

Teaching Series: The Glory of Righteousness

Title: Session 13 - Believers Cannot Sin

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Cleansing the Conscience of Sins

Believers Cannot Sin (1 John 3:9)

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.

Next, let's see how and what does the Holy Spirit convicts the world and believers of, because most of the time the condemnation coming from our conscience is confused with the Holy Spirit's conviction.

The Conviction of Sin and of Righteousness

In the night before His crucifixion, in John 16:7-11, Jesus gave His disciples some instructions, telling them the following:

John 16:7-11 (NKJV)

⁷ Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It's to your advantage that I go away; for if I don't go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you.

⁸ And when He has come, He will convict the world **of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment:**

⁹ **of sin**, because they don't believe in Me;

¹⁰ **of righteousness**, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more;

¹¹ **of judgment**, because the ruler of this world is judged.

In verse 8, we can see the three-fold ministry of the Holy Spirit: to convict the world of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment. It's amazing how religion in general has twisted this verse to make it sound condemning, when it's in fact the exact opposite. The Lord Jesus seems to have known that this passage will be misinterpreted, or that it could be misinterpreted, so He went on in the following verses explaining in detail exactly what He meant. In verse 9, it says "of sin" (singular) and not "sins" (plural). The Holy Spirit convicts the world and not believers, of only one sin: the sin of not believing in Jesus. He doesn't convict the world of all their individual immoral sins, because the conscience already does that. The Holy Spirit doesn't convict people that are not born again about whether they are drinking, lying, or stealing; that is the conscience's job. The primary reason for which people will be going to hell is the sin of rejecting Jesus, not their individual sins. This is the direct cause, because the sins of the entire world have been paid for:

1 John 2:2 (NKJV)

² And He Himself is **the propitiation (the atoning sacrifice)** for our sins, and not for ours only but also **for the whole world.**

Jesus didn't die only for the believers that would accept Him, but He also died for the people that maybe

will never accept Him. He has already paid for their sins as well. ***The sins of the whole world have been paid for.*** The Lord Jesus has paid for the sins of the whole world, even those that haven't been committed yet. Consequently, people are not going to hell for their sins. Their sins have been paid for. People go to hell for rejecting the payment that was made for their sins, which is the sacrifice of Lord Jesus. Christ has paid for the sins of every single person. It doesn't matter whether you are a good person, a moral person, or a bad person. Romans 3:23 says that "all have sinned and have come short of the glory of God." Every person has missed heaven. Some of us have lived maybe a little better than others, maybe we haven't done the evil things other people have done, but compared to God's standard of holiness, all have sinned and come short of His holiness. If you are trusting in your own goodness, your own holiness, and in your good deeds, without receiving Christ into your heart, you will go to hell. Jesus paid for your sins and you cannot come before God based on your goodness and tell Him, "God, I deserve heaven because I lived holy. I didn't curse, steal, or kill anyone. I am a good and moral person." You would be sent directly to hell. But Jesus paid for the sins of everybody. Everybody! All your sins have been paid for. It doesn't matter what you have done. It doesn't matter if you are the sorriest person in the world. Jesus has paid for your sins the same way He paid for every person's sins, so sin is not the problem anymore. Jesus ended the sin problem once and for all. It's all about Jesus. All that matters is that you put your faith in Jesus. That is what the Holy Spirit convicts the world of: Jesus' payment of all sins.

After you are born again, the Holy Spirit continues to convince you and tell you the same thing, but on the righteousness side of the payment. He tries to convince you that all your past, present, and future sins have been forgiven and removed for you by Jesus' payment of blood. The Holy Spirit is not the One going around after you everywhere telling you: "You should not do this," or "You should not have done that." Some of you have this thinking sometimes, "Oh, the Holy Spirit has been on my case and He's been telling me all the time I should not do this or that." No, this is religion that talks to you that you, not the Holy Spirit. It's your own conscience condemning you and your intuitive knowledge of good and evil, your knowledge of right and wrong. Religion only amplifies these and makes it worse. ***The Holy Spirit is not the One condemning you.*** Have you not heard people in church confessing things like, "My brother, I did this thing wrong and the Holy Spirit just made me feel miserable; He would not give me any rest?" They stand up, confess, and then they repent, and tell everybody what they have done. And they think the Holy Spirit brings this feeling of condemnation. They call it conviction, but it's actually condemnation. That does not mean that the Holy Spirit is against the conscience and He's opposing it. Conscience is good and moral, exactly like what Paul said about the Law of Moses. That is why God gave it to us in the first place, to keep

us in check. Both the conscience and the Law of Moses reflect God's nature and His perfect moral standard. They are both in tune and in unity with the Holy Spirit. However, the Holy Spirit has to convince believers of a higher reality that supersedes the condemnation coming from the conscience and the Law, and that is, the righteousness of Jesus that was paid for in blood. Isn't it so that you don't hear very often in churches today people standing up and saying: "Dear brothers and sisters, I did this or that and I know it was not good before God. But the Holy Spirit came to me and convinced me that I am still the righteousness of God and Christ, I am still God's beloved, and I am free of condemnation?" And yet, this is exactly what the Holy Spirit is trying to convince believers of, especially after they sinned, because it is so counterintuitive to the human mind's logic.

Concerning believers, the Holy Spirit continues to convince them basically of the same sin of unbelief and not of individual sins. However, this time, it is not unbelief in Jesus' payment for their sins, but unbelief in the continuous eternal result of Jesus' payment for sins, that is unbelief in righteousness. The Holy Spirit is there to convince believers of righteousness. Why? Because Jesus is no longer with them to assure them of this reality. He went to the Father. So, when you sin as a believer, the Holy Spirit is there to ask you: "Do you really believe in Jesus?" You answer: "Yes, I believe." And He says: "Then you are still righteous and in right standing with God, even if you sinned. You are not condemned. God is not angry with you and you are still in fellowship with Him. And I, the Holy Spirit, am still here with you to help you and to strengthen you. I am on your side no matter what and I love you."

The root of all sins is the sin of unbelief in Jesus. If you peel all the layers, everything goes back to unbelief. Why do you worry? Because you don't trust in Jesus. Worry is an insult to the promises of God. The doctor tells you that you are sick and you are going to die, while the Bible says that by His stripes you were healed (1 Peter 2:24). Why do you stay sick sometimes? Because you trust the doctors' facts and diagnosis, more than you trust the Word of God on healing and on who you are in Christ. And that is what the Holy Spirit is trying to convince believers of. He is trying to convince them of the Word of righteousness.

The Holy Spirit is the Comforter, the Helper and the Builder, not the Accuser. The devil and your conscience are the accusers. The Bible says:

1 John 3:20 (NKJV)

²⁰ For if our heart condemns us, **God is greater than our heart**, and knows all things.

When your own heart condemns you, God is there through the Holy Spirit to tell you that He is greater than that condemnation and He knows all things. He is aware of your failures and sins, but He is greater than those failures.

So far, we have seen from the Word that born-again believers are righteous by nature in their spirit, are free of condemnation forever, and their future sins have been removed as well. Consequently, they cannot actually sin in their spirit. What are then the implications of these facts in some areas that believers face on a daily basis, such as confession of sins, the Lord's Communion, the extent and assurance of salvation, as well as practical holiness or sanctification? We will see in our next sessions.