

Sermon File # 1041

Scripture Text: 1 John 2:1-2

Sermon Title: *What to Do When You Sin*

Manuscript written and sermon preached by Roger Roberts

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Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version, 2011.

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What to Do When You Sin

Introduction:

Today we look at just the next two verses as we continue our series from 1 John. We've noted the previous two Sundays how the Apostle John, with a pastor's heart of concern for the churches, longs to draw others into a vital love relationship with Christ (1:1-4). He next begins to issue the tests by which we can know whether we are true believers. We as people of the light reflect the character of God, enjoying fellowship with him through confessing our sins and receiving his forgiveness (1:5-10). John addressed the deceivers who claimed to be without sin by saying they had blasphemously called God a liar with their claim to be above sin. Through his word and in the person and work of Christ, God has revealed the universality of sin and the need for his deliverance (10).

Possibly John thought that what he wrote about universality of sin and God's faithful forgiveness might be misinterpreted as an encouragement to be sinful, so he seizes the opportunity to repudiate sin entirely as a serious matter and well as offer

encouragement against sinful behavior (Smalley, 34f). Note with me what John says we are to do when we sin:

Read 1 **John 2:1-2.**

John writes as a pastor genuinely concerned about his people, whom he tenderly addresses as “My dear children” (1). This doesn’t sound like some preachers who seem to enjoy preaching against sin as an occasion to remind their congregations of their pending doom because of their hopeless guilt and God’s wrath and coming judgment. Such preachers must be crypto-sadists who enjoy creating false guilt and undue misery. As preachers of God’s Word we indeed must proclaim the entire message of God’s judgment as well as his redemption, love and grace (Acts 20:27); it’s just that we shouldn’t derive any sadistic pleasure in causing carnal fear and guilt through our declaring the bad news, essential as it is to our responsibility as God’s messengers. If we really love the people we are called to serve, like John we will quickly and evenly declare God’s offer of his gracious mercy and forgiveness as the antidote to sin and guilt.

John writes to those he considers to be his children in the faith, who perhaps were directly or indirectly his spiritual offspring through evangelism and church planting around Asia Minor. As the late, great London pastor, John RW Stott said, “It is possible to be both too lenient and too severe towards sin” (79). The apostle John counters both extremes with his pastoral concern. He wants them to be aware of the seriousness of sin and its consequences in their lives as followers of Christ. Also, he realizes that there are basic truths they need to understand in order to deal with sin and to eventually overcome any recurring sins that might threaten their spiritual wellbeing as true believers and followers of Christ. John also realizes the importance of knowing the character of God and how we can approach him with our sin problem.

Hearing the words of Pastor John, let’s note that when we sin there are certain truths we need to understand. We must first **realize**:

The reality of sin

John expresses that his overriding desire and purpose in writing is that his “dear children” in the faith will live in victory above sin, that they will not continue in sinful conduct, which would be a denial of their new nature and character as people of the light (1a). He has “no patience with professional perfectionists” who say they live entirely above sin but even less patience with “loose-livers,” who continue in their pre-“conversion” sinful behavior (Robertson, 209). His desire is that those who name Jesus as Lord face the reality of sin and take necessary steps to avoid it as a pattern and know what to do when they fail to live up to God’s standards. First, it’s necessary to understand...

What it is

Throughout this letter the word “sin” appears 17 times, which is indicative of the seriousness of sin as an obstacle in the lives of believers, who need to pass the tests of the assurance of their salvation. The key image of God that John holds up is that God is light, meaning his character is absolutely holy and unstained from any defilement as well as the source of all life, truth and beauty. The purpose of God in his work of redemption through Christ, the Light of the World, is to rescue his lost, wayward humanity and restore them to a relationship with himself, which demands a restoration of character that reflects his light and holiness. God sent his Son into the world to redeem and rescue us from our separation from him caused by sin, which has marred the world since the fall of Adam and Eve.

As with our first parents, sin is our act of rebellion against the will of a loving God, who has created us for fellowship with himself and to give glory to him by reflecting his holy character as we fulfill his purposes and live in loving fellowship with him. The Word of God reveals to us his will for us, to live in love for God and for our neighbor a life that pleases him. Sin includes whatever actions, thoughts, attitudes or omissions that dishonor and disobey him and fall short of his perfect, loving will for us. John writes with a loving purpose to say that sin is not merely a superficial violation of a set of rules or a failure to live up to “the arbitrary expectations of a crotchety old apostle” (Yarbrough, 75).

Sin is “a central issue in the New Testament,” the word *hamartia* appearing not only 17 times in 1 John but also another 156 times in the New Testament (Yarbrough, 72). Sin is transgressing God’s will and Moral Law and falling short of God’s standard of righteousness Jesus says is necessary for entrance into the Kingdom of God (Matthew 5:20). Jesus says we sin, not only in unlawful, immoral fleshly, physical indulgences of our selfish appetites, but also in our lustful, angry and hateful thoughts, as well as our self-righteousness, selfish ambition, divisive spirit, pride and failure to care for and love others as ourselves. All of the Law of God, Jesus said, is summarized in the Great Commandment to love God with our entire being and our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:28-34), and not one of us in light of these commands can claim to be without sin (Luke 10:25-37). Even our failure to do what we know we ought to do is sin (James 4:17). And we sin whenever we act with doubt and apart from faith/obedience, compromising our convictions (Romans 14:23).

It’s plain to see that all have sinned, as Paul says, and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23), his will and goal for us that we reflect his glory by fully sharing in his character of holiness. As John made clear in 1:8-10, even God’s being-saved, true believers will be guilty, perhaps even daily, of single acts of sin. Here in 2:1, John refers to the fact that we will commit these occasional sins of word, thought, action, spirit or failure to obey, and he’s using the Greek aorist tense to differentiate these occasional sins from the habitual state of sin that characterized us before our

conversion to Christ (Westcott, 42; Robertson, 209; Smalley, 36). Even though true believers have been released from the dominance of the habitual patterns of sinful behavior and have access to the liberating, victorious power of the Spirit for new life in Christ, we still, as long as we remain in these sin-prone bodies, will commit sin. So most of us, in mind, in speech, or in disposition, likely sinned before we arrived at the church building this morning. If you won't admit it, I might just ask your spouse or one of your kids.

And as did John's congregations, so do we, need to be reminded of...

What it does

As we noted last Sunday from 1:5-10, as light characterizes God's holiness, beauty and truth, so does the darkness symbolize sin and unbelief. Darkness seeks to overcome the light, but as John tells us in his Gospel (1:5), the darkness has not overcome Christ the Light of the World. Sin is rebellion against God, the attitude and action of living independently of God and in disobedience to his Word and will. As David reminds us in his penitential psalm, we are sinful from birth as characteristic of our fallen nature (Psalm 51:5). We are not sinners because we sin, but sin because we are sinners. It's our nature and we are hopelessly sinful apart from God's intervention.

The prophet says that our iniquities have separated us from God, have hidden his face from us so that he will not hear us (Isaiah 59:2). Just as Adam and Eve were alienated from God by their sin, so are we, apart from God's deliverance through Christ. Like the Apostle John, we too, as God's being-redeemed people, should hate sin for what it does in our relationship with Christ. Our sin is self-destructive to the image of God in us, and is destructive also in our relationships with others. Sin hurts ourselves, hurts others and also hurts the heart of a holy, loving God, who gave his Son to die for us in order to redeem and deliver us from the wages of sin, which is death (Romans 6:23). Paul gives some sordid lists of the actions of the sinful nature and reminds us that we have, only through the grace of God and the sacrifice of Christ, been delivered from these (1 Corinthians 6:9-11; Galatians 5:21).

It is interesting that even among conservative evangelical believers a lot of our speech indicates that sin is not really "intrinsic to the person," but is something outside of ourselves that we might inadvertently commit (Yarbrough, 71). Quotes we often hear that substantiate this erroneous thinking include: "God hates the sin but loves the sinner." Yes, that's true, but the wrath of a holy God remains upon an unrepentant sinner, who is responsible for his or her sin (John 3:36). Another is, "I'm just a sinner saved by grace." That sounds humble, but also can be an excuse for allowing prevailing, habitually sinful conduct to characterize a believer's life, as though Christ's redemption has made no difference in one's conduct and power over sinful actions.

Sin harms the life and witness of the sinner, destroys relationships with others and brings dishonor to the name of Christ. As those who claim to be disciples of Jesus, we must realize the serious nature of sin and its incongruity with our claim to be regenerated children of God. Sin is a present reality in our life on this fallen planet and we need to face this reality as our formidable foe.

After confronting the reality of sin, we must next **realize...**

Our relationship with Christ

Although we should despise, repudiate and seek to avoid sin as we realize its potential to do great harm, John is quick to say that we should not fear confessing it to God (Comfort, 2141f). We should treat sin seriously and seek to avoid it zealously, but as believers in Christ and children of a loving heavenly Father, we need to be reminded of our relationship with Christ and that...

He's our Helper

We are to realize we have sinned, perhaps already today. And if you're denying it, you're likely guilty of lying, at least to yourself and to God. But John quickly reminds us (1b) that we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense, a Helper (Greek "paracletos," one called alongside to help). As believers in Christ, we have a saving, keeping relationship with the Triune God. The Father has given his Son to be our crucified Savior, and now this same risen Lord is in the heavens at the right hand of the Father as our Helper, our Advocate, and our Defender.

In pre-New Testament Greek, this word "paracletos" denoted a legal assistant or advocate, as well as someone who intercedes in behalf of another (Yarbrough, 75). And Christ is our advocate, our defense attorney, who does not maintain our innocence, but who confesses our guilt but then enters a plea to the Father on our behalf as One who has made an atoning sacrifice for our sins (Barker, 313).

The Message paraphrases verse 1b: "But if anyone does sin, we have a Priest-Friend in the presence of the Father: Jesus Christ, righteous Jesus." We know that his sacrifice of suffering and death on the cross paid the penalty we deserve to pay, and when we repented of sin and believed on Christ as our Savior, his blood/death covered all our sin and guilt forever. As our great High Priest, Christ offered the sacrifice of himself that forever satisfies the just demands of a holy God (Hebrews 9:11-10:18).

Christ is our interceding Friend, whose perfect righteousness "carries weight" (authority) before the Father and there's no chance that what Christ urges will be rejected. He never steps outside of the divine will (Yarbrough, 76f). The picture here is not of Christ the Helper and Friend overcoming the reluctance of an angry, wrath-filled Father. Rather, God the Father sent his Son to make the sacrifice and

pay the price for our forgiveness, satisfying his perfect justice at his own expense (2 Corinthians 5:19).

As Jesus is our Priest-Friend and Helper, so Satan is our accuser. In the words of a Bible teacher/pastor: "The Old Testament contains a beautiful picture of this. Joshua (Zechariah 3:1-7) was the Jewish high priest after the Jews returned to their land following their captivity in Babylon....The nation had sinned; to symbolize this, Joshua stood before God in filthy garments and Satan stood at Joshua's right hand to accuse him (cf. Rev. 12:10). God the Father was the Judge; Joshua, representing the people, was the accused; Satan was the prosecuting attorney. (The Bible calls him the accuser of the brethren.) It looked as if Satan had an open-and-shut case. But Joshua had an Advocate who stood at God's right hand, and this changed the situation. Christ gave Joshua a change of garments and silenced the accusations of Satan" (Wiersbe, 37).

Here Jesus is called our Helper, the one who speaks to the Father in our defense (1b). As we read in John's Gospel, Jesus referred to the Holy Spirit as the promised Helper (John 14:16, "Counselor" in the *NIV*). It's the same word "paracletos." We who are children of God have a Helper in Jesus and also in the indwelling Holy Spirit.

As one great pastor tells us, every time we sin, Satan will accuse us to our conscience. When we lose our tempter, he'll tell us, "Now you've done it! You're not a Christian anymore. Satan will accuse us before the Father, saying, "Look what one of your so-called children has done!" But then Jesus will show the Father his wounds and say, "My Father, I took all of that into account when I died on Calvary's tree." And even before we repent of our sin, our Helper takes up our cause and send the other Helper, the Holy Spirit, to convict us so we will confess our sin and be restored to our fellowship with the Father (Ironsides, 42f, 45).

I've had people approach me with troubled hearts, fearful that they've committed the unpardonable sin, carrying the guilt of an egregious sin or crime. I could always assure them they can be confident they have not committed the unpardonable sin. There is no sin or crime beyond the power of the cleansing, atoning blood of Christ. Christ "is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he lives to intercede for them" (Hebrews 7:25). What Jesus describes in the Gospels is not the unpardonable sin but rather unpardonable sinners, who reject the work of the Spirit in their lives until they lose the ability and opportunity to finally repent (Matthew 12:22-37; Mark 3:23-29).

Christ is the Friend of sinners and Helper and...

He's solved the problem

Sin is a serious matter and its consequences can do much harm to ourselves, others and to our testimony for Christ. But as John reminds us, Christ has solved the sin

problem as “the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (2). “Atoning sacrifice” is a translation of the Greek word “hilasmos,” which has long been a subject of debate among Bible translators and theologians. It has been translated as “expiation,” which refers to the result of Christ’s death as cancelling or dismissing the effects of our sin. It can mean also the waiving of sin’s penalty and wiping away sin’s defilement. But “hilasmos” involves also the concept of propitiation, a word meaning averting punishment by turning away the wrath of someone. And so here John is referring to Christ as the Sacrifice who accepted our punishment and satisfied God’s wrath against our sin. Likely John intends to convey the concepts covered by both expiation and propitiation (Smalley, 40).

Only by appreciating the seriousness of sin, and how it is a horrible offense to a God of perfect holiness and absolute justice, can we begin to understand how God himself must make provision for a price to be paid for our forgiveness. And so Paul writes that in the person and work of Christ God is both just and the justifier of those who have faith in Jesus (Romans 3:26). We’re not talking about a loving Savior who holds back the wrath of an angry Father. God himself is the subject of the propitiation, the payer of our sin debt, and the cross of Christ and the satisfaction of his justice were initiated by his own love (Boice, 49).

Our sins are wiped away, the sin-debt has been paid, and the problem is solved. Our relationship with Christ will forever remain secure, and we can reject and even ignore the accusations of Satan. However, as we noted last Sunday, true believers have been saved by grace to live a new kind of life, one that honors and reflects the light of God. When we do fall, and we will commit those occasional, perhaps even daily sins, we quickly confess them in order to maintain unbroken fellowship with Christ (1:9).

Other phrases we often hear, even among Christians, are “Christians aren’t perfect—just forgiven,” and “I’m just a sinner, saved by grace” (Yarbrough, 71). Those statements are true, but only with some important qualifications. We indeed aren’t yet perfect, and will not be until we see Jesus (1 John 3:2). But we are nevertheless to grow in godliness and holiness, without which we will not see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14). And Jesus said we are to keep on becoming perfect, even as is our heavenly Father (Matthew 5:48). We are indeed saved by grace and in this life retain our old, sinful nature. But the grace that has saved us is also transforming us as “God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10).

James Bryan Smith tells the story of a visit he received from a friend named Carey, a successful businessman in his Midwestern city and Sunday school teacher in his church. Carey told Jim he was “losing the battle with sin—big time!” He related how he had been yielding to the temptation to television pornography during his travels and frequent nights spent alone in a hotel room. Carey told Jim how he felt deeply guilty, promising God never to do it again, even confessing this sin to his wife, who

was upset, but also was understanding, saying she knew his behavior wasn't really him.

Jim then interrupted his friend and asked, "Who then are you, Carey?" "Well, I'm a Christian." "What does that mean?" asked Jim. "Well, it means that I believe in Jesus and am trying to follow his commands. I go to church, study the Bible and have devotional times when I can find an hour here or there. I try not to sin, you know; I try to be a good person, but I know that deep down I'm still just a sinner."

Jim assured Carey that no doubt he was trying his best but was failing in his efforts. Then continued, "So let me see if I have this right. You're a Christian, but you're also a sinner. Is that right?" "Yes." "So, if you're a sinner, then what behavior would be normative for you?" Jim asked. "Well, I guess sinning. But that doesn't seem right." "And it certainly doesn't feel right, either, I suspect," continued Jim. "The reason, Carey, that it doesn't seem right or feel right is because it isn't right. Your approach is consistently failing, right?" "Right," Carey agreed.

And so Jim began a six month series of meetings with Carey, instilling in him an understanding of "the impact of the resurrected life of Jesus." They studied together what Christ had done with the power of sin through his death on the cross and his resurrection and his life he now offers to those who follow him. Carey's story, says Jim, is not at all uncommon among Christians who strive to follow Jesus without sinning, but find themselves failing in little and sometimes big ways. "The prevalence, and seeming dominance, of sin in our lives makes it easy to conclude, as Carey did, that our fundamental identity is 'sinner.' That certainly feels more realistic than 'saint.' Who, me? A saint? That's a joke. Our experience affirms the narrative that we are sinners, through and through. It seems more logical: I am a sinner, and that explains why I sin so much," says Smith.

We need, says Smith, to change the false narrative that says, "I'm just a sinner," and begin to use the New Testament narrative that says "I am a saint." Although we must contend with the old, fallen nature, we are being made new creations in Christ (2 Corinthians 7:17) and are no longer under the power of sin (Romans 6:14). Sin remains, says Smith, but must not reign. We are God's saints, his "separated ones," and know we are to live a new kind of resurrection life, abiding in Christ (John 15:4f).

Jim shared how Carey, who used to get nervous before leaving on business trips, saying, "Lord, I don't want to fail you again," no longer has the same anxiety. He related, "When I got to the hotel room, I walked to the television, closed the doors of the console and smiled. I whispered to myself, 'I know who I am. I am a child of God. I house the fullness of God.'" Carey wasn't even tempted to turn on the TV. Humbly he realizes that sin remains, "but it doesn't reign anymore....I knew I *could* sin," says Carey, and I knew that God would still love me. But I didn't *want* to sin" (Smith, 149-164). We are not *just sinners saved by grace*. We're God's children, *saved to a new level of living*.

We aren't left alone in our battle against temptation to sin, but are given the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, who produces his fruit in us, a Christ-like, God-honoring life that mirrors the virtues of God himself (Galatians 5:22f; 2 Peter 1:3-11). When we sin, we confess our sins, maintain sweet fellowship, and have new resolve to live a holy life and to overcome the temptations that led us into sin. We learn also to wear the armor of God by which we can take our "stand against the devil's schemes" (Ephesians 6:10-20). We also must use the weapon of prayer, and live in the spirit of watchfulness and continuous fellowship and communion with the Father.

Also, because of our human frailty, we must beware of the sins of pride and individualism that might keep us from turning to the Body of Christ, the church, for support and encouragement. In our fight against sin and our striving toward true holiness, we need each other. We all need someone, a mentoring or small group of some kind, to hold us accountable, a group where we can confess, counsel, encourage and be encouraged. As members of the Body of Christ we also may at times need to take initiative toward one of our fellow believers who has fallen in his or her walk with Christ. We need to lovingly seek and humbly restore the fallen (Galatians 6:1; James 5:19f).

John adds that Jesus Christ is the atoning sacrifice, not just for our sins, "but also for the sins of the whole world" (2b). This is not a statement of universalism, that all the people in the world will benefit from Christ's sacrifice, but rather that the sacrifice that Christ made is sufficient for all who will believe. The cross of Christ has "universal extension" and that his sacrifice paid a "sufficient price for all," even though it is "not ultimately redemptive for those who reject the gospel" (Yarbrough, 79f).

As we would expect from him, Calvin noted that Christ suffered *sufficiently* for the whole world but *effectively* only for the elect (244). But since we cannot identify the elect, we share this good news with all who will listen. Those who listen with openness will reveal themselves in due time to be among the elect! As John seems to have done in every section of his letter we have considered (1:3, 5), he again turns our thoughts to those outside of the fellowship whom we should seek to draw in. We who are forgiven and who enjoy fellowship and life with God must be aware of the countless multitudes and those around us for whom Christ died and who could, like us, be covered by the atoning blood of Christ.

Another pastor named John warns us against "hogging" this good news for ourselves. John Piper exhorted his congregation to take this thought that the message of the freely offered atonement is good news for the whole world and we dare not "hog Jesus," i.e. keep selfishly the message of his saving atonement for ourselves but should "go and make disciples" <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/jesus-christ-is-an-advocate-for-sinners>. What a message we have to share, one of God's gracious forgiveness and gift of an everlasting relationship through Christ's atoning death and victorious resurrection!

Conclusion:

We as people of the light have a God who hates sin because he loves us and desires us to be rid of it. Some Day we will be completely free, not only from the penalty of sin (which we are now through the cross) and the power of sin (which we can be by the power of the Spirit), but we will be absolutely free from the very presence of sin. God hates sin because of what it does to us, to others, to his creation and what it did to his Son, who suffered and died for our sins.

Because God hates sin, we too should hate it, and long to be rid of it, more and more, every day that we live on this earth. As a pastor, John purpose in writing was to “guide (us) out of sin” (*The Message*). Like John, we must not be too lenient with sin—it’s a dangerous threat to us all the time; but neither should we be too severe with ourselves or with others. John moves quickly to say that we need to realize we have a Friend-Priest, a faithful Helper who’s standing by our side but also standing in the presence of the Father in our behalf. Let’s remember that our identity is not “sinners saved by grace,” but like Carey came to realize, we’re God’s children, saints, set-apart ones, saved to become like Christ.

Our Father in heaven is a loving Father, waiting for us to come back to him, confessing our sinful failure and forsaking the far country to return to the Father’s house of sweet fellowship and peace (Luke 15: 11-32). There’s no sin so great that the atoning Sacrifice will not wipe away and no sin of such degree and magnitude as to separate you from the Father’s mercy, grace, forgiveness and love. Now is the perfect time for you to return to the Father’s house and receive and celebrate his complete forgiveness.

I invite you to pray, right where you are, in the stillness of this moment, asking the Helper to search your heart, and reveal your sin. Thank Jesus that he’s praying for you as your Priest-Friend and that on the cross he solved your sin problem for God. Ask him to forgive you and cleanse you through his blood, and then thank him that he will help you, beginning right now, to live up to your calling as a saint, one set apart for God and one who is called to a new kind and higher level of living.

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. How do you define the word “sin”? How does your definition differ from the perception of “sin” that’s held by many in the world and in the churches? What are some sins that are perhaps more “respectable” or difficult to detect?

2. How has the teaching and preaching of the church/churches (in your experience, past and present) been too severe or possibly too lenient in its teaching and preaching about sin?
3. Why do some Christians live with constant guilt, even thinking they have committed the “unpardonable sin”? What is the solution for their fear and guilt?
4. In the story of Carey, on pages 7&8, what was the false narrative by which he had been striving to overcome temptation and sin?
5. What is the New Testament narrative that Carey discovered, and how had it transformed his thinking and actions?
6. In what ways is Christ our Helper against temptation? In times of temptation to sin, how does Christ help us? How is the Holy Spirit our Helper as well?
7. Spend some time in prayer and reflection, and if there are sins to be confessed, ask God and thank him for his forgiveness and then ask him to enable you to walk in step with the Spirit, who will help you against temptation.

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