



Just the FAQs: Frequently Asked Questions on the Bible and Theology

NO. 23 • THE IDENTITY OF THE BELIEVER (1 JOHN 3:9)

7 OCTOBER 2018 • CORNERSTONE BIBLE CHURCH • DR. DOUG MCINTOSH, PASTOR EMERITUS

My greetings to all you non-campers as well as to those who have survived two days of it and have joined us. We're glad to have you here. Today my plan is to add another passage to our list of frequently asked questions about Scripture and theology. Our passage for today is about an incredibly important issue: who we are as Christian believers. I don't think I need to persuade you that identity is a critical issue in our world. Everywhere you look, people give evidence that they have no real concept of who they are with respect to God, nor why they are even in the world. Christians are not immune from this problem. John is going to teach us in this passage who we are, as well as who we are not. The distinction is critical.

I read just this week the story of the outstanding African-American preacher of the previous generation, E.V. Hill. He once hired a teenager to be his secretary. He did not know who she was other than her name. One day one of his friends came by and said, "Do you know who your secretary is?" Hill said, "Of course I do. That's Natalie Cole." The friend said, "But do you know who Natalie Cole is?" Hill said, "Of course. She's a very nice young lady who works very hard, and I pay her \$2 an hour." The friend said, "That's Nat King Cole's daughter."

Hill was stunned. After the friend left, he asked Natalie to come to his office where he asked her if she was indeed Nat King Cole's daughter. "Yes," she said. "Why didn't you tell me?" he asked. She said, "I didn't know it was required. I just wanted a job. My daddy left me some money, but I haven't come into it yet. It won't be mine until I am twenty-one."¹

That is the way it is with all of us who are Christians. We are children of the great God of the universe but we have not yet come into our full inheritance. It is ours by rights now, but we don't come into it until we see him. In the interim, it's critically important that we understand the way to live our lives between now and then. So John addresses that in part in our text for today. But there are instructions here that can be confusing, and our goal for this morning is to clear away some of that confusion.

I think it will be apparent what the question is once I read our passage. To give a little context, I'm going to read First John 3:4-10a, but the relevant language is found in verse 9. I should add that I am reading my own translation of the Greek text of the passage.

Scripture: 1 John 3:4-10a

4 Everyone who commits sin also commits wickedness, and sin is wickedness; 5 and you people know that He was manifested that He might take away our sins, and in Him there is no sin. 6 Everyone who abides in Him does not sin. Everyone who sins has neither seen Him nor known Him. 7 Little children, let no one deceive you: the one who does righteousness is righteous just as He is righteous. 8 The one doing sin is of the devil because the devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested: to destroy the works of the devil. 9 Everyone who has been begotten by God does not commit sin, for His seed abides in him, and he cannot sin because he has been begotten by God. 10 By this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifested.

Defining the Issue

It has been my view for many years that First John is certainly the most difficult book of the New Testament. Revelation is a cake walk by comparison. First John seems so innocent with its easy vocabulary and apparently simple statements, but a careful reading makes quite a few demands on the interpreter. In fact, there are many issues in this little paragraph that would be valuable to explore, but in the interests of time I'm going to go directly to the most difficult of all its sentences, the statement of verse 9, particularly the second half of the verse: *"Everyone who has been begotten by God does not commit sin, for His seed abides in him, and he cannot sin because he has been begotten by God."*

Why would John say something like this when he, more than any writer of the New Testament, insists back in chapter 1 that believers can in fact sin, and that

people who say otherwise are liars. That's the thrust of chapter 1 pretty much in its entirety. This is a very frequently asked question, and people have put forward frequently asserted answers that unfortunately have been shown to be quite inadequate.

An inadequate—and blatantly false—solution

For some years, people have been trying to tell us that the problem is easily solved by resorting to the Greek present tense, and they have concocted clever translations to emphasize this. The *New International Version* is typical. The NIV renders verse 9, “*No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God.*” Setting aside the horrible English for a moment, this translation creates more problems than it solves. Of course, there is no word in the Greek text of verse 9 that can be translated as “continue” or “go on,” and the present tense never means that by itself, but people continue—you should pardon the expression—to come out with such translations, if they may be so called. There are excellent words in Greek to express continuous action, but unfortunately for the NIV, none of them are part of the Greek text here.

There are many problems with this approach. For starters, the statement as laid down in the NIV simply is not true. People who are born of God do continue to sin, and continue some more. So, again, we see a translation trying to solve a problem that ends up making it worse. The translation of the NIV says, in effect, that over time the Christian will simply stop sinning. Really? Would that it were so, but as John himself says, it isn't.

The NIV translation is not only confusing, it contradicts John's earlier statements in the book. In 1 John 1:8, John writes, “*If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.*” And again, I'm not picking on the NIV translators. They have lots of company here. And again, as with the NKJV, I have connections to the translators. I studied under several of them. The general editor of the NIV was the guy who taught me first-year Hebrew at DTS and served as one of my thesis advisors. So I have no particular prejudice against the NIV. I could make the point with any number of versions. And by the way, as long as we're on the subject, the NEW KING JAMES gets it right here in 1 John 3:9.

So what does it mean when John says that the one begotten of God cannot sin?

Parts of a better solution

Two points of preparation will help us here. First consider . . .

Background: the threat of false teaching

The New Testament letters weren't written in a vacuum. They were often designed to answer specific questions or problems, and that is so in 1 John. What John is doing in 1 John 3:9 is addressing an issue of false teaching that was disturbing the churches in Asia to which he was writing. You see the clue in verse 7, where John says, "*Little children, let no one deceive you.*" First John was written to combat a deception. That deception has a name today, but when John wrote it did not. All he could do was spell out some of its most deceptive assertions, and that is what leads into verse 9. Today the false teaching is called Docetism, the idea that the humanity of Jesus was just a sort of illusion. Docetists taught that Jesus only seemed to be human, because God has nothing to do with matter. The goal of life is to shed this physical body, which is also an illusion, since it's made out of matter, and become pure spirit. At that point all sin will disappear. So, why fret about sin? Jesus didn't really die, since he was not human. God wasn't all that hostile to sin, in fact, so indulge yourselves and don't worry about sin. It's no big deal. It will soon be only a memory.

John takes that viewpoint beginning in verse 4. Is sin no big deal? Verse 4: "*Everyone who commits sin also commits wickedness, and sin is wickedness.*" Sin isn't just a theological fine point. Sin has effects. It hurts people. So how does God feel about it? Verse 5: "*You people know [implication: you know because I have taught you] that Jesus was manifested that he might take away our sins, and in Him there is no sin.*" The Lord Jesus came to earth to take away sins. He had to die to do it. That's how God feels about it. It is a big deal. To minimize sin is to show contempt for the mission of Christ and for the holiness of God.

Another point of preparation has to do with . . .

The precision of John's language

John is quite precise in how he says things. Back in chapter 1 and verse 8, he warns us that we ought to know who we are with respect to sin by penning these words: "*If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.*" Are we believers sinless? No.

But then we arrive here in 1 John 3:9 only to read, "*Everyone who has been begotten by God does not commit sin, for His seed abides in him, and he cannot*

sin because he has been begotten by God.” That definitely sounds like a contradiction; but when we look closely we see that is really isn’t. First John 1:8 is a general statement, and John just uses the pronoun *we* to describe what would be a false statement if made by the Christian generally: “If *we* say that we have no sin. . .”

First John 3:9 is a specific declaration about an individual, who is described as “*Everyone who has been begotten by God. . . cannot sin, because he has been begotten by God.*” Here he speaks not of the whole person but only for a particular part of us—the part of us created by God at the time we believe in Jesus. He is talking about the new birth.

John, who is the great teacher in the New Testament on the doctrine of the new birth, knows how miraculous the new birth is. He knows that the moment a person believes in Jesus a change takes place that is eternal in its effects, incredibly powerful, and as irreversible as physical birth. A new person is instantly created by the new birth. Paul refers to that person as a new creation, in fact. He says, “*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new*” (2 Cor. 5:17). The new believer looks the same on the outside, but both John and Paul say, “Don’t believe it. On the inside, everything is different. God has performed a miracle—that newly created person has no capacity whatever to sin. And that newly created person is a fundamental part of the believer’s present identity. The newly created person appears in the New Testament under several names, depending on the translation. It may be called the new man, the new self, the new creation, the new person or in a variety of other ways. But whatever the new self is called, the term is designed to help us realize our true converted identity in Christ.

The way we came out of the box is called by many names, too: the old man, the old self, or even “the flesh.”

Significance: the true identity of the Christian

New birth, as Paul describes it, isn’t a kind reformation or a great improvement of an old creation, or the turning over of a new leaf. It is the birthing of a new person, a person in fact with entirely new abilities, and the person who believes now has two powerful spiritual entities that constitute his life in this world: the old person we were when we came into the world, the old man who is dying day by day but who still sins; and the new person who will live forever and who has a distinct identity. One of the features of the new person is that he never sins because he cannot sin. He has the life of God in him, and just as God cannot sin,

so he cannot. It is important to remember that we don't lose anything when we believe in Jesus. We acquire something new that adds to us, enabling us to please God, and in time that new person will constitute our permanent eternal identity.

So 1 John 1:8 is true; as a total entity, we do sin and can never claim to be free of it, but our new "inward self" that is regenerated, born anew, does not sin and cannot sin at all, ever. Right now, both entities are wrapped in our dying bodies. When you look at a Christian, he looks just like he did before he believed. But he is radically different inside.

So how does this new life become visible to the world? By what the believer does moment by moment. That is the meaning of verse 10, which looks back at this whole passage: "*By this [that I've just described] the children of God and the children of the devil are manifested.*" We can either manifest our old person, our old nature and behave like children of the devil, or we can manifest our new nature by doing good and people can see us for what we are eternally, children of God.

One day, the old nature will pass out of this world along with our dying body. The body will die, the old person will disappear with it, and the real person who is left will be incapable of sinning ever again. It curls my toes just to think about it.

Apparently, the Docetists were teaching their followers that sin was not all that bad. You find that you can still do it after conversion, and since the physical part of you is temporary, what you do with it doesn't matter much. So sin all you want.

So the Christian is a complex entity. He is made up of an old person and a new person and the Holy Spirit is resident within him as well. But the real person, the one who will outlive his body, is the new person. And he can never clear himself of guilt by pretending that, when he sins, that that sin came from the new person. It never happens—never has, and never will. That's why John opens this book by saying, "*God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all.*" If a believer sins, that's the old person in action. If he does what is right, that right action never comes from the old person. It is the new person in action. As he says in verse 7, "*Little children, let no one deceive you: the one who does righteousness is righteous just as He is righteous.*" Only the new person does that. Whatever good I do is God's work, coming from the new nature, the new person that I now have and that one day I will be.

Support for the better solution

Now this is not just an idea that John came up with alone. You can find this same teaching elsewhere in the New Testament, notably in Paul's writings.

Paul's inner struggle

When you read Paul's personal testimony of his own struggles in Romans 7, you see him saying something very similar to 1 John 3:9. He says, "*I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin that is in my members*" (Rom. 7:22–23). He summarizes his new identity this way: "*So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin*" (Romans 7:25). That's who I am. I, the real me, the new man, serve the law of God. That's my true identity.

At the core of his being (what he calls his *inward man* and what John calls "*the one begotten by God*") he does not and cannot sin. Indeed, in the phrase *I myself serve the law of God*, the word *serve* is the Greek verb for slave-service. The inward man (the "regenerate self") is therefore absolutely impervious to sin, fully enslaved to God's will, and as such he cannot sin, because he has been born of God. If sin occurs, it is not the inward man who performs it. This inner struggle between these two persons is not a mark of being unsaved but of being saved. Only people with both new and old persons fight this war. So if you're fighting it, you're fighting the right battle with the right equipment. But don't kid yourself. That old person is still there, and he is very powerful. Never underestimate him. Never toy with sinning. If you turn down that road you may not be able to find your way back.

Paul's victory

Another Pauline passage supports the solution also. He writes in Galatians 2:20, "*I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God.*" Here is another way of describing the Christian life. The new person is the person of Christ present within. In me, Paul says, *only Christ lives*. And what is the quality of the life that He lives? The answer: A sinless life.

Any and all sin in a Christian is in no way a part of the "Christ-life" that is being lived through us. Sin *does* exist in the Christian, but it is foreign and opposed to his newborn inner self, the new self in which Christ took up residence at the time

of the new birth. If we sin, it is the work of the devil operating through the old person at that moment. As he says in verse 8, *“The one doing sin is of the devil because the devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested: to destroy the works of the devil.”* At the moment we sin, we are doing the devil’s work.

That is precisely what Jesus said to Peter when he tried to get Jesus to avoid the cross. After Jesus told the disciples that he would have to die, *“Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, ‘Far be it from You, Lord; this [going to die on the cross] shall not happen to You!’ But Jesus turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me, for your mind is not focused on the things of God, but on the things of men’”* (16:22-23). Peter’s advice was Satanic, and Jesus took him to task for it. But Jesus knew that it was the old self who had said such a horrible thing. Nobody loved Jesus more than Peter; but at the moment he opened his mouth he was speaking from the old person, and the devil was using Peter as his tool, though Peter was, of course, a believer. Believers do the work of the devil all the time. John teaches us here that we need to know that, and not minimize the effect of what we do, and not make excuses for it. Peter got in trouble because he wasn’t thinking. He wasn’t focused on the things of God that were part of his new nature. Godly living is made possible when we focus on the things of God that issue from our new self, the things that exhibit our true identity, the identity that God provided for all those who have put their trust in His Son.

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Notes:

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1. E. V. Hill, *A Savior Worth Having* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2002), pp. 128–130.