s been no change in behavior. If John had meant to convey that a person who sins at all is not a child of God, he would have used the “preterit past tense” of the verb.

Bottom line: until we are complete perfected in resurrection, Christians will continue to commit sins, yet the Holy Spirit within us gives us a desire to overcome our sinful compulsions and addictions, remove our idols, and become more like Jesus. As John Piper wrote, “God’s seed cannot make peace with practicing sin.” In a sermon preached in 2008, his words provide helpful guidance:

Now we come to the question we raised at the beginning: How do people who have experienced the miracle of the new birth deal with their own sinfulness as they try to live in the full assurance of their salvation? My answer is: You deal with it by the way you use John’s teaching. John warns against hypocrisy (claiming to be born again when your life contradicts it), and John celebrates the Advocacy and Propitiation of Christ for sinners.

The question is: How do you use these two truths? How do you use the warning that you might deceive yourself? How do you use the promise, “If we do sin, we have an Advocate”? The evidence of your new birth lies in how these two truths function in your life. Here’s the way they function if you are born again:

1) Fleeing Presumption, flying to the Advocate

You are slipping into a lukewarm, careless, presumptuous frame of mind about your own sinfulness. You are starting to coast or be indifferent to whether you are holy or worldly. You are losing your vigilance against bad attitudes and behaviors—and starting to settle in with sinful patterns of behavior.

When the born-again person experiences this, the truth of 3:9 (“No one born of God makes a practice of sinning”) has the effect, by the Holy Spirit, of awakening him to the danger of his condition so that he flies to his Advocate and his Propitiation for mercy and forgiveness and righteousness. He confesses his sin and receives cleansing (1:9), and his love for Christ is renewed and the sweetness of his relationship is recovered and the hatred of sin is restored and the joy of the Lord again becomes his strength.

2) Fleeing Despair, Flying to the Advocate

You are sinking down in fear and discouragement and even despair that your righteousness, your love for people, and your fight against sin are just not good enough. Your conscience is condemning you, and your own deeds seem so imperfect to you that they could never prove that you are born again.

When the born-again person experiences this, the truth of 2:1 has the effect, by the Spirit, of rescuing him from despair: “My little children [he wants to be tender with their consciences], I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.”

John’s warning of hypocrisy calls you back from the precipice of presumption. John’s promise of an Advocate also calls you back from the precipice of despair. New birth enables you to hear Scripture and use Scripture helpfully—redemptively. You don’t use the promise “We have an Advocate” to justify an attitude of cavalier indifference to sin.

New birth doesn’t use the warning “No one born of God makes a practice of sinning” to pour gasoline on the fires of despair. New birth has a spiritual discernment that senses how to use John’s teaching: The new birth is chastened and sobered by the warnings, and the new birth is thrilled and empowered by the promise of an Advocate and a Propitiation.

May the Lord confirm your new birth by both of these responses to the word of God. May he grant you to embrace both the warning and the comfort and put them to proper spiritual use in preserving the full assurance of your salvation.

Our Offering to God

When we hear the word “offering,” we naturally think of giving money to finance God’s work. We also think of the time that we volunteer to bless other people. Yet our “offering” also includes how we choose to live as “sent people” in the places where we live, work, and play.

- Are there voices in our culture that encourage us to accept the grace of Jesus while foregoing the righteous expectations of Jesus?
- In your own spiritual journey, do you most need to “flee presumption” or “flee despair?”
- What steps can you take to “walk in the light”?