

To Sin or Not to Sin

1 John 2:1-2

I begin today with a little made-up story. It's only fiction, but I think you might get the point. This angel named Carruthers was called in to the heavenly front office and informed by St. Peter that he had been picked for a special assignment—to go down to earth and make a list of all the people who had misbehaved.

Two months went by. Then one afternoon the angel came flapping wearily through the Pearly Gates and collapsed on a golden stool by St. Peter's desk. "Sir," he said, "you don't know the magnitude of this job. I'm going to need some help."

"Impossible," St. Peter replied. "We're shorthanded up here as it is. You'll have to go it alone."

The angel struggled to the door. Then, suddenly, he was struck with an idea. "Saint Peter, suppose I made a list of all the people who didn't misbehave. It would be much shorter and I could finish it in a week."

"Good thinking," said St. Peter.

The angel returned to earth and, as promised, he was back in a week with his list. St. Peter studied it and passed it on up the chain of command. Shortly, an order came down to write a letter to everyone on the list, commending them for their good behavior.

"Does anyone know what else the letter said?"

"AHA! So you didn't get one either."

Last week we looked at how to deal with our sin. We said that we were not to deny it or rationalize it, but to confess it and be cleansed. John continues this thought in chapter 2 by telling us:

I. DON'T SIN (2:1a)

John says, "**My little children** [children of the faith, addressed to fellow believers] **these things I write to you, so that you may not sin.**" John's aim in writing this letter to us is that we will not sin. John wants us to understand these things so that we will not "**walk in darkness**" but "**walk in the light.**"

So what is sin? The word "**sin**" in the Greek is *hamartano* which means to "miss the mark." It is a term that was used in archery. Picture a target, the aim of the archer is to pull back the bow and let the arrow fly so that it hits the mark, the bulls-eye. But a sin occurs when he misses. The arrow flies off target. So what is the target? The Bible puts it this way:

"You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy." (Leviticus 19:2b)

"Be holy, for I am holy." (1 Peter 1:16b)

"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Mat 5:48 NIV)

Paul points out our problem when he says, **“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”** (Rom 3:23 NKJV) God’s target for all of us is His glory, His holiness and His perfection. But all of us have missed the target. We have fallen short.

ALL men are short of the glory of God. We are short in worshipping God like we should. We are short in praying, fellowshiping, and communing with God. No person obeys God perfectly all the time. All men come short of loving others like they should. We are short in witnessing and sharing Christ, and in sacrificing and reaching out to help everyone we could. No person is perfect. We are sinners who need a savior, the very Son of God Himself, to save us from our sins.

So to sin is to miss the mark of God’s holiness, His perfection, and His glory. It is to fail to live so that our lives glorify God.

Look again at what 1 John 1:10 says again, **“If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.”**

John gives us a definition of sin later in this letter of 1 John. **“Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness.”** (1John 3:4) Sin is a breaking of God’s law. It is the deliberate turning from what we know to be true and right. Sin is our refusal to submit to God’s law, His righteous commands.

A goal of every follower of Jesus should be to absolutely turn away from sin, to turn from every act, thought, and attitude that grieves the heart of Almighty God as if they were a den of poisonous snakes ready to strike at any moment. We should be made so uncomfortable by the sin that plagues us that peace escapes us until we cry out to God in confession for our sin and only then find sweet release in His forgiveness.

John says he is writing so we will NOT sin. But how often do we actually live up to that? To “not sin” is a nice thought, but our real life experience is one of continuing struggle. We identify more with Paul who said, **“the good I want to do I don’t do, and the evil I don’t want to do, that I do”** (Romans 7). We live in a sinful world, and we are housed in a body of flesh that is so easily aroused and attracted to sin.

How can John tell us in chapter 1 verse 8 that **“if we claim to be without sin we deceive ourselves”** and at another point say, **“I write this to you so that you will not sin”**? Are these words of John contradictory?

Absolutely not! The elderly John has been around the block a few times. John knows our human nature. He knows that we are not yet perfect. He knows we do fail to glorify God. But he also knows the debilitating effects of sin. Sin is serious.

Sin is so serious not only because of its consequences but especially because of its cost. **“For the wages of sin is death,”** (Romans 6:23a). **“The soul who sins shall die,”** (Ezekiel 18:4).

As believers we are not to sin. We are to walk in the light, not in the darkness. But the truth is that sometimes we do sin. And the good news is that when we do fail, when we do fall short, when we do sin—we have a wonderful provision for

our sin, Jesus Christ the righteous. Two things are said about Jesus here that show how He takes away the guilt and punishment for our sins.

II. But If You Do Sin: (2:1b)

John is not naïve and that is why he follows up the words, **"I write to you, so that you may not sin"** with the words, **"And if anyone sins. . ."** He is well aware of the fact that the Christian faith is growth process.

To keep us from getting discouraged and frustrated, John reminds us of two important truths: Christ is our Advocate and He is our Propitiation or Atoning sacrifice. These aren't words we use with regularity so we need to work to understand them.

A. We have an Advocate for our Sins (2:1).

"If anyone sins," when sin inevitably creeps in, John wants us to know that we have **"an Advocate with the Father."** **"Advocate"** comes from the word *parakletos* meaning "to come alongside to help." Only John uses this word in the New Testament. In his gospel he uses it four times to describe the Holy Spirit (John 14:16, 26, 15:26, 16:7). There the word is usually translated "helper, counselor, or comforter. Here John uses it to describe **"Jesus Christ, the righteous."** He is our **"Advocate,"** helper, counselor, or comforter with **"the Father."**

This word really relates to a courtroom setting. The advocate is the one who is called alongside the accused, his defense attorney.

Revelation 12:10 speaks of Satan as **"the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night."** Satan acts like the prosecutor. He accuses us, but Jesus defends us.

There are a couple of powerful pictures of this courtroom setting in the Bible. One is in the Old Testament book of Job where Satan accuses Job of serving God only for what he could get from God. Another is found in the Old Testament book of Zechariah chapter 3.

3:1 Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the Angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to oppose him.

2 And the LORD said to Satan, "The LORD rebuke you, Satan! The LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is this not a brand plucked from the fire?"

3 Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments, and was standing before the Angel.

4 Then He answered and spoke to those who stood before Him, saying, "Take away the filthy garments from him." And to him He said, "See, I have removed your iniquity from you, and I will clothe you with rich robes."

Joshua the high priest stands before the Lord in filthy garments, tainted by his sin and the sins of his people. Satan stands up as the prosecutor, accusing Joshua of his sin and filthiness. But notice, the Lord steps in to

speaking on Joshua's behalf. The Lord rebukes Satan and cleanses Joshua of his sin.

That's exactly what Jesus Christ does for us. He is our advocate, and He is **"with the Father,"** seated at the Father's right hand always making intercession for us (Hebrews 7:25). **"Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us."** (Rom 8:34 NKJV)

In a poem entitled "My Advocate," Martha Snell Nicholson dramatically portrays the adequacy of Christ's atoning work on the cross. She wrote:

"I sinned. And straightway, posthaste, Satan flew
Before the presence of the most High God,
And made a railing accusation there.
He said, "This soul, this thing of clay and sod,
Has sinned. 'Tis true that he has named Thy Name,
But I demand his death, for Thou has said,
'The soul that sinneth, it shall die.'
Shall not Thy sentence be fulfilled? Is justice dead?
Send now this wretched sinner to his doom.
What other thing can a righteous ruler do?"
And thus he did accuse me day and night,
And every word he spoke, O God, was true!
Then quickly One rose up from God's right hand,
Before whose glory angels veiled their eyes.
He spoke, "Each jot and tittle of the law
Must be fulfilled; the guilty sinner dies!
But wait—suppose his guilt were all transferred
To Me, and that I paid his penalty!
Behold My hands, My side, My feet! One day
I was made sin for him, and died that he
Might be presented faultless at Thy throne!"
And Satan fled away. Full well he knew
That he could not prevail against such love,
For every word my dear Lord spoke was true!"

What is it that gives Jesus Christ the right to plead the case of a believer? Note exactly what the verse says, **"Jesus Christ, the Righteous One."** He is the Son of God who came to earth and lived a sinless life as man. He is the One who secured the perfect and ideal righteousness for man. Therefore, Jesus Christ is the only Person who has the right to stand before God. Why? Because He is perfect, and only a perfect person can stand in God's presence. This is the reason why man must approach God through Jesus Christ: He alone is perfect and righteous. He alone has the right to stand in God's court as the Advocate or Attorney to represent man.

This means a most wonderful thing. God will never turn down a person who has Jesus Christ as his Advocate. The person who has Jesus Christ to approach God for him will never be turned away.

Here's our problem: we already have a perfect **"Advocate with the**

Father" who readily defends us. However, His defense will not help us as long as we are trying to defend ourselves. There can only be one **"Advocate"** on the case. As long as we are defiant and evasive, still trying to rationalize and excuses our sins, we will have no fellowship with God. However, when we stop justifying ourselves, He will justify us. As Ray Stedman said so well, **"The blood of Jesus Christ cannot cleanse excuses. It only cleanses sins."**

And Jesus is the advocate for us because He is the propitiation for our sins.

B. We have Propitiation for our Sins (2:2).

Verse 2 says **"And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins."**

"Propitiation" means "appeasement, satisfaction or payment" for sin. In pagan religions it meant that a worshippers would bring some kind of sacrifice or offering to appease the god that they had offended. The offering would satisfy or propitiate the god's anger. Of course this is not the picture we have. We can bring nothing to God to appease His wrath against sin, for we ourselves are sinners.

The Greek word for propitiation is *hilasmos* and it was used to translate the Old Testament word *kippur*, meaning a "covering or atonement." This is why the NIV translates it **"atoning sacrifice."** You can read about the Day of Atonement, or *Yom Kippur*, in Leviticus 16. On the Day of Atonement the sins of the people were confessed before God. A number of sacrifices were made. The key part of the ceremony is when the High Priest brought two goats forward. He killed one goat and sprinkled its blood on the "mercy seat" or "atonement cover" of the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies. This was a way of "paying for" the sin of the people—God's wrath against sin was satisfied. The second goat is called the scapegoat. The priest placed both hands on this goat, confessed the sins of the people, and then the goat was led out into the desert and released. This goat symbolized the removal of sin from the community.

Propitiation is the removal of the wrath of God against sinners by the death of Jesus. The ultimate problem that all human beings face is that God's omnipotent wrath is against them. The ultimate good news is that there is a way to have the wrath of God averted -- and that God himself has made the way.

John said in his Gospel (3:36), **"He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."** In other words, apart from obedience to the Son of God, the wrath of God remains the biggest problem a person will ever have. According Revelation it will mean eternal anguish, **"And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever"** (Revelation 14:11). That's how serious sin is to a holy God. Because of our sin, we have offended a Holy God. We have disobeyed Him, and violated His law. Our lives have been corrupted by sin. Could God just ignore that? No! To do so would be to make Him unjust. The penalty for our sins had to be paid.

But there is Good News for the world. 1 John 4:10 says that God has made a way to propitiate (or remove) His own wrath against sinners. **"In**

this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins." God is not content to leave all people under His wrath. Nor can He simply sweep sin under the rug of the universe. Therefore God's love and God's justice conspire to make a way for sinners to be saved and God's justice to be vindicated. The answer is the death of Jesus Christ. John Stott defines propitiation as "an appeasement of the wrath of God by the love of God through the gift of God." [John Stott. The Epistles of John. (Erdmans) p. 88].

Notice back in 1:7 that it is the "**blood of Jesus his Son [that] cleanses from all sin.**" Jesus removed the wrath of God from us by dying for us. There is no more wonderful news in all the world than that Jesus Christ has endured the wrath of God in our place so that our sins are no longer counted against us. That is what it means that Christ is the propitiation for our sins.

Paul says it this way in Romans 3:

22 For there is no difference;

23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

24 being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

25 whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed,

26 to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

So by the atoning sacrifice of Jesus, God is "**just**" because He punishes sin, and God is also the "**justifier**"—the One who takes away our sin and gives us eternal life.

1 John 1:9 tells us God is "**faithful and just.**" God cannot merely overlook our sin. Justice requires that someone pay. John gently reminds us that someone has already paid in full. 2 Cor.5:21 says, "**For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.**"

When the enemy accuses me before the Father, Jesus says, "**Richard belongs to Me. Yes, he has sinned, but I have already paid for his every sin on the cross.**"

Not only did Jesus pay for my sins, but "**also for the whole world.**" John is not saying that everyone is going to Heaven. There are many other places in the Bible that say this is not the case. What John was saying is that Jesus is the atoning sacrifice for people from everywhere in the world. He is the Savior for all who will trust Him. He provides salvation for any person in any place at any time. He is the Savior of the whole world. Everyone is a sinner alienated from God. However, anyone who believes can receive Jesus' payment for his or her sin.

The eighteenth century English Poet, William Cowper, had a miserable childhood. Only six years old when his mother died, he was put in a boarding school where he was bullied and beaten mercilessly by the older boys. He tried to study law but was overwhelmed by terror. He felt he was losing his mind. He tried to commit suicide twice, and finally the twenty-five year-old Cowper was committed to an asylum.

Cowper came under the care of a man named Dr. Cotton. Cotton was a Christian and introduced Cowper to salvation through Jesus Christ. Cowper himself tells of turning to the Bible for comfort. The first verses he saw were Romans 3:24-25. After reading them he said:

Immediately I received strength to believe, and the full beams of the Sun of Righteousness shone upon me. I saw the sufficiency of the atonement he had made, my pardon in his blood, and the fullness and completeness of his justification. In a moment I believed and received the Gospel.

This was Cowper's turning point. His life was immediately transformed. He had experienced an encounter with God's grace. Because of this he would later write:

There is a fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Immanuel's veins:
And sinners, plunged beneath that flood,
Lose all their guilty stains.

The dying thief rejoiced to see
That fountain in his day;
And there have I, though vile as he,
Washed all my sins away.

E'er since by faith I saw the stream
Thy flowing wounds supply,
Redeeming love has been my theme,
And shall be till I die.

In summary, John's message to us today is: **Don't sin!** It is tremendously and terribly serious. But if you do sin, **don't despair** because your attorney is the Son of the Judge. He is righteous and he makes his case for you not on the basis of your perfection but his propitiation. And if you have found this good news, **don't keep it to yourself**. He is the Savior of the World!