

Another manifestation of holy affections is **a decreasing pattern of sin**. First John 3:4-10 spells out this sixth test: Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness. You know that [Christ] appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin. No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him. Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God.

Unbroken patterns of sin are characteristic of the unregenerate. No matter what a person claims about being a Christian, if he or she continues in sin, it is only a claim and not a reality. When you became a Christian, the pattern of sin was broken and a new pattern came into existence. Holy affections took over. Does that mean there's no sin in your life? No, because your unredeemed flesh is still there. But the more you pursue those religious affections, the less you will sin.

Sin as a life pattern is incompatible with salvation. That's because to experience salvation is to be saved from something, and that something is sin. If a person could continue in sin after being saved from sin, that would mean salvation is ineffective. John therefore discussed the work of Christ to demonstrate just how effective it is.

He began by noting that there are people who practice sin and lawlessness (v. 4). Then Christ "appeared in order to take away sins" (v. 5). To say someone had the work of Christ applied to him or her, yet continues in the same pattern of sin is to deny the very purpose Christ came for, which was to take away sins. Continuing in sin is not consistent with Christ's work on the cross. If a saved person could keep on sinning, that would mean Christ's death--while having some efficacy in eternity--is in fact useless in time. Perish the thought! Christ's death served the very useful purpose of taking away not only the penalty of sin, but also the pattern of sin in the believer's life.

John went on to talk about Christ's work through the believer's union with Him: "No one who abides in Him sins" (v. 6). That cannot mean true Christians never sin because John just said, "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1:8). Rather, the next two verses in chapter 3 explain, "The one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil" (vv. 7-8). John's first epistle is consistent in warning against a pattern of sin.

Now let me clarify something here. I frequently receive letters from anguished Christians who doubt their salvation because they can't seem to break a sinful or unwise habit. They most often write about smoking, overeating, and masturbation. They fear their struggle with such things means they are locked into a pattern of sin. But John is not saying that the frequent occurrence of one particular sin in a person's life means that person is lost. Rather, he clarifies his meaning in saying that a true believer cannot practice lawlessness (1 John 3:4). The Greek term used there (anomia) literally means living as if there were no law. A person who rejects

God's authority doesn't care what God thinks about his habits, and is obviously not a Christian.

A Christian, however, has a drastically different way of relating to God. He or she is no longer a slave to sin, but has offered himself or herself as a servant to the Lord (Rom. 6:14, 17-18). A true Christian can still sin, and may even do so frequently, but sinning frequently is not the same as practicing sin. In 1 John we see that a true believer can do the first, but not the second.

Why is that the case? Because the true believer "abides in Him" (1 John 3:6). Not only does Christ's death take away our sin, but also His ongoing life in us breaks the sin pattern. No longer are we perpetual sinners in thought, word, and deed--as we were before we were saved. We now have the option to do good. If we find ourselves sinning, contrary to the good we desire to do inside, we are much like the apostle Paul in Romans 7--and he's a great person to be associated with! Yet because of the abiding presence of Christ, our struggle will decrease as time goes on. We will always be acutely sensitive to sin, for as we have seen, that's one of John's tests of saving faith, but sin will be less of a pattern in our lives. Christ lives in union with us to provide a new pattern--a pattern of righteousness.

A pattern of sin, however, signals a union with the devil: "The one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil" (v. 8). The devil is a sinner and nothing but. Everyone who is associated with the devil is a sinner and nothing but. Christ came to destroy the works of the devil by rescuing people who are in bondage to sin. That means those who've really been rescued will not continue in the state they've been rescued from. A habitual pattern of sin indicates that a rescue has never taken place. To claim otherwise is to denigrate Christ by implying His death didn't accomplish what He set out to do--destroy the works of the devil by rescuing people from sin.

In addition, "No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: any one who does not practice righteousness is not of God" (vv. 9-10). The believer has been born anew by the Holy Spirit. The seed He plants is a new nature, a new life principle, a new disposition. Just as a seed planted in the ground produces a distinct kind of life, God's seed produces a righteous life in us that breaks the pattern of sin. And don't worry: that seed cannot die, for the Word of God tells us it's imperishable (1 Peter 1:23). Born of the Spirit of God, the believer cannot continually sin.

John just provided us with four viewpoints in analyzing the sin in our life: the work Christ accomplished in His death, His ongoing life in the believer, His destruction of the devil's works, and the regenerating work of the Spirit. Every way you look at it, the pattern of habitual sin is broken. What does that mean to you personally? If you see a decreasing pattern of sin in your life, that's evidence of holy affections. The difference between the children of God and the children of the devil is, as John said, "obvious" (v. 10). If you practice righteousness, you're of God. If you don't, you're not. Plain and simple. If you see victory over sin in your life, if you see righteous motives, righteous desires, righteous words, righteous deeds, and if you're not all you ought to be but certainly not what you used to be, then you have eternal life, so enjoy it.

