

# Sin

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John's Epistles begin with God's Light, the best starting place for understanding sin. Those poor victims of the false Gnostic teachers needed reassurance and teaching on sin, a doctrine that had been perfected by Gnostic teachers.

John defines sin as lawlessness (3:4). It is not a mere violation of civil law, for which we ought to be arrested; not a violation of communal standards of right and wrong; nor simply some harm done to others. It is a treacherous act against God, springing from a heart of rebellion. Sin is of the devil (3:8); the unthinkable choice of self above God, an overt act of the ego. The seceders maintained that sin was something done by the flesh, not the mind. John says nay; sin is unrighteousness (5:17). Yet, John's treatment of sin is more a polarization of contrasts: darkness, light; sin, righteousness. Arndt and Gingrich suggest that sin is "conceived as a condition or a characteristic quality, e.g. sinfulness." It is a concern for life's practices, not life's foibles. The Universality of Sin John presumes the possibility of sin for everyone (1:8-10). If anyone denies their sinful past or present, John says he is a liar and self-deceived (1:8). The apostate teachers were spiritual elitists or perfectionists who "knew no sin." But their dishonesty led them to moral complacency (3:18). Indeed, the truth was not in them because they did not practice truth (John 3:21; 1 John 1:6). Even today, some deny the reality of sin. Yet, in denial, we commit a greater crime: we make God out to be a liar (1:10). Claiming sinlessness denies the very word of God (Romans 3:9, 23) and consequently affirms that God's word is not in us. All men stand condemned, in need of mercy. The

Consequences of Sin John reminds us that sin severs our fellowship with God, who dwells in unapproachable light (1 Timothy 6:16). Our darkness precludes any access to Him. Although these false teachers claimed fellowship with Him, God could never enter fellowship with them, or any who walk in darkness. This walking suggests not a single action, but rather, repeated action. Wescott agrees: "The question is not directly of specific acts, but of the whole region of life...To choose this as our sphere of movement is necessarily to shun fellowship with God." Hence, these were no single "steps in the wrong direction"; these apostates were running to darkness. Our fellowship, then, in this context is not broken or maintained by a single act. As Robert Turner puts it, "we neither maintain fellowship with God by a step, nor do we break fellowship with God by a step. We do it by walking in light or darkness" (GOT, XXIX, 18, 550-551). Walking in darkness effects severed fellowship. But, lest we forget, walking still begins with the first step.

Second, sin destroys sonship. Our special filial relationship with God is marred by sin. Children of God practice righteousness (2:29); children of the devil practice sin (3:8). "By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious" (3:10). As one country preacher put it: "How can you be a child of God on Sunday when you live like the devil all week long?" The Father sought may not be the Father found (3:8, 10).

Third, sin ruins our acquaintance with God. "No one who sins has seen Him or knows Him" (3:6). An intimate relation where God is a welcomed familiar face is predicated on keeping His commandments (2:3-5). Sin spoils it. Even as adultery strips a marriage of warmth and intimacy, sin robs the soul of God (2 John 9) and of a full reward (2 John 8).

Finally, sin's wages is death (Romans 6:23). The ultimate consequence is the "sin unto death" (1 John 5:16). Even the prayer of a righteous man for such a sinner is useless. This death is not the grave—but real and eternal separation from God. But to those who repent and confess their sins (1:9), God is faithful and just to forgive, making such sin not unto death. The Remedy of Sin The darkness of our sin has only one remedy: Jesus Christ who gave Himself as a propitiation (payment) for us and the world (2:2). Fulfilling what a holy God must demand of a sinner (2 Corinthians 5:21), He died in our place (Isaiah 53:4-5) and offered His blood as the atoning sacrifice in Heaven on our behalf (Hebrews 9:11-14). That gracious offer, totally free and undeserved, is the only remedy for our sin. Yet, we are responsible for its reception. For we are saved by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8). When we submit to Him in baptism, we claim the blessings offered in His blood, "raised to walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:3-4). John also reminds us that as Christians the same blessing of forgiveness is offered continually by our Advocate (2:1) when we repent of, and confess, our sin (1 John 7:10).

—Don Hooton Christianity Magazine, January 1991