

Does My Sinful Life Mean That I'm Not Really A Christian?

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I. Introduction

Some believe that if we continue to live in sin, then it means that we're not really Christians. Is this true, is this what 1 John 3 teaches? Or is God saying something else to His beloved children, something that may sound harsh, but is in fact the words of a Loving Father trying to encourage His children not to stray from Him?

II. Does Our Sinful Behavior Reveal That We're Not Really Christians?

Some people interpret James 2:14-26 essentially as saying that if you don't possess enough good works in your life, then it means you're lacking the right kind of faith and thus, you're not a Christian. When in fact James is talking about whether or not you will apply the faith that you have. In 1 John 3, the argument is the opposite, i.e., the focus is on your sins. If you have too many sins, then you prove that you're not a Christian. How do they come to this conclusion?

Some look at the end of 1 John and conclude that, as with his Gospel (cf. John 20:30-31), John tells you the reason why he wrote at the end of it. So they see 1 John 5:13 as containing the purpose of the entire letter. And what's the purpose of 1 John? "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life." There it is, John wrote 1 John so that you will "know that you have eternal life." Therefore, what John says in 1 John 3 is written to test whether or not you have eternal life, i.e., whether or not you're a Christian. And since 1 John 3 says, "Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him" and "He who sins is of the Devil" (3:6, 8), it follows that if you continue in sin, then you're not a Christian. Is all this true? Not exactly. It's true that John gives you the purpose of his writing at the end of his Gospel with the words "these are written" (John 20:31). But in his first epistle, John uses a similar phrase four times, not just at the end of the letter. He uses it in 1:4 to refer to 1:1-3. He uses it in 2:1 to refer to 1:5-10. He uses it in 2:26 to refer to 2:18-25. And he uses it in 5:13 to refer to 5:6-12. Therefore, 5:13 does not refer to 3:6, 8, or 9 or any other part of his letter except 5:6-12. So based on this argument, John did not write 1 John 3 as a tool for his audience to test their Christianity.

Another argument that John's first letter is in fact a way to test your Christianity, comes from chapter 3 itself. The argument is based on the Greek present tense. They say that in Greek a present tense verb can communicate continuous action. That's why you see some translations like the NIV translate a verse like 3:9 as follows, "No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God." It is true that the Greek present tense verb can communicate continuous action. However, that's not the only kind of action the Greek present tense can communicate. According to Wallace, there are 11 types of action that the Greek present tense possesses.¹ So how is one to determine which action to use? You can't translate a present tense verb with continuous action simply because it's a present tense. If that's the case, then why didn't the translators of the NIV render the verbal in 3:4 and 3:8 as continuous?

¹ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1996), 513.

The NIV renders 3:4 as, "Everyone who sins breaks the law." Why didn't they render it, "Everyone who continues to sin breaks the law"? They also render 3:8 as, "He who does what is sinful is of the devil." Why didn't they render it, "He who continues to do what is sinful is of the devil"? Because it would lead to absurdity. That is, one would then ask, "You mean if I only sin once in a while, I'm not a law breaker or of the devil?" In fact, that's what the NIV's rendering of 3:6 leads to. Because one can now ask of 3:6, "You mean, if I only sin once in a while, I can still say that I see and know Jesus?" You need more than the fact that a verb is present tense before you can render it with continuous action. There must be something in the context that indicates continuous action or something lexically (i.e., inherent in the meaning of the word) that leads the translator to think the author meant continuous action. Thus, we must ask ourselves if John indeed intended continuous action in 3:6 or 3:9 or anywhere else in his letter. If John didn't write 1 John for us to test whether or not we are Christians, then why did he write it?

Who's the audience in 1 John? They are God's children: not only is John their spiritual father, but God is their Father (2:1, 13). That's not all, there are several other clear indications that John's audience has a strong and permanent relationship with God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ: Jesus Christ is their Advocate who intercedes on their behalf and completely satisfied God's wrath regarding all their sins (2:1-2). Their sins have been forgiven (2:12). They have known Jesus (2:13). They have overcome the Devil (2:13-14). They are strong and God's Word abides in them (2:14). They have an anointing from the Holy One and know the whole body of Christian truth (2:20). And the anointing that they received from Jesus abides in them and teaches them all Christian truth and as it teaches them they will abide in Christ (2:27). This is why in the passage in question, right at the beginning, God makes an unequivocal statement that He is their Father: He calls them His beloved children (3:1)! In fact, in 5:1 God clearly says that He gave birth to them the moment they believed in His Son. Why is all this important? Because whatever God says in 3:9 or anywhere else in this letter, they are the words of a Loving Father to His children. This means that He's not questioning their identity as Christians; they are His born-again Christian children, regardless of how sinful they may be. In fact, sin cannot undo their Christian birth because all their sins have been forgiven, satisfied by Jesus Christ (2:2, 12, cf. 2 Timothy 2:13). All this talk of sin has to do with the damage that sin does to their relationship with the Father and the Son.

What's the context of 1 John 3?

1 John 1, rather than questioning his audience's Christianity or giving them a tool to test it themselves, John's focus is on living life with God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and what happens to that relationship when we sin. Thus, he starts by telling us that eternal life is not an it but a who and His name is Jesus Christ; our aim in life is to live it with Him and God the Father (1:1-3). He then makes a statement which is the key to the entire letter, "God is light and in Him in no darkness at all" (1:5). This is the reality that should strike us every time we sin, that God cannot have anything to do with sin. So if we want to live our lives with Him, then we need to be mindful of our sin. So, how will we respond when God's light **reveals** our sin? Will we lie to God and claim to have fellowship/live with Him while living in sin? Will we lie to ourselves about our sin? Will we call God a liar by claiming that we haven't sinned when we have? Or will we confess our sin so that God can cleanse us and we can resume our walk with Him? (1:6-10).

1 John 2, if you take any of John's words as an excuse to sin by saying to yourself, "Cool, all I have to do is confess my sin and I'm back with God," or "God's waiting to clobber me for the tiniest of sins," John tells you why he just said what he said: he wrote it so that you would not sin in the first place; his focus is not sin, but the damage we do to our relationship with the Father and Son. If we do sin, then Jesus is our personal Advocate who intercedes for us with the Father and His intercession for us will succeed because He's already paid for all your sins in full (2:1-2).

What does it mean to live life with Jesus, to truly know Him? To *know* Him is to *obey* Him. If we say we *know* Jesus, but refuse to *obey* Him, we're liars who don't practice the truth. On the other hand if we obey His Word, the love of God is perfected in us. This is how we know that we are truly living life with Him. If we claim to *abide/live* in Jesus, then we should live life the way He lived it (2:3-6). The word "abide" appears 21 times in 1 John (24 times in the original Greek). It is the thrust of the letter, i.e., will we live our lives in fellowship with God and His Son or not? And if our sin interrupts that fellowship, will we confess it so that God can cleanse us and we can resume our walk with Him? Can you see that all this has to do with living life with Jesus as opposed to getting you to check your Christianity based on your sins? John then begins to talk about an old and new commandment that Jesus told them from the beginning of His ministry and that is to love one another (John 13:34). It's old because they've heard it already; it's new because Jesus, the true Light, spoke it and it began to drive the era of darkness away. Thus, the one who says he's in the Light yet hates his brother is in darkness and the darkness has blinded his eyes. But the one who loves his brother lives in the light and he won't stumble (2:7-11). Recall the theme in this letter: fellowship with God and since He's light, there's no room for darkness in Him at all (1:5).

In case his audience begins to get nervous again about their sin, John reassures them of who they are: they are God's children whose sins have been forgiven, they have known Jesus, they've overcome the Devil, they have known God the Father, and they are strong and the Word of God lives in them (2:12-14). God keeps talking about sin. Why, why does He take it so seriously? Because He's a tyrant who gives you a bunch of rules to follow and if you don't, he'll cause you pain? No, because our sin grieves Him (cf. Ephesians 4:30; 1 Thessalonians 5:19) and destroys our fellowship with Him.

John reminds them of the two choices: living life with God the Father where His love is or living life in the world, where the lust of the eyes and flesh and the pride of life reside. We must realize that this world and its lust is passing away, but those who follow God will not pass away, instead, they'll live forever with God (2:15-17).

Then John warns them of those who would pervert the message of God concerning His Son: though the Antichrist will one day come, there are now many antichrists who are running around denying what God has said about His Son, that He is the Messiah. However John is confident that they will not be fooled by them because Jesus has anointed them and therefore they know the whole Christian truth. All they need to do is let that truth which they heard from the beginning live in them. If they do, then they will live in the Son and in the Father. Contrary to what the antichrists have been telling them, this is how the promise of eternal life works. Those who've believed in Jesus, have intimate access to the Father and the Son. And John wants them to know that anyone who says otherwise is a deceiver, but they have a way to combat their deceptions: the anointing they received from the Lord will continue to teach them truth and root out deception, thus, they will continue to live in the Son (2:18-27).

John wants them to abide/live in Jesus so that when He returns they won't be ashamed but instead stand confidently before Him. For as Jesus is righteous, we can rest assured that everyone who produces righteousness is born of Him (2:28-29).

With all this as the backdrop, John begins talking even more seriously about sin—calling us Devil's children when we sin!—and what it does to us, those around us, and most importantly to our relationship with God.

1 John 3, John begins with an emphatic statement about our status as God's children. He basically says, "Look at the love God lavished on us! He's made us His children!" Then he mentions the Lord's return again. It's not yet been **revealed** what we shall be, but when Jesus is **revealed**, our appearance will be like His, which is why we should strive to be pure as He is pure now (3:1-3).

Then John proceeds to deal with sin: there's no way around it, when we sin, we commit lawlessness because sin is complete disobedience. And we know that this is the very reason why Jesus was **revealed**: He came to take away our sins and in Him there is no sin. Therefore, it makes complete sense that whoever lives in Him does not sin, but it also stands to reason that whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him—recall, to “know” Jesus is to obey Him (2:3). All this is about is our fellowship with Jesus now not our future eternal destiny (1:7; 2:6). We must not let anyone deceive us about this: the one who practices righteousness is righteous just as Jesus is righteous. Doesn't it then stand to reason that he who sins is of the Devil, the originator of sin? Jesus was **revealed** for this purpose: to destroy the works of the Devil. Therefore, whoever has been born of God does not sin because His seed lives in him and he cannot sin precisely because he has been born of God. This is how God's children and the Devil's children **reveal** themselves: whoever doesn't practice righteousness is not of God nor is he who doesn't love his brother (3:4-10). The question is this: will you take sin seriously when God **reveals** it to you or will you continue to run around looking like a Devil's child, even though you're God's child?

So, is John questioning our salvation? If we're sinful, does that mean we're not God's children? No! This is not about our status as children. Remember what he said at the beginning: “Isn't it marvelous! We're God's beloved children!” God is not questioning our salvation based on our sins. He's a loving Father trying to get our attention about the damage we do to Him, our relationship with Him, ourselves, and those around us. This is why He goes on to talk about how we treat those around us, especially our brethren (3:11-24). And when He says, “He who does not love *his* brother **abides in death**. Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life **abiding** in him,” He's not saying that we're doomed to hell. He's still talking about the same thing: where are we going to live our lives with Him in life and peace or in death (Romans 8:6; 1 Timothy 5:6)? Because notice, God didn't say that the one hating his brother doesn't have eternal life. He said he doesn't have eternal life **abiding** in him. This is why He says that this individual **abides/lives in death**. We have two choices in this world: live our life with God in the light, in His life or live it in death. And because God is our Loving Father who longs to see us live with Him, He says such things, not as threats, but encouragement to remain with Him.

It's like this: imagine you have 5 sons. You love them dearly. Every day you show them how to live successful lives. But there's also a father that lives down the street; he too has 5 sons. But he's a crack dealer and his sons are just like him. One day, one of your sons begins hanging out with them. He starts dressing like them, speaking like them, and selling drugs like them. So you pull him aside and say, “Do you want to be a crack dealer's son all your life?” What are you saying, that he's in fact no longer your son? Or are you trying to get him to see that he's damaged your relationship and if he continues on this path, he will suffer terribly? This is why God speaks the way He does in 1 John 3. He's trying to encourage us to remain with Him instead of Satan.

On this Mother's day, we should take note of how similar mothers are to God the Father and the Son. Mothers sacrifice tremendously so that their children will be strong and go on to live successful lives. They want the same thing God wants: for their children to remain connected to them and what they taught them, not what the world longs to show them.

III. Conclusion

Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.