

A Family Resemblance

Heart to Heart, Part 3

1 John 3:4-10

In a recent Baccalaureate address, Ravi Zacharias told the story of a political prisoner named Andres Thomas. In the year 2,000 Russia began releasing political prisoners; in the midst of them was a man named Andres Thomas – he had been imprisoned for 55 years. He was Hungarian and wouldn't stop talking gibberish to everyone – no one could understand his mumbling, sometimes animated speech. Officials decided to execute the old man, assuming he had grown mad. Someone said, "At least bring in a psychiatrist to evaluate him before you execute him."

So they went and got a Hungarian psychiatrist to come and evaluate this man; he stayed with Thomas for a few days and afterward he came out with his report – "You know what – he's not insane; he's not talking gibberish – he's talking in an old Hungarian dialect – his prison conditions however have nearly driven him insane – you brought him in here when he was 20 years old and put him in near solitary confinement for 55 years. Give him back to us and we will make him well." He was put in a wheelchair and released.

One of his first requests was to be given a mirror. He had not seen a mirror or his own reflection for 55 years. When he was handed a mirror, he held it up to his face for an instant and then quickly put it away, buried his face in his hands and sobbed uncontrollably.

What do you think it would be like, for over half a century and not see your reflection? To start out with the robust virility of youth and now for the first time in more than a half-century, suddenly see what all those years have taken from you.

Ravi went on with his sense of humor to talk about how we take for granted something like a mirror. He said, "We get up every morning, do our necessary ablutions, put on innocent forms of disfigurement and walk out looking like what we wished we did; but it's really like when you come back from a long journey, you realize you resemble your passport picture more than anything else.

Ravi then asked this question, "Is there a mirror for the soul – is there a reflection of what we should look like?" He then began to preach on the life of the prophet Daniel.¹

And with that, my lunch break was over. But I immediately thought of the Apostle James who made it clear that there is indeed a mirror for the soul – and for life itself.

He refers to the mirror of the word which reflects the kind of person we ought to be. (**James 1:25**).

In other words, as we honestly look into the mirror of the word, it reflects back to us what we actually look like and also shows us what we *should* look like.

Right in the middle of the *third chapter of First John* is a mirror.

And what we want to see and what we ought to see is a Family Resemblance – a reflection of someone belonging to the Family of God.

We hold the mirror up and immediately are confronted with our spiritual complexion; we discover things that mar our reflection.

In fact, in this spiritual analogy, John is going to make very clear that sin is a marring, disfiguring, destructive agent that distorts our reflection and mars the image of Christ in and through us.

In fact, in *verses 4 through 10, of First John chapter 3*, the Apostle John mentions the word *sin* ten times; ten different times in 7 verses.

He's basically going to make it clear that we've all got to daily address the reflection of sin and our fallen predisposition to sin and the marring effects of sin.

There's no need hiding it . . . let's not redefine it . . . Let's expose it for what it is and then deal with it.

Calvin Coolidge was the president of the United States in 1923. He was known for being a man of few words – in fact, somewhat renowned for never using an unnecessary word. One Sunday morning, he returned from a church service and a white house staff member asked him what the preacher had preached about in his sermon that morning.

“Coolidge replied with one word, “Sin!” The staff member waited for a little more information and when none came, he asked “Well, what did the preacher say about it?” Coolidge responded, “He was against it.”

That would be the Apostle John.

And John will answer the question, “What’s really wrong with sin? What’s so bad about sin?”

John provides at least six descriptions that reveal why sin is so sinful – why it’s so wrong –so marring – so disfiguring.

And the first reason is simply:

1. Because sinning repudiates the righteous standard modeled by Christ (v. 4)

It defies God’s holy and pure standards modeled by Christ, as John pointed out in the preceding verse – *verse 3 – and everyone who has this hope fixed on Him – Christ – purifies himself, just as He is pure.*

Sin defies the moral and ethical parameters provided by God in His word, modeled by Christ.

There are a number of definitions of sin by the way, in the Bible:

- The devising of folly is sin (Proverbs 24:9);
- All unrighteousness is sin (1 John 5:17);
- To one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin (James 4:17);

Sin then is repudiating – denying – disobeying – refusing to apply the standards holiness established by God.

The word John uses here for sin (hamartia) literally means to fail to hit the target – to miss the

mark; which is primarily a classical Greek definition of the word. What’s typically lost in that definition is the fact that throughout the New Testament, the word hamartia has the added characteristic of open rebellion – an attitude of hostility against the authority of God.ⁱⁱ

It isn’t just the idea of someone aiming their actions at God’s target and failing to hit the bulls eye – awe, I missed it again; it’s really more of the idea of someone actually aiming their lives in the opposite direction on purpose.

In other words, sin is willful rebellion – it isn’t an unfortunate choice or a mistaken accident – it is willful, deliberate deviation from the target of God’s righteous standard.ⁱⁱⁱ

That’s what John means here when he writes, notice in *verse 4*, “*sin is actually lawlessness.*” That is, sin is breaking the law of God.

Which by the way automatically creates a problem, right? It is even now in our generation creating tremendous confusion in our court systems, our educational systems – in fact, it throws the whole of society into terrible confusion *if* you void the law of God.

You effectively no longer know what’s right or wrong, what’s sinful or acceptable.

Maybe sin is really the product of genetic inheritance or adolescent hormones; maybe it’s excusable on grounds of a deprived upbringing or cultural conditioning – maybe our sense of right and wrong is just a relic of evolutionary origins.

I’ve heard that very argument used to excuse the promiscuity of married men who just can’t help their adulterating – why? Because it’s really just an evolutionary leftover from the alpha male animal they descended from who was doing nothing more than ensuring the continuation of his DNA.

He’s just an alpha male – that’s what they do.

Which is one of the reasons now for so much attention in the pseudoscience of neurocriminology – where criminal behavior is nothing more than the unfortunate result of genetic makeup – it’s just how you’re put together.

One recent school shooting was explained in one national newspaper in a headline which summed up their perspective – *The Genes Did It.* I thought they were joking until I read the article.

The shooter really couldn’t help it.

The American Psychiatric Association has, of course, bought into this theory and is now promoting it; in fact, I read just this past week that the

Association is about to release its fifth version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. It has taken 13 years to revise. Those who've seen pre-publication copies, such as one Duke Psychiatry professor, the manual has now classified temper tantrums [in children] as mental disorders.^{iv}

In other words, they just can't help it – they need therapy, not discipline.

What confusion.

Dr. Tripp recorded in his book Shepherding A Child's Heart, published a few years ago, that the Minnesota Crime Commission released an interesting report on the untamed child several decades ago and man is it ever different.

Listen to how far we've come culturally . . . and I quote the Minnesota Report, "Every baby starts life completely selfish and self-centered. He wants what he wants when he wants it; his bottle, his mother's attention, his playmate's toy, his uncle's watch. Deny these and he seethes with rage which would be murderous were he not so helpless. This means that all children, not just certain children, are born delinquent. If permitted to continue in the self-centered world of infancy, given free rein to his impulsive actions, every child will grow into some form of criminal."^v

Look how far we've come.

The problem with this ever growing modern perspective is the affect it has on the unbelieving heart we're attempting to reach with the gospel.

You see, they don't have a problem with sin – they have a disorder – a genetic predisposition that yields longings and actions which must be right because they feel them so strongly.

But the gospel you present to them doesn't present salvation from mental disorders or genetic malfunctioning or alpha male virility, does it?

The gospel presents a Savior who will save them from their – what? – sin.

And that's what is so wrong about sinful mankind – they are in lawless rebellion against the standard of God's holiness.

Okay, enough on that point . . . sin is sinful because it repudiates the righteous standard modeled by Christ . . .

2. Secondly, sin is tragically wrong because it depreciates the enormous sacrifice of Christ (v. 5)

Verse 5. You know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin.

In other words, Jesus Christ not only modeled purity and sinlessness, He came specifically to deal with our sinfulness.

He appeared – John writes – a reference to His first coming as a baby – living a sinless life – announced as **the Lamb of God who comes to take away the sin of the world (John 1:29)** and He fulfilled that mission by dying on a cross, the Lamb sacrificed once and for all, **John writes here in verse 5, to take up and away sins.**

You see, you get rid of the concept of sin and you eliminate the need for – and the blessing of – forgiveness.

This was the mission of Christ – Christ came, to take away – literally to **lift up and bear away – our sins**. The aorist tense is used to speak of that singular event where Christ did that – and we know that event was at the cross.^{vi}

As one secular author transparently lamented, "We have gotten rid of God and now we have no one left to forgive our sins."

You see, the tragedy of sin is that it denigrates – it depreciates – the enormous sacrifice of Christ.

And it rejects God's glorious solution to our sin problem.

Listen to these thrilling words from scripture – **For while we were helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly . . . did you get that – the ungodly. Do you qualify for salvation? Are you ungodly? Yes . . . then you qualify. He writes further, God demonstrated His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified – declared righteous on Christ's account – we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him (Romans 5:6-9).**

- Listen, one author wrote, if mankind's true need was education, God would have sent us a host of teachers;
- If mankind's greatest need was advancement in technology, He would have sent us engineers and inventors;
- If mankind's greatest need was sickness, He would have sent us medicine and a doctor;
- If mankind's greatest need was finances, He would have sent us a financial planners and economists;
- But our greatest problem is sin . . . so He sent us a Savior.

So at the very outset, John holds up the mirror and says – “Take a look your reflection . . . we’ve all got a problem – and it’s called sin – let’s call it what it is – and then glory in our rescuing, sin atoning, dying, resurrecting, living Savior!

But for those who want to reject Christ and keep on sinning, John warns: that sinning repudiates the holy standard of Christ; sinning depreciates the enormous sacrifice of Christ.

Thirdly;

3. Sinning indicates a lack of desire to walk with Christ

Verse 6. No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him.

Now that’s an interesting verse. Does John mean to say that we’re all sinners until we come by faith to Christ and then after accepting Christ as our Lord and Savior we never sin again?

Some throughout church history have taken this to prove the potential of sinless perfection – as John Wesley did.

Others viewed this as willful sin – in other words, a Christian doesn’t willfully sin – it’s never premeditated . . . it’s accidental.

And Christianity has accidental sin insurance and you don’t have to pay a deductible on those accidents and so your record remains clear.

Still others have said that John the Apostle is clearly saying that Christians don’t sin and anyone who sins is either not a Christian or they just lost their salvation and need to be saved again. The problem with that view – is that you’re going to keep losing your salvation. You’ll never be good enough to keep it.

So others agreeing with that viewpoint came along to redefine sin so that you didn’t have to worry about always losing your salvation.

I mean, if you include coveting, or unkindness, or impatience, or selfishness in your list of sins, you’re going to have to get saved every day, so what we’ll do is make a list of the big ones and the little ones that don’t matter so much.

The historic Roman Catholic teaching solved the problem in their own way by classifying sin into two categories – the incidental sins – or venial sins, and the really serious sins – the mortal sins.

Incidental sins didn’t even have to be brought up in confession . . . they were classified as

misdeemeanors; but mortal sins forfeited the grace of justification.^{vii}

And you’re basically back to square one.

So as long as you didn’t do anything mortally horrendous you were okay – you know, you didn’t get into witchcraft – you didn’t kill anybody; there’s no dead body in your freezer – so you’re really not classified as a sinner.

The trouble is, of course, the Bible doesn’t create those kinds of categories . . . sin is sin.

And the Bible doesn’t teach repeated regeneration and multiple rebirths either. You’re born once physically and you’re born once spiritually (John 3).

In fact, the view that you can gradually overcome sin until you are completely sinless and then, having arrived at that point you no longer lose your salvation – directly contradicts John’s earlier comments from chapter 1 where we’re told that ***if we claim to have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves.***^{viii}

In other words, if you claim to not be sinning anymore, you just told a lie and you just sinned, so you blew that one.

You may have noticed in your studies that throughout the New Testament the genuine believer is challenged and exhorted and warned against sinning.

Repeated exhortations *not* to sin would be needless if we could *not* sin.^{ix}

And the promise to the believer that we can directly confess our sins to Christ our Mediator and daily restore fellowship with God would be pointless if what we needed was conversion, not confession.

So what does John mean in ***verse 6 – No one who abides in Him sins.***

The answer is in the verb tense, used by John – he uses a present active participle – in other words, John is referring to someone *whose lifestyle is sinful*. He isn’t talking about big sins or little sins – he’s describing someone who maintains ongoing, unrepentant, unremitting, unashamed sin.

In other words, he really doesn’t care about abiding in Christ.

And keep in mind that John’s definition of sin in *verse 4* is lawlessness – open, defiant rebellion against God.

What John is going to begin doing here in this paragraph is describing 2 kinds of people. The defiant, rebelling unbeliever who loves to practice sin and doesn’t abide or commune with Christ and the obedient, redeemed believer who loves to

practice righteousness and longs to fellowship or abide with Christ.

This is the general direction of their lives – toward open rebellion against God or toward an abiding relationship with Christ.

John writes in *verse 6* that a person who claims to have *seen Christ* – by faith – and that they *know Christ* – that is, they’ve entered into a personal relationship with Christ and yet lives in open rebellion to God for the purpose of sinning is self-deceived.

John is actually contrasting the difference between sinners (which we all are) and a lifestyle devoted to sinning.^x

This is the difference between sinning in life and living to sin.

I still remember not long after giving my life to Christ as a 17 year old – the summer before my first year of college – having a job, working next to another guy who also went to church – was a decent guy, about 5 years older than me.

Our job was at the Norfolk Bridge Tunnel – a tunnel and bridge system linking Portsmouth with downtown Norfolk, Virginia. And our job was to stand at our booths and collect tolls paid by the motorists as they drove up out of the tunnel, heading toward the bridge.

I’ll never forget one night as we stood outside our booths to relax – we were working the third shift – there wasn’t any traffic at the time – I remember him pointing across the water to the other side at the huge Omni Hotel and he said to me, “I can’t believe I’m here working tonight when all the fun is taking place over there. I said, “What do you mean?” He said, “Look at all those hotel rooms over there on the water . . . can you imagine how many parties are going on over there right now and all the couples hooking up for the night in those hotel rooms . . . and I’ve got to be here when I could be over there!”

I’ll never forget thinking – man, I’m fighting sin and this guy is longing to sin – he’s actually upset he has to work . . . regretting that he can’t be sinning at this very moment because his job is in the way.

That’s the person John is describing in this paragraph – someone longing to sin – someone pining for sin – someone who is upset that he isn’t able to do something sinful.

That attitude invalidates any true – any real relationship with Jesus Christ.

Spurgeon actually said on one occasion that he believed a very large majority of churchgoers were

merely unthinking, slumbering worshipers of an unknown God.

In other words, they really don’t know Christ and they’ve never seen Christ by faith – and they don’t want to fellowship with Christ which is exactly what John describes here in *verse 6*.

On the other hand, the genuine believer longs to be holy . . . he pines for the day when he doesn’t have to battle sin any more . . . he gets upset that he hasn’t lived more righteously during the day, not that he hasn’t had a chance to do something wicked.

Now let me address something here – you’re probably thinking it right now. If we add other scripture as commentary to what John is writing here, we know from I Corinthians 5, that it’s possible to be an unrepentant, rebellious believer; in fact, it’s possible for a Christian to be caught up in sin (*Galatians 6:1 – entangled in sin*).

However, the difference is that the sinning believer is heading for discipline;

- by the word - that form of discipline from God can be correction through His word – which is daily discipline for us all, right?
- disciplined by church (*remove him* – Paul wrote – *remove the unrepentant believer from the assembly (I Corinthians 5:2)*;
- disciplined as well by God the Father; *Hebrews 12:8* actually says that *if you are not disciplined by God you are not legitimate, true sons and daughters at all*.
- Discipline can come in the form of a troubled conscience – or lasting consequences – the loss of ministry effectiveness – a loss of future reward – even a loss of physical life (*I Corinthians 11*) . . . believers taken home to heaven early because of the shame of their unrepentant lifestyles.

So don’t misunderstand the correct interpretation here.

Just because a Christian can sin without losing his salvation doesn’t give the genuine Christian any consolation of a free hallway pass.

Oh boy, I get one of these free passes a day.

In fact, just the opposite occurs – the genuine Christian understands;

- that sin is a repudiation of the holy and pure life-model of Christ;
- that sin depreciates the enormous sacrifice of Christ –

- and that sin indicates a lack of desire to walk with Christ

Sin is really bad . . . for all those reasons. But there's another.

4. Fourthly, sinning demonstrates allegiance to the enemy of Christ (vv. 7-8)

Verse 7. Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; 8. 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.

Destroy here doesn't mean to annihilate – it's a verb that refers to Christ's victory over Satan at the cross – where Christ crushed the head of the serpent and rendered his grip on mankind and over the grave powerless.^{xi}

None of the works of Satan can ultimately defeat the saints, who have been delivered already from his kingdom of death and darkness into God's kingdom of life and light.^{xii}

Why would the Christian ever want to be involved in sinning – because in sinning, you are actually supporting the enemy of Christ; you are actually deferring to the enemy who delights to use our sin to bring:

- dishonor to Christ
- and reproach to His name
- and discredit to his gospel
- and scandal to His church.

Someone openly rebelling against God is acting just like the devil openly rebelling in an attempt to overthrow God and reign in heaven, whereupon God removed him from heaven and his fallen angels with him (*Isaiah 14*).

Satan's agenda has not changed, although he knows that his ultimate defeat is certain and his eternal incarceration in hell is predicted – he's read through the end of the Book of Revelation too.

But since then and up until now, one of his chief delights is to tempt someone to withhold worship or openly defy and rebel against God.

John is actually countering the false teaching of the Gnostics who were saying that sin isn't that big a deal. God doesn't even notice.

No, John writes . . . Actually God notices – and so does Satan. In fact, a sinning, openly rebelling

individual is effectively joining forces with the Devil in dishonoring God.

Sinning demonstrates allegiance to the enemy of Christ.

5. Fifthly, sinning violates the internal life of Christ

Notice verse 9. No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin.

Again – the present tense of these verbs can be expanded and understood to basically restate *verse 6. He cannot continually sin . . . he cannot practice sin . . . why not?*

John adds this new thought – because within the believer, there is this new life principle – he calls it *the seed of God*.

This new life – Paul calls it *the new man (Colossians 3:10)*; with new patterns, new appetites, new objectives, new habits.

You might be tempted to think that what you really need to overcome sin is to get away from all forms of temptation. I mean the only way to develop patterns of holiness and allow this seed to grow is to get away from unholy people, right?

One author in his commentary told the humorous story of why that won't work.

A man decided to get away from all the noise and clamor and temptation of the rat race and join a monastery. So he joined one he'd heard about – it had really demanding commitments for those wanting to take their final vows. The initiates had to serve in the monastery in silence. Only once every five years would they be allowed to speak and then they could only say 2 words. Perfect, this man thought . . . no phones ringing, no clients calling, no temptations anywhere, no credit cards ringing up, no television, no people. So he joined and for the first five years didn't say a word. At the end of that time he was called into his superior's office where he was told he could say two words.

"Bad food," he complained.

"Thank you, I'll make a note of your observation," his superior said, rather stiffly.

The man went back to his duties and for another five years didn't utter a word. At the end of that time, his superior asked him if he had anything he would like to say in two words.

The man replied, "Hard bed!"

Then for another five years he said not a word. His superior called him in and asked him if he had anything to say before taking his final vows. And the man said, "I quit."

His superior replied, "Well, I'm not surprised . . . you've done nothing but complain since you got here."^{xiii}

In other words, joining a monastery doesn't solve the complaints and the desires of the heart that you take with you everywhere you go.

So how do you develop a heart of purity and holiness and habits that are well pleasing? It is directly related to this inward principle of life – the new nature of the believer.

We actually have, as one author put it, the urge *not* to sin.^{xiv}

We still battle the urge to sin, but we now have a new urge *not* to sin – where'd that come from?!

The seed of God – Peter refers to as the word of God, implanted in our hearts – germinated and nurtured by the indwelling Holy Spirit within us as well, growing and developing this new nature – this new life – this new man.^{xv}

And that new nature wants to stay away from sinning. Why?

Because sinning:

- Repudiates the righteous standard modeled by Christ;
- Depreciates the enormous sacrifice of Christ;
- Indicates a lack of desire to walk with Christ;
- Demonstrates allegiance to the enemy of Christ;
- Violates the internal life of Christ;

Lastly – number six:

6. **Because sinning obliterates the distinctiveness of belonging to Christ**

John writes in verse 10. By this, the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious; anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother.

John just sort of sums it all up, doesn't he?

The children of God love righteousness and the children of the devil love sin.

Some time ago I read about an MTV special that over the course of a 2 hour special basically profiled what a variety of well-known actors, musicians thought of the idea of sin – what they thought about what the church considered sinful.

They asked one recording artist if she thought pride was sinful. And she responded, "Pride is a sin? I wasn't aware of that!" They asked a famous actress about pride and she said, "I don't think pride is a sin, I think some idiot made that up."

They asked a member of a top selling band if he thought lust was a sin and he said, "Lust is what I live for . . . it's what I got into the band for."

Another musician was asked if anger was sinful and he responded, "Anger isn't a sin – anger is necessary . . . you gotta release this tension because life brings tension." When asked about pride, he responded, "Pride is mandatory."

The MTV program concluded, predictably that there wasn't absolute right or wrongs. Then they ended the program with his statement, quote, "The most evil sin in the world is the killjoy attitude of those who think sin is offensive to God."^{xvi}

The Apostle John would have something to say about that.

And John says here that it really ought to be obvious – we view sin entirely differently than the world around us – we submit ourselves to the accountability of God's word and God's spirit and God's people.

That we want more than anything to hold up the mirror of the word of God and see a Family Resemblance to Jesus Christ, who loved us and gave Himself for us in order to make us members of His eternally forgiven family.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 5/19/2013 by Stephen Davey.

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- ii D. Edmond Hiebert, The Epistles of John (BJU Press, 1991), p. 141
- iii Ibid
- iv World Magazine, May 18, 2013, p. 8
- v Adapted from Tedd Tripp, Shepherding a Child's Heart (Shepherd Press, 2005), p. 4.
- vi Hiebert, p. 142
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