

Adoption

A New Relationship to Sin

By Dr. Derek Thomas

1 John 3:6; 5:18

Now if you have a Bible near you, would you turn with me to 1 John chapter 3, and we're going to read a couple of verses from chapter 3 and another, from chapter 5. And if you'd also keep your finger in Romans 6, for we'll be alluding to that in a few moments. But before we read together the word of God, let us come before Him in prayer and ask for God's Spirit to illuminate these words of Scripture to our hearts and to our minds. Let's pray together.

Gracious God and ever-blessed Father, we come into Your presence once again this evening, on this our prayer meeting evening, and ask for Your help. We are poor and weak and without You we can do nothing. And we pray, Holy Spirit, that this word which You caused to be written and which you have kept pure through the ages in Your divine and inscrutable providence...we do pray now for that work of illumination; that we might not just be hearers of Your word, but those who understand it and do it also. For Jesus' sake, we ask it. Amen.

Now, first of all, in 1 John 3:6:

"No one who abides in Him"—that is, in Jesus—"no one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him." And then in verse 9: "No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God."

And then in chapter 5 and verse 18:

"We know that no one who is born of God sins; but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him."

Amen. May God bless to us the reading of His holy and inerrant word.

Now, we are considering together, you and I, these wonderfully cool, autumn Wednesday evenings, the doctrine of adoption, the doctrine that God the Father has brought us into a relationship with Himself whereby He has become our Father and we have become His children; so that from our lips and from our hearts comes a cry, "Abba, Father," wrought as we have seen through the work

and ministry of the Holy Spirit. The very cry, “Abba, Father,” is evidence, Paul says in Romans 8 and again in Galatians 4, that very cry is evidence of the presence of the Spirit within our hearts.

And we also have noticed that we have been brought by the grace of God not only into a relationship with God as our Father, not only into a relationship with the Holy Spirit, but of course also into a relationship with Jesus Christ, who is the pioneer of our faith, and of whom the writer of Hebrews in the second chapter says, “He is not ashamed to call us brothers.” We’ve been brought into a family in which Jesus, then, is our elder brother.

Now we have been considering these along these lines of thought over these last few weeks. And perhaps theologically there is nothing more important for us than to understand and appreciate our relationship with God as our Father and with Jesus as our elder brother and with the Spirit as the Spirit of adoption.

John here in this first epistle says something that on the face of it seems well nigh written in order to shock. He tells us here in verse 6 of chapter 3 that “No one who abides in Him *sins*”; or as some of your translations, I think, will have before you, rendering it as a present-continuous—“No one who abides in Him *keeps on sinning*,” and strictly speaking, that’s an interpretation rather than a translation. And John wants us to understand something, I think, and perhaps that’s the reason why he puts it in this very blunt form. We understand—and we’ll look at it in just a second—but we understand what John is *not* saying. But he puts it in this stark way so that the message might indeed get through to us: that coming into a relationship with Jesus Christ, coming into *union* with Jesus Christ has changed everything. It has changed everything. It has changed our entire outlook on life. It has changed our relationship to the way that we look at life. And it has changed not only the way we look at God and relate to God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; but it has changed fundamentally and principally our relationship to sin, and what we think of sin, and what power it may have or may not have upon us anymore as those who now live out our lives in union with Jesus Christ, as those who with the Apostle Paul can say, “I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” John is saying something here in order, I think, to underline something: that we must never become complacent about our sin.

Now Paul, I think, too, is saying something very similar when he writes the sixth chapter of Romans, and that’s why I asked you to keep your finger in Romans, and if you want to flip over now to Romans chapter 6. Just for a few minutes we’ll be looking at Romans 6, because in many ways Paul is reflecting the very things that John is saying in chapter 3 and chapter 5 when he says that “the man or woman who abides in Jesus Christ does not sin” or “does not keep on sinning.”

Now, Paul’s logic is entirely of the same order; he’s using a somewhat different method in order to get to the same point. Paul has been contrasting our

relationship to Adam and now our relationship to Jesus Christ, and the metaphor that Paul is implying is of one who is master over our lives. But Paul in Romans 6 reaches the point where he says, "We have been baptized into union with Christ's death and resurrection." So that in a sense Paul is saying in Romans 6, "We have died to sin." We have died to sin. And in order to underline what he says in Romans 5:21 that "grace reigns through righteousness." Now I want us to look at this along three lines of thought.

I. We have a new relationship to sin because we have a new identity.

And the first thing I want us to see is that we have a new relationship to sin because we have a new identity. We have a new relationship to sin because we have a new identity.

I have a card; I don't have it with me, it's too precious to carry around with me, but I will be using it tomorrow. Sometime tomorrow evening I will be crossing the border from Buffalo, New York, into Canada. And in order to do that I need to produce this little card; it's called a green card. It's not green—I really don't know why they call it "a green card" because it isn't green—but it looks like a credit card. It has a little bar code thing on the back and a magnetic strip on the back, and for all intents and purposes it looks like a VISA card or an American Express card, except it isn't. Because written on the front of it are the words "Resident Alien"—which always makes me think of "X Files," but that's what I am. That's what Rosemary is. We are resident aliens. If you want to look at an alien, you're looking at one right now. I'm a resident alien. That's my identity. I couldn't get back into this country on Saturday evening—and I need to, otherwise we're in big trouble because I'm preaching here on Sunday—but I couldn't get back in without that identity card. It tells me who I am. It tells the government who I am. It tells me I'm not a member of Al Qaeda or something like that.

Now that's what John was saying here: We are, you and I who believe and trust in Jesus Christ and in Him alone, we are the children of God. That's what we are: we are the children of God. "Now are we the children of God and it doth not yet appear what we shall be." Something radical has taken place, so radical that John says three times in his epistle, "We don't sin anymore."

Now we need to interpret what John is saying and what John is *not* saying. And at first glance John is saying something that's altogether shocking. You remember the sharp exchanges between John Wesley and George Whitfield on the possibility of sinless perfection? John isn't saying that. John isn't saying that we reach a point where we don't sin. He's told us many times, and we've been studying it on Sunday mornings; that's not what John is saying. *We do sin*, and "if we sin we have an advocate with God, Jesus Christ the Righteous One," he says.

There are some who've suggested that John has a particular sin in mind, but what he says sounds too general for that to be the case. Let me go to Romans 5 and 6 and get a handle on what Paul is saying, and then I think we get a handle on what John is saying.

You remember the question that arises in Romans 6? It's sometimes called the "Antinomian Inference." Paul has been expounding the "justification by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone," that there is absolutely nothing whatsoever that we can do to contribute to our salvation; that we are justified and reckoned righteous in God's sight on the basis not of what we have done, but entirely on what Jesus Christ has done and imputed and reckoned to our account. So that in a sense it doesn't matter how much we sin! And in a sense, in a sense you can go on sinning and you can sin all the more, because the more you sin, the more you magnify the grace of God. That's the inference that Paul is alluding to.

Now, of course, you can't draw that inference. You cannot draw that inference: let us sin in order that grace may abound. But if you're not tempted to draw it, if it doesn't sort of shoot across your mind as a possibility; you haven't understood the doctrine of justification by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone.

Paul's response, of course, is very sharp: "God forbid!" in the King James rendition of it; "By no means, how shall we (verse 2 of Romans 6) who have died to sin live any longer therein?" Now actually Paul is doing something there in verse 2 of chapter 6 that we need to take a note of. "How shall we who have died to sin"—Paul is drawing a category; he's saying, "You and I are those who have died to sin." He's defining, in a sense, what a Christian is, and he's saying, "We are those who have died to sin." It's a category thought: we belong to that category of people who have died to sin. Now Paul expands on it later in Romans 6, and using the analogy and metaphor of baptism, that "we've been baptized into Christ's death" and "we have been baptized into Christ's resurrection"; and Christ's death was a death to sin, and a resurrection from the grave; and, therefore, because we are in union with Jesus Christ by faith, we have also died to sin and been raised again from that prison. We have a very distinct identity, and knowing that identity is crucial; knowing who you are is crucial. Psychologists will tell you that; therapists will tell you that—that it belongs to our well-being to know who we are and to have a handle on who we are. And Paul is saying, "Do you want to know who you are? You are those who have died to sin. You are those who have been raised together in Jesus Christ, and you sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus—that's what you are!"

You all, of course, remember from Hans Christian Anderson's *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, "The Ugly Duckling"? You remember Hans Christian Anderson's story. This duck had sat on these eggs, but one of them took a long time to hatch, you remember? And when it did hatch, it didn't look like all of the other little ducklings so they called him an "ugly duckling." But he wasn't an ugly duckling, because one day when he looked down into his image in the pool that he was swimming in he saw his resemblance to be like that of some swans that he had seen. And

he actually wasn't an ugly duckling whose feathers were all stubby and brown; he was a little swan; a little signet. And sentimental as all of that is—and I'm sure it is—but knowing who you are is important. And Paul is saying, “We have died to sin. That's who we are. That's the kind of people we are. That's the category to which we belong, and knowing that makes a big difference.

Are you saying tonight, “I'm the child of a King”? I'm born again! I'm risen; I'm raised! I have died to sin and my old life, and I've been raised in newness of life in union with Jesus Christ, and I belong to Him forever! I'm no longer under sin's dominion. Sin no longer is my master.” That's Paul's idea. That's John's thought. We have a new relationship to sin because we have a new identity.

II. We have a new relationship to sin because we have a new relationship to Jesus.

But, secondly, we have a new relationship to sin because we have a new relationship to Jesus. The reason for this John tells us in chapter 3:6, “No one who *abides* in Him keeps on sinning.” We are abiding in Christ. We are in union with Jesus Christ. Our lives are “hidden with Christ in God.” We are in union with the One who is Himself sinless. Look at the context of what John is saying. In verse 5 he says, “You know that he appeared to take away sins and in Him”—that is, in Jesus Christ—“there is no sin.” We are not sinless, no, not yet. “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us,” John has just said, and we've been looking at that in just the last few weeks.

I love that story of Spurgeon on a railway platform when somebody comes up to him and says he's been reading Wesley about “sinless perfection” and is intimating to Spurgeon that he's reached this incandescent state of some kind of sinless perfection in this life. Spurgeon then steps on his toe and the man curses and swears, and Spurgeon says, “I knew you weren't perfect.” Think about it: Augustine who died in the year 430 A.D., wrote in his *Confessions*, one of the great classics of western literature, “I will now call to mind my past foulness and the corruptness of my soul”—Augustine, one of the great leaders of the church! Calvin, shortly before he died, wrote this: “All I have done has been worth nothing.” Imagine that! We're still plumbing the depths of the writings of John Calvin. “I'm a miserable creature. My vices have always displeased me.” John Bunyan wrote a spiritual autobiography which he called *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*. Jonathan Edwards once wrote, “When I look into my own heart and take a view of my wickedness, it looks like an abyss infinitely deeper than hell.” David Brainerd, missionary to Indians—Edwards wrote his biography—Brainerd wrote in his journal one day, “I had opened to me such a view of my sin that I feared the ground would cleave under my feet and become my grave and send my soul quick to Hell before I could get home.” But Jesus could say, “Which of you convinces me of sin?”

You know, somebody once said that “the greatest proof of Jesus' sinlessness

was that He allowed His friends to think that He was.” He allowed His friends to think—those who knew Him best—to think that He was. We are in union tonight with the sinless Lamb of God. How can you go on loving your sins and feeding your sins when you are in union with the sinless Lamb of God? We are Christians! That's what we were first called all the way back in Antioch, as a sign of the world's displeasure that we are “little Christs.” Now are we the children of God, and “it doth not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when He shall appear we shall be like Him.” That's our destiny; that's our goal. That's what God is doing: fashioning within each one of us a likeness to Jesus Christ, because God is determined to mold and shape us to the very image of Jesus Christ in knowledge and righteousness and in true holiness, so that we share in the image of our elder brother.

III. We have a new relationship to Satan.

We have a new relationship to sin because we have a new identity. We have a new relationship to sin because we have a new relationship to Jesus, the sinless One. And, thirdly, we have a new relationship to sin because we have a new relationship to Satan. Look at the context again of 1 John 3, and look at what he goes on to say, having said in verse 6 that “No one who abides in Him keeps on sinning.” You can't keep on sinning as a believer in union with Jesus Christ with reckless abandon, because you are in a new relationship to Jesus Christ now. You cannot tolerate that sin anymore!

But notice what he goes on to say in verse 8. “Whoever makes a *practice* of sinning”—you know, the person who isn't striving everyday to repent of their sins, the person who every day isn't confessing their sins. What does John say about that person? “Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the Devil, for the Devil has been sinning from the beginning.” Do you see the context? John is drawing this conclusion about our relationship to sin in the context of saying something about Satan. It's the same in chapter 5 and verse 18. Look at what he says, “We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning .” But notice what he goes on to say in verse 19: “We know that we are from God and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.” There's something about being in a relationship to Jesus Christ; there's something about our new identity that has, in a way, brought us into an entirely different relationship with the one who once was our master. Didn't Jesus say to certain folk, “You are of your father the Devil”?

The point is that Jesus frees us from Satan. We can't go into it here, but in the history of the interpretation of the cross and what Jesus accomplished on the cross, and the motifs that we use to describe the atoning work of Jesus Christ, there is this particular emphasis that Jesus did something on the cross that in some way rendered asunder the kingdom and the power and the authority of Satan.

That idea, that motif that we find in Scripture hasn't had a great deal of emphasis in the church, but it is an emphasis in Scripture. It's the emphasis of what Paul is saying in Colossians chapter 2, that "having disarmed the powers and the authorities, Christ made a public spectacle," triumphing over them in the cross. And it's precisely what he says here in verse 8 of chapter 3: "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. "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the Devil"! That's why you don't have to keep on sinning anymore. Because Jesus has come to destroy that old master who once said something, and then you said, "How far do I need to go?" You know one of Satan's most powerful stratagems is blackmail. "You do this little thing for me, and we'll keep that other sin a secret." Do you notice what John says in chapter 5? And I know we're jumping around a little bit which is not usually how I preach a sermon, I want to insist. But if we go to chapter 5 and verse 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"—and note this!—"and the evil one does not touch him."

Isn't that a beautiful, beautiful thought—that because you are in union with Jesus Christ, the Devil cannot touch you anymore? That God protects you? That He puts His arms around you; He garrisons you? He protects you from all of the fiery darts of the wicked one; He keeps you safe. Satan can never raise that specter of past sin and level it against you anymore, because Jesus has died and shed His blood and given His life in ransom for you. Isn't that your song tonight? "A sovereign protector I have, unseen, yet forever at hand, unchangeably faithful to save, all mighty to rule and command." "I need Thee every hour. Stay Thou near by." Why? "Temptations lose their power when Thou art nigh." That's the great vision.

That's the great vision that closes the Scriptures, isn't it? That Satan is cast into that burning lake of sulfur forever and ever. That's the great image. All of Satan's pomp and show from Genesis 3 all the way through to the twentieth chapter of Revelation, and it's gone! And you and I who are in union with the risen and ascended Jesus Christ are already beginning to share in the triumph of Jesus over the powers of darkness. That's what being a child of God means. You don't have to listen to Satan anymore. You don't have to listen to his jibes and his blackmails because you can say to him, "I'm going to tell my older brother about you." You can take him outside and say that to him with all the confidence that our risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ has dealt the final death blow to all of Satan's pomp and pretended powers. What a great joy it is to be a child of God. "I'm the child of the King, a child of the King. With Jesus my Savior, I'm the child of a King."

Amen.

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