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A0437 -- Sept. 12, 2004 -- 1 John 3:6-7 – Sin: Absolute or Habitual?-Part 1

Let's review 1 John 3:1-5 and then we will embark on the most controversial section of 1 John. In 3:1 John is expressing awe of God's regenerating us which he mentioned in 2:29 in the words ***born of Him***. First thing he says in 3:1 is that he wants us to take a look at the greatness of the Father's love. This class of love is Creator love which was demonstrated to us through his regenerating us. Because we are regenerated, we are ***called children of God***. As children have a close and dependent relationship with their parents so we have a close and dependent relationship with the Father. Because of this ***the world does not know us, because it did not know Him***. The world does not know God in the sense that it cannot recognize God. Just as the world did not recognize Jesus Christ as God when He came in the flesh so the world cannot recognize the divine life of Christ when it is manifested in our lives. The world cannot therefore recognize who we really are in Christ because it does not know Christ. To recognize Christ in another person one must first know Christ personally.

v. 2 John calls them by the endearing term ***beloved*** and affirms that he and his readers are believers; we are ***children of God***. Then he tells us that in the present it ***has not appeared what we will be***. But, in the future, ***when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is***. We are spiritually like Him now, but we will be physically like Him when He comes for us. It is going to be a transforming moment for all of us when we see Him as He truly is. The only glimpse we get of what Christ looks like presently is Revelation 1. There we get a glimpse of Christ now. He is not the meek and mild Jesus we so often hear about; He is a risen, glorified King! When He comes again, we will realize this in a much greater way!

v. 3 I have modified what I taught last week on this verse. I am not afraid to tell you that I can be wrong and some of this stuff is very difficult, particularly in John's writings and I think here that the phrase ***purifies himself*** refers to the believer who ***abides in Him***. The one ***who has his hope*** constantly set on being like Christ ***physically*** constantly ***purifies himself*** by confession of sin in line with 1 John 1:9. This is the toughest verse I have run

up against in years. The point here is that the believer who constantly sets his hope on being like Christ physically at the Rapture constantly abides in Him, *just as He is pure*. That is, he undergoes a sinless experience in certain areas of his life. We will look more at this “sinless” experience today in v. 6.

v. 4 is a short but important verse. John is giving us the first reason we should stigmatize sin. It should be translated *everyone who does sin also does wickedness, and sin is wickedness*. The Greek word translated *lawlessness* in most versions has nothing to do with the Law but with *wickedness*. John is stigmatizing sin as something that has no part in the abiding Christian.

v. 5 John gives the second reason we should stigmatize sin. Not only is sin *wickedness* but because Christ appeared at His 1st Coming *in order to take away sins*. We should not sin because Christ came to take it away, not give us license to sin as much as we like. Finally, at the end of v. 5 John says that *in Him there is no sin*. This is the connecting and key idea between v. 5 and the beginning of v. 6 which we will look at now. We have got to remember that in Christ there is no sin at all, not even a bit (1 John 1:5).

We are entering the most controversial section of 1 John. If you can remember back to the first lesson I taught on 1 John, then you will remember that we spent some time looking at the *purpose* and *structure* of 1 John and then we looked at the controversy over 1 John 3:6, 9 as an introduction to the book. I showed you that most commentators admit they do not have a clue what John is talking about in this epistle. For example, Augustine says, “There is no continuous order in 1 John.” Westcott says, “No single arrangement is able to take account of the complex development of thought which it offers, and of the many connections which exist between its parts.” F.F. Bruce says, “Attempts to trace a consecutive argument throughout 1 John have never succeeded.” Now, you really need to consider what these men are saying. They are basically saying they are clueless about John’s epistle. Now, I beg to differ with these scholars. John is not off his rocker. John does have a logical argument. There is a method to his supposed madness.

Well, what’s the problem? Why have so many gone wrong when studying this epistle? Well, the big problem is that people begin on the wrong foot when they claim that the *purpose* of this epistle is 1 John 5:13. Let’s read 1 John 5:13. This they say is the *purpose* of John’s epistle. “*These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.*” And these commentators interpret this to mean “*these things I have written to you who CLAIM to believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.*” In other words, they say that

John's readers did not really know for sure whether they had eternal life and therefore John gave a series of tests throughout the book so those who CLAIM to believe could check themselves to see whether they really have eternal life or not. Well, this has several problems. First of which is simply the fact that even if this verse was the *purpose* of the book the word CLAIM is not in 1 John 5:13. That is an addition to the text which is very misleading. It gives you the idea that John is writing to those who merely "profess" Christ rather than those who actually "possess" Christ. The second reason this verse is not the *purpose* of the book is that when we do a concordance search, we find the same *purpose* clause "*these things are written*" three additional times in the book. John 1:4 READ, 2:1 READ, 2:26 READ; and of course, we have 5:13. Now, don't you find it a little odd to say that the whole *purpose* of the book is found in 5:13 when we have these other *purpose* statements? The statement is used four times in the book. Let's go back to 2:1 for example and see if we can find out what John is doing when he uses these *purpose* statements. What is John referring to when he says *these things*? Well, *these things* is the translation of the little Greek pronoun *tauta*. And pronouns always have antecedents. What are the antecedents here? Clearly, when John says *these things*, he is referring back to what he has just written. He is done writing them. So, 1:4 refers back to 1:1-3, 2:1 refers back to 1:5-10, 2:26 refers back to 2:18-25, and the famous 1 John 5:13 refers back to 5:1-12. What I am doing here is showing you the structure of John's epistle, because if we do not understand the structure, we cannot understand the letter. People who jump to 5:13 for the whole *purpose* of the book miss the *structure* of John's letter and therefore misunderstand the *purpose* of the letter. To recap what we are saying, "Whenever you find this little Greek pronoun (*tauta* = *these things*) in John's epistle, he is summarizing what he just wrote about." He is telling you the *purpose* of the previous context, not the *purpose* of the whole book. These are Johannine signals that summarize the point he just made. So, right away we find out that 1 John 5:13 is not really the *purpose* of the whole book. And I am warning you in advance that commentary after commentary adopts this pseudo-approach to 1 John. And it makes a huge difference what this epistle is all about. Does the epistle have to do with Tests of Salvation; tests to see if you are really a believer? Or does it have to do with Promoting Fellowship in the Congregation by Avoiding Sin? One assumes the audience may not really be believers. The other assumes the audience really is believers. But I have shown you time and again that John explicitly states in this letter that his readers really are believers (e.g., 1 John 2:1, 7, 9, 12-14, 20, 21, 25, 27, 28; 3:1, 2, 7, 13, 18, 21, 24; 4:1, 4, 7, 11; 5:11, 13, 19, 20, 21). If you adopt the false *purpose* of this book you can never understand it. You will sound like Augustine, Westcott, Law, and Bruce wandering aimlessly to understand John because they have started in the wrong place. The real *purpose* of the book has nothing to do with tests to see whether we are really a believer or not. The real *purpose* has to do with Promoting Fellowship in the Local Church by

Avoiding Sin. Everything is geared toward that goal. The long-term effects of not sinning are two-fold: confidence at His coming and rewards at the Judgment Seat of Christ (2:28; 4:17). The short-term effects of not sinning are the promotion of fellowship and joy in the local church (1:4). So, I have shown you the basic *structure* of the book and the basic *purpose* of the book. Now let's turn to 1 John 3:6 and work our way up to the center of the controversy in 3:9.

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Everyone who is abiding in Him does not sin: everyone who is sinning has not seen Him nor known Him.

This verse builds on the previous v. 5 which closed with the announcement that *in Him there is no sin*. *in Him* refers of course to Christ. *in Christ there is no sin*. That is easy enough. But look at the beginning of verse 6. John says *everyone who is abiding in Him does not sin*. Now, if we take the end of v. 5 to be an absolute statement, that Christ does not sin at all then how do we have to take this clause? It seems to be saying that the one *abiding in Christ doesn't sin* at all, doesn't it? If we are going to be consistent with v. 5 then we have to say that this is an absolute statement. The one abiding in Christ does not sin at all. This would be teaching that the abiding one is "perfect." If we try to say that this means that we do not sin a lot or we do not sin habitually, then we cannot say that Christ does not sin absolutely. In other words, we cannot say that Christ does not sin at all (v. 5) and then turn around and say that the abiding one sins a little bit (v. 6) because that is inconsistent. Either Christ sins a little bit and the abiding one sins a little bit, or Christ does not sin at all and the abiding one does not sin at all. So, as you can see the habitual sin approach to 1 John 3:6 does not work, because it makes Christ out to sin at least a little bit. And if Christ sinned a little bit, then the plan of salvation is destroyed. So, we have to take both statements as absolute, not habitual.

Commentators and translators have argued over this verse and v. 9 which is stating basically the same thing. So, we have to grapple with what they have grappled with and that is the concept of "perfection." Can 1 John 3:6, 9 really be teaching that the abiding one is "perfect"? Some translators have taken it upon themselves to answer that for us in their translation. For example, if you have an NIV, it takes it to be habitual. The NIV reads, "*No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him.*" But then we have to say that v. 5 should really say *in Christ there is no continual sin*. Of course, the NIV does not say that, but it should if it was consistent. So, now we have got Christ sinning, just not continually sinning.

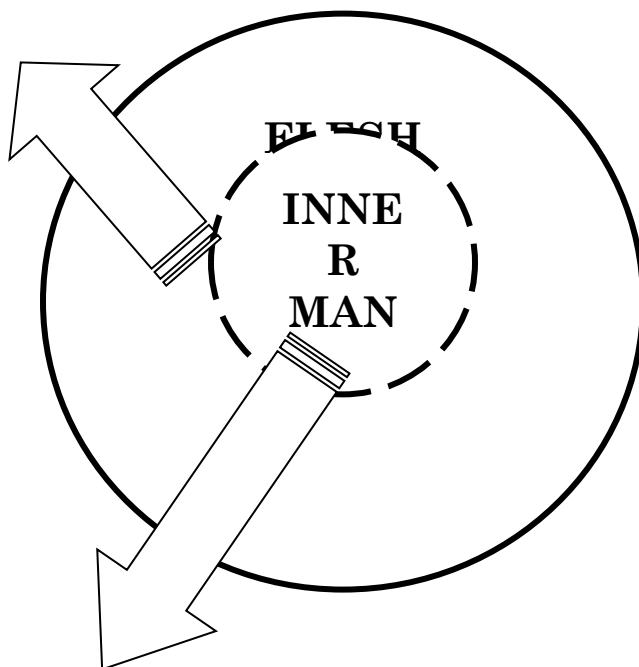
The only other alternative is that 1 John 3:6, 9 is teaching that the abiding one is “perfect”! But how can that be? How can John teach that the abiding one can have a sinless experience? Because everyone here who is a believer knows that they still sin. In fact, John already told us that we cannot claim to be without sin. Turn over to **1 John 1:8**. “*If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.*” So, how do we answer this? Do we have a contradiction in John? It seems that John is teaching in 1:8 that we do sin and here in 3:6 that we do not sin. Which is it, John? Do we sin or do we not sin? Well, to put it bluntly it is both, but let me show you from the context how it can be both without being a contradiction. 1 John 1:8 is teaching that when looked at as a total person no believer can claim to be without sin. However, in 1 John 3:6, 9 he is not looking at the total person, he is only looking at the regenerate aspect of a believer, the part that abides ***in Him*** does not sin. He is not looking at the total person. How am I getting that? How am I separating out that John is only looking at the regenerate aspect of the believer in 1 John 3:6, 9? Well, there are two things that help me know this. The first is linguistic and the second is contextual. First, the linguistic has to do with the word “abide” (Greek = *meno*) which John uses in 3:6. He says ***everyone abiding in Him does not sin***. Some people try to skirt the issue here by saying that ***abiding*** is another way of saying “believing”. In other words, the code word for a “believer is an “abider”. Is an “abider” simply another way of saying he is a “believer”? If it is, we have several problems. First, turn to John 15:1-8 and try replacing the word “abide” with the word “believe”. Let’s do this together because I want you to see the nonsense of this approach...

John 15:1-11 "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. ² "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit. ³ "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. ⁴ "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. ⁵ "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. ⁶ "If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned. ⁷ "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples. ⁹ "Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; ***abide in My love***. ¹⁰ "If you keep My commandments, you will ***abide in My love***; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and ***abide in His love***. ¹¹ "These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.

As you can clearly see it is impossible for “abide” to mean “believe.” This approach has been shown many times to be impossible.¹ But people keep defining “abide” falsely as “believe”. When they do, they are forced to translate this verse as habitual sinning. What does “abide” mean? In the Greek lexicons it means “to remain” and one can only “remain” somewhere he already is. Therefore, only believers are able to “remain” in Christ. Unbelievers cannot abide in Him because they have no part in Him! So, only people who are already believers can ***abide in Him***. As a believer you have the volitional capacity to ***abide in Him***. Unbelievers do not, I repeat, do not have the volitional capacity to ***abide in Him***. Second problem is directly in the context of 1 John 3. There are two contextual hints that this section of 1 John is only looking at a part of the person, not the total person. First, as I have already demonstrated, the book is clearly written to believers and the command here in 2:28 is to ***abide in Him***. This infers that believers can either ***abide in Him*** or not ***abide in Him***. We can have two types of experiences; ***abiding*** and ***not abiding***. And here we are being commanded to ***remain in Christ***, in vital connection with Him so that we can bear fruit. Second, look at 2:29. In 2:29 John introduces a specific concept for the first time in this book. Does anyone remember what doctrine John has in mind when he uses the word ***born of Him***? Regeneration, that’s right. John is talking about the regenerate aspect of a believer. He is not looking at the believer as a total person; he is only looking at the regenerate aspect of a believer. Look at the diagram on the insert of your bulletin. This is a diagram of what we are saying.

1 John 3:6, 9; Rom.7:17, 20; Gal. 2:20

SIN



RIGHTEOUSNESS

So, what John is saying is that when a believer is *abiding in Him*, he has a sinless experience. He is “perfect” when he is *abiding in Him*. This can never be said of the total person. The total person can never say that He is sinless (1 John 1:8). We must be abiding in order to have this condition. And abiding involves keeping the commandments of God. Thus, we can conclude that if we are abiding in one aspect of our experience, say we are obeying God’s commandment to “be watchful over our doctrine” but not abiding in another aspect of our experience, say we are not obeying God’s commandment to “pray without ceasing” then our obedience is not tainted in God’s sight by our failure. One is perfect and the other is sinful. “God is able to look past all our failures and sin and see the actual obedience that is there.”ⁱⁱ John already told us this in 1 John 1:7! “Abiding” is therefore being obedient to Him, it is remaining *in Him* by obeying His commandments. Abiding can have no part with sin, not even a little bit. They are absolutely contrary to one another and distinct from one another. Because of this it logically follows that John would say, *everyone who is sinning has not seen Him nor known Him*. This refers to everyone and should be taken absolutely just like the previous statements. “Most commentators have not been able to accept this conclusion, but it is unavoidable.”ⁱⁱⁱ These words apply to believer and unbeliever alike. *sinning* is so outside of the *abiding* life that whenever anyone sins it can be said that they have *not seen Him nor known Him*. The two verbs for *seen* and *known Him* are in the Greek perfect tense. The perfect tense means a past completed action having present results. Since it is hard to translate the perfect tense the best rendering should emphasize the present results. Thus, this phrase means that when one sins, he is demonstrating that he has been overtaken by blindness and ignorance regarding God. The perfect tense **does not** indicate whether the one sinning is *saved* or *unsaved*! Instead, John is still trying to show the stigma of sin (as in 3:4). No sin is the product of “abiding”, instead sin is the product of “blindness and ignorance of God” (cf. 1 John 2:3-6). This phrase does not mean that the one sinning has never seen Him nor known Him. The present perfect does not mean “*never*”! If I say “I have not finished eating supper” it does not mean that *I have never finished eating my supper*. In the same way, we should not read these words as meaning that *everyone who is sinning has never seen Him nor known Him*. John is simply saying that at the point when a person sins, He has acted in blindness and ignorance toward God. When we face the truth head-on, we do not sin. When we walk in the light as He is in the light we are “perfect.” When we walk in the darkness, we are wicked, vile sinners!

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Little children, do not be lead astray: the one who does what is righteous is righteous, just as He is righteous:

John addresses his readers as ***little children***. He has used this term throughout 1 John to address his readers. It is a very endearing term. He warns them not to ***be led astray*** by the Revisionists. The Revisionists were trying to say that sin and righteousness were not opposites, that they could co-mingle in the regenerate aspect of the Christian life. That abiding in Christ could produce sin! John is saying just the opposite! Sin is never the product of abiding; it is always the product of blindness and ignorance of God. Righteousness is always the product of abiding, and never the product of blindness and ignorance of God. Thus, ***the one who does what is righteous is righteous, just as He is righteous***. Both statements must be taken as absolute! The translation ***practices*** in the NASB is totally without merit as we will see in more detail in 1 John 3:9. The addition of the word ***practices*** makes it sound like habitual righteousness. But there is a Greek word for ***practice*** (*hexis*). If John had wanted to say ***practices***, he very well could have added that word in the Greek. But he does not!!!! That is because John is speaking in absolute terms, in absolute categories. So, you can strike that word out in your Bible because it does not exist in the Bible. Just strike it out because it is misleading. It is not God's word, and commentators have failed to understand these verses because they have failed to see that John is not talking about the total person, but only the regenerate aspect of the believer that is activated when we abide in Him. John is saying that ***the one who does what is righteous is righteous, just as He is righteous*** can only mean that John is talking about the regenerate aspect that is activated when we abide in Him. When we abide in Him, we are expressing the very righteousness of God! Notice John says we are ***righteous, just as He is righteous***. John is not talking about the total person, but he is talking about what Paul called the "inner man," who we are at the core of our being, the part of us that is as sinless as Christ is sinless, that part of us cannot sin, it produces righteousness and righteousness only! So, if you do not catch what John is doing, and most people get off track here because they miss the connection between v. 5 and 6, then you are radically going to misread this passage.

CONCLUSION

You are going to have to work really hard to keep this distinction in mind as we teach the next few weeks. John is antithetical and he talks in absolute terms. He is not talking about the distinction between saved and unsaved people! He is talking to saved individuals who the Revisionists are trying to deceive and yet many teachers today are deceived! They are misreading John and teaching the same thing the Revisionists taught, that you cannot really know whether you are saved or not and that you need to go through these tests to see

whether you really are a believer. That is not the issue at all! That is far removed from John's mind. He is talking in these verses about the regenerate aspect of a believer which is activated when we abide in a certain area of life. When we abide, we do not sin at all, not even a bit. We are perfect. No sin can come out of abiding. Sin and Abiding are antithetical in John. The abiding Christian does not habitually sin or sin a little bit. He is sinless because it is Christ living in him. If you read John's epistle you keep finding these antithetical words: Light vs. Darkness, Sin vs. Christ, Sin vs. Righteousness, Sin vs. Abiding, Son of God vs. the Devil, and John is doing the same thing here.

ⁱ For example, see Robert Dean, Jr., *Abiding in Christ: Dispensational Spiritual Life* (Chafer Theological Seminary Journal Volume 7)

ⁱⁱ Hodges, Zane, *The Epistles of John* (Irving, TX; Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 134.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hodges, Zane, *The Epistles of John* (Irving, TX; Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 135.

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