

*The Transformed Life
provides constant
cleansing within
the framework
of*

THE SOLUTION TO THE SIN PROBLEM (1 JOHN 1:5—2:2)

Becoming a Christian does not get rid of all of life's problems. Christians get sick and die. They lose their jobs, or their businesses go broke. They are disappointed in personal relationships. They have family problems. But the greatest problem faced by the Christian is not to be found among his health problems, financial problems, or family problems. It is the sin problem.

The Christian has been saved from sin. When he believed in Jesus (John 8:24), repented of his sins (Luke 13:3), confessed his faith (1 Timothy 6:12), and was baptized into Christ (Galatians 3:27), he received forgiveness for his sins (Acts 2:38). He was, at that point, born again; he was added to the Lord's church; he was saved.

Yet the Christian still sins! Although he was saved from sin, his salvation does not keep him from sinning. The problem of sin continues to haunt him. He may try to solve his "sin problem" in one of three ways: (1) He may decide that since he still sins he was never saved. He will either go back into the world or seek salvation again through re-baptism. (2) He may decide that since he is unable to live without sinning, he may as well give up the idea of being a Christian. He will "drop out," thinking himself too weak, too unworthy, to be a child of God. (3) He may decide that since he will sin anyway, he may as well quit worrying about it and enjoy himself. Thus, he will continue to be a Christian while continuing to live in sin.

None of these are really solutions. But the Bible provides help. Specifically, in 1 John 2:1, 2, along with its context, the solution to the sin problem is presented by John. He makes four points concerning sin and the Christian.

CHRISTIANS SHOULD NOT SIN

John says, "I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin" (1 John 2:1). (See also 1 John 2:15, 16; Galatians 5:19-22; Romans 6:12-14.)

John's readers needed this message. Apparently, some of them had accepted a heresy known as Gnosticism in its early stages. There were many forms of Gnosticism, but all had this in common: They thought that the flesh—and everything connected with it—was evil; but the spirit—and everything connected with it—was good.

Theologically, this led the Gnostics to the conclusion that Jesus could not really be God in the flesh. God, being spirit, was too good really to inhabit wicked, sinful flesh. Thus, they might say that Christ only *appeared* to be flesh. (See 1 John 4:2, 3.)

Morally, the same kind of belief led the Gnostics to take two opposite viewpoints. Some reasoned that since the flesh was evil, the job of the Christian was to deny the flesh, or even mutilate it. These might expose themselves to the freezing

weather, starve themselves, or cut themselves with stones. At the other extreme were some who argued that the flesh does not really affect the spirit that dwells in the flesh. So they believed that the Christian could live as he desired—he could be a drunkard, a glutton, or a fornicator—and it did not hurt anything. After all, what mattered was the state of the spirit which could be good, closely bound to God, no matter what the body did.

Some of John's readers seem to have shared this latter viewpoint because John says: ". . . God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth" (1 John 1:5, 6).

They must have said, "We are in fellowship with God. Our immorality does not really matter, because our spirits are pure." John replied: "You are living a lie. You can't have fellowship with God as long as you live in a way that is contrary to His nature and to His Word. Your spirit is not pure if your actions are not pure."

Perhaps we, too, need this message: We should not sin! Some Christians know they sin, but shrug off their sins and say: "I know I swear when I get mad, but that's just the way I am"; "Yes, I lose my temper a lot, and sometimes I'll punch the guy out who made me mad, but you know how we red-headed Irishmen are!" When Christians say things like that, they say that they sin and know it, but they have no intention of quitting their sinning. Those Christians need to understand that *God does not want them to sin!*

First John 1:5, 6 also tells us why we as Christians should not sin. John says that it is not appropriate for us who have fellowship with God, who is light, to walk in darkness or sin.

We can understand the concept of appropriate behavior. Imagine the President of the United States arriving for a visit with a foreign Head of State. The President's plane rolls to a stop. The spotlight focuses on the door of the plane; the stairs are rolled up to the door; the band plays "Hail to the Chief." The door opens, and the President jumps out, slides down the bannister, turns a couple of cartwheels, concludes his entrance with a comic fall at the feet of the foreign Head of State, saying, "Hi, y'all!" As a matter of fact, we cannot imagine such a scene: Presidents just do not act like that. Such behavior is not appropriate for someone in that position.

When a baby comes to church and sucks his thumb, holds his security blanket against his nose, and starts crying out loud during the service, we think nothing of it. After all, that is behavior we expect of babies. But let a fifty-year-old man come to church sucking his thumb, holding his security blanket against his nose, and let him begin crying out loud during the service; and we would think, "That's weird; something's wrong." Grown men just do not act like that. Behavior appropriate for a baby is not appropriate for a grown-up.

John is saying something like that: Christians should not sin because it is not appropriate for one who has fellowship with God to sin! If you have been looking for a reason to give to others as to why you do not join them in sin, here it is: *Christians just do not do things like that!* Sin is not appropriate behavior for a Christian.

EVEN THOUGH CHRISTIANS SHOULD NOT SIN, THEY DO SIN

John says, "I am writing this to you so that you may not sin; but *if anyone does sin, . . .*" There was a real possibility that a Christian might sin. John uses even stronger language in the context: "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us . . . if we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us" (1 John 1:8-10). Obviously, Christians can and do sin. The difference between Christians and non-Christians is *not* that non-Christians are sinners and Christians are not. Rather, it is that Christians are sinners saved by grace, and non-Christians are sinners, period!

Just knowing that Christians can sin and still remain Christians will help individual disciples. If they are forewarned that Christians sin, they will not be as likely to despair when they themselves are overcome by sin. As a Christian, do you sin? So does every other Christian! Do not quit just because you sin. Sinning does not inevitably lead to condemnation, but quitting does.

However, recognizing that we sin presents a problem. Is there not something contradictory in saying we should not sin, but we do? If we are not supposed to sin, yet we do, how much sin can we "get away with" and still be saved eternally? John helps solve the problem in two other, rather difficult, passages in 1 John:

No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him. Little children, . . . the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. . . . No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God (1 John 3:6-9).

We know that anyone born of God does not sin . . . (1 John 5:18).

Does John mean that it is absolutely impossible for a Christian to sin? Obviously not, for then he would contradict what he said in 1 John 1:8, 10; 2:1. What then does he mean?

The answer to that question lies in the tense of the verbs in the original language. In Greek, these verbs are in the present tense, which carries with it the idea of continuing action. They could be translated as “continues to. . . .” Literally, what John says is:

No one who continues to abide in Him continues to sin. . . .

He who continues to commit sin is of the devil. . . .

No one born of God continues to commit sin. . . .

He cannot continue to sin because he is born of God. . . .

Anyone born of God does not continue to sin. . . .

So John is teaching that Christians sin, all right; *but they do not continue to sin!* They do not habitually sin. Sin is not the chief characteristic or guiding principle or major tendency of their lives. He pictures the Christian as one who strives not to sin, but who occasionally gives in to sin’s allure. He walks usually, habitually, in the way of God, but he sometimes stumbles and falls. The aim and goal of his life is righteousness. But he infrequently succumbs to sin.

To illustrate, think about what a winning athlete or team does: A great golfer does not hit every shot straight, make a par (much less a hole in one) on every hole, or even win every tournament. But he does much better than most and wins more than his share. . . . The best hitter in baseball does not hit a home run every time he bats. In fact, he does not even get a hit every time he walks to the plate. Sometimes he even strikes out. But he gets enough hits that you expect something good to happen when he comes to the plate. . . . The greatest football team does not make a touchdown every time it runs a play, or even make a first down every time it gets the ball. But it makes enough first downs and

enough touchdowns to win its games.

So with the Christian: He does not always win over sin, but he wins much more than he loses. Even though he loses his battle with temptation occasionally, he does not make a habit of it. The tendency, the direction, of his life is righteousness, not sin. He may “strike out” now and then, but most of the time he “gets a hit.”

The Christian needs to realize that he should not sin, but he will sin. When he does, there is no reason to despair, but there is reason to get up and try again to live a righteous life.

WHEN CHRISTIANS SIN, GOD PROVIDES A REMEDY

John says: “. . . if anyone sins, *we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world*” (1 John 2:1, 2; emphasis mine).

John says we should not sin, but we do. That is bad news. Then comes the good news: God has made provision for us to be forgiven when we sin! That message tells me that even though I am a sinner, I can still be forgiven, and I can still go to heaven!

By what means is this forgiveness accomplished? God’s provision is simply this: Jesus Christ. He is our advocate, the one who pleads our cause with the Father. He is the expiation for our sins—the “means whereby sin is covered and remitted.”¹ Through His blood our sins are forgiven (1 John 1:7).

On what basis then do we have hope for forgiveness and for eternal salvation? On the basis of our innate goodness? Our good works? Our living the Christian life perfectly? No! But on the basis of God’s grace and Christ’s blood! We are forgiven, not because of what we have done for God, but because of what God has done for us!

CHRISTIANS MUST DO SOMETHING TO RECEIVE GOD’S REMEDY FOR THEIR SINS

John also makes the point that the forgiveness God provides for Christians through Christ is conditional. Christians must do something to receive that forgiveness.

We should not be surprised at this. We are saved initially by grace, but only when we accept that grace by meeting the conditions of pardon:

when we believe, confess, repent, and are baptized. Therefore, it is not unreasonable that we should be asked to do something to continue to be saved by grace through Christ.

But what does God require of Christians to be forgiven? What must we do to stay saved? I tried to think of three or four points to use under this heading, but I finally decided that God requires of us *only one thing*—not three or four—to receive forgiveness of our sins! John tells us what that *one thing* is in 1 John 1:7. The *one thing* necessary for a Christian to be cleansed from his sins is to “walk in the light”!

But someone objects: “What about repentance—is that not necessary?” Yes, it is: the Christian must repent of his sins (Acts 8:22). *But if he is walking in the light, he will be constantly repenting.* Of course, in this context John says, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). *But if a Christian is walking in the light, he will be constantly confessing his sins to those whom they concern.* “What about prayer? Does a Christian not have to pray for forgiveness?” Certainly (Acts 8:22). *But the Christian who is walking in the light will be constantly praying for forgiveness.* “Walking in the light” would therefore include repenting, confessing sin, and praying for forgiveness. Thus, there are not three things to be done to receive forgiveness as a Christian. There is only *one thing necessary*: to “walk in the light.”

But what does “walking in the light” mean? It does *not* mean “living sinlessly.” If it meant “living sinlessly,” John would be saying, “If we live sinlessly, the blood of Jesus cleanses us from our sins.” But if we were living sinlessly, we would have no sins to be forgiven! Therefore, “walking in the light” *cannot* mean living sinlessly.

What does it mean then? It seems to me that it can only mean *striving diligently* to live according to the light of God’s Word.

“Striving diligently” is the key to walking in the light. The Christian does not live sinlessly, but he is always striving, doing his best in his own circumstances, to do God’s will. He often stumbles, but he is always working to accomplish that goal. If he does that, we believe that God accepts him as “walking in the light.”

If we are “walking in the light,” we have this blessed promise: “The blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.” Here again the present

tense of the verb is used; the continuing aspect of the action is emphasized. We could translate it in this way: “If we are continuing to walk in the light, we are continually having fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus is continually cleansing us from all sin.” We are, as Christians walking in the light, continually walking in a shower of Christ’s cleansing blood! As quickly as we sin, the blood of Jesus cleanses us, and God forgives us.

That means that if I am a Christian striving diligently to do the will of God, I do not need to worry that one day if I have a bad thought and then have a heart attack and die before I have a chance to pray for forgiveness I will go to hell because of that one unprayed-for sin! Rather, I can constantly rejoice, knowing that, because I am constantly striving to obey Him, Jesus is continually forgiving my sins and I can be sure I am going to heaven!

CONCLUSION

One question yet remains: Are you walking in the light, striving diligently to do God’s will in God’s way?

If I knew you well, I think I could tell if you are walking in the light. At least, it seems to me that when Christians have no interest in reading the Bible or praying, when they do not attend worship regularly, when they participate in worldly activities, that they are *not* striving diligently to do all they can to live for God. But my judgment could be wrong in your case.

On the other hand, even if I do not know for sure whether or not you are walking in the light, *you* know, do you not? *You* know whether you are striving diligently to live, according to God’s Word or not. You can fool others, but you probably are not fooling yourself.

Someone else knows. *God* knows whether or not you are truly walking in the light, striving diligently to follow Him. You may fool others; you may even fool yourself. But you cannot fool God! He knows how much can be expected of you. He knows your heart and if your intention is to do all you can to live by His Word. The real question is this: What does God know? How does God see you?

—Coy Roper

ENDNOTE

¹W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, vol. 3 (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1966 reprint), p. 224.