

Sermon 50, Kept from Evil, 1 John 5:18-19

Proposition: The God-begotten don't sin because they keep themselves and Jesus keeps them from Satan's clutches.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, John has been reviewing the basics of the Christian life in this final section of his first letter. As he wraps it up, he has already told us that we have eternal life, and he's discussed the first act of eternal life, which is prayer. He has positively told us that prayer means coming into God's presence and getting a hearing, and negatively reminded us that prayer is not a time in which to ask God to do everything on our terms rather than on His. Well, having reminded us about eternal life and its breath in prayer, he now turns to three final things we know as Christians and then a final imperative. We will look at the first two of those things we know today, and at the final one next week. What we know, John says, is that we don't sin. We know this because Jesus keeps us from Satan and from the world. You are kept from evil, but evil is all around you. That is the message of our text this morning.

I. The Fact: No One God-Begotten Sins, v. 18a

Here's what we know. This is one of the basics: No one God-begotten sins. John has said this in various ways throughout his letter, and it's a note he wants to strike again as he draws the letter to a close. We have talked about this. Obviously, Christians sin. I sin and you sin too. John knows that we sin, because he says that if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves. So how can he say that no one God-begotten sins? Well, as we saw, he means that the new birth and sin are radically incompatible. All of you have done something to which your mom responded, "You didn't get that from me." Well, that may be questionable. If you didn't get it from your parents, where did it come from? But we know that however inaccurate it is for a mom to say that to her obnoxious offspring, it is certainly valid for God to say to His beloved children, "You didn't get that desire to sin from me. The new birth is not what planted the desire to steal chocolate and embezzle money inside your heart." The new birth and sin are fundamentally, radically, incompatible. Eschatologically speaking, no one born of God sins. The more the new birth works

itself out in your conscious life, the less you will sin. We know that. And yet we often have a hard time putting it into practice. Well, John gives us a huge piece of the puzzle in his teaching here at the end of his first epistle. A big part of how we're kept from sin is through being kept from the evil one, even as evil is all around us.

II. The Explanation: The Keeping of the God-Begotten One, v. 18b

Why don't we sin? We don't sin because we are safe in the keeping of the God-begotten one. John uses a very strange turn of phrase here. He describes us, the God-begotten, as being kept by "the one born of God." Now, what does that mean? Well, there are two possible interpretations, and both of them have merit.

A. How You're Kept

1. Jesus Keeps You

The first interpretation sees "the one born of God" as Jesus, the only begotten Son. And, in support of this view, we see Jesus' prayer in John 17, where He tells the Father "I have kept them," referring to the believers. Jesus keeps you! That's why you don't sin. You are in the keeping of someone far more powerful, far better suited to guard you, than you are yourself.

We know that Christ keeps the believer. He tells us that no one can pluck us out His hand. He tells us that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. He tells us that we are safe in His tender keeping. And that is true.

How does Jesus keep you from sin? He intercedes with the Father. He gives you the love, satisfaction, and fulfillment you need to know that sin isn't worth it because you have something better. He providentially leads you away from temptation and delivers you from evil. That's how Jesus keeps you from sin. He puts you in a group of others who will encourage you not to sin, who will give you something positive to do, who will hold you accountable to a community standard you'll be highly motivated to keep because you don't want to lose your place in that community. He gives you parents who discipline you, children who keep you busy, productive work that keeps you from needing to steal or amuse yourself with crime, and a spouse to share your love and satisfy your sexuality. That's all part of how Jesus keeps you from sin.

Finally, Jesus is the one who answers prayers you pray asking to be kept from sin. Jesus hears those requests, and He changes both the world and your heart in response. I've told you before how we drove by a ruined building in York, PA. The windows were broken, the stucco was falling off in big chunks, there were weeds five feet tall in the parking lot, and the place looked terrible. We drove by, and as I looked at this spectacle of a ruined building in a thriving commercial zone, my wife told me "That used to be a strip club. Every time we drove by it, my mom would shoot it with her finger gun and pray against it. Look at it now."

"Remind me never to get your mom praying against me!" I told her.

Jesus keeps us from evil! He hears our prayers against the evil of our own hearts, and against the evil of this world. Don't you dare underestimate the countless evils from which your Lord protects you. In seminary, our homiletics professor warned us not to use *Lord of the Rings* analogies in sermons, and so far, I haven't. But in Tolkien's classic trilogy, there is a scene where

it is revealed to the hobbit protagonists that their land is prosperous and safe because tough men from a line of ancient kings roam the wild and stop threats long before they ever reach the borders of the Shire. Well, that is the revelation here, according to the first interpretation of these words. The main reason you are spared from sin is that Jesus is on the watch, Jesus is roaming the wild, Jesus is scanning for threats and neutralizing them long before they ever work their way into your sleepy consciousness. And brothers and sisters, that is most definitely true.

2. You Keep Yourself

The problem with the first interpretation is that John nowhere else refers to Jesus as “the one begotten of God,” while he clearly gives that title to Christians all the time. Now, of course, John uses similar titles of Jesus, and he could just be highlighting the similarity between Christ and us: We are both begotten of God the Father! That may be. But many ancient scribes took this as a reference to the Christian being the one begotten of God. Similarly, then, those scribes read “him” (*auton*) as “himself” (*heauton*). The difference in Greek is only a single letter. And brothers and sisters, whether the original text said “him” (which it probably did) or “himself,” this second interpretation — that the Christian keeps himself — is a valid way to read what John is saying. At the end of the day, it is true. The reference to “the one born of God” is ambiguous, and “him” could be used for “himself” in the Greek of this period. I don’t think there is a way to be certain what John’s referent was, even if we can be certain that he wrote *auton* and not *heauton*. And so, I want us to consider this side of it too. Christian, you need to keep yourself. As one 19th century commentator said, imagine that you were made your brother’s keeper. You had sole charge of his movements and thoughts. What would you do to keep him? How would you ensure that he didn’t sin? Obviously, whatever you would do for that brother you need to be doing for yourself.

How? Well, the text tells us plainly that if you have been born again, fathered by God, then you have the wherewithal to keep yourself. You need to draw on your parentage, relying on the fact that you have been begotten by God. That is the first step, which is why John harps on it so frequently throughout this entire letter. If you’re not a Christian, forget it! You will never keep yourself from sin. But if you are God-begotten, then you have within yourself the principle of new life, supernatural eternal life. This is such a life as killeth death, as George Herbert wrote. It is by the power of this life, God’s life in you, that you will be able to keep yourself from sin. How, practically speaking?

Well, you need to draw on the Spirit. As we’ve talked about, that means working on the inputs. The Spirit comes through the word, through singing with God’s people, and through prayer. If you don’t read the word, attend worship and sing heartily, and pray for all you’re worth, you won’t have enough of the Spirit’s presence to keep yourself from sin. You just won’t. So the big anchors in your schedule, the things that you will not miss, all need to revolve around seeking the presence and power of the Spirit of sonship, who enables the God-begotten to cry “Abba, Father!” If you don’t do this, anything else you do to keep yourself from sin will be a joke.

But by the same token, if all you do is worship, read, and pray, you will still sin. This is where the effort comes into it. You have to look at your life and discover when, where, and why you sin. And then you systematically have to remove those occasions of sin and motives for sin, as much as humanly possible. If you don't do this, you're not keeping yourself from sin! If you're in charge of keeping your brother, and you send him to nightclubs, to white supremacist conferences, to porn sites and gangster bars, then what do you think is going to happen? Obviously, those things are hardly the daily fare of most of us in here. Our sins are more likely to be anger, pride, peevishness, self-righteousness, and a clutch of other deadly but spiritual-seeming sins. How do we fight those? By listening to rebuke. By changing the circumstances of our lives as best as we can to discourage sin and encourage righteousness. And by crying out in prayer! Sanctification is God's work: He sets you apart for holiness. But obedience, living in accord with your purpose of existing for God, is your work. Thus, John can emphatically say that the God-begotten one keeps himself.

B. What You're Kept From

So Christ keeps you, and you keep yourself. You are kept from sin; that is the first point. But John highlights two other things you and I are kept from.

1. Satan's Clutches, v. 18c

The first of these is Satan's clutches. John uses the word "touch," a word that he uses elsewhere only when Jesus says to Mary Magdalene, "Touch me not." Modern translations rightly paraphrase "Do not cling to me." When John says that the Devil can't touch us, he doesn't mean that we are in a better position than Job. Satan touched Job, and he did it with God's full permission. And Satan is definitely going to touch us. He can hurt you badly. But the difference is that once you're a child of God, he can't hang on to you. He can poke you in the ribs, in the wallet, in the family, in your health or job or church or nation. He can sow temptation, confusion, and lies, and with those tools he can do serious damage, as he did to Job. But he cannot hang on indefinitely as he used to when you were not a believer. You belonged to him once, and always served him in one way or another. But once you're born again, the Evil One can no longer fasten onto you. He is no longer a tapeworm, eating your vitals for years. Now he is a mosquito. That's still painful. It's still annoying. He can still introduce some noxious diseases into your life. But he can't bite forever; the amount of blood he can suck is limited now.

Why? Because Jesus is a strong man, stronger than Satan, and He keeps you. Also, because you are born again and keep yourself from sin — and without sin, Satan can't hit you where it ultimately matters. He can take earthly things, but he can't take anything permanent.

"You can't hang onto me, Satan!" If you wriggle hard enough, he has to let you go.

2. The World's Corruption, v. 19b

But then John says something deeply disturbing. He tells us that we know that the whole world lies in the power of the Evil One. Once again, John draws the contrast that he made in ch. 2 between the world on one side and what is from the Father on the other. We are from the Father. The world, in the sense of the corrupt system generated by human desire, is not from the Father.

Rather, it is self-generating (“from the world”). Now we know why. In its self-generation, it is supported by an evil spiritual power. Satan is the one who keeps the world in business. Human desire generates and supports the world, but underneath and behind it is the Arch-fiend, the Adversary or Accuser, the one we know as the Devil or Satan.

The world lies in the Evil One. Do you believe this? It is a good test of whether you are really sold out for God. If the world is not so bad, if the corrupt system has problems but not to the point where you would call it Satanic, you have missed the teaching of John. He’s neither joking nor exaggerating when he calls false teaching anti-Christian and refers to the world as being in Satan’s lap. What he means by this is that non-Christians are serving the Devil in their daily lives. When they go out and pursue human goods, they pursue them in a corrupt way, with motives that are wrong somewhere and actions that are incorrect somewhere. By the restraining grace of God, this evil is often held back. Often the world looks like a pretty great place.

How do you believe that the system generated by human desire is Satanic? Well, I encourage you to look at what it does. Think about the quest for status: Up or out. Publish or perish. Either you’re gaining prominence or losing it, gaining influence or losing it. Talk to people who live in Washington, D.C., about the culture of our nation’s capital. Every District resident I’ve talked to says the striving after influence and power is evil, corrupting, and pervasive. One of my wife’s friends nannied for a D.C. family; the mother of that family was exercising and dieting to lose weight and look good — in the sixth month of pregnancy. Brothers and sisters, that is all kinds of unhealthy. It’s not from the Father; it’s from the world.

Think about the quest for wealth. I need more, more, more! If my portfolio is not growing, it’s shrinking through inflation. If the companies I invest in aren’t constantly becoming more productive, more valuable, better assets, then I dump them and find new companies. I’m always looking for the hot new thing, for the better investment, for the better-performing stock.

Think about the quest for moral stature. I am all about doing good, so I one-up the other do-gooders. What does that show? That I am more concerned about my reputation than about the good that I can do!

Brothers and sisters, if you exclude the natural part of what we call the world — the portion that’s from the Father — and just look at the part of the world created by human desire, you will see what I’m talking about. You will see that the world is sucking at the teat of Satan and always has been. That’s why John told us not to love it, to overcome it. We aren’t overcoming the natural world; rather, we are bypassing the quest for wealth, status, and power. We’re leaving it on one side and traveling to a heavenly destination.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones says that if this statement about the world lying in the Wicked One bothers you, you have not understood any of the New Testament. Nothing is more typical of the NT than this attitude, he says. Oh, brothers and sisters, I beg you: Don’t love the world or the widgets it builds. Those things are passing away. Satan’s day is almost over; in the quest for status and power, he is falling ever further behind as Christ gains in status and power day by day.

Don't go for the losing side; follow Jesus, keep yourself from sin, and stay safe in His keeping!
The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.