

# **That You May Know That You Have Eternal Life**

**An Elaboration of the Moral Test**

*1 John 3:4-10*

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# **An Elaboration of the Moral Test**

## **Scripture**

Let's read 1 John 3:4-10:

<sup>4</sup>Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. <sup>5</sup>You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. <sup>6</sup>No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. <sup>7</sup>Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. <sup>8</sup>Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. <sup>9</sup>No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God. <sup>10</sup>By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother. (1 John 3:4-10)

## **Introduction**

When I served in my previous pastorate, I was asked by one of the evangelical campus ministries to participate in a panel of pastors for an evangelistic outreach meeting. I agreed to do so and I commended the campus ministry for their evangelistic zeal. The evening was advertised as "Ask a Pastor Any Question," or something like that. Including me, about five local pastors were on the panel. I think there were perhaps one

hundred students in attendance. I assume that most of them were Christians but I am sure that there were also some unbelievers in the crowd. When the program began, students asked questions along the following lines: “Why is Jesus the only way of salvation?”; “Why is the Bible to be believed?”; “What happens when we die?”; and so on.

I only really recall one question from that evening. It was, “What happens to people who have never heard the gospel?” I was shocked by the answers given by my fellow panel members. They said, “People who have never heard the gospel will be saved by the light that they have. God will not hold them accountable because they never had a chance to hear about Jesus.” It was awkward for me because I did not want to disagree with the other panelists and have unbelievers think that we do not agree on such an important question. But I had to say that if people who have never heard the gospel are saved by the light that they have, then we should immediately stop sending missionaries to them. If they are saved apart from Jesus, the worst thing we can do is tell them about Jesus.

Friends, God does not have two standards: one for those who have heard of Jesus but rejected him and those who have never heard of Jesus. The truth is that all people have broken God’s law and deserve eternal punishment. Jesus is the only remedy for sinful lawbreakers, and that is why sending missionaries all over the world is so important.

I wonder what the Apostle John would have thought about such a contemporary misunderstanding of the gospel. He wrote his first letter to correct the false teaching that was being taught by false teachers. He set out three tests to evaluate whether one has a relationship with God: the test of obedience (in 1 John 2:3-6), the test of love (in 1 John 2:7-11), and the test of doctrine (in 1 John 2:18-27).

## That You May Know That You Have Eternal Life

John now once again set out three tests by elaborating on them. He set out the test of obedience (in 1 John 2:28-3:10), the test of love (in 1 John 3:11-18), and the test of doctrine (in 1 John 4:1-6).

Today, we continue examining the test of obedience in 1 John 3:4-10. In John's elaboration of this moral test, he shows how Jesus' first advent was to deal with sin and enable holy living. He repeats his argument in verses 4-7 and 8-10, each time with a different emphasis.

### Lesson

First John 3:4-10 teaches us about the indispensable necessity for holy living.

Let's use the following outline:

1. Two Truths about Sin (3:4, 8a)
2. Two Purposes for Christ's Appearing (3:5, 8b)
3. Two Conclusions about the Christian Life (3:6, 9)
4. Two Appeals for Righteousness (3:7, 10)

#### I. Two Truths about Sin (3:4, 8a)

John was writing to encourage his beloved flock in their assurance of salvation. The false teachers taught that their souls had a relationship with God and so it did not matter what they did with their bodies. According to them, sin did not touch their souls. So John set down two truths about sin.

*The first truth about sin is that the nature of sin is lawlessness.* John wrote in verse 4, **“Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.”** The *New International Version* states verse 4 as follows, “Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness.” John

is stating a universal truth: **everyone** sins. There is no escape from this truth and there is no exception to this truth.

John's definition of sin is that **“sin is lawlessness.”** This is not a comprehensive definition of sin but it is a very helpful one. John's use of **“lawlessness”** points to the moral law in the Old Testament that is summarized in the Ten Commandments by which the nature of sin is revealed.

Question 14 in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* asks, “What is sin?” And the answer is: “Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God.”<sup>1</sup> Sin is defined as any deviation from the law of God.

Interestingly, John's definition of sin is more profound than the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*. John does not merely assert that sin is deviation from the law of God. For John, sin is a spirit of lawlessness. The very nature of sin is lawlessness.

I have only met one person who told me that he never committed a sin. Most people admit that they do not keep God's law. Their mistake is in thinking that their violations of God's law are relatively minor and that God will overlook their sins. They are not aware that James, the brother of Jesus, said, “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it” (James 2:10).

Perhaps the easiest way to understand sin as lawlessness is to see sin as simply the desire to have my own way. Sin as lawlessness says, “I will do what I want to do and not what God wants me to do.” We see this most easily in toddlers and young children. As we grow up, we learn ways to satisfy the demands of others, such as parents, teachers, and so on, but we forget that we do not submit to the law of God.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Westminster Shorter Catechism: With Scripture Proofs*, 3rd edition. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996).

*The second truth about sin is that the origin of sin is the devil.* John wrote in verse 8a, **“Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning.”** The devil broke fellowship with God when he rebelled against his Creator and led a rebellion of angels against God. After God created Adam and Eve, the devil successfully tempted them to sin, thereby plunging all people into sin.

Since it is the nature of the devil to sin, so it is the nature of all descendants of Adam to sin as well. Moreover, John reminds his readers that there are only two groups of people in the world: those who belong to the devil and those who belong to God. All people are naturally born into the devil’s family, and all believers are spiritually born again into God’s family.

This past week, I was watching a children’s show with my grandsons. A child would ask a question about how things were made, and the animated characters in the show would find the answer. One child asked the question about how planets were made. It was interesting to hear the explanation that completely left God the Creator out of the answer.

In a similar way, most people don’t believe that God is the Creator and that the devil is the originator of sin. They believe that people are basically good. People sin because of lack of education, or society’s influence, or some external factor. But they do not recognize that sin originated with the devil and that we are by nature sinful.

## **II. Two Purposes for Christ’s Appearing (3:5, 8b)**

Second, let us see two purposes for Christ’s appearing.

*The first purpose for Christ’s appearing was to take away our sins.* John writes in verse 5, **“You know that he [Christ] appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.”**

John tells his beloved flock that Jesus came to deal with sin. He takes away sin in two ways, first, in justification, and second, in sanctification. Jesus deals with sin initially by taking our sins upon himself. He credits us with his righteousness so that his Father sees us clothed in the robes of his righteousness. And Jesus also deals with our sin continually by ongoing cleansing and forgiveness. He is able to deal with the sins of his people because he has no sin.

One aspect of the good news is that our sins are dealt with properly. When I was converted to Christ, all my sins – past, present, and future – were paid for by Jesus. He took them all upon himself and paid the penalty for all my sin. And then, as I live my life as a Christian, he continues to assure me of continually dealing with my current sin by forgiving and restoring me to fellowship with him. What a Savior!

*The second purpose for Christ's appearing was to destroy the works of the devil.* John writes in verse 8b, **“The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.”** Notice that John uses the plural for **“works.”** The devil does not merely do one work. His activity is manifold as he seeks to undo all God's good work in creation. John Stott writes of the devil, “Morally, his work is enticement to sin; physically, the infliction of disease; intellectually, seduction into error. He still assaults our soul, body and mind in three ways; and Christ came to destroy his works.”<sup>2</sup>

Satan's work is to sin. But the good news is that Jesus' work is to save. He does so by taking our sins upon himself, and then he empowers us to overcome sin and live holy lives.

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<sup>2</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 19, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 128.

### III. Two Conclusions about the Christian Life (3:6, 9)

Third, let us observe two conclusions about the Christian life.

*The first conclusion about the Christian life is that no one who abides in Jesus keeps on sinning.* If the first advent of Jesus was to deal with sin and to destroy the works of the devil, then it follows that the one who is saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone must not sin but live a holy life. John writes in verse 6, **“No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him.”** John is not saying that a believer never sins. He has already told us in chapter 1 that Christians do sin (in verses 8 and 10). Moreover, he has also told us about God’s provision for our forgiveness and cleansing (in verse 9). So, Christians can and do sin, but they do not want to sin. In addition, Christians are forgiven for their sin. But Christians should always keep in mind that forgiveness is at the expense of the life-blood of Jesus. God’s grace is free, but it is not cheap. David Jackman notes that “the mark of true gratitude is that we do not keep on sinning.”<sup>3</sup>

*The second conclusion about the Christian life is that no one who is born of God makes a practice of sinning.* John writes in verse 9, **“No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God.”** John Stott says of verses 6 and 9, “These verses teach the utter incongruity of sin in the Christian.”<sup>4</sup>

I was saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ

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<sup>3</sup> David Jackman, *The Message of John’s Letters: Living in the Love of God*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 88.

<sup>4</sup> John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, 126.



alone when I was in the South African Air Force on Easter Sunday in 1976. Almost a year later, I started attending the University of Cape Town. I was eager to grow in my walk with Jesus. I was involved in our Campus Ministry, attended Bible studies, and had daily devotions. At some point during that first year at UCT, I came across these verses in my reading of the Bible. And I have to tell you that verse 9 especially threw me for a loop. I read it in the *New International Version*, which reads as follows, “No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God.” I knew that I was **“born of God.”** But I also knew that I still struggled with sin in my life. So, was I not really a Christian? I struggled and wrestled with this verse until a more mature Christian pointed out that the word for “continue” is in the present tense. That means that a Christian does not engage in a pattern of habitual sin. The *English Standard Version* uses the expression **“makes a practice of sinning.”** The sense of the Greek text is to behave in a certain manner, that is, in a sinful manner.

Am I saying then that Christians no longer commit acts of sin? No. Christians do sin but it is something they now fight against. So, for example, a habitual thief will stop stealing. A serial fornicator will become chaste. A continual liar will tell the truth. Yes, there may be occasional lapses, but the new direction of the believer’s life is to stop sinning.

The reason a Christian does not make a practice of sinning is because **God’s seed abides in him.** Most likely, the **“seed”** refers to “God’s very nature,” as *The Good News Translation* puts it. That parallels with the reason given at the end of verse 9, where John states that a Christian cannot keep on sinning **“because he has been born of God.”** John’s point is that because a Christian has the new life of God in him, he

does not continue in habitual sin.

#### IV. Two Appeals for Righteousness (3:7, 10)

Finally, let us see two appeals for righteousness.

*The first appeal for righteousness is to let no one deceive you.* John writes in verse 7, **“Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous.”** The false teachers were insisting that the soul was what was important and it did not matter what one did with one’s body. John sweeps that spurious assertion aside and urges his beloved flock not to be deceived. Only those who do what is right may be called **“righteous”** because God’s children look like Jesus, and **“he is righteous.”**

We don’t have the Gnostic heresy around today. But I think we do have a lot of people who don’t pay enough attention to their souls. Many people think that they have their ticket to heaven because they prayed a prayer, or walked an aisle, or go to church a couple of times a year, and so on. They pay little attention to conforming their lives to Jesus. Friends, that is a problem. A born-again child of God strives to look like his or her older brother. We have a model in Jesus. We live as he lived because we are related to him by blood – his blood.

*The second appeal for righteousness is to give evidence that you are a child of God.* John writes in verse 10, **“By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.”** Here John is contrasting the only two spiritual families in the world: **“the children of God”** and **“the children of the devil.”** Every child comes into the world as a child of the devil. By his amazing grace, God rescues a countless multitude out of the

family of the devil and adopts them into his own family. They are then the children of God. And the distinguishing feature of the children of God is that they practice righteousness, particularly as it is seen in love for fellow believers.

Love for fellow Christians is a very important mark in the life of every Christian. We love them because they are brothers and sisters in Christ. We encourage and support them. We overlook minor faults. We lovingly confront them when they sin against us. We want to help one another become more like Jesus, our older brother. Sadly, too often professing Christians have disagreements with each other and then act like children of the devil in cutting them off, in saying unkind or uncharitable things to them, or in acting in kind to them. This is exactly what the devil wants us to do. And this is exactly what we must not do.

## Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed sin and righteousness in the children of God in 1 John 3:4-10, let us practice righteousness.

The practice of righteousness does not earn or merit us favor with God. The practice of righteousness demonstrates that we already have God's favor and are his children.

If you are a Christian, let me encourage you to continue to fight against sin in your life and to obey all of God's commandments. By doing this, you will show yourself to be a child of God.

And if you are not yet a Christian, let me encourage you to believe that Jesus is the only one who is able to save you. Also, repent of all your sin. And do so today. Amen.

# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church  
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and membership in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike maturity,  
equip them for their ministry in the church  
and life mission in the world,  
in order to magnify God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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