

1 John 5:18-21

18 We know that whoever is born of God does not sin; but he who has been born of God keeps ⁷himself, and the wicked one does not touch him.

19 We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies *under the sway of the wicked one.*

20 And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.

21 Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.¹

Do you sin?

Do you believe you have committed a sin **this week**?

We might consider it briefly and maybe nothing comes to mind. And we might think, well I know the right answer is “yes”, but I am not really sure.

So let’s ask some pointed questions:

Have you been perfectly loving of your spouse if you have one?

Of your kids if you have any?

Of your church members?

Of your neighbors or coworkers?

Have you treated everyone, all the time like **you**, yourself want to be treated?

Have you fostered thoughts of worry, or envy, or jealousy, or lust, or discontentment, or self pity, or wishing for different circumstances, or for wanting more attention or recognition?

Have you been perfectly content with God and the circumstances God has provided for you?

Have you spent the **time** fostering your relationship with Christ and fellow believers that you think you **should have**?

OK I think that is enough to prove the point. Our evaluation is only as good as the standards we hold our behavior up to.

I would guess that all of us could quickly see that we have missed the mark. And that is what one definition of sin is. We won’t even look at the other definitions. I think we have enough to go on.

¹ [*The New King James Version*](#). (1982). (1 Jn 5:18–21). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

OK

Now let's read what our brother John encourages us with.

18 We know that whoever is born of God does not sin

Woah. We are immediately faced with a problem. We have faced this problem once earlier in 1 John. How can this **be true**?

If this means what it appears to mean at face value, and if we know that we **often sin**, this would mean that we **are not** born of God.

There are generally 2 ways of reconciling this problem.

First is to conclude that it **must be possible** for a Christian to live in some kind of moral perfectionism. This is what John Wesley believed. Methodism promoted this belief. And a holiness movement sprung up that was based on this idea as well. This theology often points to an experience of a **second blessing** where a person becomes so spiritual that they live in the state of **not committing sin**.

This would all be well and good if the Bible presented this, across the board, as the state of a true believer. But the problem is, in order to maintain such a position, a person soon needs to waffle a bit on **what sin is**.

They either change the definition of sin,

they **spiritualize sin** just like the Gnostics did, so it is not really **us** who are doing the sin,

or they delude themselves into believing that they are **not failing** when they **are** failing.

Fortunately we do not to fall into that bind.

The most important principle in Bible interpretation is **context**. While someone may get vehement about that we need to believe what this verse appears to say at **face value**, and that we are not being faithful to God if the sentence **cannot stand alone**, that is not good **Bible interpretation**.

In context we know beyond a shadow of a doubt that this verse cannot mean what it appears to mean at first glance. How?

Look at it a second.

Look at verse 16 in your Bible. 1 John 5:16.¹⁶ **If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God will give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death.** ²

² [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#). (2016). (1 Jn 5:16). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

Now, in context how can John say, both, that a believer **can be** committing a sin and be restored and that a Christian **cannot sin** within just a few words of each other?

We let context interpret scripture. And fortunately, in this case, it is easy.

The context is that John was teaching us about **praying for ourselves**. This led John to tell us about **praying for our brothers**. And then, as is common with John, that brought up what to do with this **truth about sin**? What do we do about sin? How do we think about it?

The Gnostic false teachers were saying, sin is no problem. John just said that **all wrongdoing is sin**. So sin is real. It is identifiable. And it is bad.

So how does that affect the Christian life?

Do you see how dangerous it is to base a doctrine on a single verse? I was speaking to a fellow pastor and I was surprised to find out that there are some **serious believers** who are **against** preaching through the Bible verse by verse. We have always done it that way so we just **assume** it. But it is so much **safer** to take it verse by verse. It will be clear, over time, if we are getting the gist of what the passage is saying. The continued progress will either **support** what is said or **contradict it** and we will know to readjust. So once we know what a verse **cannot** mean, it is easier to discover what it **does** mean.

In this case we know that the words “**does not sin**” are in a verb tense that means continually sinning. It is saying a believer cannot live in a state of sin. It may even be talking about a **position** of sin. A believer cannot live in the same **position** or **condition** of a **non** believer.

Then it makes perfect sense that John then goes on to describe the two states.
¹⁹We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies *under the sway of the wicked one.*

We can know we are barking up the right tree when the flow of thought matches our interpretation. Essentially the thinking is, **the whole world** lives in a state of sin. It is **natural** for them to abide in sin, both in practice and in that state. And it is completely **unnatural** for a **believer** to live in that same state because they are not **of the world** but **of God**.

This understanding of scripture allows us as believers to be very candid about our sin. We do not have to feel that if we **sin** we have **lost our salvation**. We do not need to **redefine** sin. And we can allow ourselves to process our sin

realistically. We can do **with it** exactly what scripture **tells** a believer **to do** with their sin.

To hammer in this point a little more, let's look at some reasons why the **one who is born of God** cannot live in an unbroken pattern of sin. We will touch on this briefly and the supporting texts will be in the notes that I will post later.

First, sin is incompatible with the law of God (1 John 3:4). The redeemed love God's law (Ps. 119:97, 113, 163, 165) and cannot habitually live in violation of it (cf. 1 John 2:3-4; 3:24; 5:3).

Second, sin is incompatible with the work of Christ, who "appeared in order to take away sins" (1 John 3:5; cf. v. 8; Matt. 1:21; John 1:29).

Finally, sin is incompatible with the work of the Holy Spirit, who in the new birth plants the principle of divine life in the redeemed (1 Peter 1:23; 1 John 3:9).

OK let's look at the whole of verse 18 now.

¹⁸We know that whoever is born of God does not sin; but he who has been born of God keeps ⁷himself, and the wicked one does not touch him.

Now I would like to look at it in the English Standard Version. Again I believe the ESV is a more accurate translation based on better ancient texts. It says this:

¹⁸We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, but he who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him.³

Now before we go on I would like to point out the differences.

First ESV captures the essence of this verse better I think because it says someone born of God does not **keep on sinning**. They do not live a lifestyle of belligerent rebellion against God. Such a thing can last much longer than we would think it could. But God will intervene. So the ESV by **translation** matches what we have come to by **interpretation**. So I like that.

But the other thing to notice is the difference in the translation of the second phrase.

³ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#). (2016). (1 Jn 5:18). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

NKJV, being true to its manuscript says **but he who has been born of God keeps himself,**

But ESV says **but he who was born of God protects him,**

Do you see the dramatic difference in those two translations?

The NKJV says that the believer **keeps himself.**

The ESV says that the one born of God **keeps him.** We will look at this later but it is important to note it.

Ok, so back to verse 18.

18 We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, but he who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him.⁴

We have been talking about certainty. And verse 18 is a certainty. We **know** it. It is a truth we can depend upon. We **know** that it is true. And what is true? Believers live differently than non believers. Their **status** is different, and as a result their **actions** are different. The Gnostics say that committing sin in this life **does not matter.** John is saying that they are full of hogwash. What we do **does matter.** And a believer is a person who will stop being in the trade guilds that demand idol worship. They will stop being card carrying members of sinful guilds. They will not excuse what they do in the flesh as some kind of irrelevant action. No. They will **see** that activity as being **incongruent** with their new identity and they will change their behavior. It will not be perfect, but it will be substantial.

Like a hog who has been changed to a sheep, it might visit the slop once in a while. But it is going against its nature to do so. In any moment of time it might be hard to tell the difference between **what it was** and what it **is now,** but over time it will be dramatically obvious.

That, John says, is a certainty.

Why?

Because when a person is born of God, they are fundamentally different than they were. They are spiritually different. They have a powerful spiritual force working inside of them for change. That force can be grieved, but over time it

⁴ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#). (2016). (1 Jn 5:18). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

will not be powerless. The Holy Spirit will change the behavior of a Christian over time.

Anyone building a campfire knows that if there is no smoke, there is no fire.

And in our lives, if there is no change, there is no Spirit.

Now the next section of our verse. The NKJV says this:

but he who has been born of God keeps ⁷himself,

The ESV quote says this:

but he who was born of God protects him

Now, let's look at this from both translations. It is not as though a believer never keeps himself from anything. John MacArthur compiled this:

They are to **keep themselves pure** 1 Timothy 5:22 (NKJV)

²² Do not lay hands on anyone hastily, nor share in other people's sins; keep yourself pure.

Keep commandments 1 John 3:22 (NKJV)

²² And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we *keep His commandments* and do those things that are pleasing in His sight.

keep the faith (2 Tim. 4:7), 2 Timothy 4:7 (NKJV)

⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have *kept the faith*.

Keep unspotted James 1:27 (NKJV)

²⁷ Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, *and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.*

Keep self from idols 1 John 5:21 (NKJV)

²¹ Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.

keep God's Word (1 John 2:5),

and keep themselves in the love of God (Jude 21). 1 John 2:5 (NKJV)

⁵ But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. **By this we know that we are in Him.**

So it is not that we as believers are never taking action to **keep ourselves** from things and in things. We surely are. That is very true.

But the better manuscripts change the focus to something else that is very true and probably more consistent to our context.

The ESV quote says this:

but he who was born of God protects him

What this means is that it is Christ, who is born of God, protects us. There are so many scriptures that support this.

Philippians 1:6: “For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.”

To the Thessalonians he wrote, **“Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass” (1 Thess. 5:23–24).**

Nearing the end of his life, with martyrdom looming, Paul still confidently affirmed, **“The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed, and will bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom; to Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen” (2 Tim. 4:18).**⁵

Look what Romans 8 31-39 says about God keeping us.

³¹ What then shall we say to these things? If God *is* for us, who *can be* against us? ³² He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? ³³ Who shall bring a charge against God’s elect? *It is* God who justifies. ³⁴ Who *is* he who condemns? *It is* Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? *Shall* tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

³⁶ As it is written:

***“For Your sake we are killed all day long;
We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.”***

³⁷ Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.⁶

⁵ MacArthur, J. (2007). [1, 2, 3 John](#) (pp. 207–208). Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers.

⁶ [The New King James Version](#). (1982). (Ro 8:31–39). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

And here again in John 17 Jesus prayed

John 17:12 (NKJV)

¹² While I was with them in the world, I kept them in Your name. Those whom You gave Me I have kept; and none of them is lost except the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled.

John 17:15 (NKJV)

¹⁵ I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one.

It is very clear that God is **keeping His children**. He is maintaining them in this present world. What a wonderful truth that is.

Do you feel sometimes like your world is teetering on the edge? Are you afraid of your weakness and your frailty. Are you afraid you will not hang on? Well think of little children. What would you tell them when **they** were afraid of things that **you** were perfectly in control of? Would you not tell them, It is ok. Daddy and mommy have this covered. Well it is similar with God when we are a child of His. The one born of God, Christ, is **keeping us**. We cannot be lost if we are in His care. It is **ok** that you do not **trust yourself**. It is ok that you are afraid to say that I would never commit this certain sin against Christ. It is ok not to trust your ability to deliver on your best intentions. You do not need to trust you. But you can trust Him. Remember our friend Peter who trusted his own loyalty to Christ so much that he bragged that he would always boldly stand for Christ? What did Christ have to teach him? Peter had to learn that we cannot trust ourselves. The virtues of our flesh are not dependable. But **Christ** will keep us. He will not **let us go**. While we have things **we must do** to keep our walk with Christ where it should be, ultimately our salvation does not depend upon **our work** but upon **Christ's work**. What a comfort that can be to us when life situations show us just how undependable our best intentions are. Christ keeps us.

Now the last part of verse 18.

and the wicked one does not touch him.

The word for touch is not what we might think. It is not to lightly touch something like a child might touch an animal's skin. No. The only other time John used this word was when Mary Magdalene grabbed hold of Jesus after the resurrection. She was holding on to Him for dear life. And Jesus told her to stop. That is the kind of touch used here.

We need to understand what the devil **can do** to a believer and what he **cannot do**. The devil has zero power to make you do a single thing. He cannot command anything. He can roar, trying to flush you from your safe cover. But he cannot lay his claws into you. That is impossible. He wants to. And he would so love to destroy you. But he cannot. He does not have that freedom.

But what the enemy **can do** is **advertise**. He can watch those things that you display in your day to day activities and he can draw conclusions. He can spot your weaknesses. And to the degree that God allows him to, he can advertise. He can show you things that appeal to your **fears**. He can show you things that threaten your **competing loves**. He can show those things that appeal to your **lusts**. He can lie to you about anything under the sun. That is his specialty. But he is absolutely powerless to **make you** do anything. And he cannot **create** anything so everything appealing he **advertises to you** was created by a different manufacturer. God made all the good stuff. The devil just adds poison and re markets it.

Does that make you angry at yourself? It should. You and I have never committed a sin as a Christian we **had** to commit. We can blame it on all kinds of things, but ultimately we did the thing because we **wanted to** and we didn't care enough about our Savior to either **find out what He wanted** or to **do it** if we knew He wanted it.

And there is no point sugar coating it. Our sin is an affront to our Savior. His work for us was perfect. It 100% freed us from the power of our enemy.

When we choose to give in to whatever advertising that most affects us, we are without excuse. We are slipping back to the hog pen temporarily that we were rescued from by the blood of Jesus.

We did not do it because the devil grabbed hold of us. If anything we may have reached out and grabbed hold of the devil temporarily.

But praise God, Jesus is keeping us. Praise God He is disciplining us when we stray. Praise God He is convicting us of our sins, past and present. He is not allowing us to live under our own illusions of innocence and powerlessness. His Word calls a spade a spade and He is drawing us to Himself continually. Oh what a wonderful Savior we have. Praise His glorious name.

It looks like the Lord has provided us another week to live. Let's display this truth that sin is powerless over a believer and live in such a way that glorifies our Lord. He is keeping us. Let's display just how good Christ is at that.