

St. John Interpreted and Vindicated

by Daniel Steele

The sermon refutes the Gnostic heresies that were prevalent in the church at the time, particularly the idea that Jesus was not a real man but a phantom, and emphasizes the importance of the new birth and the blood of Jesus Christ in cleansing from sin.

Scripture: 1 John 3:9

Topics: "Sin And Guilt", "Christian Sanctification"

Description

Daniel Steele preaches on the importance of understanding sin and holiness in the context of the Holy Bible. He emphasizes that the Bible aims at producing holiness in its readers and does not justify sin in any way. Steele delves into the interpretation of 1 John 1:8, highlighting the distinction between sin as a culpable state and conscious transgression of the law. He addresses the misconceptions around sin and the new birth, refuting the idea that all Christians continuously have guilt and deserve punishment. Steele also explores the significance of perfect love, obedience to God's commandments, and the concept of sinlessness in those born of God, providing insights into the complexities of sin, guilt, and sanctification.

Transcript

The Book of books is called the Holy Bible because it has a holy author, and aims at a holy purpose, the production of holiness in its readers. We should expect to find nothing in it in any way extenuating sin, or implying its necessary continuance in any believer. Hence we should do more than suspect an interpretation which favors sin. We should reject it as not in accord with the Holy Spirit, called holy because it is his office to extinguish sin, and create holiness in every consenting free agent. Nothing which justifies sin can proceed from God. He will never contradict in revelation the principles he has implanted in creation. He has created in me certain self-evident truths, styled by Joseph Cook "the activity of the immanent God in the human soul." Says Bishop Butler, "Either clear immoralities or contradictions would prove a supposed revelation false." I think it is Shakespeare who says something like this, "There is no sin which cannot find a parson to bless it with a text." In my treatment of such texts I am impelled, by self-evident truth or moral reason, or the immanent God within, either to pronounce them spurious, or to assert that they are grossly misinterpreted. I take the latter alternative in every case.

1 John 1:8, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. Many so erroneously explain this verse as to make it the greatest stumbling-block to Christian holiness in this life.. It is interpreted as teaching that all Christians have sin, conscious transgression of the law, all their lives,

and are self-deceived and utterly destitute of truth, if they say they do not sin, or that sin as a culpable state is not in them.

Dean Alford insists that "John is writing to persons whose sins have been forgiven them, and therefore necessarily the present tense have refers not to any previous state of sinful life before conversion, but to their now existing state." "If we say we have not sin in the course of our walking in the light, we deceive ourselves."

Others go beyond Alford, and say that St. John purposely included himself when he said, "If we say we have no sin," because he himself was conscious of having sin, and confessed it in the use of the first personal plural. For one I wish to raise my voice to vindicate the beloved disciple from so gross a libel. The truth is, the candid student of St. John's style in this letter finds that for the sake of avoiding sameness of expression, like a good rhetorician, he uses a variety of phrases such as, "If a man say (4:20), "He that saith (2:4, 9), "If we say (1:6, 8, 10), without any perceptible difference in meaning, even to so keen an insight as that of Bishop Westcott.

But let us apply a cardinal law of interpretation to this subject -- the law of non-contradiction. We must avoid making a writer flatly self-contradictory. This interpretation contradicts the context, "The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth [present tense] from all sin." "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. In what sense does a forgiven man have sin, or a cleansed man have impurity? Turn now to 1 John 3:9, "Whosoever has been born of 'God [perfect tense implying that the new life has continued] is not sinning, because his seed abideth in him: and he cannot be sinning, because he has been born of God."

This is John's ideal of the regenerate, which is utterly irreconcilable with the character he has in view in 1:8. Whom has he in view? This brings us to the purpose of this epistle. That purpose is strongly hinted at in the first verse, in which he appeals to three of the five special senses, to seeing, hearing, and feeling, in proof of the reality of Christ's body. But who doubted, or rather denied, that his body was real matter, and asserted that it was a phantom which walked the earth thirty-three years?

The Docetae, or seemers, who taught that the incarnation was a seeming and not a reality. Why did they teach thus? Their philosophy of dualism required it for the following reason. They asserted that good and evil are eternal and uncreated, and that moral evil resides only in matter, which is incurably evil. Even God cannot expel it. An immoral inference was soon made by those pretended Christians who adopted dualism; namely, that their souls, being immaterial, were always free from moral evil or sin, and had no need of cleansing through the atonement, nor could they be defiled by sin, which could taint the body only.

Hence they could practice gluttony, drunkenness, impurity, and all other sins, while their souls were perfectly free from sin. Their favorite illustration was that of a golden jewel in a dunghill, the gold being in no way alloyed or defiled by the encompassing filth. So their souls remained untarnished amid sensual sins. At a doctrine so immoral John aimed this epistle. He directed his spear to the weak spot in their philosophy. If sin exists in all matter, it existed in the person of Jesus Christ.

To avoid so shocking an assertion they openly declared that he was a sham man. At this idea John directs his batteries from the beginning to the end of this epistle, again and again asserting that the Son of God has come in the flesh, not in a shadowy and unsubstantial form of a man. This aim of John at the Dualists, or Docetae, commonly called Gnostics, "the knowing ones," or "the illumined," is the key to the entire epistle, unlocking its difficulties. Carry this key through the first chapter, and see how it opens the door and

lets in the sunlight.

God's character is first cleared of all clouds, and made to stand forth as diffusive light, a personality in whom is no darkness, "no, not even one speck." (Alford.) "If we [not genuine Christians, but professors corrupted by Gnostic notions and practices] say we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness [i.e. in sin], we lie, and do not the truth." Says Dr. Whedon, "In truth, the three instances in this chapter of 'if we say,' are quotations of the language of Nicolaitan Antinomians, who maintained that however bad their conduct, they were still sinless."

Our next point is, that "to have sin" is a phrase so strong that it totally excludes the new birth, and that St. John could not have had genuine Christians in view when he wrote the words "If we say we have no sin." Bishop Westcott calls attention to the fact that this phrase "have sin" is peculiar to St. John, and is used elsewhere in the Bible only in John 9:41 and 15:22, 24, that it is much stronger than the verb to sin, and always implies guilt and desert of punishment. Bengel concurs. What logically follows? Either that St. John does not include real Christians in "If we say," but spurious ones of the Gnostic type, or it follows that all Christians have guilt and deserve punishment, and if they say they are forgiven and are regenerate, they deceive themselves and the truth is not in them. Every one who says he is justified is self-deluded, for every professed disciple of Christ, after believing on the Saviour with all heart, is still burdened with guilt and beneath divine wrath. This is the dilemma of the Alford school of expositors. Their theory that all Christians have guilt negatives justification, and contradicts St. Paul's joyful exultation in Rom. 8:1, "there is therefore now no condemnation." The steps in our argument are few and plain. Guilt and the new birth are mutually exclusive. Sinning -- a course of wilful violations of the known law of God -- excludes being born of God (3:9) because guilt is incurred. "To have sin" in the meaning of St. John is to have guilt. Therefore the words "to have sin" exclude from regeneration and the spiritual life.

The difficulty with the Alford school is in the use of the phrase "have sin" in an indefinite, vague, and loose meaning, in the sense of weakness, defect or involuntary error: whereas St. John always uses it in the definite sense of a guilty transgression of the law. It will not do to read into the Holy Scriptures our own modern, weakened, and blurred conception of sin.

With St. John sin always entails guilt. It originated in the devil, "who has sinned from the beginning" of sin. He inspired the first fratricide. Cain, not Adam, is the great exemplar of sin; "not as Cain was of the evil one and slew his brother." Satan suggested the betrayal of Jesus. Sin always has a Satanic character. There is no such character as "a sweet sinner." -- (Father E. T. Taylor.)

James traces sin to lust swaying the will; "When lust hath conceived it bringeth forth sin." Paul traces it to Adam; "Death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned." John's doctrine of sin is more clear-cut and less hazy than Paul's, because it always means one thing, lawlessness, active, voluntary, and responsible, "Sin is lawlessness" in the concrete as an act, not in the abstract merely. In its essence it is an act of moral injustice, the wilful transgression of the known law of God. John contemplates sin in the light of the law, Paul in the light of his experience. John's best synonym for sin is a lie. These are a pair, as inseparable, as their opposite pair, truth and holiness. Sin is hatred of the brother, and love of a world hostile to God. With John sin always entails guilt. It is never a guiltless tendency. Nor does John weaken the term sin by confounding it with that word of various, and hence vague, meaning, the flesh, which in his epistles is not used in a bad sense, but only "to express humanity under the present conditions of life." -- (Westcott.)

It cannot be proved that John uses sin in a softened sense without guilt, and that he applies it "to Christians who though certainly not walking in darkness, yet have sinful tendencies in themselves, sensuous impulses, non-spiritual inclinations, lack of self-knowledge, a lowered standard, principles and views borrowed partly from the world, wavering of will, and hence even graver faults." -- (Sinclair.) All of these defects may exist without guilt, so long as the will inclines to the right. The tenth verse, where a past tense is used, "have not sinned," strongly implies that "the sins confessed" are not wilful transgressions continuously committed since the new birth, but are pre-Christian sins. It is certainly a very unreasonable assumption that all Christians knowingly commit sins, especially in view of John's strong assertion that "he that is born of God sinneth not." It is exceedingly difficult to harmonize a defense or extenuation of sin with the Holy Scriptures. Bishop Westcott has the true idea of the phrase, "to have sin." "Like corresponding phrases, to have faith, to have life, to have grief, to have fellowship, it marks the presence of something which is not isolated, but a continuous source of influence. It is distinguished from 'to sin' as the sinful principle is distinguished from the sinful act itself. 'To have sin' includes the idea of PERSONAL GUILT." Bengel says "not to have sin denies guilt; and not to have sinned denies the actual commission."

To assume that this guilt exists in those who are walking in the light is shocking indeed. To say that the non-imputation of personal guilt to the Christian is to deceive one's self, to be void of the truth and to make God a liar, in view of the precious doctrine of "the knowledge of the forgiveness of sins," is, to say the least, strange, severe, and contradictory language. John, the loving disciple, never applied such words to his brethren in Christ. Nor does he himself in this verse, by the use of "we," confess sin, as Dr. Sinclair asserts. Says Alford, "This state of needing cleansing from all present sin is veritably that of all of us; and our recognition and confession of it is the very first essential of walking in the light." The absurdity of this note will appear by another paraphrase. "God is light, the light of holiness. If we walk in holiness as he is in holiness, faith in the blood of Jesus Christ banishes all darkness. But if we, while consciously walking in the light, say that we are not walking in darkness, we deceive ourselves, or if, while walking in holiness, we say we are not walking in sin, the truth is not in us." "The blood of Jesus Christ is the cure of sin, but if any one attests that cure, he deceives himself. Quinine is a sure cure of the African fever. But if we who have applied the remedy and proved its curative quality certify that we are healed, we are self-deceived." The truthfulness of my exegesis all turns on the existence of Gnostic heresies in Ephesus in John's lifetime.

My readers will find some excellent commentaries, such as Alford's, which unaccountably evade any acknowledgment of the existence of these philosophies in the time of St. John's old age. But not long after his death, Polycarp, a pupil of St. John, writing to the Philippians, quotes 1 John 4:3, to show that this doctrine of the phantom Christ had worked down to the last fibers of the root of the creed, by two negations -- no resurrection of the body and no judgment. Its natural tendency is to evaporate dogmas, sacraments, duties, and redemption. If the body of Jesus was unreal, "redemption was a drama with a shadow for a hero. The phantom of a redeemer was nailed to the phantom of a cross." The trend of modern sacred scholarship is toward the existence of these heresies, in germ form at least, as the historical setting of this epistle and the occasion of its being written.

This is the view of Bishop Westcott in his exhaustive annotations on this epistle, and of Bishop Wm. Alexander in his notes in "The Expositor's Bible," who gives a comprehensive yet concise statement of the general method and purpose of Gnosticism. "It aspired at once to accept and to transform the Christian creed; to elevate its faith into a philosophy, a Gnosis (knowledge), and then to make this knowledge cashier and supersede faith, love, holiness, redemption itself." We note the principle theories:

1. That "sin" is inherited depravity, which is diminished by the atonement, little by little, but leaving a residue till death. This may be styled the Calvinian theory, against which we have the following objections: (1) All the exhortations to perfected holiness are in the present tense. (2) All the prayers for this grace are in the same tense. Both exhortations and prayers are out of place if the thing sought cannot be obtained till death. (3) There is a total silence in the Bible respecting sanctification in death or after death. (4) A gradual sanctification, completed at death, leaves the whole work on 'the plane of natural law, with no emphasis on the Divine Sanctifier. In fact, this theory could stand complete, even if the Holy Spirit should be left out altogether.

2. The second theory is that the entirely sanctified soul has infirmities, errors, and ignorances, which daily need the blood of sprinkling. All of this may be true, but it is to be greatly doubted whether John applies so strong a term as sin to these involuntary defects. For they lack the voluntary element, and do not entail guilt. St. John knows no guiltless sin.

3. The third theory is that sin has its full meaning, "actual and original" -- (Bengel), but that the continuous cleansing has for its object not each individual believer through all his life, but the instantaneous purification of successive believers, one after another, through all the course of time. To justify our position we quote the eminent English exegete Prof. Joseph Agar Beet: "It is worthy of notice that in the New Testament we never read expressly and unmistakably of sanctification as a gradual process, or of degrees and growth in holiness, except perhaps in Rev. 22:11, 'And he that is holy, let him be made holy still,' or, 'yet more,' margin R. V."

"A gradual process is not necessarily implied in the present participles of Heb. 2:11; 10:14." "The present participle in Rom. 3:24, 'Being justified freely by his grace,' referring to those who from time to time are justified, proves that, in these two passages, the participle may denote those who from time to time are laid on the altar of consecration." Ellicott, on Heb. 10:14, says, "It literally means those who are being sanctified, all those from age to age who, through faith, receive as their own that which has been procured for all men. To prove that the verb cleanse in the present tense is used of a succession of lepers, we refer the reader to Matt. 10:8, where the twelve are commissioned "to cleanse the lepers." But when an individual leper is cleansed in Matt. 8:3, "Be thou cleansed," the aorist is used to denote instantaneous and decisive action. This use of the present tense therefore denotes the continued efficacy for purifying from all sin, actual and original, by a momentary action, every successive believer who claims his full heritage in Christ; and it does not signify the constant purification of the same individual till he dies, any more than the present tense in Rom. 3:24 proves that justification is not one decisive act, but an action prolonged through life.

4. There is a theory universally rejected by the best scholars, that to cleanse signifies judicial clearance from sin, in the sense of forgiveness. But this makes St. John, in verse 7, an advocate of justification by works and not by faith only. For walking in the light, or maintaining a series of good works, would be the condition on which the sinner is cleansed or cleared from sin. This would contradict that vital doctrine which teaches that God forgives not the godly, but the ungodly, through penitent faith in Jesus Christ. But the glory of the gospel is in the fact that Christ Jesus receives sinners who submit to him. "In verse 9," says Alford, " 'to cleanse from all unrighteousness' is plainly distinguished from 'to forgive us our sin'; distinguished as a further process; as, in a word, sanctification, distinct from justification. This meaning must be held fast." This is to reject the judicial meaning of "cleanse."

The theory has recently been advanced that St. John, in his first epistle, makes no distinction between love and perfect love, that the adjective perfect is an expletive adding nothing to the sense. But it will be found that St. John uses these words with great discrimination and deep significance. This is seen in 4:7, "Every one that loveth is born of God." We note that the author does not say that loving perfectly is a sign of regeneration. This would have narrowed down the number of the regenerate to a few, excluding all weak and struggling believers. For such the beloved apostle had a strong sympathy. He remembered the time in his early discipleship when he had so defective love that he asked of Jesus permission to bid fire to come down from heaven and consume the bigoted Samaritans who did not receive his Master. St. John had seen very many young converts weak and wavering because of love imperfect and intermittent, needing sympathy and encouragement while trying to lay aside their pagan habits. It would have extinguished the smoking flax to have set the standard of regeneration so high as perfect love to the exclusion of lower degrees. Instead of such a treatment of the weak in faith, this wise pastor recognized the new birth wherever divine love had been implanted, in its lowest manifestations, and he beckoned them on to the higher altitudes, the Alpine summits of grace, by presenting the possibility of entering into the experience of pure, that is perfect love. He was not afraid of discouraging them by telling that that it is better farther on.

This good news, proclaimed in love and not with threatening, will always be welcomed by every truly regenerate person.

The same wise appreciation of any degree of love to God is seen in 4:18. "He that feareth is not made perfect in love." He did not say, "has no love," and hence is not a Christian. St. John writes with remarkable precision and discrimination, recognizing degrees in love, from the rill slowly meandering through the meadow to the Amazon floating the navies of the world. It is quite evident that St. John discerned two quite distinct classes in the school of Christ, and he treated them in such a way as to give no offence to the lower class, those not made perfect; and that the specific difference is the presence or absence of fear. Both classes love, in the evangelical sense, the one wholly delivered from servile dread of God, of punishment, of death, and from forebodings of future ill; while the other class has a degree of fear of these objects mingling with true love toward God and men. We call the attention of a certain class of zealous public religious teachers to the fact that St. John threw no stones at those whose love was imperfect, nor did he utter any word of threatening. They were all his brethren, the fearless and the fearful, those with love perfected and those with love incomplete. Yet he plainly implies that one state of experience is preferable. This he presents as a privilege.

In 1 John 4:12 we learn that continuous love (present tense) to one another as a brotherhood in Christ is another sign of perfect love. We believe that it is easier to love God whom we have not seen than our brethren with whom we are in daily contact, noting their defects and perhaps denying ourselves to minister to their needs. He whose affection for all the members of the family of God knows no interruption nor abatement, evinces that pure, and hence perfect, love dwells in his bosom. It is because of the decay of this love towards the brethren that so many secular brotherhoods, open and secret, have sprung up like suckers, diverting nourishment from God's vine, the visible Church of Christ.

In 1 John 2:5 we have another sign of perfected love. "Whosoever is [constantly] keeping [present] his commandments, in him verily hath the love of God been perfected." The tense of the verb implies continuous, i.e., perfect obedience. Hence, says Alford, "The perfect observation of his commandments is the perfection of love to him." A perfect, fruit-bearing tree implies a perfect root. Love is the root of obedience. Defective obedience springs from mixed love, the self-life not having been nailed to the cross.

We speak of the self that bears not the image of our adorable Lord Jesus Christ.

All English readers are perplexed with the apparently unconditional assertion of St. John in his first epistle, 3:9, "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin." The reason assigned seems also to be without any conditions; "because his seed remaineth in him," the love of God shed abroad in the heart by the Holy Spirit. (Rom. 5:5.) Then both assertions are strengthened by the declaration of the impossibility of sinning; "and he cannot sin, because he is begotten of God." This seems to teach the absolute infallibility of the regenerate. This is a doctrine far beyond the final perseverance of the saints, which conceded the possibility, and even the unavoidableness, of daily sin "in thought, word, and deed." But the Greek reveals an important condition in the perfect tense, "has been born," with the emphasis on the present to which this tense extends, thus implying the continuance of the regenerate life. The assertion of St. John, therefore, resolves itself into this, that, while loving God, a person cannot be disobeying him. The declaration is also modified by the use of the present tense "is not sinning," and "cannot be sinning," as a course of life, although under stress of sudden temptation he may commit a single sin as in 2:1. "If any man sin (aorist)" against the tenor of his character, "we have an Advocate to whom the penitent may resort for pardon. But should there be no such penitent resort, but rather a persistent repetition of the sin, sonship to God is forfeited, and the habitual sinner is no longer included in the phrase "whosoever has been born of God." Thus St. John's "cannot sin" is harmonized with his "if any man sin.

But in 5:18 there is a statement which apparently collides with this nice theory of harmony -- "We know that whosoever is born [perfect tense] of God sinneth not, but he that is begotten [aorist tense, denoting a single, decisive event] keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not." Here we seem to have infallibility predicated of the momentary act of regeneration, a state of perpetual sinlessness beyond the reach of the tempter. It would seem, after all, that St. John is not an Arminian, but the highest style of a Calvinist.

Here the latest results of criticism on the Greek text come very opportunely to our relief. These results are seen in the R. V., "But he that was begotten of God, [called only begotten in 4:9] keepeth him." The text of Westcott and Hort has "him" instead of "himself," and the keeping is conditionally done by Christ, kept by the power of God through faith." (1 Pet. 1:5.) See Bishop Westcott's commentary on 1 John 5:18.

Verse 17. "All unrighteousness is sin" means "every unjust act is sin." -- A. Clarke, Bengel, Whedon, and Alexander.

We will not attempt to explain the paradox of a "brother" who "sins a sin not unto death," and of the "sin unto death" for which we are under no obligation to pray. Future generations of scholars may arrive at some acceptable solution of this practical difficulty.

The best explanation I can give is that St. John speaks of the irremissible sin.

"There is a time we know not when,

A point we know not where.

That marks the destiny of men

To glory or despair.

"There is a line, by us unseen,

Which crosses every path,
The hidden boundary between
God's mercy and his wrath."

Addison Alexander.

The inexplicable difficulty lies in the question, How may we know who are past praying for? The poet, I think, is correct in his assumption that only God knows.

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