

On Sin in Believers

by John Wesley

The sermon explores the question of whether sin remains in believers, arguing that sin is present in the flesh, although believers are delivered from its power and guilt.

Scripture: Romans 8:1, 1 Corinthians 3:1-3, 1 Corinthians 6:19, 2 Corinthians 5:17, 2 Corinthians 7:1, Galatians 5:17, Ephesians 6:11-12, Hebrews 12:22, 1 John 3:9, Revelation 2:4

Topics: "Spiritual Warfare", "Sin in Believers"

Description

John Wesley addresses the complex relationship between sin and believers, emphasizing that while those in Christ are new creations, sin still remains in their nature. He argues that even justified believers must contend with an evil nature, as evidenced by Scripture and the experiences of early Christians. Wesley warns against the dangerous belief that true believers are entirely free from sin, asserting that this notion is both new and contrary to biblical teaching. He encourages believers to recognize the ongoing struggle against sin and to actively resist it, maintaining their faith and reliance on God's grace. Ultimately, Wesley calls for vigilance and perseverance in the Christian walk, acknowledging the dual nature of believers who are both justified and still wrestling with sin.

Transcript

"If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature." 2 Cor. 5:17.

I. 1. Is there then sin in him that is in Christ? Does sin remain in one that believes in him? Is there any sin in them that are born of God, or are they wholly delivered from it? Let no one imagine this to be a question of mere curiosity; or that it is of little importance whether it be determined one way or the other. Rather it is a point of the utmost moment to every serious Christian; the resolving of which very nearly concerns both his present and eternal happiness.

2. And yet I do not know that ever it was controverted in the primitive Church. Indeed there was no room for disputing concerning it, as all Christians were agreed. And so far as I have observed, the whole body of ancient Christians, who have left us anything in writing, declare with one voice, that even believers in Christ, till they are "strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might," have need to "wrestle with flesh and blood," with an evil nature, as well as "with principalities and powers."

3. And herein our own Church (as indeed in most points) exactly copies after the primitive; declaring in her Ninth Article, "Original sin is the corruption of the nature of every man, whereby man is in his own nature

inclined to evil, so that the flesh lusteth contrary to the Spirit. And this infection of nature doth remain, yea, in them that are regenerated; whereby the lust of the flesh, called in Greek *_phronEma sarkos_*, is not subject to the law of God. And although there is no condemnation for them that believe, yet this lust hath of itself the nature of sin."

4. The same testimony is given by all other Churches; not only by the Greek and Romish Church, but by every Reformed Church in Europe, of whatever denomination. Indeed some of these seem to carry the thing too far; so describing the corruption of heart in a believer, as scarce to allow that he has dominion over it, but rather is in bondage thereto; and, by this means, they leave hardly any distinction between a believer and an unbeliever.

5. To avoid this extreme, many well-meaning men, particularly those under the direction of the late Count Zinzendorf, ran into another; affirming, that "all true believers are not only saved from the dominion of sin, but from the being of inward as well as outward sin, so that it no longer remains in them:" And from them, about twenty years ago, many of our countrymen imbibed the same opinion, that even the corruption of nature is no more, in those who believe in Christ.

6. It is true that, when the Germans were pressed upon this head, they soon allowed, (many of them at least,) that "sin did still remain in the flesh, but not in the heart of a believer;" and, after a time, when the absurdity of this was shown, they fairly gave up the point; allowing that sin did still remain, though not reign, in him that is born of God.

7. But the English, who had received it from them, (some directly, some at second or third hand,) were not so easily prevailed upon to part with a favourite opinion: And even when the generality of them were convinced it was utterly indefensible, a few could not be persuaded to give it up, but maintain it to this day.

II. 1. For the sake of these who really fear God, and desire to know "the truth as it is in Jesus," it may not be amiss to consider the point with calmness and impartiality. In doing this, I use indifferently the words, regenerate, justified, or believers; since, though they have not precisely the same meaning, (the First implying an inward, actual change, the Second a relative one, and the Third the means whereby both the one and the other are wrought,) yet they come to one and the same thing; as everyone that believes, is both justified and born of God.

2. By sin, I here understand inward sin; any sinful temper, passion, or affection; such as pride, self-will, love of the world, in any kind or degree; such as lust, anger, peevishness; any disposition contrary to the mind which was in Christ.

3. The question is not concerning outward sin; whether a child of God commits sin or no. We all agree and earnestly maintain, "He that committeth sin is of the devil." We agree, "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin." Neither do we now inquire whether inward sin will always remain in the children of God; whether sin will continue in the soul as long as it continues in the body: Nor yet do we inquire whether a justified person may relapse either into inward or outward sin; but simply this, Is a justified or regenerate man freed from all sin as soon as he is justified? Is there then no sin in his heart? -- nor ever after, unless he fall from grace?

4. We allow that the state of a justified person is inexpressibly great and glorious. He is born again, "not of blood, nor of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." He is a child of God, a member of Christ, an heir of the kingdom of heaven. "The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, keepeth his heart and

mind in Christ Jesus." His very body is a "temple of the Holy Ghost," and an "habitation of God through the Spirit." He is "created anew in Christ Jesus:" He is washed, he is sanctified. His heart is purified by faith; he is cleansed "from the corruption that is in the world;" "the love of God is shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost which is given unto him." And so long as he "walketh in love," (which he may always do,) he worships God in spirit and in truth. He keepeth the commandments of God, and doeth those things that are pleasing in his sight; so exercising himself as to "have a conscience void of offence, toward God and toward man:" And he has power both over outward and inward sin, even from the moment he is justified.

III. 1. "But was he not then freed from all sin, so that there is no sin in his heart?" I cannot say this; I cannot believe it; because St. Paul says the contrary. He is speaking to believers, and describing the state of believers in general, when he says, "The flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: These are contrary the one to the other." (Gal. 5:17) Nothing can be more express. The Apostle here directly affirms that the flesh, evil nature, opposes the Spirit, even in believers; that even in the regenerate there are two principles, "contrary the one to the other."

2. Again: When he writes to the believers at Corinth, to those who were sanctified in Christ Jesus, (1 Cor. 1:2) he says, "I, brethren, could not speak unto you, as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, as unto babes in Christ. Ye are yet carnal: For whereas there is among you envying and strife, are ye not carnal?" (1 Cor. 3:1-3) Now here the Apostle speaks unto those who were unquestionably believers, -- whom, in the same breath, he styles his brethren in Christ, -- as being still, in a measure, carnal. He affirms, there was envying, (an evil temper,) occasioning strife among them, and yet does not give the least intimation that they had lost their faith. Nay, he manifestly declares they had not; for then they would not have been babes in Christ. And (what is most remarkable of all) he speaks of being carnal, and babes in Christ, as one and the same thing; plainly showing that every believer is (in a degree) carnal, while he is only a babe in Christ.

3. Indeed this grand point, that there are two contrary principles in believers, -- nature and grace, the flesh and the Spirit, runs through all the Epistles of St. Paul, yea, through all the Holy Scriptures; almost all the directions and exhortations therein are founded on this supposition; pointing at wrong tempers or practices in those who are, notwithstanding, acknowledged by the inspired writers to be believers. And they are continually exhorted to fight with and conquer these, by the power of the faith which was in them.

4. And who can doubt, but there was faith in the angel of the church of Ephesus, when our Lord said to him, "I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience: Thou hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted?" (Rev. 2:2-4.) But was there, meantime, no sin in his heart? Yea, or Christ would not have added, "Nevertheless, I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love." This was real sin which God saw in his heart; of which, accordingly, he is exhorted to repent: And yet we have no authority to say, that even then he had no faith.

5. Nay, the angel of the church at Pergamos, also, is exhorted to repent, which implies sin, though our Lord expressly says, "Thou hast not denied my faith." (Rev. 2:13, 16) And to the angel of the church in Sardis, he says, "Strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die." The good which remained was ready to die; but was not actually dead. (Rev. 3:2) So there was still a spark of faith even in him; which he is accordingly commanded to hold fast. (Rev. 3:3.)

6. Once more: When the Apostle exhorts believers to "cleanse themselves from all filthiness of flesh and spirit," (2 Cor. 7:1,) he plainly teaches, that those believers were not yet cleansed therefrom.

Will you answer, "He that abstains from all appearance of evil, does ipso facto cleanse himself from all filthiness?" Not in any wise. For instance: A man reviles me: I feel resentment, which is filthiness of spirit; yet I say not a word. Here I "abstain from all appearance of evil;" but this does not cleanse me from that filthiness of spirit, as I experience to my sorrow.

7. And as this position, "There is no sin in a believer, no carnal mind, no bent to backsliding," is thus contrary to the word of God, so it is to the experience of his children. These continually feel an heart bent to backsliding; a natural tendency to evil; a proneness to depart from God, and cleave to the things of earth. They are daily sensible of sin remaining in their heart, -- pride, self-will, unbelief; and of sin cleaving to all they speak and do, even their best actions and holiest duties. Yet at the same time they "know that they are of God;" they cannot doubt of it for a moment. They feel his Spirit clearly "witnessing with their spirit, that they are the children of God." They "rejoice in God through Christ Jesus, by whom they have now received the atonement." So that they are equally assured, that sin is in them, and that "Christ is in them the hope of glory."

8. "But can Christ be in the same heart where sin is?" Undoubtedly he can; otherwise it never could be saved therefrom. Where the sickness is, there is the Physician,

Carrying on his work within,

Striving till he cast out sin.

Christ indeed cannot reign, where sin reigns; neither will he dwell where any sin is allowed. But he is and dwells in the heart of every believer, who is fighting against all sin; although it be not yet purified, according to the purification of the sanctuary.

9. It has been observed before, that the opposite doctrine, -- That there is no sin in believers, -- is quite new in the church of Christ; that it was never heard of for seventeen hundred years; never till it was discovered by Count Zinzendorf. I do not remember to have seen the least intimation of it, either in any ancient or modern writer; unless perhaps in some of the wild, ranting Antinomians. And these likewise say and unsay, acknowledging there is sin in their flesh, although no sin in their heart. But whatever doctrine is new must be wrong; for the old religion is the only true one; and no doctrine can be right, unless it is the very same "which was from the beginning."

10. One argument more against this new, unscriptural doctrine may be drawn from the dreadful consequences of it. One says, "I felt anger to-day." Must I reply, "Then you have no faith?" Another says, "I know what you advise is good, but my will is quite averse to it." Must I tell him, "Then you are an unbeliever, under the wrath and the curse of God?" What will be the natural consequence of this? Why, if he believe what I say, his soul will not only be grieved and wounded, but perhaps utterly destroyed; inasmuch as he will "cast away" that "confidence which hath great recompense of reward." And having cast away his shield, how shall he "quench the fiery darts of the wicked one?" How shall he overcome the world? -- seeing "this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith." He stands disarmed in the midst of his enemies, open to all their assaults. What wonder then, if he be utterly overthrown; if they take him captive at their will; yea, if he fall from one wickedness to another, and never see good any more? I cannot, therefore, by any means receive this assertion, that there is no sin in a believer from the moment he is justified; First, because it is contrary to the whole tenor of Scripture; -- Secondly, because it is contrary to the experience of the children of God; -- Thirdly, because it is absolutely new, never heard of in the world till yesterday; -- and Lastly, because it is naturally attended with the most fatal consequences;

not only grieving those whom God hath not grieved, but perhaps dragging them into everlasting perdition.

IV. 1. However, let us give a fair hearing to the chief arguments of those who endeavour to support it. And it is, First, from Scripture they attempt to prove that there is no sin in a believer. They argue thus: "The Scripture says, Every believer is born of God, is clean, is holy, is sanctified, is pure in heart, has a new heart, is a temple of the Holy Ghost. Now, as 'that which is born of the flesh is flesh,' is altogether evil, so 'that which is born of the Spirit is spirit,' is altogether good. Again: A man cannot be clean, sanctified, holy, and at the same time unclean, unsanctified, unholy. He cannot be pure and impure, or have a new and an old heart together. Neither can his soul be unholy, while it is a temple of the Holy Ghost.

I have put this objection as strong as possible, that its full weight may appear. Let us now examine it, part by part. And, 1. "That which is born of the Spirit is spirit, is altogether good." I allow the text, but not the comment. For the text affirms this, and no more, -- that every man who is "born of the Spirit," is a spiritual man. He is so: But so he may be, and yet not be altogether spiritual. The Christians at Corinth were spiritual men; else they had been no Christians at all; and yet they were not altogether spiritual: they were still, in part, carnal. -- "But they were fallen from grace." St. Paul says, No. They were even then babes in Christ. 2. "But a man cannot be clean, sanctified, holy, and at the same time unclean, unsanctified, unholy." Indeed he may. So the Corinthians were. "Ye are washed," says the Apostle, "ye are sanctified;" namely, cleansed from "fornication, idolatry, drunkenness," and all other outward sin; (1 Cor. 6:9, 10, 11;) and yet at the same time, in another sense of the word, they were unsanctified; they were not washed, not inwardly cleansed from envy, evil surmising, partiality. -- "But sure, they had not a new heart and an old heart together." It is most sure they had, for at that very time, their hearts were truly, yet not entirely, renewed. Their carnal mind was nailed to the cross; yet it was not wholly destroyed. -- "But could they be unholy while they were 'temples of the Holy Ghost?'" Yes; that they were temples of the Holy Ghost, is certain; (1 Cor. 6:19;) and it is equally certain, they were, in some degree, carnal, that is, unholy.

2. "However, there is one Scripture more which will put the matter out of question: 'If any man be' a believer 'in Christ, he is a new creature. Old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.' (2 Cor. 5:17.) Now certainly a man cannot be a new creature and an old creature at once." Yes, he may: He may be partly renewed, which was the very case with those at Corinth. They were doubtless "renewed in the spirit of their mind," or they could not have been so much as "babes in Christ." yet they had not the whole mind which was in Christ, for they envied one another. "But it is said expressly, 'Old things are passed away: All things are become new.'" But we must not so interpret the Apostle's words, as to make him contradict himself. And if we will make him consistent with himself, the plain meaning of the words is this: His old judgment concerning justification, holiness, happiness, indeed concerning the things of God in general, is now passed away; so are his old desires, designs, affections, tempers, and conversation. All these are undeniably become new, greatly changed from what they were; and yet, though they are new, they are not wholly new. Still he feels, to his sorrow and shame, remains of the old man, too manifest taints of his former tempers and affections, though they cannot gain any advantage over him, as long as he watches unto prayer.

3. This whole argument, "If he is clean, he is clean;" "If he is holy, he is holy;" (and twenty more expressions of the same kind may easily be heaped together;) is really no better than playing upon words: It is the fallacy of arguing from a particular to a general; of inferring a general conclusion from particular premises. Propose the sentence entire, and it runs thus: "If he is holy at all, he is holy altogether." That does not follow: Every babe in Christ is holy, and yet not altogether so. He is saved from sin; yet not entirely: It remains, though it does not reign. If you think it does not remain, (in babes at least, whatever be

the case with young men, or fathers) you certainly have not considered the height, and depth, and length, and breadth of the law of God; (even the law of love, laid down by St. Paul in the thirteenth of Corinthians;) and that every _anomia_, disconformity to, or deviation from, this law is sin. Now, is there no disconformity to this in the heart or life of a believer? What may be in an adult Christian, is another question; but what a stranger must he be to human nature, who can possibly imagine, that this is the case with every babe in Christ!

4. "But believers walk after the Spirit, [What follows for some pages is an answer to a paper, published in the Christian Magazine, p. 577-582. I am surprised Mr. Dodd should give such a paper a place in his Magazine, which is directly contrary to our Ninth Article. -- Editor] (Rom. 8:1,) and the Spirit of God dwells in them; consequently, they are delivered from the guilt, the power, or, in one word, the being of sin."

These are coupled together, as if they were the same thing. But they are not the same thing. The guilt is one thing, the power another, and the being yet another. That believers are delivered from the guilt and power of sin we allow; that they are delivered from the being of it we deny. Nor does it in any wise follow from these texts. A man may have the Spirit of God dwelling in him, and may "walk after the Spirit," though he still feels "the flesh lusting against the Spirit."

5. "But the `church is the body of Christ;' (Col. 1:24;) this implies, that its members are washed from all filthiness; otherwise it will follow, that Christ and Belial are incorporated with each other."

Nay, it will not follow from hence, "Those who are the mystical body of Christ, still feel the flesh lusting against the Spirit," that Christ has any fellowship with the devil; or with that sin which he enables them to resist and overcome.

6. "But are not Christians `come to the heavenly Jerusalem,' where `nothing defiled can enter?'" (Heb. 12:22.) Yes; "and to an innumerable company of angels, and to the spirits of just men made perfect:" That is,

Earth and heaven all agree;

All is one great family.

And they are likewise holy and undefiled, while they "walk after the Spirit;" although sensible there is another principle in them, and that "these are contrary to each other."

7. "But Christians are reconciled to God. Now this could not be, if any of the carnal mind remained; for this is enmity against God: Consequently, no reconciliation can be effected, but by its total destruction."

We are "reconciled to God through the blood of the cross:" And in that moment the _phronEma sarkos_, the corruption of nature, which is enmity with God, is put under our feet; the flesh has no more dominion over us. But it still _exists;_ and it is still in its nature enmity with God, lusting against his Spirit.

8. "But `they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh, with its affections and lusts.'" (Gal. 5:24.) They have so; yet it remains in them still, and often struggles to break from the cross. "Nay, but they have `put off the old man with his deeds.'" (Col. 3:9.) They have; and, in the sense above described, "old things are passed away; all things are become new." A hundred texts may be cited to the same effect; and they will all admit of the same answer. -- "But, to say all in one word, `Christ gave himself for the Church, that it might be holy and without blemish.'" (Eph. 5:25, 27.) And so it will be in the end: But it never was yet, from the

beginning to this day.

9. "But let experience speak: All who are justified do at that time find an absolute freedom from all sin." That I doubt; But, if they do, do they find it ever after? Else you gain nothing. -- "If they do not, it is their own fault." That remains to be proved.

10. "But, in the very nature of things, can a man have pride in him, and not be proud; anger, and yet not be angry?"

A man may have pride in him, may think of himself in some particulars above what he ought to think, (and so be proud in that particular,) and yet not be a proud man in his general character. He may have anger in him, yea, and a strong propensity to furious anger, without giving way to it. -- "But can anger and pride be in that heart, where only meekness and humility are felt?" No; but some pride and anger may be in that heart, where there is much humility and meekness.

"It avails not to say, These tempers are there, but they do not reign: For sin cannot, in any kind or degree, exist where it does not reign; for guilt and power are essential properties of sin. Therefore, where one of them is, all must be."

Strange indeed! "Sin cannot, in any kind or degree, exist where it does not reign?" Absolutely contrary this to all experience, all Scripture, all common sense. Resentment of an affront is sin; it is anomia, disconformity to the law of love. This has existed in me a thousand times. Yet it did not, and does not, reign. -- "But guilt and power are essential properties of sin; therefore where one is, all must be." No: In the instance before us, if the resentment I feel is not yielded to, even for a moment, there is no guilt at all, no condemnation from God upon that account. And in this case, it has no power: though it "lusteth against the Spirit," it cannot prevail. Here, therefore, as in ten thousand instances, there is sin without either guilt or power.

11. "But the supposing sin in a believer is pregnant with everything frightful and discouraging. It implies the contending with a power that has the possession of our strength; maintains his usurpation of our hearts; and there prosecutes the war in defiance of our Redeemer." Not so: The supposing sin is in us, does not imply that it has the possession of our strength; no more than a man crucified has the possession of those that crucify him. As little does it imply, that "sin maintains its usurpation of our hearts." The usurper is dethroned. He remains indeed where he once reigned; but remains in chains. So that he does, in some sense, "prosecute the war," yet he grows weaker and weaker; while the believer goes on from strength to strength, conquering and to conquer.

12. "I am not satisfied yet: He that has sin in him, is a slave to sin. Therefore you suppose a man to be justified, while he is a slave to sin. Now, if you allow men may be justified while they have pride, anger, or unbelief in them; nay, if you aver, these are (at least for a time) in all that are justified; what wonder that we have so many proud, angry, unbelieving believers!

I do not suppose any man who is justified is a slave to sin: Yet I do suppose sin remains (at least for a time) in all that are justified.

"But, if sin remains in a believer, he is a sinful man: If pride, for instance, then he is proud; if self-will, then he is self-willed; if unbelief, then he is an unbeliever; consequently, no believer at all. How then does he differ from unbelievers, from unregenerate men?" This is still mere playing upon words. It means no more

than, if there is sin, pride, self-will in him, then -- there is sin, pride, self-will. And this nobody can deny. In that sense then he is proud, or self-willed. But he is not proud or self-willed in the same sense that unbelievers are; that is, governed by pride or self-will. Herein he differs from unregenerate men. They obey sin; he does not. Flesh is in them both. But they "walk after the flesh;" he "walks after the Spirit."

"But how can unbelief be in a believer?" That word has two meanings. It means either no faith, or little faith; either the absence of faith or the weakness of it. In the former sense, unbelief is not in a believer; in the latter, it is in all babes. Their faith is commonly mixed with doubt or fear; that is, in the latter sense, with unbelief. "Why are ye fearful," says our Lord, "O ye of little faith?" Again: "O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?" You see here was unbelief in believers; little faith and much unbelief.

13. "But this doctrine, that sin remains in a believer; that a man may be in the favour of God, while he has sin in his heart; certainly tends to encourage men in sin." Understand the proposition right, and no such consequence follows. A man may be in God's favour though he feel sin; but not if he yields to it. Having sin does not forfeit the favour of God; giving way to sin does. Though the flesh in you "lust against the Spirit," you may still be a child of God; but if you "walk after the flesh," you are a child of the devil. Now this doctrine does not encourage to obey sin, but to resist it with all our might.

V. 1. The sum of all is this: There are in every person, even after he is justified, two contrary principles, nature and grace, termed by St. Paul the flesh and the Spirit. Hence, although even babes in Christ are sanctified, yet it is only in part. In a degree, according to the measure of their faith, they are spiritual; yet, in a degree they are carnal. Accordingly, believers are continually exhorted to watch against the flesh, as well as the world and the devil. And to this agrees the constant experience of the children of God. While they feel this witness in themselves, they feel a will not wholly resigned to the will of God. They know they are in him; and yet find an heart ready to depart from him, a proneness to evil in many instances, and a backwardness to that which is good. The contrary doctrine is wholly new; never heard of in the church of Christ, from the time of his coming into the world, till the time of Count Zinzendorf; and it is attended with the most fatal consequences. It cuts off all watching against our evil nature, against the Delilah which we are told is gone, though she is still lying in our bosom. It tears away the shield of weak believers, deprives them of their faith and so leaves them exposed to all the assaults of the world, the flesh, and the devil.

2. Let us, therefore, hold fast the sound doctrine "once delivered to the saints," and delivered down by them with the written word to all succeeding generations: That although we are renewed, cleansed, purified, sanctified, the moment we truly believe in Christ, yet we are not then renewed, cleansed, purified altogether; but the flesh, the evil nature, still remains (though subdued) and wars against the Spirit. So much the more let us use all diligence in "fighting the good fight of faith." So much the more earnestly let us "watch and pray" against the enemy within. The more carefully let us take to ourselves, and "put on, the whole armor of God;" that, although "we wrestle" both "with flesh, and blood, and with the principalities, and with powers, and wicked spirits in high places," we may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand."

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