

Real Christians Don't Sin? — 1 John 3:6, 9

Whoever abides in Him does not sin. Whoever sins has neither seen Him or known Him. 1 John 3:6 (NKJ)

Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God. 1 John 3:9 (NKJ)

Many have a difficult time with these verses (and similarly 5:18 and other verses in 1 John, which cannot be included in this study), because they seem to contradict experience and contradict 1 John 1:8 which says, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us,” and 1:9 that tells Christians that “we” should confess our sins. So if John establishes the fact that Christians sin in chapter 1, how can he say later that Christians do not sin? An incorrect interpretation of these verses has caused many Christians to doubt their salvation.

A Proper Understanding of the Epistle's Purpose

That these verses are written to Christians is beyond question. The purpose of the epistle is to encourage the readers' fellowship with both God and the apostles in order to make the readers' joy full (1:2-3). The readers are addressed in many ways as believers. Even chapter 3 begins with a clear statement that they, like the author, are children of God (3:1-3; see GraceNotes no. 37, “Interpreting 1 John”).

A Proper Understanding of Key Words

It helps to look carefully at a few of the words John uses. In verse 6 John does not say “Whoever *believes* in Him does not sin,” but “Whoever *abides* in Him . . .” That John understands *believe* and *abide* differently is clear from John 8:31 where he writes, “Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed in Him, ‘If you abide in My word you are my disciples indeed.’” *Believe* is the condition for anyone who wants to be eternally saved, but *abide* is a condition for anyone who wants to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. The two are not the same. To *believe* is to be convinced of something, to *abide* means to *remain* or *continue* (in a sphere). The sphere John wants them to remain in is declared in his purpose statement as fellowship with God through Jesus Christ (1:3; see also 1:6-7). His exhortation to his readers, who he affectionately calls “little children,” is “abide in Him” (Jesus). So John has in view Christians who remain in fellowship with Jesus Christ—these Christians do not sin.

We must also carefully define the two verbs that are stated as negative consequences in verse 6: “neither *seen* Him or *known* Him.” Though these verbs are sometimes used by John in relation to salvation (John 3:36; 4:42; 6:69; 8:28; 10:38), they are also sometimes used by him to describe a deeper experience of more intimate knowledge of the Savior. Most lexicons recognize that “see” (*horaō*) can refer to one's perception and experience of something, especially in John's literature (compare John 6:36; 12:45; 14:9; 15:24; 3 John 11). Likewise, John sometimes uses “know” (*ginōskō*) to describe personal acquaintance, familiarity, or fellowship (John 14:7, 9; 17:3). We find in verse 6 that to *see* and to *know* both describe a deeper acquaintance with Jesus Christ. They are words well suited for John's purpose in 1 John—fellowship with God.

Simply put, John is saying that those who remain in fellowship with Jesus Christ do not sin. Those who sin do not have the intimate experience with the Lord that is available to all believers.

A Proper Understanding of the Present Tense

Some have claimed that since the verbs *sin* (*hamartanō*) and *poieō* (*to do, to commit, to practice*), used with the

noun *sin* in v. 9) are in the present tense, they mean *keeps on sinning* or *continues to practice sin*. In other words, they say John is not talking about occasional sin or sin in an absolute sense, but habitual repeated sin (called iterative action). Some Bible translations reflect this interpretation in verse 6 and/or verse 9 (e.g., NIV, NET Bible, ESV, NASB). However, if used in a habitual sense, the present tense would need additional words that clearly indicate repeated action. There is nothing inherent in the present tense itself that demands a continual or repetitive action, and John's readers should not be expected to catch such a subtle use of the present tense. A habitual use of the present tense in 1:8 and 5:16 would be inconsistent with its use in 3:9. (Also, try making sense of a continuous action in a verse like John 6:33—"For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven . . .") Apparently, this mistranslation of the present tense is theologically derived and assigned by those who teach that those who are genuinely saved will not persevere in sin.

There are other problems as well. What sins would qualify as habitual—anger, pride, lust, or prayerlessness? And when should a sin be considered habitual—if committed once a day, once a week, once a month, or once a year?

The absolute use of the present tense for the verb *sin*, not the habitual use, makes perfect sense when we understand what John says about the new nature.

A Proper Understanding of the New Nature

In 3:5 John says that Jesus Christ came to take away our sins and "in Him there is no sin." Then verse 6 says that when Christians are abiding in Jesus they *do not* sin—it is impossible to sin because there is no sin in Him. If believers abide in the sinless Christ, verse 9 says they *cannot* sin. *Fellowship with Him never results in sin!*

Verse 9 puts this truth in terms of the new nature that the Christian receives in regeneration. God's "seed" in the believer refers to new life that gives the believer a new nature. A sinless parent begets sinless children. The believer's new nature from God never expresses itself by sinning, therefore those believers who sin are not in fellowship with or abiding in Jesus Christ. (The Apostle Paul also wrote about the manifestation of the believer's old and new natures in passages like Romans 7:14-25 and Galatians 2:20.) With this understanding of the new nature, there is no need to translate the present tense in verse 9 as habitual in order to harmonize with 1:8. In 1:8 John speaks of the Christian in his general experience, but in 3:9 he speaks of the Christian viewed through his new nature, just as in 3:6 he speaks of the Christian as one who is abiding in Christ.

Conclusion

Real Christians sin, and sometimes sin seriously and repeatedly. We know this from experience and from the testimony of Scripture. But when the Christian is abiding in fellowship with Jesus Christ, it is impossible to sin because in that sphere—in Christ Himself, there is no sin. Jesus came to take away the sin of the world. He did that provisionally when He died on the cross for sin, and He does that experientially for all believers who abide in Him. Without this understanding, many Christians will doubt their salvation because they know that they sin. God's grace gives us not only a way to avoid sin (3:6, 9), but also a remedy when we do (1:9).