



CAPITOL COMMISSION™

Encouragement from a Difficult Paragraph (1 John 3:4-10)

Brent Alderman / PO Box 2060, Annapolis, MD 21404 / brent.alderman@capitolcom.org / 240.818.3053

Former Nixon advisor, Chuck Colson, in his book The Body, relates the following quote from Marla Maples, who became famous as the other woman in breaking up the marriage of Donald and Ivana Trump. She spoke about her thoughts on religion in an interview, saying she believed in the Bible, but added, “you can’t always take it literally and be happy.”

Some people may feel that way about the passage we’re considering in this study. It’s a difficult text, probably the most difficult in the book of First John. But that’s the advantage to approaching a book of the Bible the way we have – verse by verse – so that we do not skip over the hard sections. But Maples’ view on the Scriptures falls flat here because we can take it literally and be very happy at the same time.

The problem that some see in this passage is that John seems to contradict himself as well as make a claim that is simply impossible. But as we work our way through this paragraph, let’s allow the Bible to interpret itself (which it does perfectly) and be amazed that John’s teaching is not impossible nor contradictory.

1 John 3:4-10 - Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. ⁵ You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. ⁶ No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. ⁷ Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. ⁸ 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. 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. 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.

IS JOHN CONTRADICTING HIMSELF?

The text here says that those who abide in Christ cannot sin. The version I’m using says that this person cannot keep sinning (verses six and nine, for example), but the idea from the Greek is that he cannot sin, if he is abiding. This creates some confusion if not understood in the right way, since John seems to say the opposite thing in chapter one:

1 John 1:8 - If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

We will see as we go further that there is no contradiction here at all. In fact, the truth that John conveys is a beautiful teaching that

should give all believers great hope and peace in their walk with the Lord.

THE UGLINESS OF SIN

When John says that a person who sins is committing lawlessness, he is using much stronger language than our English expression. He is actually saying that sin is flagrant wickedness. It is far more disgusting than we can imagine.

What’s worse, we’re born with the nature to sin. It’s what we naturally do and we cannot completely rid ourselves of that nature. We’re trapped by a desire to naturally please ourselves without regard to God or others.

About four years ago, you might remember an international news story out of Chile when thirty-three miners were trapped ½ mile down in a copper mine. We all waited nervously and checked the news often to see if there was a change in their status or if a plan had been made to rescue them. A strategy quickly came together for a way to communicate in the short-term, then a long tube was inserted through the ground to bring each miner out, one by one.

Just like those miners, we are trapped. Hopeless to get ourselves out, we might try to rescue ourselves and better our situation, but there is really nothing we can do. Paul was familiar with this reality, even after he followed Christ:

Romans 7:18-20 - For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

Without a supernatural work of God in our hearts, this sinful condition will go on unabated. That is why the news John presents in this passage is so encouraging. “You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin” we read in verse five. That is the remedy to the impossible trap of sin we all find ourselves in. This is reinforced in other Scriptures as well.

2 Corinthians 5:21 - For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

John the Baptist recognized Jesus and his mission the same way.

Maryland

Encouragement from a Difficult Paragraph (1 John 3:4-10)

John 1:29 - The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

THE BENEFIT OF ABIDING

If sin is more disgusting than we can imagine, then abiding in Christ offers more benefit than we can fathom.

Intimacy with Jesus requires holiness. This forms some of the main themes throughout 1 John, such as fellowship, confession and abiding. Our passage says that Christ came to take away sin, and in him there is no sin. It is incongruous to live in sin and abide in Christ at the same time, since at that point we would be involved in lawlessness.

We've already seen that the believer who is given a godly nature will still struggle with the earthly, fleshly nature he began with. It is possible to abide, to remain in Christ and have such close fellowship that sinning won't be committed. John says as much right here. But we cannot, in this world, live in this kind of abiding relationship without interruption. Abiding only lasts for a time before we eventually fall to the sinful nature again. That's the importance of the principle of confession John gave us in chapter one:

1 John 1:9 - If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

But our passage says that if one sins, he does not see or know God. The words for "see" and "know" in this context carry a slightly different meaning in the original language. It means a relationship with intensity, so for the person who sins, God cannot be seen intensely or known intensely. From this we can see that Satan still has a temporal impact on believers. He cannot overcome or destroy them, but he can still impact them, keeping them from knowing God on a more intimate level.

There are really only two camps. We are either sinning or abiding. We only have one vote of love to cast at any given moment – to the world or to God. There is no neutral condition when it comes to our hearts. Paul put it this way:

Romans 6:16 - Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?

But there is still an elephant in the room. This text actually says that the person who closely abides in Christ cannot sin. That is an

amazing statement, especially when we know ourselves so well. But being in such closeness with the Lord is possible and answers the problem we have with sin. Just as Paul said in the previous verses, we will serve something, either sin or righteousness. The latter will not happen simply by willpower, but by Christ actually living his life through us, accomplished only with his help and power. But it is possible. Paul gave this testimony of how he could abide in Christ:

Galatians 2:20 - I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

John says in verse nine that the true follower of Jesus cannot sin because God's seed abides in him. This is the very divine nature of God that is given to each one in his family. That is what makes the victory over sin possible, creating a struggle with the old nature.

1 Peter 2:11 - Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.

A FINAL THOUGHT

This passage is a huge encouragement and doesn't have to cause any doubts or confusion. It does serve as a reminder to us, though. We cannot fall to the temptation to explain our sin away or delude ourselves into thinking that sin is not damaging.

When we do that, we set ourselves up for all kinds of wrong thinking. Why? Because there will still be times of feeling distant from the Lord, of isolation and coldness. If we downplay the horror of sin, what will be our reasoning when we feel distant from Christ? We will ask questions that are unhelpful, because we have to find a logical reason. Am I not saved? Does God not love me? Am I not keeping enough of his rules?

To understand this we have to strike a balance. First, sin's ugliness has to be comprehended, then we have to experience the blessings and benefits of what it means to abide in Christ. Only then will we know the fullness of living with God so closely that sinning isn't even an option. Our desire to please him will overcome any desire to please ourselves or find satisfaction anywhere else.