

## 1 John 3:4-8

To sin or not to sin, that's the hot potato John is handling in the section we're looking at today. John tells it like it is in verse 4 of chapter 3. He pulls no punches, he gives it to them straight from the shoulder. He lays it down the line when he says in the opening phrase: 'Everyone who sins breaks the law.' John can't possibly make it any clearer than that, nothing could be more plain or simple! In other words, if you sin, you break the law of God. If you go your own way, if you do your own thing, if you think you know better, you are flying in the face of God's statute; you are guilty of flouting the command of God in a serious breach of protocol. The closing phrase in verse 4 gives one of the most concise definitions of sin that you will ever come across anywhere in Scripture. John says: 'sin is lawlessness.' It has to be said, there are some commentators who feel that John's understanding of sin in this verse is rather naïve and superficial, they suggest he puts sin on the same level as someone breaking a set of rules or someone not adopting a code of practice. And yet, when you place John's definition under the spotlight and subject it to a closer examination, it couldn't be better, it certainly can't be improved upon. I am sure that John did not think of sin in such a narrow way and I am equally convinced that the word 'lawlessness' does not imply that he did. The fact is, what John is saying here, is that the root of all sin is rebellion against God's authority and God's standards. That goes against the grain, I realise that; it's not in vogue to label sin like that, it's not the kind of comment you dare make in the public arena; if you think like that, you sure won't rise in the popularity stakes. We hear a lot these days about the reasons why people do what they do and why they act in a particular manner in a given situation, and it's all put down to certain propensities we have within us or other outside factors which influence us. We tend to blame this, that, and the other! We wash our hands and say, 'I can't help it' and every time we do that, we refuse to accept personal responsibility for our behaviour. Sad

to say, but this trendy mindset has infected so much of our modern thinking; it seems to me, Roy Clements says it well when he described this syndrome in rather colourful language as ‘humanistic claptrap.’ I think the Bible makes it abundantly clear that sin is not the product of our genetic inheritance or of our adolescent hormones. Sin is not excusable on grounds of a deprived upbringing or cultural conditioning. Sin is not a relic of our evolutionary origins or the artefact of our social development. At the end of the day, sin is sin *is* sin; sin is an attitude of moral anarchy. ‘Why should I?’ is the question everybody asks. The sulky child weeps ‘it’ when he is told to tidy his room and put his toys away. The petulant teenager demands ‘it’ when he is told to switch the telly off and do his homework. The irate employee mutters ‘it’ when he is told by management to get his act together and be more punctual. Adam said ‘it’ when he was told to leave the tree of knowledge alone in the idyllic setting of the garden of Eden. And, you know, from that day to this day, every sinner has said it! You have said it, I have said it, we have all said it! That’s what sin is, it is a blunt refusal to accept the authority of God over our lives; it is the failure to conform to God’s norms for our lives. The story is told about little Judy who was riding in the car with her father when she decided to stand up in the front seat. Her father told her to sit down and put on the seat belt, but she declined. He told her a second time, and again, she defiantly refused. ‘If you don’t sit down immediately, I’ll pull over to the side of the road and spank you!’ her father said. In all fairness, Judy did what she was told to do, she obeyed her father. They had only travelled a short distance down the road when Judy turned and whispered to her father: ‘Daddy, I may be sitting down, but I am still standing up inside!’ That’s only a story, but it illustrates what sin is all about; now you can see why John defined it the way he did; he said, sin is lawlessness, sin is rebellion! Thank God, John didn’t stop there, for if he had, we would still be grovelling in the dirt. He goes on to tell us about the remedy for the sin problem, and in verse 5, the main beam is shining on Jesus Christ. The apostle writes: ‘But

you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin.' This is a classic verse for it highlights for us the wonderful nature of the person and work of Christ. He is presented to us as one who is sinless, one who is perfect, one who is without fault, one in whom there is no flaw, here is one without blemish or spot. There is no stain on his character, there is no dark blot on his personality. We read elsewhere the testimony of Peter and Paul where they both declare: 'he did no sin' and 'he knew no sin.' This triple affirmation from ordinary men, Peter, Paul and John, men who were extremely conscious of their own shortcomings, says a lot about the One who turned their world upside down, and transformed their lives inside out. Jesus did what no-one else could do, he paid the price for our redemption, he gave himself on our behalf so that he might secure our eternal salvation. He died for you, he died for me! He alone was able to do it, because he alone is sinless! He didn't need a Saviour for himself, for as John confirms, 'in him is no sin.' You see, only someone who was sinless in himself could effectively atone for the sins of others. That, my friend, is why the cross is the heart of the Christian gospel, it is God's sole answer to man's deepest need. When we have come as sinners to Jesus and knelt by faith at Calvary, when forgiveness has become a wonderful reality in our hearts, when we have tasted and seen that the Lord is good, then we discover in each of our lives, that sin is no longer the flavour of the day so far as we are concerned. The question which assumes a place of mega importance is: what difference does Jesus make in our lives? The answer is found in John's bold statement in verse 6 where he says: 'No-one who lives in him keeps on sinning' (by the way, that's in the present continuous tense.) John goes on to say, 'No-one who continues to sin (and that's in the same tense) has either seen him or known him.' You see, John is not primarily interested in what we are doing day by day for the Lord nor is he supremely concerned with all that is happening in our inter-personal relationships with other members of God's global family. What matters to him is this: what is our

attitude to sin, how do we treat it, how do we view it; the punchline is, do we keep on sinning? John puts all his cards on the table when he unequivocally declares that the person who continues to engage deliberately or habitually in sin has not yet 'seen' or 'known' Christ; in other words, such a person has never truly been born again, they have never felt the joy and thrill of his forgiveness, they have never known the sweet reality of being reconciled to their God. Oh, I know, they may have raised their hand at the end of an evangelistic meeting, they may have signed a decision card, they may have been counselled by one of their peers, they may have done all sorts of things and made all sorts of commitments; but, the harsh reality is, if the life isn't changed, the hard question must be asked and it can't be avoided, do such individuals know the Lord? The fact is, if they do, sin will no longer be a way of life to them! They will be significantly different! That doesn't mean to say, we won't have our moments when we slip and fall, for we will; it doesn't mean, we won't face any struggles with temptation, for we will; it doesn't mean, we won't let the Lord down, for we will; it doesn't mean, we won't fail the Lord, for we will; but when we do, we can be forgiven. What we need to always remember is this, forgiveness is at the expense of the precious blood of the Son of God. It cost him His life! As someone has said, grace is free, but it is not cheap. The implication from John's incisive and sharp comment is, the mark of genuine appreciation to God is that we do not keep on sinning. We are not sinless, we never will be this side of heaven; but as God's grace works in our hearts and lives, we sin less and less as time marches on! The pattern of your life is not to sin, the practice of your life is not to sin. To be a son in the family and keep on sinning against the father, according to John, is mutually contradictory, they are wholly incompatible. So far as the Christian is concerned, we can look at it like this: sin is the exception and not the rule!

John begins verse 7 with his customary greeting when he calls them 'dear children'. Having warmed their heart with such an

affectionate introduction, he proceeds to caution them, when he says: 'Do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.' He continues in verse 8a with a further remarkable insight into such unacceptable behaviour, when he says: 'He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning.' You have probably noticed, but in this section spanning verse 29 of chapter 2 through to chapter 3:10, John is giving us a series of identikit pictures of two staggeringly different groups of people. There are those who do right, as in 2:29; and those who keep on sinning, as in 3:4,5. There are those who live in Christ and those who have neither seen nor known him, as in 3:6. There are those who do what is right, as in 3:7, and those who do what is sinful, as in 3:8. There are those who do not continue to sin, as in 3:9, and those who do not do right and do not love the brothers, as in 3:10. When you focus in on chapter 3:8 the two groups can be easily recognised as two families of people, with two heads; group number one is the children of God, and group number two is the children of the devil. The bottom line is, if a tree bears apples, you can tell it's an apple tree; if a branch bears grapes, you can tell it's a vine; the same criterion holds good in today's world for today's generation. Jesus said as much in Matthew 7:15,16 when he advised us that, 'by their fruit you will recognise them.' The dilemma John faced was this, it's relatively easy for a person who is mature in the faith to spot someone who is not all that they claim to be; an 'older' believer has much more experience and you can't buy that on a supermarket shelf, they have insight into the teaching of Scripture, they may have the rare gift of spiritual discernment. So, on the whole, it's not those who have been on the road for quite a while that John is concerned about; it's those who are young in the faith, those who are just taking their first faltering steps, they are more vulnerable than most and are fairly soft targets for those who want to take them for a ride and exploit them. This is the real danger confronting a new generation of believers and that's why John faces the problem head-on. The false

teachers looked really good, their ministry sounded exceptionally good; the fact is, it was far too good to be true! Even the devil can stand in a pulpit and pontificate on the doctrines of grace and glory, but he's like a wolf dressed in a sheepskin jacket; even the devil can sit round a table drinking tea or coffee and talking theology, but he does it as an angel of light! John wants to underline the message that appearances aren't everything; if the truth be told, they count for very little at the end of the day. In other words, you can't judge a book by its cover! You can't judge a man by his mantle! It's the lifestyle of the speaker that makes the difference, it's what he does when out of the glare of the public eye, it's what he is at home with the wife and the kids, it's the things he does and the way he reacts when the guard is down; it was certainly true in John's day, it's equally valid in the third millennium, actions speak louder than words! If they know the Lord, they will do the things which are right; if they continue to sin and divert your attention away from the Lord Jesus, you can tell they are not the friends of God, they are sons of the evil one. And, I tell you, he's not a brilliant example to follow, he's not a particularly good example to emulate. The devil is no gentleman, he is a spiritual rapist. He awaits an opportunity not an invitation to assault us. From day one he has been sinning, from the first day he had his own agenda, he was playing a game of one-upmanship with the God of heaven! He's not content to play second fiddle, he wants to be number one in the pecking order. That's *his* problem, and that same mentality has filtered through to each of his children; it's a classic case of like father, like son! The devil was the very first sinner, and sinners today, without Christ, are his posterity. We may not always appreciate the fact, but we live on a planet which is submerged in a state of cosmic civil war. Our personalities are now enemy occupied territory, that's *our* problem, and that is the principal reason why Jesus came. If we had been capable of pleasing the Lord through our own efforts, if we had been capable of getting to heaven under our own steam, there would have been no need for such an extraordinary stratagem on God's

part. He could have managed without Jesus; and we would have no need of a Saviour. But the fact is, as things stand, we have no hope without one! I like the way one commentator has expressed it, he says: 'Like a computer in a science-fiction thriller, the universe is in the perverted grip of an evil hacker, and it needs somebody to come in from outside to emancipate us from that programme loop of wickedness in which we are so helplessly confined.' That, says John, is why Jesus appeared, in order to take away sin. We read at the end of verse 8, 'The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work.' The root meaning of the verb which John employs here means 'to untie and so to set free.' It is used of the donkey on which Jesus made his kingly entry on that first Palm Sunday into Jerusalem, as in Matthew 21:2. It is also used of Lazarus' grave clothes being unwound when Jesus raised him up, as in John 11:44. It also came to be used of breaking something up into its component parts, tearing down a building, for example, and so destroying it. This gives us John's precise meaning here in terms of doing away with the devil's works. It seems to me, the overriding purpose of the incarnation was to demolish and bring to an end the work of the devil. And, thank God, Jesus succeeded! Christ not only came to set the captives free, but he came to destroy the captor. The coming of Christ, the cross of Christ, spells total triumph over all the hostile forces which have tied us in knots and bound us in chains of sin which we cannot loose. But, what we could never do, and what others could never do for us, Jesus did! He achieved what was, humanly speaking, impossible! If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent an educator; if our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent a scientist; if our greatest need had been money, God would have sent an economist; but, since our greatest need was forgiveness, God sent a Saviour. It is of the utmost importance that we grasp this. Jesus did not come primarily as a teacher to improve our moral education, he came as a sacrifice to make atonement for our lawlessness. Jesus did not come primarily as an example to demonstrate the way of love, he

came as a warrior to win a victory over spiritual hosts of wickedness and to liberate us from their power. This is the ethos of what John is saying here in chapter 3, this is the heartbeat of John's message, the entire purpose of Jesus was to overcome the power of sin in our lives. Since that is the case, John asks how we can possibly continue to surrender to it, you find that alluded to in verse 6. Someone has wisely written: 'Every sin a Christian commits he knows he adds directly to the burden Christ bore on the cross. Every failure to conform to God's standards denies the spiritual victory Jesus won there and grants the devil grounds for hope. Nobody who understands why Christ came can possibly live in anything but a state of unceasing war against sin.' I like to think of it like this: the devil has done untold damage and seeks to complete his work of woe, but Christ has restored his people and will complete his work of grace. My friend, the old song is right when it says: 'there's victory in Jesus!'