

Sermon 25, Sin, 1 John 3:4-6

Proposition: Sin is real, and really evil. But Christ's coming conquers it.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the title of this morning's sermon reminds me of the old anecdote about Calvin Coolidge that I've told you before. Silent Cal went to church one Sunday morning. When he came home, his wife asked what the sermon was about.

"Sin," the president responded.

"Well, what did he say about it?" Mrs. Coolidge pressed.

"He was against it."

Brothers and sisters, that will be a major part of this morning's message. I am against sin and I trust that all of you are too. But John doesn't confine himself to telling us that sin is bad. He pushes on to emphasize that Christ has conquered sin, and that insofar as you and I are abiding in Christ, we too overcome sin. What we'll see this morning is that sin is real and really evil, but that Christ's coming conquers it.

I. What Sin Is

John has not mentioned the word "sin" for quite a while now. He talked about it several times in the first chapter. But in the more recent context, he's been focusing on this theme of being children of God. Suddenly he swerves aside from that theme to give us a definition of sin, which he then relates to the coming of Christ and the behavior of the Christian. While in one sense this divergence from his topic is unexpected, in another it is welcome. You see, the good news of the Christian faith is — and this is uncomfortable to say — ultimately predicated on sin in a pretty important sense. We'll talk about that more when we get to v. 5. But let me just say that you can't have a conversation about what it means to be a child of God and to be pure like Christ without getting specific about what impurity is and therefore what it means to get rid of it and be

purified. You all have no doubt noticed the slipperiness of definitions of purity when it comes to certain foods. Thus, on their orange juice carton Walmart puts “100% orange juice,” while on their Great Value natural peanut butter they put “Peanut Butter Spread: 90% peanuts.” Is the second food less pure than the first? Depends on what you mean. We would all call the second “peanut butter,” but it’s got a hefty dose of palm oil in it and this is not pure peanut.

So, how about it, Christian: How do you know whether you are purifying yourself like Christ? What do you need to be purified from?

A. The Breaking of the Law

And the succinct, memorable definition John gives is that sin is lawbreaking. That is, sin is doing anything God told you not to do, or failing to do anything He did tell you to do. The way the Shorter Catechism puts it is inimitable: “Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God” (WSC 14). In other words, nothing is sin except things that God has legally defined as sin. Sin is an open-and-shut violation of a published rule whose most basic description is “love the Lord your God with all your heart.” In one way, this is incredibly freeing: We are not bound to follow impulses, thoughts, or impressions. It is not a sin to choose the wrong college or the wrong car. It is only a sin to violate one of the Ten Commandments. It is only a sin to break the law of God, and nothing is a sin except what God tells us not to do. It’s not a sin to refuse to obey sister Susie who is sure that God has told her exactly what you ought to be doing. It’s not a sin to eat a BLT or wear pants or one of the myriad other things that some well-intentioned person or other has defined as a sin. In one sense, it is this very definition of sin where we Reformed Christians part ways with the Catholics and Fundamentalists, both of whom ascribe to the church in some sense the power to create extrabiblical laws and regulations and essentially to create sins where there were none before. Thus, the Fundamentalist says that it is a sin to purchase alcohol; the priest says that it is a sin for him to take a wife. These are things that God did not say. These are commands which cannot be found in the law of God, yet those who embrace them passionately believe that it is just as sinful to violate these human laws as it is to violate God’s laws. We disagree vehemently. Sin is lawlessness — that is, sin is the breaking of God’s law, and it is nothing else. Now, God’s law does give authority to parents, bosses, and all other legitimate authorities. To say “God didn’t tell me to be at work at 9 and therefore it’s not a sin for me to be half an hour late every day” is a category mistake. Bosses have the right to tell you when to be at work, and parents have the right to tell you when to go to bed and what to eat for dinner. But the church is nowhere given the right to tell God’s people what they must do above and beyond the non-negotiables that God Himself made clear in the Ten Commandments. As your pastor, I can’t tell you whom to marry, what to wear, or that it’s a sin for you to miss church on any particular Sunday. I can’t tell you that you must show hospitality next Thursday at 4 PM, or indeed attach any specifics that God Himself did not attach to His general commands. As a minister of the gospel, I insist that you must not commit adultery at any time — but I have no objection to you not exercising hospitality (a general, positive command) at some particular time.

So this is what sin is. It is any lack of conformity to God's law, and any transgression of the same. Sin is lawlessness. To be purified, then, in the sense in which the previous verse is speaking, means becoming a law-keeper. To get sin out of your life is to become more and more like Jesus Christ, who always kept God's law perfectly.

But why does John bring this up right here? He rarely mentions the law. The only specific commandment he even mentions is the command to love one another. And so, the commentators point out that John is probably not speaking merely of sin as lawlessness in general, but in particular as The Lawlessness.

B. Final Rebellion

What is that, you ask? It is, perhaps, associated with the man of sin whom Paul calls "the lawless one" in 2 Thessalonians. In other words, John, as he talks about the children of God and the children of the Devil, is eager to point out that sin is not simply an everyday affair. In one sense, every sin is a final act of lawlessness. It is an end-time act of opposition against God. There is something eschatological about sin, something worthy of being called The Iniquity. Sin is the evil of evils. I still remember my mother asking me "What's the worst of these: death, sin, pain, or Hell?" I said that Hell was the worst — but Mom said, "No. Sin is the worst. The others are consequences of sin." And she's right! Brothers and sisters, sin is the worst thing in the world. It is a cosmic rebellion, a last-ditch act of defiance against God. No wonder those who hope in Christ purify themselves from it!

C. Devilry

Well, John goes on to speak of the children of the Devil as those who do not practice righteousness. Sin is diabolical. Sin is devilry. Sin is the mark of those who do not love God and do not obey Him.

Brothers and sisters, if you are a Christian you need to recognize how evil sin is and you need to hate it!

II. What You Know About Sin

Well, John not only describes sin. He also tells us two things we need to know about Jesus and thus about sin. In our era some have said that the Christian church is too focused on sin and we need to embrace the positive realization that the Son of God has always existed and would still be exactly who He is, our perfect Christ, regardless of whether we had ever sinned. A faith predicated so heavily on sin seems to these folks to be somewhat repulsive. But brothers and sisters, though there is an element of truth in their protest, it is ultimately nonsense.

A. Jesus Appeared to Take It Away

Jesus in fact came to take away sin. Without sin, He would not have come! Sin provided the purpose for which He came. He would never have assumed flesh, never have become one of us, without the reality of sin in this world and in our lives. Yes, the Son of God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He would be the one we know and love even if we had never sinned. And yet, He wouldn't — He would be the Son of God, but He would not be the man Jesus. He would not be the Lord's Anointed. He would not be Christ. He would be the same

person, but He would never have added our human nature to Himself and become one of us. In that sense, then, He would not be the same at all! Jesus Christ is who He is because of sin — not His own sin, but ours. He came because of sin, but not in a positive way. He came not because he loved sin, but because He hated it and wanted to destroy it. Indeed, destroy it He did. He came to take away sin. He came to endure the punishment directed against sin by God Himself, and in so doing to destroy the one who held the power of death (the Devil), put an end to the sin of His people and the condemnation it brings them, and make us into God's righteous servants. That is our Lord, Messiah, Redeemer, Jesus the Anointed One! Can I get an amen? Jesus came to take away sin. That was figured in the scapegoat carrying the people's iniquity into the wilderness. It was figured in the burnt offering, entirely consumed by fire. But it was realized at Calvary, where by suffering the ultimate penalty Jesus swallowed up sin. This does not mean that no one has ever sinned since Jesus' death; rather, it means that sin cannot and will not have the final word in the lives of those for whom Christ died. His death means that sin has lost. You cannot give yourself to sin anymore when you have given yourself to Christ.

B. Jesus Is Perfectly Sinless

But note well that Jesus did not destroy sin by being sinful. He destroyed sin by suffering God's penalty against it, even though He was perfectly righteous. John could not say "In Him was no sin," or "will be no sin." No! It is obvious not only that Christ was perfectly free of sin, but is now perfectly free of it and always will be perfectly free of it. He is perfectly sinless; in Him is no sin! He suffered its penalty, but He never did a single wicked work, never broke the smallest of God's laws.

III. What You Should Do About Sin

So what should you do about sin? You should stop it! Do not sin! Do not do anything evil; do not break any law of God! Don't worship an idol, commit adultery, think an unloving thought, lie, cheat, steal, or covet! We know that, of course. But how do we do it? John tells us.

A. Abide in Christ

We have to abide in Christ. No one who abides in Him sins. Remember, to abide means to remain attached to Him by faith. It means trying your best not to sin, and going to Him in confession and repentance whenever you do. The anointing you have — that is, the Holy Spirit's presence in your life — teaches you to abide. And, as Bede put it long ago, insofar as you abide you don't sin. Insofar as you are consciously joined to Christ, what's said here is true of you: No one who abides in Him sins! Your Bible might say "Makes a practice of sinning." That is something of an overtranslation, but the point it makes is basically correct. Every Christian sins, as John has emphatically pointed out already. He doesn't mean that everyone who commits a single act of sin is not a Christian at all. Rather, he means that everyone who is comfortable living in sin and never turning away from it has neither seen Christ nor known Him. So abide in Him.

B. See Christ

Secondly, you need to see Christ. The one who sees Christ does not sin! Where do you look for Jesus? Do you see Him in word and sacrament here at church? Do you see Him in His word, a perfect portrait of the Wise Son? Do you see Him in your fellow saints? If you're looking at Christ, then sin loses its attraction. And if you don't see Christ in those places, then your fight against sin is going to be pretty pathetic. Whoever doesn't see Him sins.

C. Know Christ

And finally, you need to know Christ. How do you do that? Spend time with Him! Read His word. Talk to Him in prayer. Meet with His people. Worship Him. Quite simply, if you know who He really is then you will fall on your face. You won't need me to tell you to worship Him.

The one who sins doesn't know Christ. He finds something more fulfilling than Jesus. And folks, I do that. All of us do. Why? Because we don't know Him like we should. But the better we get to know Him, the less we will sin — the less we will commit the devilry that John warns us against. Brothers and sisters, seek out Jesus. He came to take away sin. In Him there is no sin. And when we His people love and obey Him as we should, then in us there will be no sin either. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirits. Amen.