

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
November 5, 2023

Sinful and Sinless

1 John 2:28-3:10

About five years ago, Lifeway Research conducted a study on what Americans think of sin. According to the findings, two out of three Americans confess to being a sinner. The other third of respondents had mixed opinions on the subject. Eight percent didn't see themselves as sinners. Ten percent didn't think sin exists. And 15 percent preferred not to answer the question. Among those who viewed themselves as sinners, a small percentage didn't mind being one. But most said they were either working on being less of a sinner or were depending on Jesus to overcome their sin. The research organization's executive director captured the gist of the numbers when he said, "Almost nobody wants to be a sinner."¹

The writer of 1 John hadn't surveyed the congregation, but he knew the folks in this fellowship well enough to recognize that some were claiming to be without sin. How they came to that conclusion is hard to tell. It's possible that they had taken something that was true and had carried it to such an extreme that their thinking and actions were now contradicting the gospel. They believed, rightly, that they had been born of God. Faith in Jesus Christ meant they were children of God. Their spiritual parentage brought them into relationship and communion with God in such a way that they themselves reflected the very character of God. If God the Father was light, with no darkness in him, then they the children must be children of light, pure and righteous. In other words, sinless.

In one respect, what these folks are claiming is true. Being born of God through faith in Jesus Christ does involve being brought out of the darkness of sin and into the light of God. It means being transferred to the realm where righteousness, not sin, holds sway. But in another respect, their grasp of what's true is blended with what's false. They believe that because of their spiritual parentage, nothing more is required of them. They already live in a state of spiritual purity. But this is a deception, says the writer. As he emphasizes earlier in the letter, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1:8). So even the claim that they aren't sinners simply confirms that in reality they are.

Now at that point, I guess the writer could highlight his cleverness and celebrate how he has turned their argument right back against them. He could repeat his conclusion that they're not as righteous and spotless as they think. Then he could cap it off by dropping the mic and showing them the church exit. But that's not his ultimate goal. His objective is to help them recognize their sin and grow in purity. "My children, I write this to you so that you will not sin" (2:1). The writer's goal is in keeping with God's goal, namely, to eradicate the power and effects of sin in the life of God's people.

Bringing that about will take way more than a series of exhortations about steering clear of misbehavior. It will take a return to the cross, which is exactly where the writer takes them. No sooner does the writer talk about behaving righteously than he talks about "Jesus Christ, the Righteous One" (2:1). "He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (2:2). When it comes to the self-deception

and the devil's deception at work in the life of the congregation, the solution doesn't lie in trying harder. It lies in the death of Jesus, whose self-giving love for sinners displays and accomplishes the love of God for the world.

"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called the children of God! (3:1). Maybe part of the reason the writer stresses the greatness of God's love has to do with the greatness of the problem that God's love aims to solve, that is, the problem of sin. In one of her sermons, preacher Fleming Rutledge says,

How do we measure the size of a fire? By the number of firefighters and fire engines sent to fight against it. How do we measure the seriousness of a medical condition? By the amount of risk the doctors take in prescribing dangerous antibiotics or surgical procedures. How do we measure the gravity of sin and the incomparable vastness of God's love for us? By looking at the magnitude of what God has done for us in Jesus, the Son of God who became like a common criminal for our sake and in our place.²

The effect of this "great" love is to bring us into a relationship that is best pictured by the metaphor of being God's children. As one commentator has put it, this means that believers "belong to God as surely and permanently as children belong to their parents."³

But within this relationship, and within this family comprised of God's children, sin is still a very damaging and destructive reality. It's more than just making mistakes or experiencing occasional lapses in judgement. Sin is a fundamental relational disorder in which we refuse to live within the limitations that come with being finite human beings. We repudiate the will of God, defy our Creator's good purpose, and reject accountability to our Maker. This fundamental opposition to the source of our life and salvation expresses itself in our disobedience to God's righteous ways.

When it comes to life in the community of faith, this is the way the writer of 1 John summarizes obedience to God's commands and doing what pleases him: "And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he has commanded us" (3:23). So all our disobedience—whether in the form of hatred, violence, sensuality, greed, pride, discord, bitterness, jealousy, selfishness, and many others we could name and confess—comes down to a failure and refusal to love God and love one another.

That's the danger and destructiveness of sin. Sin opposes our knowing and receiving the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Sin opposes our love of God and love of others. Sin damages communion with God and with one another. Sin disrupts the wholeness and goodness that God intends for human beings and for his world. Neal Plantinga says:

Sin is both the overstepping of a line and the failure to reach it—both transgression and shortcoming. Sin is a missing of the mark, a spoiling of goods, a staining of garments, a hitch in one's gait, a wandering from the path, a fragmenting of the whole. Sin is what culpably disturbs shalom. Sinful human life is a caricature of proper human life.⁴

That's what we the church are supposed to be. We're called and created to be an embodiment of human life as God intends it, in loving communion with him and one another. And we can only be that as we do what the writer says in today's text, namely, staying in fellowship with Jesus. Being born of him has to be coupled with continuing in him (2:28), living in him (3:6), obeying him (3:24). Jesus is the Son of the Father, perfectly reflecting the image and likeness of God. Jesus is what God intends for us as human beings and as humankind. So faith in Jesus and fellowship with him are what make us fully alive, children of God being remade to reflect the image and likeness of God.

But this isn't the devil's agenda and objective. He has other plans for us. Sin is his expertise, and he loves to unleash it, especially in the lives of those who identify with Jesus. Jesus came to bring us life and light. The devil shows up to spread death and darkness. No wonder the writer in 1 John says, "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work" (3:8).

In one respect, the destruction of the devil's works of sin is complete. The death and resurrection of Jesus mark the defeat of the devil's deadly project. But the full effects of Christ's victory are still being worked out in our lives, individually and together. That's why letters like 1 John were needed in the life of the church, and why messages like today's sermon are needed to keep us both vigilant about the dangers and destructiveness of sin and hopeful about the righteousness that's taking shape in us through communion with Christ.

The writer says, "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure" (3:2-3). Notice how being sinless has both a now and a not yet. "You know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin" (3:5). So Jesus has secured our forgiveness, taking away the guilt we have before God and breaking sin's grip on us. We are children of God *now*, purified through the sinless Son, whose death makes us sinless. But it is *not yet* revealed, or manifest, what we shall be. Us, sinless? Yes, because Christ has appeared, and will appear. But between the *has appeared* and the *will appear*, there's always the risk of complacency. The risk of deception. Deceiving ourselves, or being deceived by a defeated devil who still wants to inflict as much damage as he can in our lives and in the church.

Fleming Rutledge points to a part-serious, part-tongue-in-cheek survey that *People* magazine conducted among its readers. According to Rutledge,

The results were published as a "Sindex," with each sin rated by a sin coefficient. The outcome is both amusing and instructive. Sins like murder, child abuse, and spying against one's country were rated the worst sins in ascending order, with smoking, swearing, and illegal videotaping far down the list. Parking in a handicapped spot was rated surprisingly high, whereas unmarried live-togethers got off lightly. Cutting in front of someone in line was deemed worse than divorce or capital punishment. Predictably, corporate sin was not mentioned at all. The survey concluded, "Overall, readers said they commit about 4.64 sins a month."⁵

A little less than five sins a month sounds pretty good. But calculating our sins isn't always so easy or precise, especially when considering the standards we often use. For us, that standard is God, revealed in Jesus Christ, in whom is no sin. Zero. Complete purity. Perfect righteousness. This is the God who took on human form and gave himself for our sins, bringing us into loving communion with himself, and is remaking us in his image as his people. "What we will be has not yet been made known." But we know that for now the power of sin is great, and that the devil won't relent in trying to work among us. And yet, someone greater, the Son himself, is at work in us, overcoming the power of sin with the law of love, so that we can reflect his righteousness.

¹ Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, "Lord, Have Mercy on 67% of Us." Christianity Today. March 28, 2018. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2018/march/lord-have-mercy-on-us-sinners-kyrie-lent-sin-surveys.html> (November 1, 2023).

² Fleming Rutledge, *The Undoing of Death: Sermons for Holy Week and Easter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) 118-119.

³ Marianne Meye Thompson, *1-3 John*. IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1992) 88.

⁴ From Plantinga's book, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*. Quoted in John Ortberg, "The Sin Tamer." Christianity Today. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2009/spring/sintamer.html> (November 2, 2023).

⁵ Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016) 193-194.