

Practice Matters (1 John 3:4-10)

Sunday May 23, 2021

Faith Evangelical Free Church

[4] Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. [5] You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. [6] No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him.

[7] Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. [8] Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.

[9] No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God. [10] By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.

1 John 3:4-10 (ESV)

The passage we're looking at this morning as we continue our study of 1 John gives us a chance to ask ourselves a question that is often critical to consider when thinking about the things that matter the most to us:

What is it that is expected of me? What do I have to do in order to be successful or to do things right or to live the right way?

When we start a new job we want to know what we have to do to meet the expectations of our administrators, clients, or customers.

If you enroll in a class or a training to learn something, one of the very first things you do is flip through the syllabus trying to find out when the tests are, what books you need to read, what assignments you need to complete, how are grades going to be calculated?

Last year I became a father for the first time, and my life practically exploded with "what am I supposed to do now" kind of questions. How do I feed the baby? Where should she sleep? When do I start teaching her things? What car seat do I need? How does a diaper genie work? (For those who may be unfamiliar, a diaper genie is a very fancy trash can that is specifically designed to contain both the diaper and its smell, but also requires an engineering degree to set it up correctly).

It is a common human desire to want to know how to do what we're supposed to do, and how to do it well.

In the letter of 1 John, we can find a lot of guidance and encouragement in how to go about our lives in a good way that allows us to understand and obey what God wants for us and expects from us. So far we've already learned about how we are to "walk in the light, as he is in the light" and enjoy close fellowship with the Lord (1:7). We are to keep the commandments that we find in Scripture, paying particular attention to those that teach us to love God and love others as well (2:3-11). We are told to be careful and not fall in love with the things of this world, or be deceived by those who tell us to deny what we know to be true about Jesus (2:15-27). And last week, Pastor Steve told us about how we are to abide in the Lord, trusting in him for our salvation and believing in His work to makes us more like him, now and at his eventual, glorious return (2:26-3:3)

Hopefully it has been encouraging and even inspiring to read about the kind of life that God wants you to experience, full of hope and trust and obedience born out of love. I think the Apostle John wrote this letter in order to be uplifting and to make the expectations of the Christian life both clear and attainable in the sense that, with the Lord's help, you really can live the way John describes and God desires.

However...if you're like me, there's been a question lurking around in the back of your mind and in the depths of your heart, one that is almost too difficult or perhaps too frightening to ask out loud. I can clearly see that there is a lot of wonderful stuff that God promises me as I seek a beautiful, meaningful relationship with him. But there's this one big thing that I'm afraid might stand in the way of that progress, or even bring it all crashing down around me:

What am I supposed to do about the fact that, no matter how hard I try, I still sin?

What is expected of me, as a Christian, in relation to my sin? Do I have to be perfect? If there is any amount of sin in my life, if I do anything that is opposite of the will of God...have I ruined everything and made myself his enemy once again? I want to believe that I really am a child of God, but if the children of God are known for their righteousness and for their lack of willful disobedience against God...where does that leave me?

Because if I'm being honest, even on my best days, on those days when I feel almost seamlessly connected to the presence of God...I know I still choose to love the things of this world, or to be angry with or even hate people in this world, or at times decide the commands of God are too burdensome or too limiting for me to obey. And in those moments, I commit sins. So where does that leave me? If you've had similar thoughts or experiences...where does that leave you?

What is expected of us, as Christians, in relation to sin?

John will hit this question head on, and he does so in such a blunt and sudden way that it's easy to be shocked by the severity of his words and get so focused on only what is said in these six verses that we forget about what is said throughout the five chapters of the letter, or even in the Bible overall in regards to our sin and God's expectation for how we live.

Ultimately, our challenge will be to live with the tension that while it is true that we should not sin, it is also just as true that the love and grace and mercy of Jesus Christ are powerful enough and trustworthy enough and more than good enough to deal with the sins we still commit.

With all this in mind, let's jump back into the text.

[4] Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. [5] You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. [6] No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him.

1 John 3:4-6 (ESV)

It would be absolutely understandable if someone were to read these verses and determine that perfection, or sinlessness, is what is expected of anyone who calls themselves a Christian. It certainly sounds that way. John says that Jesus "appeared in order to take away sins", so a logical conclusion would be that he has done just that for the people who follow Him. On top of that, v6 says no one who abides in him keeps on sinning, an idea that John will double-down on in vv.7-10 where he says things like "*Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil*", and "*No one born of God makes a practice of sinning.*"

The problem with interpreting this passage to mean you "cannot sin and call yourself a Christian" is that it fails to apply what John has already promised us about forgiveness, and it misses the emphasis on what kind of sin is taking place.

In Chapters 1 & 2 of 1 John, the Apostle tells us in no uncertain terms that, yes, even Christians are going to sin. The Good News is that Jesus stands ready to forgive those sins. All we need to do is go to him, be honest with him, and trust him with the rest:

[8] If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. [9] If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

1 John 1:8–9 (ESV)

[1] My little children, 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. [2] He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

1 John 2:1–2 (ESV)

Being a follower of Jesus does not mean you must be sinless.

Until the day that Jesus returns to this earth and purifies us to be as pure as he is, we are going to continue to sin. It is sad, and I wish it wasn't so, but it is the truth. And so we are going to continue to need Jesus, to absolutely depend on him, for the forgiveness of our sins. Part of the glory of the Gospel is that through our faith in Jesus we are forgiven not just once or twice, not just for the big sins or the little sins, but for every sin that we commit, and forever.

That's the height and depth and the breadth and the everlasting power of God's love for those who know His Son, Jesus, as their Savior and King.

Being a follower of Jesus does not mean you must be sinless. You can always trust Jesus to faithfully keep his promise to deal with your sin. As John says in v5, you can trust Jesus to do the work he set out to do in coming to this earth and “*take away sin*”, eliminating it so thoroughly that it can no longer be counted against you.

However, ***being a follower of Jesus does mean your habits and patterns of sinful behavior ought to change. (Or, being a follower of Jesus means you do try to SIN LESS.)***

In v.4 John says “*Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.*”

“Sin” is one of those biblical words that gets used so often and tossed around so much that it's easy to lose its meaning. It is also a word that, throughout Scripture, evades an exact definition. There are no fewer than 12 different Hebrew and Greek words that could all justifiably be translated as “sin”. A quick glance at any Bible concordance will show you dozens and dozens of references to this critically important theological word.

So I'm going to give you a definition of sin that will not capture every nuance or complexity of the term, but will provide a common understanding for us all to build on this morning:

Sin is our selfish opposition to the will of God.

Ultimately, when we sin -- whether in thought, word, or deed -- we are telling God that we believe we know what is best for us and that we don't need or want him. Sin is tragic, treasonous, and rebellious. The underlying intent of all sin, no matter how “small”, is to take God's place as the Sovereign King of the universe and of our lives.

So when John says “sin is lawlessness” in v4, he's saying that our selfish opposition to the will of God is more than just breaking the rules. It's rejecting the rules and the rule maker. It is a kind of disobedience that reveals our disdain for something that God requires of us and, in its worst forms, our disdain for God himself.

Our sin makes us participants in lawlessness, it draws us further into the world and further away from God. So there can be no doubt that all sin is bad. But what John is most concerned with in these verses is not occasional sin (which, again, is still bad), but chronic and habitual sin. John is calling out the sins we return to, the sins we never truly repent of, the sins we

decide are worth more than obeying God's commands and decrees. John is warning us against the dangers of "the practice of sinning", of holding on to sin so tightly and desiring it so deeply that we refuse to give it up and instead go back to it again and again, rejecting the will of God every time we do.

God understands that your struggle against sin will continue, even after you begin to follow Jesus. He knows that you are going to fail, that you are going to fall short of perfection, and that from time to time you will choose to do things that are flat out disobedient. He's prepared to forgive you when you seek him out and say you're sorry for the things you've done.

But he's also expecting you to make real changes to your life. As a Christian, sin cannot dominate your character. It cannot be your habit or normal practice. We should each live in such a way where the will of God is obviously what we're drawn to and what we make our normal way of life, and where sin is the surprising and strange outlier that we are ready to confess and flee far, far away from after we've messed up and disobeyed our Lord.

If you choose to keep on sinning, then John says that you can't abide, or have fellowship with God, and that you really don't know him at all. And that sounds harsh, and might even be scary, because when sin becomes a habit, when it becomes our regular practice to selfishly oppose God and try to make ourselves happy or strong or satisfied...it's hard to stop. Changing our ways and giving up something we've deceived ourselves into enjoying for a long time is not easy.

But part of the reason I think it is so hard is that we often believe what God expects of us is to simply go "cold turkey" on sin -- to cut it out of our lives and just move on without it. But that's only half of what we need to do. Yes, we let go of our sin...but we also pick up something that can fill the void that sin left behind. And what John says is that the alternative to sin is what we've really wanted all along. It's what we were truly made for.

Instead of being plagued by sin...we can be blessed and filled and satisfied with righteousness.

[7] Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. [8] Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.

1 John 3:7-8 (ESV)

It's so easy to read this passage, and get so focused on the dire warnings against a lifestyle of sin, that we miss John's instruction for what to do instead of practicing sin. But in v7 we find a wonderful promise that can change everything: "*Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous.*"

Being a follower of Jesus means you will, as often as you can, choose and practice righteousness.

In the same way that making a habit of sin puts you in opposition to God, making a habit of **righteousness -- of being in right relationship with God through willing and joyful obedience to his will** -- will prove that you are committing your life to becoming more like Christ, who is our perfect example of what it means to be righteous.

In vv7-8 John draws a pretty clear line in the sand. You can either practice righteousness and follow Jesus, or you can practice sin and follow the devil. There is an uncomfortable lack of middle ground or gray area, and that is intentional. You are either for God, or against him. You either confess Jesus as your Savior, or you dismiss him as unimportant to your life. And you reveal which side you are on, who you are really committed to following, by whether you practice sin or practice righteousness.

Again, you have to remember that this doesn't mean you never sin. It does mean that your life will more often than not reflect the sort of things Jesus wanted to see in the hearts and minds and actions of those who love him:

- A tendency toward grace, mercy, and a tremendous willingness to forgive others
- Evidence of the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control
- A readiness to sacrifice for the sake of others, to love people who may not deserve it, including people who may be considered “our enemies”
- A boldness in sharing the truth, in telling the story about our salvation in Christ, and inviting others to join us in following Jesus.

Practicing righteousness includes all this, and more. It’s the sum of what Jesus taught us to do and how to live. It’s why we study Scripture and gather to learn about his Word together. Because the greatest incentive we have to not practice sin is the joy that can be found in being obedient to God’s will.

And I promise you, there is joy. Obeying God really does feel like walking in the light. There is a beauty and wonder to following Jesus that is nearly impossible to describe but so very worth it when you’re in it. It’s what Jesus was trying to tell us in Matthew 11:

[28] Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. [29] Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. [30] For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Matthew 11:28–30 (ESV)

Too often we think resisting sin is all about shutting down a habit and gritting our teeth in resistance to temptation. (And sometimes that’s true.) But God doesn’t command us to just stop doing bad things. He also invites us to do better, beautiful things too.

- He tells us not to give our love or devotion to lifeless, created things...because instead we can give our love and devotion to him, and experience an incredible, everlasting relationship.
- God tells us not to lie, cheat, or steal...because instead we can live honestly, depending on the Lord for what we need and building meaningful, trusting relationships with the people around us.
- Sexual immorality is one of the most common struggles for folks practicing sin, but God doesn’t forbid things like premarital sex or the use of pornography in order to impose restrictions on our relationships or ban satisfaction from sex...it’s because sex is something he created and therefore he knows its best, safest, and most satisfying expression is within the context of a loving, committed marriage.

This is a truth we sometimes forget: You won’t be able to stop your practice of sinning if you don’t also embrace the practice of righteousness. God is not a dictator. His commands are not arbitrary or pointless. God is the King of true life, and his invitation to that life comes through obedience to his commands which result in righteousness.

So his expectation is that we all, as often as we can and to the best of our ability, choose righteousness.

We could look over this passage for hours and still not reach the end of all it has to teach. But I do want to take a look at one more subtle, yet important point in our final verses for this morning:

[9] No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God. [10] By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.

1 John 3:9-10 (ESV)

John continues his clear warning: making a practice of sin -- committing to a life that is selfishly opposed to the will of God -- makes a true relationship with God impossible.

However, he also adds a crucial reminder of what allows us to diminish the sin in our lives and instead pursue a life of righteousness. It's not because we try harder, work more, or become more legalistically obedient to everything God requires. Our ability to reject a lifestyle of sin and take up the practice of righteousness is because "God's seed" (which is probably a unique reference to the Holy Spirit) dwells within us and because we have been "born of God."

The power to break from your practices of sin and embrace the practices of righteousness is not your power, but God's power within you. You don't have to figure out how to do this. You don't have to find a way to be strong enough on your own. Eliminating sin in your life is not a matter of self-help, self-effort, or self-anything else. It is something that is accomplished through dependence, partnership, and reliance upon the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Trust that God loves you. Trust that God wants what is best for you. Trust that God's power and promises really can help you live a life where you sin less and practice righteousness more, each and every day. It's only from that place of trust and dependence that you can truly get to the work of making changes for a better life with Him.

One last thought: I am sure that for many people in this room or joining us online, dealing with your practice of sin will mean confronting your struggle with addiction or perhaps mental illness. And I'm sure many of you have friends, family members, or loved ones who suffer from those sorts of things and you wonder how on earth you're supposed to help them practice righteousness when sin has such a powerful hold on their will and their capacities.

No matter what circumstances surround your practices of sin, I want you to know and to hear from your church and from one of your pastors that we understand your fight against addiction or your coping and healing from mental illness is not easy. At Faith we want to be a community where you can celebrate and praise God for your victories and growth, but also be honest and come before the Lord in your moments of despair or defeat. We believe God's love and His willingness to forgive is stronger than your addictions, afflictions, or mistakes. A life of righteousness is not beyond you because I promise, without any doubt, God has not abandoned you. If you want help dealing with big, scary, deeply entrenched sins...please seek us out. Let us know. We're not going to shame you. We're not going to judge you. We're going to do our best to lead you into the presence of the One True God who takes away the sins of the world, yours included.

Each and every one of us can make a life of practicing righteousness, because our good and loving God is here to help.