

# God's Law for Modern Man

## Chapter 4: Sanctification and the Law

[Brian Schwertley](#)

Before discussing sanctification and the law, one must first define sanctification. The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* says: “Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.”<sup>1</sup> Berkhof defines sanctification “as that gracious and continuous operation of the Holy Spirit, by which He delivers the justified sinner from the pollution of sin, renews his whole nature in the image of God, and enables him to perform good works.”<sup>2</sup> In justification, the sinner who believes in Jesus is declared righteous before God solely on the merits of Jesus Christ. The guilt of sin is removed by the sacrificial death of Christ and the sinner is clothed with Christ’s perfect righteousness (His sinless life). But once the believer is justified by God, then *immediately* begins the lifelong process of sanctification.

Sanctification cannot be separated from justification. Why? Because the person who believes in Jesus Christ receives Him as Lord (Acts 16:31; Col. 2:6). The idea that Jesus Christ lived a sinless life and suffered humiliation and an excruciating death on the cross to satisfy the righteous demands of God’s holy law, so that Christians could live a life of sin and loose morals, is unbiblical and perverse. Second, Christians are united with Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection: therefore, Christ breaks the power of sin for all believers. “For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin” (Rom. 6:5-7). “If we have become identified with Christ in his death and if the ethical and spiritual efficacy accruing from his death pertains to us, then we must also derive from his resurrection the ethical and spiritual virtue which our being identified with him in his resurrection implies. These implications for us of union with Christ make impossible the inference that we may continue in sin that grace may abound.”<sup>3</sup> Third, Christians receive the Holy Spirit when they believe in Christ (Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 12:3). “The Holy Spirit is called holy not only because He is to be distinguished from all other spirits, and in particular from *unclean* spirits, but also because He is the source of all holiness.... The holiness of God’s people that results from their sanctification by the Holy Spirit must be attributed entirely to Him as He works through His word. The ‘fruit’ of the Spirit is just that: it is the *result* of His work.”<sup>4</sup> All the saving graces flow forth from Christ’s atoning death. Jesus Christ as the exalted King sent His Holy Spirit unto the church. Therefore, those for whom Christ died *will* be sanctified. Sanctification does not contribute one iota to one’s salvation or justification before God. But those who are justified will be sanctified. “Pursue peace with all men, and holiness [sanctification], without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14).

---

<sup>1</sup> *Shorter Catechism*, Question 35.

<sup>2</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1939), p. 532.

<sup>3</sup> John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 1:219.

<sup>4</sup> Jay Adams, *The Christian Counselor’s Manual* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), p. 6.

Sanctification begins in regeneration when God implants “a new spiritual nature in the subject of His grace.”<sup>5</sup> Sanctification is definitive in the sense that it was secured by our union with Christ. It is progressive in the sense that it is a lifelong process whereby the Holy Spirit subdues sin and increases our personal righteousness over time. The Bible teaches that no Christian can achieve ethical perfection in this life (1 Kg. 8:46; Prov. 20:9; Rom. 3:10, 12; Jas. 3:2; 1 Jn. 1:8). Since sanctification involves the whole man, both body and soul, final sanctification does not occur until believers are resurrected and receive glorified bodies. Sanctification as a process consists of two parts. First, sin is subdued in the believer. Sinful lusts and habits are progressively removed from the believer’s life. Second, the believer becomes more righteous and godly in his personal life. Thus, sanctification is both negative and positive in character and these two aspects of sanctification occur simultaneously. “The old structure of sin is gradually torn down, and a new structure of God is reared in its stead.... Thank God, the gradual erection of the new building need not wait until the old one is completely demolished. If it had to wait for that, it could never begin in this life.”<sup>6</sup>

Sanctification is a work of God *in* the believer. In sanctification the Holy Spirit works upon man in both a mediate and immediate way. In regeneration, the Holy Spirit works immediately; He works directly upon man’s soul implanting a new spiritual nature. The working of the Holy Spirit directly upon the Christian’s heart is beyond our comprehension and is encompassed with mystery. The Holy Spirit also works mediately or through means. He works upon the conscious life of man through the word of God. He employs the *means* of grace such as the word of God and the preached word, (i.e., by public worship [Jn. 17:17, 19; 1 Pet. 1:22; 2:2]; by partaking of the sacraments [Matt. 3:11; 1 Cor. 12:13; 1 Pet. 3:21]; by communion with God in prayer [Jn. 14:13-14]; and by practicing good works [Jn. 15:2; Rom. 5:3-4; Heb. 12:5-11]). “Thus, while sanctification is a grace, it is also a duty; and the soul is both bound and encouraged to use with diligence, in dependence upon the Holy Spirit, all the means for its spiritual renovation, and to form those habits of resisting evil and of right action in which sanctification so largely consists.... An action to be good must have its origin in a holy principle in the heart, and must be conformed to the law of God. Although not the ground of our acceptance, good works are absolutely essential to salvation, as the necessary consequences of a gracious state of soul and perpetual requirement of the divine law.”<sup>7</sup>

The Holy Spirit uses the word of God to sanctify believers. “Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth” (Jn. 17:17). “You have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit...” (1 Pet. 1:22). “As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby...” (1 Pet. 2:2). The whole Bible is our law-word unto sanctification. Christians learn and grow by the Bible’s precepts, history, examples and so on. Since sanctification is concerned with spiritual growth and ethical conformity to God’s word, it is proper to focus on God’s moral law as a means of sanctification. It is the law that defines sin and tells us what behavior must be removed from our lives. It is God’s law which tells us what is good. Christians need the law in order to die unto sin and to live unto righteousness. Thus, the Psalmist said, “How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word.... Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You.... I will meditate on Your precepts, and contemplate Your ways. I will delight myself in Your statutes; I will not forget your word.... Teach me, O LORD, the way of Your statutes, and I shall keep it to the end. Give me understanding, and I shall keep

---

<sup>5</sup> A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1992 [1869]), p. 195.

<sup>6</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 533.

<sup>7</sup> A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith*, p. 196.

Your law; indeed I will observe it with my whole heart” (Ps. 119:9, 11, 15-16, 33-34). Furthermore, all the means of grace are dependent upon and subordinate to God’s law-word. The word defines prayer; it tells believers how to pray and even what to pray. Apart from the word, the sacraments are meaningless rituals, thus the Lord’s supper is part of public worship and always accompanies the word of God preached.

The idea that the Holy Spirit uses God’s law as a means of sanctification is anathema to many Fundamentalist and Evangelical believers. Because they regard the law as something bad or something belonging to a former dispensation, they attempt to replace the law as a means of sanctification with another source of authority. Thus, in our day, one finds a plethora of bizarre, heretical theories of “Christian” ethics being promulgated by professing believers. One such idea states that Christians are led mystically by the Holy Spirit apart from the word of God. This view is especially popular among charismatic believers. Instead of carefully studying God’s word and meditating on God’s law as a guide for daily decisions, many follow what they believe is the inward guidance of the Holy Spirit. One often hears phrases such as: “The Spirit led me to do this” or “I was led by God to do that.” Such practice is antinomian and subjective. “An amazing irony is to be found in the fact many such ‘spiritualistic’ groups boast in being preachers of God’s word and adamant opposers of modernism while, in point of fact, they have a *great deal* in common with liberal theology as regards ethics; the post-Kantian theologian is ear-marked by his making *religious experience*, not the revealed word, his authority (this is variously labeled as insight, piety, intuition, practical reason, mystical rapport, valuation, spiritual vitality, guiding light, etc.).”<sup>8</sup> How is one to judge these mystical feelings and inner promptings apart from God’s word? The truth is that if people follow their feelings apart from God’s word, they are nothing more than “Christian” relativists. Thankfully, most professing Christians who adhere to such nonsense have enough sense not to blatantly contradict God’s word in their promptings.

Does the Bible teach that the Holy Spirit mystically leads Christians into a sanctified life apart from God’s law? What does Paul mean when he says: “Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lusts of the flesh” (Gal. 5:16)? Doesn’t Paul say that “if you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law” (Gal. 5:18)? To walk in the Spirit means to live or conduct one’s behavior according to the Holy Spirit. Paul is not opposing the law as a rule for life; he is telling the believer that sanctification and victory over sin can only occur in those who are saved and have the Holy Spirit dwelling in them. The word of God apart from the power of the Holy Spirit cannot save and cannot sanctify. “Not that we are sufficient of ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3:5-6). The law proves that we are sinners and under a curse; thus Paul says the letter kills. The law apart from the Holy Spirit cannot impart the power to obey. *The problem is not that the law is bad and must be eliminated, but that people have sinful natures that are in rebellion against God.* When Paul says, “For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh” (Rom. 8:3), he means that our *depravity* renders the law weak and unable to save. Christians are governed by the Holy Spirit; therefore, they will by no means fulfill the desires of the flesh. Paul is not giving a command but describing a reality.

When Paul says “If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law” (Gal. 5:18), or “Sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under the law but under grace” (Rom. 6:14), he is telling believers they are not under law as a condition of salvation or as a curse. Thus, they are free. “Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do

---

<sup>8</sup> Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, p. 169.

not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace” (Gal. 5:1-4). “As no man is free from sin, as no man can perfectly keep the commandments of God, every man who rests upon his personal conformity to the law, as the ground of his acceptance with God, must be condemned. We are not under law in this sense, but under grace; that is, under a system of gratuitous justification. We are justified by grace, without works.”<sup>9</sup> Dispensationalists have taken passages which teach that Christians are not slaves to the law as a means of salvation, that the indwelling Holy Spirit proves that believers are justified and freed from bondage, and turned them into proof texts against the law itself, as if the law and not our sinful behavior were the enemy. “Galatians 5:18-23 explains that to be *led by the Spirit* is not to be under the curse, bondage, impotence, and death of the law (which had been described in the preceding sections of Galatians); the demand of the law remains [for sanctification], but now the *power* needed to obey is provided by the Spirit of God. The law could not be against those who walk by the Spirit, for they are fulfilling the law (see vs. 14, 23). Far from *detracting* from the law, the Spirit enables us to *observe* the law as we should. Instead of being condemned and held in bondage by the old *letter* of the law, we now serve in the newness of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 7:6); we are released from guilt and set free to obedience. The letter of the law without the power of God’s Holy Spirit is a word of condemnation and death to us, but the Spirit gives life and ethical ability.”<sup>10</sup> The law does not save, regenerate, quicken or enable; only the Holy Spirit can change a man’s heart. But, once a man is saved, the Holy Spirit uses God’s law to show the believer his sins and bring him to daily repentance and growth in holiness.

The rejection of God’s law in sanctification for individuals, institutions and cultures has led to an unbiblical form of pietism. Pietism, in the negative sense, refers to the practice of defining holiness in terms of emotionalism, subjective experience and asceticism rather than obedience to God’s revealed law. The result has been a man-centered faith. “Moreover, pietism’s history has been marked by doctrinal waywardness, because the emphasis on personal experience tends to take priority over God’s word and faithfulness thereto.”<sup>11</sup> Unbiblical pietism leads Christians to a retreatist, escapist mentality. The focus is on revivalism and the salvation of individuals to the exclusion of the biblical reformation of society and culture. Pietism has led to a mentality of compartmentalization among many professing Christians. God’s word is something for private devotions; it is something relegated to church buildings on Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings. The idea that God’s word is to be applied to all areas of life and that nations must submit to the *Lord* Jesus Christ and obey His law is hated by most present-day believers. “What we find in our day is that Christians despise biblical law almost as much as humanists do.... The modern anti-nomian Christian and the modern power-seeking statist want to break God’s judicial chain, His revealed law. The result is the victimization of the judicially innocent and the expansion of the messianic state.”<sup>12</sup> The modern Christian maxim is “meet, eat, retreat,” and “don’t polish brass on a sinking ship.” Pietism leads to an ethical vacuum in individuals, churches and society. Pietism leads to legalism, for the only alternative to rule by

---

<sup>9</sup> Charles Hodge, *Romans*, p. 206.

<sup>10</sup> Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, p. 171.

<sup>11</sup> R. J. Rushdoony, *Systematic Theology* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1994), 1:538.

<sup>12</sup> Gary North, *Tools of Dominion: The Case Laws of Exodus* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990), pp. 43, 315.

God's law is some form of man-made law. Thus, one can find the Fundamentalist pastor who orders men in his congregation to wear white shirts and ties; and chews out the deacon who didn't have time to shave; yet, who does absolutely nothing to stop the advance of statism, abortion on demand, sodomite rights, and so on, in society.

Because many of the leaders in modern Evangelicalism do not understand the relationship between God's law and sanctification, churches have become antinomian. Such thinking comes primarily from Dispensationalism which teaches that God's holy law is itself opposed to grace. In their zeal to protect their concept of grace, they have discarded the law. The result has been a disaster for the Evangelical churches. Most Christians cannot recite the Ten Commandments. Many Christian businessmen and contractors are no more trustworthy than their pagan counterparts. Polls taken at several Evangelical Christian colleges have indicated that professing Christians at these schools practiced almost the same amount of sexual immorality as found among their non-Christian counterparts. One study indicated that only 4% of Evangelicals tithed. Modern churches rarely discipline members who are involved in gross immorality. Many churches will gladly accept people under discipline from other churches. Excommunication is rare. Most churches simply remove people from their rolls rather than discipline them.

An unbiblical view of God's law and sanctification has even perverted the doctrine of justification itself. If the law itself is considered bad, and is relegated to a former dispensation, then it seems rather unreasonable that Christ had to die to satisfy that same law. "Justification sustains the law of God: it does not nullify it or displace it. If the law were subject to change or replacement, then it was futile for Christ to die if the law given to Moses had no permanently binding character. Where the law is denied, justification is eventually denied, because an antinomian religion has no need of a judicial act of God to effect salvation.... An antinomian religion will tend to by-pass or under-play the word *justify* in favor of *saved*, i.e., to look at the results rather than the only way to those results. Instead of answering, 'I know I am saved, because Christ died for my sins, and, apart from any good thing in me, or faith in me, by His sovereign grace pardoned my sins and redeemed me,' the Arminian or antinomian will say, 'I know I am saved, because I believe in Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior.' The *ground* of salvation is made the personal choice of an autonomous man who has appropriated another resource in order to achieve his happiness or final good."<sup>13</sup>

As antinomianism leads to subjectivism in sanctification, it also leads to a subjective view of salvation as a whole. Ask the average sixteenth-, seventeenth-, or eighteenth-century Protestant how one becomes right before God and one would likely be told about the objective work of Jesus Christ, that He achieved the justification of sinners through His sacrificial death and perfect sinless life. He would argue that God declares a person justified because Christ met the demands of the law and paid the price for man's disobedience to that law with His own death and blood. He would say that a person must appropriate the objective work of Christ through faith. Now ask the same question of a modern Evangelical. The most common response will be something like: "accept Jesus as your personal savior," or, "ask Jesus to come into your heart." The Bible does not tell unbelievers to ask Christ into their heart, but to trust in Him and His completed work. Furthermore, Jesus Christ, the divine-human mediator, is in heaven at the right hand of God the Father. It is the Holy Spirit who enters one's heart the moment one places his trust in the objective work of Christ. "The Christian religion is unique in that it is the only historical religion; i.e., it proclaims a salvation that is based on concrete historical events: the life, death and resurrection of Christ. It is not centered in the worshiper's own experience but in

---

<sup>13</sup> R. J. Rushdoony, *Salvation and Godly Rule* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1983), p. 272.

the saving acts of God in Christ—historical acts that were accomplished outside, above and beyond the sinner’s own life. The gospel message is therefore an objective reality.”<sup>14</sup> Only Jesus Christ can save sinners. The just demands of the law cannot be met by believers. The law could only be satisfied outside the sinner in a sinless substitute, the divine-human Son of God.

The importance of God’s law-word for sanctification must be emphasized today because of the popularity of mysticism, subjectivism, existentialism, antinomianism and escapist pietism. “If God does not direct Christians through His law, then mysticism, antinomian intuition, and inner voices remain to provide uniquely ‘Christian’ guidance.”<sup>15</sup> Christians who believe that sanctification can occur apart from God’s law are deceived. If one desires to be more holy, one must study, memorize, meditate on, and love God’s holy law. “Teach me, O Lord, the way of Your statutes, and I shall keep it to the end.... Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day” (Ps. 119:33, 97).

## Trust and Obey

If one had to summarize the message of the Bible, one could do so by saying, “trust and obey” or “believe in Christ and repent.” The *Larger Catechism* put it this way: “What do the Scriptures principally teach? The Scriptures principally teach what man is to *believe* concerning God, and what *duty* God requires of man.”<sup>16</sup> Believers are not only required to believe in the whole counsel of God (i.e., the Bible), but they are required to be obedient to all its precepts. The main purpose of Christ’s ministry through Paul was “to make the Gentiles *obedient*” (Rom. 15:18). Paul received his apostleship “for *obedience* to the faith among all nations” (Rom. 1:5; cf. 16:25-26). Paul wrote to the Corinthian believers to see whether they were “*obedient* in all things” (2 Cor. 2:9). Christians are saved in order to *obey* God. “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10). “To the pilgrims of the Dispersion...elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for *obedience* and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus...” (1 Pet. 1:2). When Israel affirmed the covenant with God they said, “All that the LORD has said we will do, and be *obedient*” (Ex. 24:7). Since God requires a perfect and perpetual obedience to His holy law, we must examine the meaning, nature and motivation of this obedience.

The word “obey” means that one submits to a command or does as one is directed. One does what one is told to do and thus obeys. There are different Greek words for “obey” in the New Testament, with different nuances. The most common word is *upskouo*. It simply means to obey or to submit and is related to the idea of hearing. In English, if someone asks a person to do something at times the response is: “I hear you,” which means, “yes, I will obey your command.”

---

<sup>14</sup> Robert D. Brinsmead, *Present Truth: Subjectivism and the Everlasting Gospel* (Fallbrook, CA, 1975), p. 5. “But the history of the church has demonstrated that the cursed tendency of human nature is to reverse the order until the *existential* is elevated above the *historical*. (Or to say it another way, the *in you* is elevated above *for you*.) When the *historical* element of Christianity is eclipsed, the essential genius of the Christian message is lost, and Christianity is reduced to everything else in the world that offers you a glorious experience. And when religious experience itself is preached as the gospel, it is the very anti-Christ itself. For when the *existential* is placed above the *historical*, the divine order is reversed. This really means that man is placed above God” (Robert D. Brinsmead, *Present Truth: Anti-Christ, 1975*, [Fallbrook, CA], vol. 4, No. 2, p. 19).

<sup>15</sup> Gary North, *Tools of Dominion: The Case Laws of Exodus* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990), p. 17.

<sup>16</sup> *Larger Catechism*, Question 5.

The verb *upskouo* and the noun *upskoa* (obedience, compliance, submission), when used in the context of biblical faith, refers to those who hear God's word and then act upon it. They obey what God has said and submit to God's authority. Another word for obedience, *peitharcheiu*, is rarely used in the New Testament. "This is the special term for the obedience which one owes to authority. It occurs four times in the New Testament: Acts v. 29, 32; xxvii. 21; Tit. iii. 1; and in every case, of obedience to established authority, either of God or of magistrates."<sup>17</sup> The verb *peitho*, which is usually translated "to persuade," can in certain contexts mean to obey, listen, comply or yield to. This verb is used in Acts 5:36 of the men who followed Theudas. These men *obeyed* him as a result of persuasion.

## Faith and Obedience

One of the most dangerous and widespread heresies of the twentieth century is the idea that obedience to God's word is optional for believers. People are told to accept Christ as Savior and then, when it suits them, they can accept Christ as Lord. Therefore, an examination of the relationship between faith and obedience is necessary. The Bible teaches that true faith always leads to obedience to God's precepts. Put another way, one could say that faith always leads to repentance. The regenerated heart which now has a new, loving attitude for God, Christ and the word of God *will* repent. Those who believe in Christ, but have not repented of their sins, do not have a biblical faith, but a mere intellectual assent to some historical propositions. This does not mean that Christians never sin. They clearly do (cf. 1 Jn. 1:8), but they do not live a sinful lifestyle. They stumble, but do not wallow in the mire. Their lives are characterized by obedience.

The relation of faith to obedience or good works is discussed at length in the epistle of James: "What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,' but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, 'You have faith, and I have works.' Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?... For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also" (Jas. 2:14-20, 26). James is dealing with professing Christians who give an assent to the truths of the gospel, yet whose lives have changed little, if at all. "James is specific. He says, 'if a man claims to have faith.' He does not write 'if a man has faith.' James intimates that the faith of this particular person is not a genuine trust in Jesus Christ. In fact, that man's claim to faith is hollow.... True faith results in works that show a distinctive Christian lifestyle, and demonstrates that the believer stands in a saving relationship to God."<sup>18</sup>

Is James saying that works or obedience contribute to one's salvation? No, not at all. He is simply pointing out that real faith which comes from a regenerate heart will result in obedience. Faith without obedience is dead, worthless, counterfeit. The body that does not have the spirit is a corpse. The professing believer who treats obedience as an option, who views sin as a light thing or a trifle, is unregenerate. Jesus said, "Even so, every good tree bears good fruit,

---

<sup>17</sup> Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, [1887] 1946), 1:471.

<sup>18</sup> Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Epistle of James and of the Epistle of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1986), pp. 88-89.

but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree *cannot* bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore, by their fruits you will know them” (Matt 7:16-20). Obedience and good works are the fruit, the effect, and the sign of a genuine, vibrant, living faith.

Does this mean that real Christians can never backslide and fall into grievous sins? No. There is the example of King David who, although regenerate, did serve his lusts for a season. But, the lesson one learns from David’s fall is *not* that Christians can go out and have fun with the pleasures of sin for a season and then repent in time to escape hell. The lesson is that real believers who serve sin are miserable in their sins; the joy and peace of salvation are gone. The intimate fellowship with God is sorely missed. The burden of guilt and the displeasure of God are continually pricking the regenerate heart. Did not David say, “my sin is ever before me” (Ps. 51:3)? Did he not plead, “Do not cast me away from Your presence and do not take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore me to the joy of Your salvation...” (Ps. 51:11-12)? Why do professing Christians who are truly regenerate always repent from their backsliding ways? Because the regenerate heart is tortured by sin and *cannot* continue in it. “There is no soundness in my flesh because of Your anger, nor is there any health in my bones because of my sin. For my iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden they are too heavy for me. My wounds are foul and festering because of my foolishness. I am troubled, I am bowed down greatly; I go mourning all the day long. For my loins are full of inflammation, and there is no soundness in my flesh. I am feeble and severely broken; I groan because of the turmoil of my heart” (Ps. 38:3-8). How many false professors are there, who have made a decision for Christ, who have walked an aisle, who have signed a card, who have prayed a prayer, but yet are still in their sins? A living faith must issue forth unto obedience; otherwise, it is dead and worthless.

Another passage which sets forth the relation of faith and obedience (or the lack of faith and disobedience) is in the book of Hebrews. “Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called ‘Today,’ lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end, while it is said: ‘Today,’ if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion. For who, having heard, rebelled? Indeed, was it not all who came out of Egypt, led by Moses? Now with whom was He angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.... For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it.... Since therefore it remains that some must enter it, and those to whom it was first preached did not enter because of disobedience” (Heb. 3:12-19; 4:2, 6). The experience of rebellious Israel is set forth as a warning for Christians. Why did a whole generation of Israelites (save two persons) die in the desert? Because they rebelled or sinned against God in the wilderness. But why did they rebel against God? Because they did not believe. Disobedience is a direct result of unbelief. “Disobedience is a refusal to hear the voice of God and an obstinate refusal to act in response to that voice. Disobedience is not merely a lack of obedience; rather it is a refusal to obey.”<sup>19</sup> In verse 19, the writer says they did not enter in because of unbelief; then in Hebrews 4:6 he says they did not enter in because of disobedience. Unbelief and disobedience go hand in hand. Unbelief is the fountain from which spring all sin

---

<sup>19</sup> Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), p. 97.

and rebellion; from Eve in the garden, to Cain in the field, to apostate Israel in the wilderness. “Hence those very persons who through unbelief rejected the possession of the land offered to them, pursued their own obstinacy, now lusting, then murmuring, now committing adultery, then polluting themselves with heathen superstitions, so that their depravity became more fully manifested.”<sup>20</sup> Those who regard obedience as an option must look upon the bloated, rotting corpses in the wilderness as a monument to all such foolishness. “Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have a right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates of the city” (Rev. 22:14).

The modern, carnal Christian heresy which says that a person can be saved without submitting to Christ as Lord, without repentance and forsaking of sin, is actually an ancient error. The apostle John dealt with a similar heresy in his first epistle. This was the antinomian heresy of the Nicolaitans. The Nicolaitans held to a dualistic view of the believer. They believed the spirit (which was the recipient of God’s grace) was good while the body (i.e., the flesh) was intrinsically evil. Since the flesh or body was evil and there was really nothing one could do about it, and since the spirit was good, no matter how evil the flesh was, then, (according to the Nicolaitans) one could sin as he pleases without any spiritual consequences. Thus, the Nicolaitans were notorious for committing acts of sexual immorality. In Roman and Greek society where all forms of sexual expression were perfectly acceptable (e.g., prostitution and sex orgies), the Nicolaitan heresy became a problem among Gentile believers in the early church. Christ Himself condemns the Nicolaitans twice in the book of Revelation (Rev. 2:6; 3:15). They are compared to the followers of Balaam. It was Balaam who convinced the king of Moab to seduce Israel into idolatry, fornication, and eating meat sacrificed to idols. This type of wicked behavior was such a problem in the early church among Gentiles that fornication and eating meat offered to idols were specifically condemned by the first church council (cf. Acts 15:28-29).

Although the Nicolaitan antinomianism was arrived at in a manner different from modern antinomianism, John’s doctrinal discussion of the relationship of obedience and salvation is applicable to modern times. “This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.... If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us” (1 Jn. 1:5-7, 10). John says that God is ethically perfect, infinite in holiness. There is nothing impure, evil or sinful whatsoever in God’s nature. The relationship of man to God is determined by God’s nature. Did God who is pure and perfect light save man so that man could walk in darkness? Absolutely not! The person who claims to be a Christian and yet walks in darkness is a liar. Such a person is living in self-deception. His conduct or lifestyle reveals that his mind is in spiritual and doctrinal darkness. Thus, John says they “do not practice the truth.” Such people are really following the world. One’s walk or behavior reveals one’s priority in life; action always follow the mind or heart. One’s mind and actions must be focused upon Christ and His kingdom and not on the fulfillment of one’s sinful pleasures. “The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness” (Matt. 6:22-23). “We really show what we are by what we do; we reveal our doctrine in our practice, and those who have not realized the truth about sin, and certainly those who have a wrong idea about it all, cannot be having a real fellowship

---

<sup>20</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981), p. 92.

and communion with God.”<sup>21</sup> “To walk in the light is above all to believe the light, the truth, and then also to obey it in word and in deed. What is in the soul will become manifest in the conduct; this is not a mere claim that contradicts open evidence.”<sup>22</sup>

John is not teaching that Christians are ethically perfect or sinless. On the contrary, he says that any believer who claims to be without sin is self-deceived (1 Jn. 1:8). In verse 10 John uses the perfect tense to describe the sin of believers: “If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.” The verb with the negative (not sinned) indicates that anyone who looks back at his past life that continues up to the present moment and claims that he has not been sinning calls God a liar, for God says repeatedly in His word that all have sinned and fallen short of what God requires (Rom. 3:23). What sets Christians apart from unbelievers is that Christians are not slaves to their sinful behavior. John sets a clear demarcation between the lifestyle of believers and unbelievers by using the aorist tense (which indicates punctilious rather than continuous action) to describe the sinful behavior of Christians in 1 John 1:8 and 2:1. Christians still have a sinful nature, but it manifests itself in isolated acts of sin, not in a continuance in sin. A Christian businessman may have too much to drink on occasion, but he is not a drunkard. A Christian man may look at a woman in a miniskirt and lust in his heart, but he does not frequent strip clubs or porno shops. The Christian sins, but he does not lead a sinful lifestyle.

What John repeatedly condemns in this epistle is the idea that someone can be a Christian yet continue in a sinful lifestyle. “Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, ‘I know Him,’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar and the truth is not in him” (1 Jn. 2:3-4). “John teaches that the believer may fall into sin but he will not walk in it.”<sup>23</sup> That is, his sinful behavior is not habitual; it is not a continuing pattern. This truth is clearly brought out in chapter three where John uses present continuous tense verbs five times to describe sinful, non-Christian behavior. “Whoever commits sin, also commits lawlessness...” (1 Jn. 3:4). “Whoever abides in Him does not sin. Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him” (1 Jn. 3:6). “He who sins is of the devil” (1 Jn. 3:8). “Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in Him” (1 Jn. 3:9). John says that the person who continually walks in sin is lawless; does not have a relationship to Christ; is of the devil; and, has not been born again.

In contrast, real Christians continuously practice righteousness. “He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous” (1 Jn. 3:7). “Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God...” (1 Jn. 3:10). One’s behavior reveals one’s true nature. The man or woman who is righteous will live a righteous life. “[T]he one who is not righteous shows it by not living a righteous life. That is where his reference to the devil is significant—‘He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning.’ That is his characteristic, his nature, his habit; that is his way of living. That is the thing that is so true of the devil: he sins from the beginning; he *goes on sinning*. ‘And the man,’ John says, ‘who goes on sinning is, therefore, the man who is proclaiming that he has the kind of nature that the devil has. He does not have the new nature that the Christian has.’”<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Fellowship with God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1993), 1:117.

<sup>22</sup> R.C. Lenski, *Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1966), p. 388.

<sup>23</sup> David Smith, W. Robertson Nicoll, *Expositor’s Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 5:184.

<sup>24</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Children of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1993), 3:76.

One's actions reveal one's true nature. Do biker groups, such as the Hell's Angels, enjoy public worship? Do pagan college students like to spend Friday and Saturday evenings reading a good theology book? Would a true believer enjoy a night at the local crack house, getting stoned and listening to gangsta rap? Do real believers like to spend their evenings at drunken parties with whore-mongers in dark, smoke-filled rooms? True Christians want to serve the Lord Jesus Christ. "Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall" (Matt. 7:24-27). "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome. For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith" (1 Jn. 5:2-4).

Copyright, 2000 © Brian Schwertley

[HOME PAGE](#)