

1 John 3:1-10

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Introduction

We continue our study of difficult passages that are often misinterpreted with 1 John 3:1-10, a passage that some say means that:

- A believer cannot sin
- Or he can lose his salvation if he does sin
- Or, more likely, he was never saved.

As we shall see, these interpretations are flawed. Before we dive into our study passages, we need to first establish the context.

Context

John's readers had been hearing false teachers, called "antichrists" (1 John 2:18), deny the full deity and humanity of Christ as a manifestation in the hearts of believers, the "new person" that comes from regeneration. Considering 1 John 3:7, "Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous," it's probable that the antichrists had a milder view of sin that John wanted to counter.

In Chapter 1, John shares personal testimony about the person of Christ. He states that he has seen and touched Him, confirming His existence (vs. 1 and 2). He then discusses light and darkness, with light symbolizing righteousness and darkness representing carnal living. In verses 8 and 10, he clearly indicates that believers do sin, but there is a remedy for this found in verse 9: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

In chapter 2, John encourages the believers hearing his message to live holy and honor God.

1 John 2:1 My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

“So that you may not sin” implies that a believer, John’s “little children,” can choose not to sin. John presents Christ as our antidote to sin as long as we “walk in the light” (1 John 2:10).

1 John 2:28 And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming.

We are to “abide” (*meno*) in Him, which can refer to either the Father or the Son, so that when Christ comes back, we will not be ashamed (v. 29). Two words here crucial to understanding this passage need to be addressed: “abide” and “ashamed.”

Abiding

The Greek verb *meno* (“abide”) is used by John more than by any other writer in Scripture. John uses *meno* 10 times in verses 6–27. He uses it 66 times out of the 112 total instances of its use in the New Testament. The word means to sojourn, tarry, not to depart, and to remain present with. It is very similar to the word “walk,” which John also frequently uses.

1 John 1:7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

“Walk” is *peripateo* and means to walk or be occupied with. It is also used to describe a lifestyle, as seen here. John is calling for his readers to “walk in the light, as he is in the light,” meaning our lifestyle should mirror that of Christ. Since it is a command, it implies that successful “walking” is feasible. If we conduct our lives in a way that we are “living” (walking) in the light of God’s Word, just as Jesus walked in the light, then we have fellowship with one another and are cleansed from all sin. *Meno* and *peripateo* are very similar in meaning. Both could be viewed as describing a lifestyle. *Meno* implies continuing or remaining in that lifestyle, and *peripateo* is the lifestyle itself. Paul sheds some light on this in his Epistle to the Galatians.

Galatians 5:16 But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

Here is that word *peripateo* (walk). Paul is saying the same thing John is saying. A lifestyle (walk) in harmony with God will be a lifestyle free of sin. That harmony with God, that lifestyle free of sin, is only possible when the believer has confessed his sins and conducts his life in a manner that he is *placing his full faith* in the leading and power of the indwelling Holy Spirit to see him through all of life's trials and tribulations.

1 John 2:24 Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Son and in the Father. ²⁵ And this is the promise that he made to us—eternal life.

John uses *meno* again here, which is translated as “abide,” meaning to remain or dwell, and suggests ongoing action – to keep dwelling. When referring to a state or condition, it means to stay in that state and not become something different. In this context, John is urging his audience not to be drawn into the world and its evil, but to stay in a state of abiding in the Lord. In that abiding condition, the believer can experience their God-given eternal life here and now to the fullest.

The manifestation of that would be what Paul, back in Galatians, refers to as the Fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). We understand that the Fruit of the Spirit is divinely produced in the faithful believer by the indwelling Holy Spirit, and more importantly, these nine qualities describe the very lifestyle of Christ when He walked on this earth. We can walk by means of the Spirit, experience a life free of sin (Galatians 5:16), and live the same lifestyle as Jesus Christ as long as we abide (walk, trust) in the guiding and power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. As such, we will be “keeping His commandments, loving the brethren, and not loving the world. In other words, if we abide/walk in the Spirit, we can live the same perfect lifestyle as our Savior and enjoy His perfect “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23). We can be just like Him. With this understanding from Paul that there are conditions in which we will not sin, the passage in Matthew 5:48 suddenly makes sense, “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” We are called to perfection, and if we walk in the Spirit, we can be “perfect” (sinless) – at least as long as we maintain that “walking in the Spirit” attitude.

Ashamed

1 John 2:28 And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming.

We are called to abide in Him, and if we do, we will not experience “shame at His coming.” “His coming” refers to His Second Coming, specifically the Rapture of the Church. That is a wonderful event that we all look forward to. Why would we feel shame? Because the Bema Judgment follows the Rapture, and that is when we stand before Christ the Judge and give an accounting of our spiritual lives back on Earth.

2 Corinthians 5:10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

This judgment takes place in Heaven after the Rapture, while the Tribulation unfolds on Earth. It involves only believers from the Church Age, the Bride of Christ, who are raptured before the Tribulation begins. It is called a “judgment,” but more accurately, it is an evaluation. Church Age believers will stand before our Judge, Jesus Christ, to give an account of our works while on Earth, “whether good or evil.” “Evil” is *phaulos* and can mean ethically, bad, base, or wicked, which is the definition we most often associate with the word “evil” in modern usage. But the Greek can also mean worthless and of no account, which I think is the idea being expressed here.

Did we produce divine good, or did we produce “good” that is worthless and of no account, what we have been calling human good? Divine good is a result of divine guidance and enablement that glorifies God. Human goodness may have benefited someone, but it is a product of human effort and for human glorification. It is worthless and of no account in God’s plan.

1 Corinthians 3:11 For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw — ¹³ each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work

each one has done. ¹⁴ If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

These works are assessed to determine rewards. Divine good, "gold, silver, precious stones," survives the "fire test" and will be rewarded for its value in the Kingdom. Human good, "wood, hay, straw," will be burned up in the fire test, and its human creators will not receive rewards because it is "worthless and of no account" in God's plan and glorified mankind.

Note two things:

1. Sins are not a concern at the Bema judgment or any other judgment. The sins of the whole world were judged at the Cross and will never be addressed at any judgment after the Cross.
2. Also note that the believer's salvation is not at stake. "If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire" (v. 15).

However, the believer whose works are burned as "wood, hay, straw" will feel shame for their failure.

1 John 2:28 And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not **shrink from him in shame** at his coming.

"Confidence" is *parrhesia*, and it means freedom in speaking – speaking openly and frankly. If the readers of the epistle of 1 John would maintain their fellowship with God, they would enjoy a genuine boldness of speech when they meet their Lord. This boldness comes as a result of abiding/walking in the Spirit and following the guidance and empowerment of the Spirit to do all that we are called to do for the Lord. Those believers will not "shrink from Him in shame," for they have nothing to be ashamed of. In contrast, those who have deserted Him shall be ashamed before Him; they shall be ashamed of themselves, ashamed of their unbelief, their cowardice, their ingratitude, their temerity, and their folly in forsaking so glorious a Redeemer. They shall be ashamed that they had deserted Him and did not trust Him. The good news is this is the only time they will feel shame in Heaven.

Practice Righteousness

1 John 2:29 If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.

“Practices” is *poieo* and doesn’t mean keep trying – practice until you get it right. The word means to do something. Those “who *do* righteousness” are born of Him. By their righteous deeds, you can be sure they have been “born of him.” It is one thing to testify that we “know” Christ, but it is entirely another to demonstrate a life that shows *He is our righteousness*. It is one thing to know positionally that we are in Christ and that we are accepted and loved, but it is altogether different to have a life that honors and glorifies Him. We recognize other believers not by their words but by their lives. Righteousness is a family trait of the Father, and His children should resemble their Father.

The statement has nothing to do with the readers’ personal assurance of salvation. Instead, it asserts that when they see genuine righteousness demonstrated, they can be confident that the person displaying it is a child of God.

The opposite of John’s statement is not true; that is, not everyone who is born of God does righteousness. John understood that Christians can walk in darkness and are prone to sin; otherwise, why call for walking in the light? A born-again believer can appear lost if his lifestyle doesn’t reflect that of the Father. John clearly states that a Christian can sin and do so impressively.

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

1 John 1:9 If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

1 John 2:1 My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

John was writing in 1 John 2:29 about how you can see the new birth in others' actions, saying, "everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him." It should be obvious, but sadly, it is not always the case.

1 John 3:1 See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

John is amazed by the fact that we are members of the Royal Family of God when he says, "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God." He is not suggesting that we *expect* to become sons of God, but that we *are* sons of God through the new birth. And if we are sons of God, then we share in His DNA – His characteristics.

The word "know" should be translated as "begin to understand." That last sentence in the verse might be better expressed as, "The reason why the world does not *begin to understand* us is that it did not *begin to understand* Him." We are sons of God, and the world has no appreciation for that fact. In reality, the world might see the righteousness of a son of God and feel only contempt because they lack understanding of the Father and what He is doing in His children. A good example of this is the way so many on the political left see what they perceive as "evil" in the ministry of Charlie Kirk and Turning Point USA, but fail to see or understand the good. The conclusion one must draw is that they don't even "begin to understand God."

1 John 3:2 Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. ³ And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

We might be God's children now, and what you see might or might not reflect His righteousness, but just wait! "What we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him."

The world's failure to know (understand) Christ's followers is not surprising, because the world did not know Him. Grammatically, "Him" should refer to the Father, but clearly John is referring to Christ. We are God's children now, not at some future time. His recognition of our present sonship does

not prevent John from acknowledging that the best is yet to come. “When he appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.”

To finally “see” God means we will undergo a transformation. The transforming power of this vision of Christ is the consummation of the glorious process begun at the new birth.

2 Corinthians 3:18 And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

1 Corinthians 13:12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

“Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself” (1 John 3:3). This is the only place in John’s letters where the word “hope” appears; his focus in this letter is primarily on the believer’s current situation rather than their future hope. However, this passage shows that John recognizes the significance of hope. It is not clear whether “Him” refers to God or Christ, but perhaps John does not sharply distinguish between the two here. He emphasizes that the believer’s hope is based on a strong foundation, which affects how Christians live. Those who “see” God—in terms of awareness of His person, His deity, and His righteousness—are spiritually alive with that understanding. To know (see) God is not to lead to spiritual complacency but to foster an expectation of living a pure life. It is the pure in heart who see God.

Anyone who puts their hope in faith on the Son of God undergoes an inner purification that is just as complete as Christ’s own purity (“just as He is pure”). John thus laid the foundation for the statements he would soon make (1 John 3:6, 9). Being born again involves a perfect cleansing from sin.

John is sharing the wonderful love that the Father has for His children. I have been saved, I am being saved, and I will be saved.

1 John 3:4 Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.

John now writes about sin, which opposes the purity he just mentioned in verse 3. The NIV translates his statement as, “Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness (*anomia*).” In the Greek New Testament, *anomia* is generally a broad term similar to the English word “wickedness” that is often used in eschatological contexts (see Matthew 7:23; 13:41; 24:12; 2 Thessalonians 2:7). Its use here might be significant. John likely meant it as a strongly negative description of sin. He emphasizes that sin is wickedness, and anyone who sins is doing what is wicked.

The Law reflects God’s perfect standard. Sin is a violation of the Law. Since no man or woman can fully keep all the Law, its real purpose is to convict us and make us aware that we are sinners. It is meant to show that we cannot meet God’s perfect standard.

James 2:10 For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it.

James emphasizes that even breaking a single rule under the Law makes you just as guilty as breaking them all. Sin is essentially anything that goes against God's will, and a sinner is someone who disobeys God's commands.

The Law was never given with the purpose of saving anyone. Salvation has always been by grace through faith. It was meant to show man that he is a sinner and to point out that man cannot save himself. This means there must be another way of salvation, and that way is Jesus Christ, the way, the truth, and the light.

Romans 8:5 For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.

If you are “abiding” in the flesh – living a fleshly lifestyle – then all your thoughts and actions are fleshly and conflict with the will of God. However, those who “live” or “walk” in the guidance and power of the indwelling Spirit will *naturally* focus on “the things of the Spirit,” meaning following the Spirit’s lead. The question then is, who will you trust? Do you trust your fleshly sin nature, or do you trust God? Which one is more likely to lead you astray? Sin must not be taken lightly.

1 John 3:5 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.

Here begins a tricky series of verses that are often misunderstood. A common explanation of this verse is that a believer “does not sin habitually,” meaning sin is not their pattern of life. However, the Greek text does not have words to represent phrases like “keeps on,” “continues to,” or “habitually.” These interpretations rely on an understanding of the Greek present tense, which many New Testament scholars now dispute. It cannot be proven anywhere in the New Testament that the present tense can carry this kind of meaning without additional words. Such a view is invalid for this verse and also for 1 John 3:9. Nor does John mean that sinless perfection must be achieved, or that those who fail to do so will lose their salvation. That idea is foreign to John’s argument and to all of Scripture.

The seriousness of sin is emphasized by the fact that Christ came to take away our sins. And in Him, there is no sin. The Incarnation brought into the world the One who is completely sinless and whose goal was to remove sin from the lives of His own (cf. John 1:29; Hebrews 9:28a). It logically follows that a person who “abides” in a sinless Person must also be sinless, because they have a new, pure nature that is sinless.

Sin can never be part of the experience of abiding in Christ. “No one who abides in Him sins” (v. 6a). While the meaning of this is clear, there has been a perceived inconsistency between this and John’s earlier insistence that a believer can never claim to be without sin (1:8). The answer to this problem is suggested by 3:3, where the purification of the one “who has this hope in Him” is compared to the purity of Christ (“just as He is pure”). From this, it follows that the regenerate life is, in a sense, fundamentally sinless. For the believer, sin is abnormal and unnatural; his whole orientation is away from sin. Hebrews refers to this urging by the Spirit as “chastisement.”

Hebrews 12:6 For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.”

Chastisement implies correction in righteousness. The Spirit guides and corrects believers.

The fact remains, however, that Christians do not live a perfect, sinless life on this earth; therefore, 1 John 1:8 and 10 remain true. The two ideas are not really incompatible. The Christian still battles with the flesh and overcomes its impulses only through the help of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:16-26).

Paul wrestled with sin and said, “Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it” (Romans 7:20). In this way, Paul sees sin as not truly part of his innermost being (cf. Romans 7:25). When he wrote, “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20), he was expressing the same idea. If Christ is the one truly living in him, then sin cannot be part of that experience. To the extent that God is experienced by a believer, that experience is free from sin.

1 John 3:7 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.

“Little children,” this is addressed to those who belong to God. John suggests that they have been misled by the “antichrists” mentioned earlier (2:18), who spread false teachings about sin and righteousness. Perhaps the antichrists felt free to sin while denying their guilt and claiming to live righteously. Or they *believed they could sin* and simply fall back on 1 John 1:9. Believers are positionally “in Christ” at salvation, but here, John is speaking of being *identified with Christ in deeds*. If you identify with Him (past tense: *was saved*) and abide in Him through fellowship and service (present tense *being saved*), sin must be abandoned. Those who are righteous (past tense: *were saved*) practice righteousness (present tense: *are being saved*) “walk in the Spirit,” (Galatians 5:16). Only righteousness comes from a righteous nature.

In contrast, anyone who commits sin is of the devil. All sin, regardless of type or degree, is satanic in origin. This is because the devil has been sinning from the beginning (John 8:44). Sin originated with Satan and is his

ongoing practice. Any involvement in sin is participation in his activity. And God will not allow you to be satisfied or happy in sin (chastisement).

It also opposes the work of the Son of God, who came (appeared; 1 John 3:5; Hebrews 9:28a) to put an end to that activity (*lysē*, destroy), which is the devil's work. Even the smallest sin runs counter to the work of Christ. Believers are to overcome "the evil one" (1 John 2:13-14), here called "the devil," and not take part in what he does.

1 John 3:9 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.

As was pointed out in connection with verse 6, adding phrases such as "continue to" and "go on" to John's statements about sinning is not justified based on the Greek text. John is not referring to an absolute in the sense of a believer or unbeliever, but rather he is speaking of a tendency to sin or not, depending on the current state of the believer's fellowship with God.

All sin originates from Satan (1 John 3:8). Sin does not stem from God's seed, the believer's regenerated nature. The child of God cannot and does not sin. The explanation here is the same as in verse 6. The "new man" or "new self" (Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10) is an entirely perfect new creation. By emphasizing this point, John was seeking to correct a false idea about sin. Sin is never, and cannot be, anything but satanic. It can never come from the true, regenerated nature of a Christian.

1 John 3:10 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.

John provides several reasons why Christ was revealed.

1. To reveal the Father and enable us to fellowship with Him, 1:2–3;
2. To take away our sins, 3:4–5;
3. To destroy (annul) the works of the devil, 3:8; and
4. To reveal God's love and bestow God's life, 4:9.

The fact that sin caused Christ's suffering and death should be enough reason for a Christian to hate sin and flee from it. John describes sin as

breaking the law. A Christian who *abides* in Christ (fellowship) will not intentionally break God's law. Every Christian sins, maybe without realizing it, but no true Christian will intentionally and repeatedly disobey Him.

More accurately, verse 6 should say, "Anyone who abides in Him has no tendency to sin."

Ephesians 2:1 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— ³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

Ephesians 2:1-3 clearly shows that the unsaved constantly sin because they live according to the flesh and for the devil. But the Christian has a new nature within and is no longer a slave to Satan. God does not destroy or erase the old nature; instead, He places a new nature inside that creates a desire for spiritual things. This new nature cannot sin. Of course, believers who yield to the old nature will stumble and fall.

What John is saying is that the believer has two natures, and therefore two places where they can "abide." Think of abiding here as "function." We can give control to our sin nature and abide in carnality, functioning there, *and* appearing as if we are unsaved. In that state, we cannot produce righteousness. Any product will only be lawlessness.

Alternatively, we can abide in Christ, in whom there is no sin. Abiding in Christ involves partaking of His sinless nature, which we received at regeneration. Someone who partakes of His divine nature does not commit lawlessness but only produces righteousness (Galatians 5:16). *Ongoing* sinless righteousness depends on *consistently* abiding in the divine nature within us. Continuing to function in that new nature relies on faith in the Spirit's leading and power.

2 Peter 1:3 His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, ⁴ by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become

partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.

A child of God is given a new nature, and that new nature does not – cannot – sin. God knows what is in our hearts and whether we are truly born again, but our neighbor next door has no such understanding. The only way for him to know is to see the life of our new nature, the life of God, manifested in our lives. Our testimony comes not from our words but from the way we conduct our lives.