



1 John 3:9 (NKJV)

⁹ Whoever has been born of God *doesn't sin*, for His seed remains in him; and *he cannot sin*, because he has been born of God.

Many people struggle to understand this passage because its context clearly shows that Christians still sin:

1 John 1:8 (NKJV)

⁸ If we say that *we have no sin*, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

1 John 1:10 (NKJV)

¹⁰ If we say that *we haven't sinned*, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.

1 John 2:1 (NKJV)

¹ My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. *And if anyone sins*, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the Righteous.

These are three instances from the same letter where the writer, the apostle John, talks about sinning. The first two passages communicate that, "If you say you haven't sinned, you are a liar." Then, in the third passage, John adds this, "I am writing to you so that you will not sin (future tense). But if you do sin, you have an Advocate with the Father." Then, in 1 John 3:9 he declares, "If you are born of God, you cannot sin." That sounds very contradictory, isn't it? Both Scripture and experience reveal that Christians can sin and still sin. Even the entire context of the book of 1 John shows that it's possible for a born-again believer to do something that is sin. Yet, 1 John 3:9 clearly says that if you are born of God, you cannot sin. How can this be?

Some people take 1 John 3:9 to mean you cannot “habitually” sin. Several Bible translations now even render it this way. People who think along this line preach something like this: “If you were a drunk before you were saved, you might get drunk once or twice, but if you are truly saved, you will not habitually sin. Eventually, you will see victory in that area, or you were not truly born again.” However, in order to embrace this view, you have to categorize sin – which God doesn’t. To Him, there are no “big” sins and “little” sins. By His definition, we all habitually sin. We all habitually fail to study God’s Word as much as we should. We all habitually fail to love others the way we should. We all habitually fail to be as considerate as we should. We habitually get into self-centeredness, and God has to habitually deal with us about it. Sometimes, we also pass over things that God calls sins. For instance, God views gluttony the same as drunkenness, adultery, and murder (see Deuteronomy 21:20). Gluttony is a sin that can only happen habitually. You cannot become overweight by eating just one large meal. Even if you gorged yourself one meal, it would only make a pound or two of difference. However, in order to gain an extra fifty to a hundred pounds, you would have to do it repeatedly. Being overweight is a habitual sin. I don’t say that to condemn anyone, because I know there are overweight people who are not that way necessarily because of food. But I want to put things into perspective.

If you interpret 1 John 3:9 to mean that you cannot habitually sin if you are truly born of God, then nobody would qualify, because we all habitually sin. The only way this can be preached is to say, “Well, you cannot habitually do the big sins, but the little sins, yes, you can habitually do them.” However, this is not what this verse is saying.

I believe that the apparent contradiction and confusion created by the book of 1 John concerning the new creation and sin flows from the frequent and subtle alternation between sinning at the level of the body and soul and sinning at the level of the new spirit. If you understand the human composition of spirit, soul, and body and that God deals with the born-again believers in the spirit or at the spirit level, then a better interpretation of this passage would be the following. The only part of you that is born of God is your spirit. Your soul is not born of God and your body is not born of God. They have been purchased, but they are not redeemed yet. Your soul and mind are being renewed, and your body will be glorified at the end. But the only part of you that is changed right now in an instant is your spirit and your spirit cannot sin. That spirit was created in true righteousness and holiness (Ephesians 4:24). Once you believed, your spirit was sealed (Ephesians 1:13), preserved and encased in the Holy Spirit in such a way that sins that you commit in your actions and in your thoughts don’t penetrate it. Since the recreated spirit cannot sin by itself, it retains its purity and its holiness. You don’t lose your spirit’s holiness based on your performance. This understanding is pivotal to having a relationship with God and fellowship with Him.

Based on Hebrews 9 and 10 and on what we’ve discussed so far about future sins, we can also interpret 1 John 3:9 in the following way: if all past, present, and future sins of born-again believers have already been removed by Jesus’ sacrifice once and for all, then there is no sin that a believer could do that would fall outside of what the sacrifice of Jesus has already dealt with. As such, a Christian cannot commit sin anymore.

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