

When the Spirit says No

by Ray C. Stedman

We come now to one of the most difficult verses in Scripture,

No one born of God commits sin, for God's nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God. {1 Jn 3:9 RSV}

From time to time I run into someone who says he has gone beyond the ability to sin. He has arrived at what he calls *sinless perfection*. Obviously, these would be very difficult people to live with, but they are around and you may meet them from time to time. If, in trying to deal with them from the Scriptures, you should quote a verse like First John 1:8, "If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us," they, relying upon the tactic which all cultists use "if they persecute you in one verse, flee into another," will turn to this verse in First John 3 and read to you, "No one born of God commits sin; for God's nature abides in him, and he cannot commit sin because he is born of God." There, they say triumphantly, God's Word itself says that it is possible, even necessary, for a real Christian to come to the place where he cannot sin.

So, through the centuries there have been many differing interpretations of this verse. It is a bit difficult, and many commentators have labored to explain it. Because I want to be as helpful as possible in these studies in First John, I would like briefly to mention these interpretations to you, lest you run into one some day. They boil down essentially to seven views of this verse:

1. First, there is the view I have just mentioned; those who feel this verse teaches that a Christian cannot commit even one single act of sin. These people almost always teach that this follows a crisis experience in the Christian's life which they call by various terms, usually

sanctification. A Christian passes through a time of crisis, faces himself and his whole sin nature, and the whole thing is settled, the sin nature is taken away, and from that time on the Christian cannot sin. It is a kind of religious "sheep dip" experience, where one goes through and comes out cleansed on the other side, so there is no further possibility of sinning.

I have already dealt with this in essence. John says in this same epistle, certainly with no intent to contradict himself, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves," {1 Jn 1:8a RSV}. Those who hold this view are clearly self-deceived.

2. A second view suggests that the word sin should be narrowed down to certain specific things, certain gross sins, such as murder, adultery, cruelty and other violations of love. What the apostle is saying here is that it is impossible for Christians to commit certain kinds of sins. Most Catholic commentators take this verse to support the Catholic distinction between mortal and venial sins, i.e., certain sins which are mere peccadillos that can be forgiven, and others which are impossible to forgive. That view holds there are certain kinds of sins which no real Christian can commit. But the answer, of course, to that is that all the sins that are listed in whatever catalogue of mortal sins is in view, have been committed by believers mentioned in the Bible, so that it is clear from the Scriptures that believers can commit these sins. There is no such double standard for sins in the Scriptures as is suggested by this division of mortal and venial sins. It simply does not exist.

3. A third view of this passage (a view related to #2) is that this is referring to certain willful sins, i.e., it teaches a Christian cannot commit willful or deliberate sins. He may drift into sin, he may, through weakness or carelessness, fall into sin, but he never knowingly, deliberately, openly, violates the will of God. Again, the answer to it is to ask, “What about David in the Old Testament who willfully and deliberately committed the twin sins of murder and adultery?” The whole range of Christian experience as well as Scripture contradicts this. Who of us would dare claim that we never have willfully, deliberately sinned? How many of us are aware of the times when, knowing a thing to be wrong, we have deliberately gone ahead and done it? That view can hardly be the correct one.
4. A fourth view approaches this by teaching that sin in a believer is not regarded as such by God, that what may be done by an unbeliever and called sin is not so called when done by a believer; there is a difference between these. If an unbeliever tells a lie, that is a sin; but if a believer does it, that is a mistake, or, at most, a manifestation of weakness, but it is not a sin. That view is so presumptuous and so ridiculous as hardly to warrant an answer. It is enough to point out that, early in this passage, John defines sin for us: He says it is lawlessness, becoming a law unto yourself. Any act of it, whether committed by a Christian or a non-Christian is exactly the same – it is sin.
5. There is yet a fifth view of this passage which declares that John is describing here an ideal condition, not a realistic one, that ideally this should be true. This, of course, changes the meaning of the passage to make it say that a Christian should not sin, rather than he cannot. But that is to water down the force of the word which John uses. It is clear that what he says, plainly and without equivocation, is that a Christian cannot sin because he is born of God. So this view does not settle the matter.
6. A sixth view is widely held by many people, that John here is contrasting two natures within the believer:

- One which is received from Adam, the Adamic nature, the natural life, which always sins; and
- The other, the new nature received from God, which never sins.

This seems to be a plausible explanation of this verse, at least to many. I confess that for some time it had great appeal to me, until I began to examine the passage more critically. It is true, of course, that the old nature within a believer does sin, and the new life which God has implanted can never sin. This is most certainly true. But not natures are in view here but a whole person. It may be possible to distinguish between a conflict in desires within us (who is not aware of that? – a civil war going on in the presence of temptation, where we feel ourselves pulled first in one direction and then in another), but it is quite another thing to try to distinguish acts as belonging to one nature or another. A person acts as a whole being. A decision must be made between conflicting desires and the result is an act, but that act is the act of the whole person, not merely of one side of his being.

That kind of reasoning always reminds me of the burglar who was arrested and brought before a judge. His defense consisted of pointing out to the judge that it was not his whole body that was involved in the burglary, but only his arm and hand. Though he would freely admit that the arm and the hand had taken something that did not belong to him, nevertheless, it was unfair of the judge to punish his whole body along with the arm and the hand. The judge very wisely solved the problem by sentencing the arm and the hand to thirty days in jail, and leaving it up to the rest of the body whether it chose to accompany them or not!

It is true that the apostle says in Romans 7, “It is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells in me,” {cf, Rom 7:17}. This would superficially lead us to think that Paul is making this kind of a distinction, saying, “I no longer sin. It is just something within me, that is not me anymore, which does this kind of a thing.” But we can hardly take that view if we read the

whole passage, for the apostle is clearly not denying a personal involvement in sin, but rather he is denying the conscious intent of sin. He is saying that even when he thinks he is avoiding sin, even when out of a dedicated, sincere, earnest desire to do the will of God, he is trying to do what God wants out of the energy and power of his flesh, he finds himself confronted yet with the results of sin – weakness, barrenness and despair. That whole struggle in Romans 7 is that baffling, frustrating experience of a person who, in utter dedication and sincerity, is trying to do God's will but finds his life still in the doldrums of despair, depression and weakness which can only come as a result of sin. That is why he calls out, "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from this body of death?" {Rom 7:24 KJV}.

7. The seventh view of this verse, and the one we espouse because it fits the context, is that the Apostle John is saying here that a Christian cannot persist in habitual, continual sin because he is born of God. He cannot sin without a struggle or without a sense of grief so powerful that ultimately, despite his struggles, he will be brought to repentance and a forsaking of sin. What he is declaring to us, then, is that sin is no longer natural to the believer. Though, for a time, he may slip into it rather easily, nevertheless, it is now contrary to his nature. His heart is set toward God, and his life is a truceless antagonism against sin, and this must become apparent by breaking away from the bondage and slavery of sin. "No one born of God commits sin; for God's nature abides in him," he declares. He cannot persist, he cannot go on continuously living in what he knows to be sin. This is made clear in the tense of the compound verb, *to commit sin*. It is not aorist, which would have meant a single act of sin, but rather it is the present, continuous tense, "to go on committing sin." This usage fits the context of the verse. Twice John has told us that the Son of God has appeared to take away sin and to destroy, unloose, or dissolve the works of the devil, the results of sin. He comes into our lives by faith for this very purpose. Since he is a Sovereign, Supreme Being, in whose hands all power in heaven and on earth resides, he moves irresistibly to this end within us. There-

fore, it is quite to be expected that John would say it is not possible for anyone who has been born of God to go on endlessly living in sin, and content to do so.

This means that, if we have been born again, soon after our conversion (often very soon) there comes a time when the Spirit of God, who has filled us with joy, blessing, peace, assurance and other glorious things in Christ, begins to put his finger upon certain specific things and says, "No! These must go." Our usual reaction is to say, "But they're such little things, they really don't bother. Let's not talk about these trivial things, these peccadillos; let's go on in this happy relationship together. Don't disturb it now with these minor matters." But they are not minor. They are the things that have been keeping us in bondage. They are the reason for our restlessness, our distress, our depression, and our heartache. Because God loves us, he will not put up with them, so he persists, he perseveres, despite our struggling and twisting; he is absolutely inflexible, ruthless. We twist about a dozen different ways and try to get around his insistence, but at every turn there he stands with his arms folded saying, "What are you going to do about this?"

Have you ever had that experience? Have you known what it means for the Spirit of God to say "No," and, despite everything you do, you cannot get away from that "No"?

Other Scriptures confirm this interpretation of Verse 9:

- There is Philippians 1:6, which we often quote, "Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work within you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ." He will not grow discouraged, he is not going to quit. He has started to free you from sin, and he is going to do it. He will not force your will, but he will bring you into circumstances that will make you listen, and at last he will do the job. "He who has begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ."
- There is that passage in Romans 8, Verse 29 which says, "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son [that is the goal he has in mind, that

is what he starts out to achieve in you], in order that he [the Son] might be the firstborn among many brethren.” Then he goes on, “And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified: and those whom he justified he also glorified.” You see, he is determined to do what he began.

- Again in Galatians 5, “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would,” {Gal 5:17 RSV}. There is the Spirit of God standing across your path, like the angel stood across the pathway of Balaam, the prophet, as he sought in disobedience to do that which God had commanded him not to do. Everywhere he turned the angel stood across his path, and the only one intelligent enough to see him was the donkey Balaam rode. Thus God stands across our path. We cannot do the things that we would.

There have been times in my experience as a Christian when I have felt the full force and drive of some temptation, and was in a circumstance where I could have fulfilled it, I had every opportunity to do it, and felt a full desire to do so, but I couldn't. Something held me back; I just couldn't do it, despite all my desire. That is the Spirit saying, “No!”

Now notice what John says is the reason for all this; why John says it is true – because “God's nature [or God's seed] abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God.” When we are born again, something very radical has happened to us. There is a deep, radical, inward transformation which changes us from the bottom up. Because of that change, the process can never be reversed. God's seed abides in us and we cannot persist in habitual sin because there is a root within, a life that is constantly surging up, that simply will not permit this thing to go on forever.

Yesterday, in Southern California, I talked with a handsome young man, twenty-one years of age, who told me that six months before he had been a college student, frustrated, restless, rootless; living in a constant depression. He described how continually despairing he was, and how life was one drab, colorless hue. In his desperation he had tried

marijuana, LSD and several other things, but nothing helped at all. When I talked with him only six months later, he was a clear-eyed, happy-hearted youth – peaceful, joyful, obviously living life to the full. What had happened? In the meantime he had been born of God! It made all the difference in the world. He was a completely different person. He had been joined to Jesus Christ.

Now he did not have two natures; he had only one and it was linked to Christ, joined to Christ. As Paul says, “Christ, who is our life” {Col 3:4} will one day appear. As Christians we do not have any other life than his life, he is our life. We are married to him, is the way Paul describes it in Romans 7, married to him who is risen from the dead. We do not have any other life but that. It is true there is another nature within us, but it is not ours any more – it is a false life. The difference between these two natures is that, for the believer, one is true and the other is false. One is the true life that is his by virtue of being joined to Christ; the other is false. Temporarily we can act in response to that false life, but, like everything else false, it has no permanency about it. A Christian can commit single acts of sin, even repeatedly, for awhile; but he cannot go on, cannot habitually, persistently, contentedly live in sin. This is what John is declaring to us so plainly here.

We are joined to Christ. Because of this tie which exists and which can no longer be broken by us, the Spirit of God who dwells within us, and by whom we are sealed unto the day of redemption, who will never leave us, is continually pressing us on to enter this “abiding” state we have been discussing. We are joined to Christ by regeneration, but our attitude can sometimes be very resistant and difficult, and we are always striving to do everything ourselves. What the Spirit of God is constantly teaching us is to relax and to “abide” in him; to learn to be quietly, trustfully, dependent upon the life we have received within us to express itself through our actions, our words, and our deeds. That is abiding. As we have seen in Verse 6, “No one who abides in him sins;” {1 Jn 3:6 RSV}. This is why the Spirit of God is forever putting us into circumstances which temporarily force us (and that word is not too strong) to abide in Christ. That is why even the newest believer in Jesus Christ, though he may not understand much at all about the theology of living in Christ, abiding in him, will nevertheless sometimes experience it,

because he is put into circumstances that force him to do so, even if only for a limited period of time. This is God's way of teaching us that this is the intended basis of life, this is Standard Operating Procedure. "If we walk in the Spirit," Paul says in Galatians, "we will not fulfill the lusts of the flesh," {Gal 5:16 KJV}. So, to help us to break the habit of sin, God forces us into circumstances in which we must walk in the Spirit.

From this we can make two brief observations:

1. One is that this is the explanation for many of the pressures and trials we go through. Not for all of them, but for many. What is abiding? Well, trust and dependence. Thus when we get into a circumstance where we don't know what to do and we are rendered desperate by some pressure, then after we have exhausted every other possibility there is only one place left to go – to God, to Christ. When, in a kind of quiet desperation, we turn to him and say, "Lord, I've had it. I don't know what else to do but trust you," he says, "That's exactly the point I was hoping you'd see. That's what I've been trying to get you to do all along, to trust me, depend on me to work through you." Thus, in that desperate moment, even though it be for but a moment, we are abiding in Christ and the pattern and power of sin is broken for that moment.

You can see it in that story of Peter walking on the water. Remember, as the fearful disciples looked out from their boat in the midst of the storm, they saw Jesus walking on the waves. They thought he was a ghost. They were very frightened, but Jesus said, "Be not afraid, It is I." Then Peter, in his bold impulsiveness, said, "Lord, if it be you, bid me come to you on the water." The Lord immediately said, "Come." {cf, Matt 14:28-29}. Without thinking through all that was involved, Peter climbed out of the boat and started across on the water, doing fine – until he began to think about what he was doing. When he suddenly realized that he was out away from the boat, unsupported, on the surface of the waves, and he saw them billowing up on either side and heard the wind blowing, he took his eyes off the Lord and down he went. About the time he began to blubber he looked up and saw the Lord and said, "Lord, save me," {Matt 14:30}. It is

said to be the shortest prayer in the Bible. The Lord reached out his hand and lifted him up and the two of them walked back together on the water to the boat.

Now that is the Christian life. The Lord will put you in places where you have to say, "Lord, save me." He does this continually.

Yesterday at the Bible Study Fellowship Conference at Arrowhead Springs we had a sharing time. Among many wonderful expressions of God's faithful dealings with those present was one woman who stood up, and with her voice breaking with emotion, tears very close to the surface she said, "I want to tell you that a year ago I was arrested for nearly beating my two-and-a-half year old son to death. It so frightened me that I would be capable of doing a thing like that in anger that I began to listen to what the Lord was saying to me and I came to Christ." Then her voice did break, and with tears flooding down her cheeks, she said, "and you know, the greatest joy that I have in Bible Study Fellowship is that they've made me the attendant at the nursery. I've got eleven children and next year, they tell me, it will be doubled." She was so happy she could hardly contain herself. Now what taught her that lesson? It was God allowing her to be put into that circumstance, where in desperation she called out for help and thus abode in the Lord. Of course, he strengthened her because, "no one who abides in him sins."

2. Then the second observation we can make from this is that the inability to persist in sin is primary proof of the new life in Jesus Christ. If you are claiming to be a Christian, but you are not turning from sin, if you are going on week after week, month after month, year after year in a condition and relationship that you know is wrong, then you are not a Christian. Despite your experience, despite your claim, despite your attendance in church or anything else, you have never been born again! This is the proof of it. Is that not what John says? No one who sins has either seen him or known him." No one who persists in sin, no one who habitually remains in a rebellious, lawless attitude toward God, has ever seen him or known him.

It is possible for both a sheep and a pig to fall into a mud hole, but the difference in their nature becomes immediately evident in their reaction. The pig is perfectly happy. He rolls over on his back, singing "Home Sweet Home." But the sheep is very disturbed, troubled, unhappy and miserable, and earnestly desires to get out.

So, John says, no one born of God can persist in habitual sin, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot go on sinning continuously, because he is born of God. The seed of God, the Spirit of God, the life of God, implanted by the Word of God, abides in him. It is as ineradicable as crabgrass! You know how you cannot get rid of that no matter what you do. You can spray it, you can dig it, you can pull it up, but it is still there the next spring. So the world can, with its antagonism, spray the life of God, the devil can dig at it, but it cannot be gotten out, it is still there. That is what the mark of a real Christian is, he is growing away from sin, he

is turning away from evil things. If you go on in sin you are deceiving yourself; you are not a child of God.

Prayer:

Thank you, our Father, for these plain words from this apostle. He has made it crystal clear what must be the test. We cannot deceive you, Lord, for you know our hearts, but we can deceive ourselves so easily. What a wonderful comfort it is to know that if we have been born of you; our desire has been changed; there is something deep within us that rises above this passion and lust after sin which we admit is there, and which cancels it out, makes us turn from it and drives us on to purity, holiness and truth. We thank you in Christ's name, Amen.