

Sermon Notes

Series on First John
First John 3:4-10
“Maintaining Purity”

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Introduction: Previously the Apostle John wrote about the soon *appearance* of Jesus (2:28 & 3:2). John 2:28 is a bridge between chapter 2 and 3. In the previous verses, 1 John 3:1-3, the Apostle John asserts the believer’s wonderful relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ, designating believers as *children of God* and the importance of continuing this relationship *with Him* in anticipation of Christ’s return. It is this present relationship *with Him* that provides the assurance of future likeness. As *children of God*, one day soon believers will live that likeness perfectly. In 1 John 3:4-10, John answers what believers are to do now and how to maintain *purity* today? The emphasis on *purity* in verse three sets the stage for the examination of verses 4-10 where the Apostle John explains how we *purify ourselves* or **maintain purity** in everyday life. He instructs believers to *fix one’s hope on* the soon return of Jesus to take believers to be *with Him* in rapture. That kind of *hope* will enable believers to maintain *purity*. God doesn’t want our lives to be an expression of occasional *purification* but rather a life of *purity*. As to the grammatical construction of these verses, Dr. Westcott comments: “The present vv, 3:4-9, form six strophes, each of which divides...roughly into half. The two halves of the strophes balance one another; for the second part of the v provides a development of the first part (vv 4, 5, 7), or a parallel (vv 6, 9) or a contrast (v 8) to it.” [Westcott, Brooke Foss, The Epistles of St. John, 1883, Reprint ed. England: Marcham Manor Press, p. 97]. Consider this observation; the Apostle John uses three primary terms for *sin* in his epistle on which we will comment later: (1) αμαρτια, hamartia, *sin* (10 times in 3:1-12); (2) ανομιαν, anomian, *lawlessness*; (3) αδικια, adikia, *unrighteousness*. The biblical doctrine of *sin* is complex and is not completely explained by just one biblical writer.

First a believer’s ongoing self *purification* is helped when we:

#1 ACKNOWLEDGE THE NATURE OF SIN 3:4

Verse 4: It’s crucial as we consider this passage that we recall that the Gnostics taught that knowledge was all important but behavior wasn’t which is totally opposite biblical teaching on *sin* (a subject that he mentioned in 1:7-9; 2:2 & 12 and then repeats the word *sin* 9 times in 3:4-10). Here the Apostle John begins by expressing a universal truth that the nature of *sin* is lawlessness and all *sin* stands in opposition to *purity*. I find it fascinating that the Apostle John uses an interesting Greek phrase 5 times in verses 4-10, utilizing the Greek articular present participle πᾶς ὁ, here translated *everyone who* also used in 3:6 twice; 3:9 & 3:10 (also 7 times in verses 3-15). John is referring to a person who is not *practicing righteousness* as John has written in 1 John 2:29 (also cf. 3:10) and who is characteristically engaged in *practicing sin* as a lifestyle. Hiebert writes: “It pictures a class that is the opposite of those practicing righteousness (2:29).” [Hiebert, D. Edmond, An Introduction to the New Testament, Moody Press, p. 255.] The Greek word for *sin* is αμαρτιαν, hamartian, and in classical Greek it meant “to miss, fail, fall short,” while in the New Testament, such as in Romans 3:23, Paul states that ‘sin is ultimately

missing the mark of God's glory.' Thus *sin* is that which falls short of the standard of God's character, which is righteousness. While there are several definitions of *sin* stated in Scriptures such as: (1) *The devising of folly is sin* (Proverbs 24:9); (2) *Whatever is not from faith is sin* (Romans 14:23); (3) *Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin* (James 4:17); (5) *All unrighteousness is sin* (1 John 5:17) where John views *sin* here from the human standpoint; (6) Perhaps the most comprehensive, clearest and most revealing is the one here, *sin is lawlessness* (1 John 3:4) and views *sin* from the divine standpoint. The word *lawlessness* is used in the New Testament only in Matthew 7:23; 13:41; 23:28; 24:12; Romans 4:7; 6:19; 2 Thessalonians 2:7; Titus 2:14; Hebrews 1:9; 8:12 & 10:17. When a believer *practices sin* he/she *also practices lawlessness*. John's statement allows for no exceptions! The essential nature (and not the result of *sin*), and the very heart of *sin*, is *lawlessness*. The Greek word is *ανομία*, anomian, and can literally be translated "without law" or "without laws." John is not referring to someone who accepts the *law* and breaks it but to those who live as if there were no *law* and no God to enforce the *law*. *Law*, in its most absolute sense, represents God's character whereas *lawlessness* is the antithesis. *Lawlessness* is not the absence of *law* nor breaking God's *law* but the willful rejection of the *law*, or the willful rejection of the will of God, and the substitution of one's own will—'my way or the highway! A Christian cannot live that way because Christianity is all about relationship with Jesus Christ as Lord. A Christian is not to be *lawless* as believers are not without the *law* but under the *law* of Christ (1 Corinthians 9:21). While in 1 John 1:9-2:2 John views *sin* as defilement; here John views *sin* as defiance and rebellion. To live as if there were no *law* is to live as if there were no God! John's use of the word *lawlessness* carries a clear connotation of wickedness as in Matthew 7:23; 13:41; 24:12; 2 Thessalonians 2:7) and is opposite those who *practice righteousness* in 2:29. One more observation on *lawlessness* as here the Apostle John is not referring to a violation of the Mosaic Law, as Paul does in Romans 4:7. For the Apostle John, the *law* is the *law* of love found in his gospel, John 13:34-35; *love one another* (also compare James' *law of liberty/love*, James 2:12.) Evidently the Gnostics and other false teachers were soft on *sin*! No believer is sinless as demonstrated by Romans 7:14-20, where Paul shares his own life's struggle with *sin*. John writes that it is important to acknowledge the nature of *sin*, as this is the first step in maintaining *purity*. Call it what it is, *sin* or *lawlessness*—acknowledge *sin*! Notice that the word *sin* is singular; *sins* are the fruit but *sin* is the root. Again, *sin* stands in opposition to *purity*. One more comment here: there appears to be a progression as John seems to be stating what considerations will deter believers from indulging in *sin*: (1) 3:4—*sin* is a violation of God's *law*; (2) 3:5—Christ's purpose for coming was *to take away sins*; (3) 3:6—true Christians do not habitually *sin*; (4) 3:8—those who *sin* cannot be true Christians; (5) 3:9—one *born of God* has *His seed in him* and cannot *sin*.

The Apostle John writes that our ongoing self *purification* is helped when believers:

#2 APPROPRIATE CHRIST'S PURPOSE IN COMING, 3:5

Verse 5: John highlight the seriousness of *sin* and states that to continue in *sin* is inconsistent with the work of the Lord Jesus Christ for believers—totally incompatible.

John begins with the important words, *and you know* [Greek is και οιδατε, kai oidate] because we believers must *know* (his readers do *know*) the two truths the Apostle John presents here: **(1)** Christ's purpose: *to take away* our *sins* and *lawlessness*! Dr. Cook writes; "In light of the context this must be understood as a reference to sanctification rather than to justification." [Cook, W. Robert, "Hamartiological Problems in First John, in "Bibliotheca Sacra," 123:491, July-September 1966, p. 255]. Christmas messages and articles often focus on Christ's incarnation as in the Matthew 1:21 which records the angel's message to Joseph giving him guidance as to what to do with Mary: "*She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.*" Here John did not write that Jesus was born, but that *He appeared* or was made visible to human eyes, implying His preexistence before *He appeared*. The Apostle John is asking believers to appropriate Christ's work, *to take away sins* [Greek is τας αμαρτιας, tas hamartias,] referring to the many acts of humanity's *sins* (plural) rather than the sinful nature that prompts *sins*. John chose to use an interesting verb, *to take away* [Greek is αφη, are] as it can be translated, "to lift up and carry" or *to take away*. "In view here is the effect of the atonement on human practice. Bultmann remarks that this stated purpose is parallel to the purpose in verse 8, "that He might destroy the works of the devil." Hiebert, D. Edmond, An Introduction to the New Testament, Moody Press, p. 255.] So, what He accomplished at the cross took care of the root (*sin*) and the fruit (*sins*). He became the *sin* offering for what we are by nature and the trespass offering for what we do because of our *sin* nature. In John's mind, it is Jesus, the Lamb of God, who *takes away the sins of the world* (John 1:29). How do believers appropriate Christ's purpose in *taking away our sins*? **(a)** While we cannot *take away* the **p**resence of *sin* in our lives, Christ can; a work that will ultimately be completed when we see Him face to face; **(b)** While we cannot *take away* the **p**ower of *sin* in our lives, the Lord Jesus Christ can which is what He continues to do in us; **(c)** While we cannot *take away* the **p**enalty of *sin* in our lives, the Lord Jesus Christ can and has for all those who know Him as Savior. Dr. Westcott puts an interesting slant on all this; "The dominant thought here is not that of the self-sacrifice of Christ, but of His utter hostility to sin in every shape." Westcott, Brooke Foss, The Epistles of St. John, 1883, Reprint ed. England: Marcham Manor Press, p. 103]. **(2)** The second fact that John presents is Christ's person: *in Him there is no sin*, emphasizing the total *sinless* nature of Jesus (read John 8:31-59; 10:30; 17:22; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 4:15; 7:26; 1 Peter 1:19; 2:22 & 3:18.) Don't forget that John has already stated that Jesus Christ is *righteous* (1 John 2:1) and *pure* (3:3). Because our Savior was *sinless*, this can be the character of those who *abide in Him* (read Hebrews 2:10 & 5:9). Perhaps John adds *in Him there is no sin* to make sure that we don't think that when Christ took *away our sins*, that He kept them. Therefore, the Apostle John is declaring that Christ's work on the cross is denied when believers continue to *practice sin*. However, as we *abide in Him* we will not practice sin and John returns to this subject, one of his favorites, of *abiding* in the next verse.

Third John writes that our ongoing self *purification* is helped when believers:

#3 ABIDE IN HIM 3:6-10

Verse 6: This is the key verse for this passage. When believers *abide in Him* they maintain a life of *purity*. When believers have a close intimate relationship to Jesus Christ they can't sin; they'll be *abiding*. Stott writes; "It is typical of John's method that he should drive the truth home by this double hammerblow about *sinning* and not *sinning*. Since there is *in Him no sin*, it is obvious that if we *abide in Him* we shall not *sin* either." [Stott, John R. W., The Epistles of John, Tyndale Bible Commentaries, Eerdmans, p. 123]. To *abide in Him* basically means to obey Him and not *sin* with the result that we maintain that *purity* as we *purify* ourselves *just as He is pure* (3:3). Whenever believers *sin* they separate themselves from a relationship with Christ. That phrase, *no one who abides in Him sins*, means that a lifestyle of habitual *sin* doesn't continue. The grammar in this verse indicates that the Apostle John is speaking of a settled, continued lifestyle of *sin*. A true Christian can only be temporarily in a lifestyle of *sin*. Dr. J. Vernon McGee provides down-to-earth illustrations such as this; 'the believer won't continue in sin but the unbeliever lives in it all the time. But the child of God has a new nature and he cannot continue living a sinful life. This is pictured for us in the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-24). Only pigs live in pigpens; sons do not. Someone will say, but the son got into the pigpen and yes he did but he also got out of that pigpen too! My friend, the child of God can get into it, but he will get out. Why? Because he is a son of the Father, and he takes after his Father who is *righteous* and a son desires to live that kind of a life.' [McGee, J. Vernon, Thru The Bible, Vol. 5, 1 Corinthians-Revelation, p. 790.] The high and holy standard of God for believers is that believers don't *sin*! Dr. Charles Ryrie writes: "The person who is abiding in Christ is not able to sin habitually. Sin may enter his experience, but it is the exception and not the rule. If sin is the ruling principle of a life, that person is not redeemed (Romans 6); thus a saved person cannot sin as a habit of life. When a Christian does sin, he confesses it (1 John 1:9) and perseveres in his purification (3:3)." [Ryrie, Charles C., The First Epistle of John, Wycliffe Bible Commentary, C. Pfeiffer & E. F. Harrison, editors, p. 1473]. The Apostle John is asserting that the Christian life and *sin* are in principle, contrary to each other and that the true believer cannot live a life characteristically *sinful*, although he/she might commit acts of *sin*. John has already indicated that a believer cannot *sin* (1:8-9 & 2:1-2). While *sin* may enter the believers experience as an exception that needs confession and cleansing, he/she isn't free to make occasional excursions into *sin*. A key to understanding this verse lies in the words that John uses, *seen* and *knows*, words that John often employs in this epistle (1:7: 2:3 & 10). The *abiding* believer will not reject God's authority over him/her and when and if we do reject God's authority, it will be the same as not *seeing* Jesus or *knowing Him*; the Greek word translated *know* is εγνωνκεν, egnoken, from γινωσκω, emphasizing experiential *knowledge*. When believers refuse to *abide in Him*, he/she no longer *sees Him* in the intimate sense of fellowship nor *knows Him* because he/she is walking in darkness (1 John 1:5-7).

Verse 7: John addresses his readers with his familiar tender title, *little children* (2:1, 12) as members of God's family. If believers are *abiding in Him* then they will be cognizant of the perils that face them. This explains John's strong warning; *make sure no one deceives you*. When believers *abide in Him* they maintain a life of *purity* and aren't *deceived*. The

deceivers in John's day were the false teachers and Gnostics and were aggressively seeking followers. In my 40 years of pastoral ministry I have seen this *deception* by Satan and his agents of *deception*, many of whom include notable pastors and religious leaders who are often held in high esteem. The Greek word translated *deceive* is [πλανατω, planato] which means “to lead astray;” here it’s a warning against moral *deception* while in 2:26 the warning is against doctrinal *deception*. The Gnostic heretics and other false teachers were trying to teach the Christians of John's day that they could *sin* all they want without harming their spirit. People today have bought into that devilish thinking—‘I can live however I want and it won’t affect me!’ *Sin* always impacts our spirit. Because the false teachers in John’s day had somehow indulged in the perverse reasoning that a Christian could be *righteous* without *practicing righteousness*, John adds *the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous*. John is asserting that it is impossible to be *righteous* without *practicing righteousness*—that’s proof of a believer’s relationship to Christ. The test is not our performance of an occasional *righteous* deed but a lifestyle of *righteousness*, the product of our new birth (read 2:29). A lifestyle of *righteousness* does not make a Christian *righteous*, but it does reveal who owns us—our inner nature (read Romans 6:1-2; 1 Peter 1:23 & 2 Peter 1:4). When a person’s relationship with God is genuine, *the practice of sin* or sinful acts are but accidents. Call on God for deliverance! Whatever our sin, if we have the nature of our heavenly Father, we will not continue in *sin*.

Verse 8: A correct doctrine of *sin* recognizes that paternity is proven by *practice*. The opposite of *practicing righteousness* is also true which is why John goes on to add in verse 8 that *the one who practices sin is of the devil*. Just like Jesus, the Apostle John accepts the reality of a personal *devil*. Many pastors and religious leaders today do not accept the reality of a personal *devil*. The following statistics are cited from George Barna’s research and are found on his website (www.barna.org). He states that only 51% of Senior Protestant Church pastors believe in the reality of a personal *devil*—only 51%! “Based on interviews with 601 Senior Pastors nationwide, representing a random cross-section of Protestant churches, Barna reports that only half of the country’s Protestant pastors - 51% - have a biblical worldview. Defining such a worldview as believing that absolute moral truth exists, that it is based upon the Bible, and having a biblical view on six core beliefs (the accuracy of biblical teaching, the sinless nature of Jesus, the literal existence of Satan, the omnipotence and omniscience of God, salvation by grace alone, and the personal responsibility to evangelize), the researcher produced data showing that there are significant variations by denominational affiliation and other demographics.” (January 12, 2004.) *The devil* is the source of all *sin*. In one of Jesus’ confrontations with the Pharisees, the religious rulers of His day, Jesus said *you are of your father the devil* (John 8:44). If a person’s father is *the devil* then he/she has his nature and takes after him. If a person’s Father is Almighty God, then he/she has His nature and takes after Him. The word *of* denotes source, not of his existence but of the wickedness that is part of Satan's life. John is making a strong statement that all *sin is Satanic!* *Sin* has a diabolical nature. To make any *sin* less than that is to soften *sin*’s character and prepare the ground for tolerating it. Satan is a rebel! In total contrast, the Lord Jesus Christ was obedient unto death

(Philippians 2:8). Note the striking contrast between Jesus who has no *sin* (2:5) and *the devil* who can do nothing but *sin*. John writes that *the devil has sinned from the beginning*, as he is the originator of *sin*. The phrase, *from the beginning*, in the Greek text which is placed emphatically forward, does not mean ‘from the beginning of Satan’s existence,’ for he was made holy like other angels, but rather from Satan’s fall (Isaiah 14:12-15 & Jude 6). Ever since his fall, he continues to *sin*. In order to reinforce the concept that legitimate birth in Jesus Christ precludes the *practice of sin*, the Apostle John reminds us of why Jesus came to earth. This is the good news for us sinners! This is hope! Here we see God’s provision for the believer in the words, *the Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil* (read Mark 1:24). Notice John employs the word *appeared* again (3:5). If the work of *the devil* is to *sin* the work of Jesus Christ is to save, redemptive. His *purpose* for coming to earth (read John 1:29) is *to destroy the works of the devil*. Now what does that mean? *Destroy* [Greek is λυση, luse,] means “to render inoperative,” “to loose,” “to untie,” or “to rob of power” and not annihilate. Satan has not been annihilated but when Jesus *appeared*, He came to reduce Satan’s power and his arsenal of weapons that are aimed against believers (read Ephesians 6:10-17). Satan’s *works* were like chains around believers but when Jesus *appeared*, He threw off the chains and freed us from *sin*. John speaks of *the works of the devil* and that word *works*, which is plural, points to that arsenal of weapons, his tricks, Satan’s *schemes* which Paul reveals in Ephesians 6:11. Praise God for what Jesus Christ accomplished at the cross. My father’s favorite hymn was “Calvary,” and the refrain proclaims this about Christ’s *work* at the cross: “Mercy there was great and grace was free; pardon there was multiplied to me. There my burden soul found liberty; at Calvary.” Returning to John’s word, *destroy*, λυση, a Greek aorist verb which implies a decisive occurrence and probably refers to Christ’s victory over Satan at the cross (John 12:31 & Hebrews 2:14-15). This victorious work of Christ will be consummated at the Second Coming of Christ when Satan will be cast into the abyss (Revelation 20:1-3). Here’s one more comment on the Greek word λυση, luse as in his gospel, John uses it both literally and figuratively. In John 1:27 he employs it literally—*sandal untying* and in John 2:19, figuratively of the destruction of Jesus’ physical body (cf. uses in John 5:18; 7:23; 10:35 & 11:44).

Verse 9: John continues his challenge to *abide in Him* by drawing this logical conclusion; *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*. This verse is really important for us to understand and though the verse presents some difficulties, I’ll attempt to explain it as clearly as I can. On first glance, we might think that the Apostle John is contradicting himself here with these two affirmations: (1) a Christian doesn’t *practice sin* and (2) a Christian *cannot sin*. Doesn’t that contradict what he writes in 1:8-2:3? First of all the Word of God never contradicts itself! Never! So, what’s this verse all about? John is emphasizing what it means to be *born of God*, a phrase used for the first time in First John (referring also to regeneration) and is used again after this occurrence (4:7; 5:1, 4 & 18. Prior to this *born of Him* was used in 2:29 & after also 5:1 & 18.) The reason a Christian doesn’t continue to *practice sin* is because we are *born of God*. Hodges writes: “In other words, the regenerate

one is sinless because he is begotten by a sinless Parent.” Hodges, Zane C. The Epistles of John: Walking in the Light of God’s Love, Grace Evangelical Society, p. 60]. When we were saved, a tremendous spiritual change took place; we were given a new standing; accepted as righteous in Christ; given a new nature, a new capacity, and became a partaker of God’s divine sinless nature at this new birth (read Romans 6:1-2; 1 Peter 1:23; 2 Peter 1:4; James 1:18 & 21.) This new nature *cannot sin* and John calls this new nature *His seed*. The old nature/capacity is from our physical birth and this new nature/capacity is from our spiritual birth. The old capacity produces *sin* but the new capacity enables us to maintain *purity* and live a holy life pleasing to God. John is looking at our new capacity which cannot *practice sin*. If we were able to *abide in Christ* continually, without any breaks, we would never *sin* because our new capacity controls us because *sin* is never the product of a Christian’s *abiding* experience. When we *abide in Him* our new nature controls us; when we don’t *abide in Him* the old nature, that old capacity controls us. This is something that is true of every believer without exception—we *cannot sin*. With all that stated, we cannot ignore the fact that the old nature/capacity is still within believers (John 3:6). John’s point is that divine sonship and *sin* are mutually exclusive. *He cannot sin* is not a declaration of “sinless perfection”. If the Apostle John had used the Greek aorist infinitive instead of the present infinitive, this phrase would have meant, ‘he is not able to commit a sin!’ To sum up: to maintain *purity* we are to behave like we are a *child of God* and not a child of *the devil*. I read about the converted American Indian (not our own Gene Thompson), who explained it this way: ‘I have two dogs living in me; a mean dog and a good dog. They are always fighting. The mean dog wants me to do bad things, and the good dog wants me to do good things. Do you want to know which dog wins? The one I feed the most!’

Verse 10: The first part of verse 10 makes a startling announcement; the way we live and act is *obvious*—it’s seen by the entire world! I trust that we are maintaining *purity* and not continuing to sin before our family, neighbors, co-workers, classmates, etc. Do others see the Lord Jesus Christ transparently living in and through us as our lives are evidence that we are *the children of God*; our actions prove our parentage—divine or diabolical! In addition, our behavior declares who is our authority. John illustrates this truth, showing specifically that how we treat *brothers* and sisters in the church, the body of Christ, is evidence of our new life in Christ. *Loving* our *brothers* and sisters is a proof positive sign that we are *abiding in Him* and *practicing righteousness*. No exceptions!

Note: It is my prayer that these printed notes will encourage serious Bible students to do further study on this passage. If you find any typos, errors or have any questions, please contact me. Thank you. Pastor John A. Eastman