

## 1 John 3:4-6 Commentary

### Verse 4

In verse 4, John broaches the subject of sin. The topic wasn't a popular one amongst his readership. Within the church, there were individuals who denied its existence. Many years have passed since John's writing, but things haven't changed that much. There are still many who dismiss the doctrine of sin. Popular preachers have publicly professed that they don't like to talk about the topic. Silence on this matter is a grave error. Without an understanding of sin, one doesn't really have an understanding of what's gone wrong with the world. In addition, one will never see his or her need for Christ, if one doesn't first see why he or she isn't confronted with sin's reality.

The faithful Christian must be real about sin. It is for this reason that John talks about the topic in 3:4-6. To start, he gives a textbook definition of sin in verse 4, saying, "Everyone who commits sin practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness." Notice that the spoilt uses a Greek word translated "everyone" at the outset of his discussion. He means to be inclusive, to show that there is no one who is immune to sin's infection. All were susceptible to moral and spiritual failure, even the haughty gnostics who boasted of perfection.

John has said a lot about the subject of "sin" in his letter (1 John 1:7, 8, and 9; 2:2 and 12). In our current verse, he aims to give his audience a clear understanding of what sin is. He says "everyone who commits sin practices lawlessness." The word translated "commit" appears in the present tense; thus, it depicts a habitual action.<sup>1</sup> One has translated the verse as saying, "Whosoever commits the sin on a continual basis."<sup>2</sup> John means to point the finger at those who were engaging in flagrant immorality. There were some who excused sexual and relational sin through their weird interpretations of Christian doctrine. They lived with an unrepentant attitude, and they were guilty of unconfessed sin.

While some minimized sin, John called it what it was. He said the gnostic heretics were guilty of "lawlessness." The Greek word ("anomia") underlying English translations is a compound word that strictly means "no law." It contains the simple word for law with an alpha prefix affixed to the beginning. It depicts the act of violating God's law.<sup>3</sup> It involves attitudes and actions that are contrary to the Lord's revealed will.<sup>4</sup>

When John speaks of such "lawlessness," what law does he have in mind. It seems that he is speaking of a the Moral Law of God, that law which exists because of God's holy character, and as a result of His creative order. Before time began, the Lord existed in perfect holiness (Isaiah 6:3 and Revelation 4:8). He is incapable of wrongdoing. His impeccable character sets the standard for what is right and wrong. When He created humankind and the creative order, He subjected all things to the standard of His character (Genesis 1:26-31 and 2:16-17). This standard is known by theologians as "the Moral Law."

This aspect of God's Law is famously stated in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17). Paul comments on it by saying, "So, when Gentiles, who do not by nature have the law, do what the law demands, they are a law to themselves even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts. Their consciences confirm this. Their competing thoughts either accuse or even excuse them" (Romans 2:14-15). The Moral Law is hardwired into the hearts of every man, woman, boy, and girl. As such, it serves as a wonderful evidence of God's existence. One has commented, "Why do most human beings seem to have that same intuitive sense that they ought to do good and shun evil? Behind the answers to those questions is more evidence for the theistic God. This evidence is

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<sup>1</sup> Robertson, 221.

<sup>2</sup> Zodhiates, 186.

<sup>3</sup> Zodhiates, 186.

<sup>4</sup> Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 57.

not scientific...but moral in nature...There's a Moral Law that has been written on our hearts. In other words, there is a "prescription" to do good that has been given to all of humanity."<sup>5</sup>

Prior to the revelation of Scripture, and before the unveiling of the Mosaic Law, God's Moral Law stood intact. The earliest humans knew that there were obvious standards of right and wrong. They were well aware that certain beliefs and behaviors were off-limits. Transgressions like idolatry (Genesis 2:17), murder (Genesis 4:9); adultery (Genesis 12:18), fraud (Genesis 26:12-27), homosexuality (Genesis 19:15), Greed (Genesis 14:20), jealousy (Genesis 37:11), drunkenness (Genesis 9:21), a lack of faith (Genesis 1:6), deceit (Genesis 25:7-11), anger (Genesis 27:41), prostitution (Genesis 38:1-30), rape (Genesis 34:1-31), adultery (Genesis 39:10), prejudiced behavior (Genesis 37:3), and theft (Genesis 44:4) are clearly portrayed as displeasing to God in the Bible's pre-Mosaic history.

When John wrote his letter, he was dealing with individuals who were indifferent to sin.<sup>6</sup> They relabeled their rebellion and called it something other than what it was. He aimed to remind his readers that there was such a thing as sin. The Bible was clear about the topic. God clearly had a Moral Law, and sin was a violation of that law.

In a twenty-first century world in which even people within the church are giving into the seduction of moral relativism, it is important for Christians to stay aware of sin's reality. The Bible teaches that Christians are to avoid the lawlessness of which John speaks (2 Corinthians 6:14). It has no place in the life of the believer. It belongs to our pre-Christ life (Romans 6:19). Scripture affirms that Jesus hates lawlessness (Hebrews 1:9). It is because of transgressions that He gave Himself on our behalf (Titus 2:14 and Romans 4:7). Jesus has declared that at the end of time He will send all lawless people into eternal damnation (Matthew 7:23).

To experience the life for which they have been created, believers must stay on guard against sin. They must have wisdom, knowing that sin is lawlessness. It is the act of violating the Lord's Moral Law. It involves over stepping the ethical and spiritual boundaries He enacted aeons ago. Sin is untying we say, think, or do that goes against God's character and His code of righteousness.

Though moral imperatives may seem to be a thing of the past, we must remember that there is a God who is holy. He has made each of us for a relationship with Himself, but He has standards by which that relationship must operate. His character makes demands concerning what is wrong and with. To know Him, and to enjoy the life He has for us, we must come to grips with the reality of sin and pursue forgiveness in Jesus (Romans 4:17). In addition, it is important that we always wage war on the sin in our lives that keep us from the Lord. If we want to be spiritually and morally safe, we must stay vigilant of God's guidelines. The life that is most purposeful, meaningful, and enjoyable is only found within the parameters of the Lord's Moral Law.

## **Verse 5**

John draws his readers' attention to the work of Christ in verse 5. He says, "You know that he was revealed so that he might take away sins, and there is no sin in him" (1 John 1:5). The verse starts with one of John's favorite expressions — "you know." The apostle has used the same verbiage frequently in his letter to remind his readers of the core Christian doctrines they had been taught (2:20, 21, 29 and 3:2). Believers often need to recall the rudimentary aspects of the faith, especially when it comes to what Jesus has done on their behalf. John knew his audience stood in need of such a reminder.

Consequently, He spoke to them regarding why Jesus was "revealed." The Greek term underlying English translations is one John has used previously in His letter. It speaks of someone or something appearing or being made manifest. John used the same word in 2:28 and 3:2 to speak of the Second Coming of Christ. He uses it here, as he did in 1:2, to refer

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<sup>5</sup> Turek, 170.

<sup>6</sup> Akin, 141.

back to the First Coming of Christ. John means to make his readers reminisce regarding the reason for the First Advent. He wants them to think about the theological implications associated with the incarnation.

He says “he was revealed *so that he might take away sins*.” The doctrine of sin is an important subject in John’s writings. Since the false teachers made claims of moral perfection (1 John 1:7, 8, and 9; 2:2 & 12; 3:4, 8, and 9; 4:10; 5:16 and 17), the apostle took great aims to remind his readers of the truth. He wanted them to know they were all guilty of sin (1 John 1:8 and 10), but he also wanted them to remember that Jesus had accomplished a great work on their behalf (1 John 1:9; 2:2; and 4:10).

The Greek word translated “that” in our verse is a purpose clause in the original language.<sup>7</sup> John uses it to point to God’s sovereign purposes in sending Jesus to Earth. According to the apostle, Jesus came to “take away sins.” The word translated “take away” was used in the ancient world to depict the act of literally lifting something and taking it up.<sup>8</sup> It appears in Acts 27:13 to convey the act of one lifting an anchor of a boat. In the context of our current verse, it appears “as a religious technical term, of the effect of Christ’s paying the complete penalty for sin.”<sup>9</sup> It portrays Jesus as lifting up our sins and carrying them away.<sup>10</sup> It expresses the idea that Jesus has completely removed the penalty of our sin.<sup>11</sup> At salvation both the imputation and punishment of sin is eradicated.<sup>12</sup>

John the Baptist used the same Greek word from our text to speak of our Lord’s ministry. He once said, “Here is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). The apostle echoes the teaching of the baptizer in our current text. The concept of “sin” was an important one for his audience, since the gnostics were minimizing its reality. Through their doctrines, they boasted of perfection. John here reminds his readers of what Jesus did on behalf of sin, just as he does elsewhere in his letter (1 John 1:9; 2:2; and 4:10).

It is critical for Christians to grasp the meaning of John’s message. Without a strong awareness of the way in which Jesus delivers from sin, one will likely be spiritually weak. Sin brought suffering (Genesis 3:16-19), shame (Genesis 3:8), death (Genesis 2:17), and separation (Genesis 3:22-24) from God into the human condition. Jesus’ work at Calvary provides rescue. Christians don’t have to live in bondage to guilt and shame. Fear and insecurity should wilt in light of God’s glorious gospel. Believers have closeness with God and hope of a hereafter in a perfect paradise. Life is good for those who know Jesus and have had Him lift the penalty of sin off of their lives. They can live with confidence, courage, happiness, hope, boldness, and blessing because of what Jesus has done!

John closes verse 5 with a simple assertion that “there is no sin in him.” The personal pronoun obviously refers to Jesus, the only one who ever lived a perfect life. To some, it may seem proposterous that John would make such a claim concerning our Lord. However, Jesus said the same thing of Himself. He often remarked on His sinless nature (John 7:18 and 8:46).<sup>13</sup> In addition to Jesus’ words, the New Testament is replete with assertions concerning

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<sup>7</sup> Robertson, 221.

<sup>8</sup> Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 37.

<sup>9</sup> Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 37.

<sup>10</sup> Robertson, 221.

<sup>11</sup> Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 595.

<sup>12</sup> Zodhiates, 99.

<sup>13</sup> Robertson, 222.

the faultless character of our Lord. The author of Hebrews referenced this aspect of the atonement on numerous occasions (Hebrews 4:5; 7:26; and 9:13-14).<sup>14</sup>

Ultimately, it was the perfection of Jesus that made His substitutionary death effective. If He would have ever sinned, He could not have been able to provide salvation for sinners. The Lord has always required unblemished sacrifices (Leviticus 22:22-25 and Deuteronomy 15:21). Jesus' life, death, and resurrection on our behalf was accepted because Jesus was spotless. Paul spoke about this truth in his second letter to the Corinthians, saying, "He made the one who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). In order to stand strong against the plague of immorality in their church, John's readers needed to stay cognizant of what Jesus had done for sin.

## Verse 6

In verse 6, John speaks regarding the Christian's relationship to indwelling sin. He says, "Everyone who remains in him does not sin; everyone who sins has not seen him or known him" (1 John 3:6). Once again, John hits on the topic of "remaining" in Jesus. The subject is one of his favorites to discuss (1 John 2:10, 24, 27, and 28; 3:24; and 4:16), and for good reason. Our Lord taught on it often (John 6:56; 8:31; 15:4, 5, 6, 7, 9, and 10). Considering the way in which John talked about the topic of "remaining" so often, Jesus' teaching had undoubtedly made an indelible impression on him.

The word translated "remaining" in our text was one that was used in the ancient world of a lodging or dwelling place (Luke 8:27 and John 8:35). Used in a figurative spiritual sense, it picturesquely depicts fellowship with God. One has commented that the word literally means "to stay," but in the context of our current passage it means "to continue" or "to abide."<sup>15</sup> Thus, the term here describes a state of fellowship with the Lord. The word portrays the idea of staying with the Lord, in the sense that one is "united with him, one with him in heart, mind, and will."<sup>16</sup>

We all should be familiar with this concept from our own lives. Don't all relationships involve this act of "staying" or "abiding?" To really relate to his family well, a husband must spend quality time with his wife and kids, engage in regular conversations, be a good listener, schedule his life priorities around his family, make sound decisions that honor his family, and give of his resources to bless them. Good family relationships are all about "staying" and "abiding" with one another.

Shouldn't our walk with Christ be similar? Remaining in Jesus involves a focus on relationship. It means we regularly listen to Him and talk to Him. It involves quality times of worship, both privately and corporately. An abiding walk with God requires schedules and life priorities that take Him and His will into account. If we are remaining, we will joyfully give of ourselves to the Lord. Choices and decisions will be made from a heart that wants to know and please the Lord. While there is surely much more involved in the act of remaining, perhaps this provides a picture of what it means to abide in Jesus. Remaining implies relationship.

Interestingly, the gnostics used the same terminology of themselves. Knowing the way in which Jesus used the word translated "remaining," they ripped it off and implemented it in their teaching (1 John 2:6). John seeks to set the record straight. When he speaks of "remaining" in Christ, his language is present tense. As a result, he refers to an continual, habit-of-life activity. The apostle's words could be translated "everyone who keeps on abiding in him."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Robertson, 222.

<sup>15</sup> Gingrich and Danker, 125.

<sup>16</sup> Zodhiates, 959.

<sup>17</sup> Robertson, 222.

According to John, the one who remains in Jesus “does not sin.” Once again, the apostle’s language is present tense. The idea is “does not keep sinning.”<sup>18</sup> Some struggle with John’s claim. At face value, it may seem that he promotes the doctrine of sinless perfectionism. We know this isn’t true, because he repudiates that same teaching earlier in His letter (1 John 1:9-10). The apostle does not mean to say that Christians never sin; rather, he means to say that they don’t have the habit of sinning. They don’t brazenly embrace immorality as the gnostics did. They have lives, though imperfect at best, that are marked by a degree of repentance.

John wanted his readers to know that an ongoing relationship with Jesus is the means and method of overcoming indwelling sin. That’s why he said, “Everyone who remains in him does not sin.” Our Lord taught the same idea. He said, “Remain in me, and I in you. Just as a branch is unable to produce fruit by itself unless it remains on the vine, neither can you unless you remain in me” (John 15:4). A close connection with Jesus is what makes us capable of overcoming sin. By themselves religious profession and church involvement cannot stifle sin. Will power will fail. Man-centered behavior modification and self-improvement cannot produce the life of Christ. Only a soul-to-soul connection to God through Jesus will give victory over indwelling sin. Those who stay close to Him won’t be overcome by habitual moral failure.

But the apostle also wanted his readers to know that the immoral heretics who continued in sin were not real believers. The apostle tells it like it is in the last part of verse six, saying, “everyone who sins has not seen him or known him” (1 John 3:6). Some struggle with our verse, thinking it means one transgression disqualifies one from eternal life. Such an interpretation is misled. John isn’t talking about the ordinary relapses into sin, nor is he alluding to the single instances of failure that all believers face from time to time (James 3:2). He’s addressing false teachers who blatantly and flagrantly embrace serious sin while professing to be Christians. Using a present active imperative, John means to convey the idea of habitual sin. One has said that the idea of the verse is “the one who keeps on sinning.”<sup>19</sup>

Despite their claims, the gnostics were not real Christians. John wanted his readers to be aware. He makes mention of two realities in order to enforce his point. First, he reminds his readers that the gnostics had never “seen” Jesus. The apostle used the same verbiage is back in 1 John 1:1, 2, and 3 to speak of the way in he and the other apostles were eyewitnesses of Jesus’ ministry. He uses it again here to remind his audience that he had personally seen and followed Jesus. He knew what Jesus taught. He heard the Sermon on the Mount and the Olivet Discourse in person. For several months, he followed Jesus personally. He was a part of the Lord’s inner-circle. When it came to Christian doctrine, he was a much more reliable source of truth. The gnostics didn’t know what they were talking about. John had personally seen the Lord (John 1:3) and they hadn’t.

Secondly, John tells the churches of Asia Minor that the gnostics didn’t “know” Jesus. Interestingly, the Greek word underlying English translations is the one from which the gnostics got their name. It was the most important term in their entire system of belief. The gnostics used it to brag about the supposed super-spiritual, secret knowledge they possessed. Because of the way in which they used this term, John implemented it a lot in his letter (1 John 2:3, 4, 5, 13, 14, 18, 29; 3:1, 6, 16, 19, 20, and 24; 4:2, 6, 7, 8, 13, and 16; 5:2 and 20). In our current verse, John uses the word to flatly deny that the gnostics had any spiritual knowledge at all. Their lives of continual immorality were evidence they had never been changed by grace. John will emphasize this point again in 3:8 and 9. Real Christians don’t continue in sin. They don’t embrace immorality and unloving behavior in a habit-of-life fashion. Jesus demonstrated that His followers should fight against sin, not embrace it in a calloused and unrepentant fashion. Did He not tell the adulterous woman He forgave to “not sin anymore” (John 8:11).

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<sup>18</sup> Robertson, 222.

<sup>19</sup> Robertson, 222.