

The Man who Denies Sin

by Ray C. Stedman

We are now experiencing the unique ministry of John the Mender, the apostle whose particular function it was to call men back to fundamentals. This was foreseen, in figure, in the act John was performing when he was called by Christ, for he was found mending his nets. The ministry of a mender is very much needed in any hour of weakness and attack. This is why the Holy Spirit chose the Apostle John to be the last writer of Scripture. His writings came at a time when the Church had begun to be infiltrated by various false concepts and ideas, and strong persecution had arisen.

John lived in the reign of Domitian, the Roman emperor whose cruelties exceeded all those before him, including even the infamous Nero. The church was under great attack, not only from the violence of a direct and frontal attack on it by the Roman Empire, but also from the subtle and much more dangerous attacks of various ideas which had arisen.

Now you will recognize that we live in the same kind of a day. Today much of the Christian church is under direct and frontal attack. Here in America we are free from that, and we ought to give thanks every day for our freedom, but here we are exposed to a very powerful barrage of attack by many devious errors that exist today. The Christian faith is threatened with a very subtle undermining that removes all vestiges of vital Christianity, leaving us dull, dead, and useless. So this letter of John's has tremendous significance for us.

John is writing to Christians and pointing out that their great need is fellowship with Jesus Christ, i.e., to hold all things in common with him. Not just to talk about it – he makes that point clear. It is so easy to say we have fellowship but what is needed is to really have fellowship, actually enter into the experience of having all our resources in common with him, and all his resources in common with us. In other words, it is to turn from a reli-

ance upon methods and propaganda, programs, and pronouncements unto power; to discover again the power of genuine Christianity.

We have looked enough at this letter of John's to know that fellowship is not an automatic thing. Simply because you are a Christian does not mean that you have fellowship with Christ. That needs to be made clear, for there are many who feel that it is almost automatic, and they take it for granted. But there is a key to fellowship, and the key, as John is reminding us, is to walk in the light. "If we walk in the light we have fellowship, one with another" {1 Jn 1:7 RSV}, i.e., with Jesus Christ and with one another as well.

Walking in the light, as we have already seen, means to see and treat things exactly as the light reveals them to be. Suppose you and I were in this room with the lights out and it was dark outside and we had never been here before. It would be quite likely that moving around in the room, stumbling over pieces of furniture, we might mistake the character of them. We might think the piano was a table, or the organ was a piano. This would be understandable in view of the absence of light. But once the light comes on, we would be stupid morons if we went on calling the piano a table and the organ a piano. The light reveals them for what they are, and to walk in the light is to call things what the light reveals them to be.

Now, the Apostle John simply applies this to life. He says God is light and to walk with him in the light of his Word is to see life as it really is. Well, then, act accordingly: That is walking in the light. Adjust yourselves to what you see. Treat things realistically. That is walking in the light. Openness, honesty, and obedience, these are the characteristics of walking in the light. This is the key to fellowship, and fellowship is the key to the enjoyment and glory of vital Christianity. So it is

exceedingly important that we understand what this means.

The apostle now points out that there are three ways by which, traditionally and continuously, we avoid walking in the light. We have already looked at one, the tendency to avoid light, to refuse to look at what it reveals, i.e., never to examine ourselves. This is the unexamined life, and even Plato says that an unexamined life is a life not worth living. The need for Christians these days is to examine themselves in view of what they see in the light.

But now we shall look at a second thing which will keep us from walking in the light and thus miss out on fellowship. It is given in Verses 8 and 9 of Chapter 1:

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. {1 Jn 1:8-9 RSV}

It is necessary that we note first the difference between the words, *sin* and *sins*. In Verse 8 it is in the singular number, "If we say we have no sin," in Verse 9 it is plural, "If we confess our sins." Now this marks a very important distinction, the distinction between the root which is *sin*, singular, and the fruit, which are *sins*, plural. Sin is that fallen twist in man which makes him want to play God on every occasion. We know how this is: We want the world to revolve around us, always to be the center of things. That self-centeredness is sin. It goes by other names as well – pride, selfishness, or independence. That is the root, the twist in human nature which makes us commit sins.

Sins, therefore, are those specific forms which this inward bent makes us take from time to time. They can cover a wide range of experience. There are many kinds of *sins*, but all from one root, *sin*.

This is now what John is zeroing in on. He says if we say we have no sin, that is, no capacity to commit sins, if we deny the very possibility of sins, then we deceive ourselves. Obviously, this is a worse case than the previous one. In the first instance, you remember, John says, "If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not live according to the truth" {1 Jn 1:6 RSV}, i.e., we are trying to deceive oth-

ers and to some degree we often succeed. But if we say we have no ability to sin at all, we are only deceiving ourselves. Others are quite aware that we are lying to and deceiving ourselves. They are not fooled, it is we who are. That is always pathetic. The man who ignores the light deceives others, but seldom himself. He knows that he is not living as he ought, he knows he is ignoring light. But this one deceives himself. He actually believes that he can no longer sin, that there is no longer any possibility of evil in him.

You say, "Does this really happen? Are there people so deluded that they have come to the place where they really think they cannot sin?"

Unfortunately, we must say "Yes," it often happens in our day, and for several reasons. But whenever it happens, the one who makes this claim loses immediately that glorious *fellowship* which makes Christianity so vital and unforgettable. He loses his power, his influence, his vitality, and his effectiveness as a Christian. His life becomes lustless, orthodox, dull, and deadening.

Now how does this happen? There are primarily three ways in which this occurs:

1. First, a Christian can become the victim of one of the cults which teach along this line. There are cults which deny the reality of sin, who say that sin is but "an error of mortal mind." Sin, they say, has no real existence, it is a mere figment of the imagination, and all that is necessary to deal with sin is to correct your thinking. You will recognize that this teaching is widespread. It is represented by groups such as Christian Science, the Unity School of Christianity, and Religious Science. Also, it is widespread in non-Christian religions such as Theosophy, Hinduism, and Buddhism. They teach this concept that sin does not really exist, it is merely in the mind. Truth exists, and good exists, but sin does not have objective reality.

Unfortunately there are many who are really Christians who have fallen into this trap and believe that sin merely calls for an adjustment in their thinking. But John says if you believe that, the truth is not in you, there is no light in you, for light is truth and truth is light. The truth as it is revealed in Jesus says quite differently. According to the word of the Lord, both directly from his own lips and through the apostles that followed, the truth is that sin is a

very objective reality. It does exist, it is always a present possibility. It finds its final expression in the great hosts of satanically-controlled beings who are at work in the world, as we have seen in previous series, influencing and controlling the thinking of men. Sin is personified in the person of the adversary, the devil, but it exists as a very powerful and persuasive factor in life. To treat it as though it is not there is but to practice self-deception and to become the victim of the saddest of delusions.

Sin does exist. There is nothing more pathetic than the person who denies the reality of sin.

It has always reminded me of the story of the young woman who was attending a meeting with older women. They were discussing the effects of prenatal influences upon a child, and some gave rather strange accounts of how, when they were carrying their babies they saw a red fire engine and the baby was born with a red blotch on the forehead, etc. This young woman said, "I don't believe all this. My mother told me that before I was born she dropped a whole pile of phonograph records and broke every one, but it didn't affect me, affect me, affect me."

So those who make this claim of being free from the universal taint of sin are constantly saying by their very lives that it did affect them, as it affects all.

Now that is the first classification, those who succumb to the false teaching of the cults.

2. Then there are those Christians — and very devout Christians, for the most part — who have come to believe that the root of sin with which they were born has been somehow eradicated. By the activity of the Holy Spirit in the outworking of their salvation, it has been completely torn out, lifted out, and they are freed from the root of sin. There are a considerable number of Christians who follow this teaching today. They group themselves in denominations that usually bear the name, *holiness*. They interpret sanctification as a digging out and eradicating of the root of sin. Often they even base this idea upon a verse here in First John. Many of them quote First John 3:9: "No one born of God commits sin; for God's

nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God."

We must admit that at first glance this looks like a confirmation of that view. I shall withhold the explanation of that verse until we come to it in the study of the passage, but suffice it to say now that it does not mean that the Christian's ability to sin is totally removed. But there are those who take it that way. Having gone through this wonderful experience of sanctification, and they are usually ready to describe it to you in the most glowing terms, they now say they have reached a place where they no longer sin. I am always reminded of the words of D. L. Moody when someone came up to him and told him that he had reached the place where he no longer sinned. Mr. Moody, in his practical way, said, "Well, I'd like to ask your wife about that."

Quite a number of years ago, in Pasadena, I went into a barber shop one day to get a haircut because I had heard that the barber was a Christian. I sat down in the barber chair and he began his work. It was not long before I discovered that he was indeed a Christian, but he was a Christian of the holiness group, and that he personally believed that he had come to a place where he did not any longer have the possibility of sin. Now, unfortunately for him, I was that most knowledgeable of creatures, a seminary student in his second year, and we got into an argument that waxed hotter and hotter as it went along. Finally, he became so perturbed over our discussion that he began yelling and shouting at me and waving his fist in front of me, until another customer, waiting, got up in disgust and walked out. I felt that was quite an adequate commentary on the theology of the barber, for he was himself demonstrating the folly of his position.

Here again, those who do this are self-deceived. They walk in the darkness and therefore they are without fellowship, for the key to fellowship with Christ is to walk in the light. If you have reached the place where you say there is nothing for the light to reveal anymore, all sin is taken away, there is nothing to look at anymore, then, of course, you are deceiving yourself and walk in darkness and it always results in loss of fellowship.

3. Now there is a third classification, even more subtle, but perhaps more widespread, that occurs among the best instructed Christians, those who have learned that there is a possibility of being free from sin by walking in the Spirit. They have fully grasped the implications of the great verse in Galatians that says, “if we walk in the Spirit we shall not fulfill the lusts of the flesh,” {Gal 5:16 KJV}. They are aware of the mighty possibilities for freedom from the control and power of sin and they enter into this with all their heart. They give themselves diligently to understanding how to walk in the Spirit in every circumstance until they believe that they have so mastered the process of being free from sin that they invariably fulfill it; therefore, they do not, and even cannot, sin.

It seems a perfectly logical position to take, does it not?

Theoretically it is possible, for any given period of time, to so walk in the Spirit that we are free from sin, we do not sin. This is the whole purpose of salvation in its present tense. When we manifest the life of the Spirit, we do not sin. This is true. But the remarkable thing is that, as you read the pages of the New Testament, you discover that no New Testament Christian ever makes a claim to sinless perfection. The only one who could say, and did say, that he was without sin was the Lord Jesus himself. All others are reminded that though we must face constantly the challenge of walking without sin, nevertheless, the subtlety of the enemy, the cleverness of the wiles of the devil, the ease by which we can deceive ourselves and be deceived, is so prevalent and powerful that there will be times when we succumb, times when we fail.

As Paul warns his readers, “He who thinks he stands, take heed, lest he fall,” {cf, 1 Cor 10:12}. This is why the Christian is always exhorted to walk in fear and trembling. As Paul writes again, “If any man thinks he knows something, he knows nothing as he ought to know it,” {cf, 1 Cor 8:2}. When we think we have come to the place where we have mastered the processes of walking in the Spirit, then we need to think again. We have not yet learned it all. Even the Apostle Paul can say of himself at the close of his ministry that he re-

gards himself as “the chief of sinners” {cf, 1 Tim 1:15}, not because he sees sin abounding in his life, but because as his conscience is sensitized his awareness of transgression multiplies. He is fully aware of the ease with which he can fall into an attitude of mind that is contrary to the things of the Lord. He is aware of the fact that not until he stands in resurrection life with a redeemed body will he be totally free from the taint of sin. This is why our Lord himself taught in the great Lord’s Prayer that we are daily to pray, “Lord, lead me not into temptation,” {cf, Matt 6:13, Luke 11:4}. The pressures are so great, the opposing forces are so subtle, that it is easier to succumb.

Then let us not take this stand. If any man deny sin, if any man says he cannot sin, he deceives himself, and the truth is not in him. Then what is the remedy? Well, as we have been seeing all along, it is always the same thing. It is to walk in the light. It is to face reality. Specifically, as the apostle puts it, it is to confess our sins. Regardless of whether we have deluded ourselves into thinking there is no root sin in us anymore, it will still be there and it will keep on producing sins, and all the more if we think there is no need to guard against it. Well then, face the sins, John says. Take a good look at them and agree with God about them. The light reveals them to be there.

Remember the word of the Lord himself? “Out of the heart of man,” he says, “proceed murders, adulteries, fornications, evil thoughts, etc.” {cf, Matt 15:19, Mark 7:21}. All these things come from within. The root is still planted deep within our physical natures and we shall not escape it until the body is redeemed. Of course, we do not need to yield to it, that is the point of redemption. As we learn to walk in the Spirit there can be great, protracted periods of time when we walk free from the taint of sin. Ah, but when we do sin, do not try to hide it, do not cover it over, do not, out of some mistaken notion that you will lower yourself in the estimation of someone else, refuse to acknowledge sin. Confess it, say what it is – anger, or malice, envy or lust, jealousy or selfishness or ambition – any of these things. Do not deny them and do not deny the root. Face the reality, the apostle says, confess these faults when they do appear.

Now the word *confess*, as you know, does not mean to ask for forgiveness, and you will see why in a moment. Christ's work for us upon the cross has already done all that is necessary to forgive us. What God wants us to do is to look at the sin before us and call it what he calls it. That means to agree with God about it, and that is what the word *confess* means: *Fess* comes from a root which means "to say," and *con* means "with." "To say with" God what he says about this thing, that is confessing sin. There is a popular song which you sometimes hear in Christian circles,

If I have wounded any soul today,
If I have caused one foot to go astray,
If I have lived in my own selfish way,
Dear Lord, forgive.

That is not a confession at all. The "*if*'s" take it out of the realm of confession. Do not say "*if*," say, "Lord, I have caused some foot to go astray, I have lived in my own selfish way." That is confession, that is agreeing with God.

When you agree with God about these things, what happens? Well, we are told,

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will cleanse us from all unrighteousness. {1 Jn 1:9 RSV}

Sometimes, I might add, there is need for confession to others besides God who are injured by what we do. There is need, often, for restitution. If we are honestly saying what God says about it, then we need to do something about it. We need to remedy the harm we have done as much as possible, and God will sometimes demand this of us. There is no sense of forgiveness granted to us until we have moved in restitution. Ah, but if we look at it as he does, then he says we are cleansed.

The cleansing is not based upon God's mercy, or his kindness, or his love, least of all his caprice; it is based on the work of Jesus Christ. On that basis God is faithful and just to forgive, and he would be utterly unjust if he refused to forgive a penitent sinner. God himself would be wicked if he refused, on the basis of the work of Christ, to forgive a penitent sinner. That is how certain we can be of the cleansing that comes when we agree with God about these things.

Do you remember how our Lord himself dramatized this for us in the solemnity of that Last

Supper, before he went to the cross? Gathered with his disciples in the Upper Room, he took a basin and a towel and girded himself and set about to wash the feet of the disciples. You recall, as he came to Peter, Peter shook his head and said, "No, Lord, you will never wash my feet," {cf, John 13:8a}. Jesus then said these significant words, "If I wash you not, you can have no part with me," {cf, John 13:8b}. Peter did not understand all he meant until years later, but we can see that what our Lord meant was, "Peter, here is the key to fellowship. You can be related to me by sharing my life, but you do not have any fellowship with me unless you let me wash you feet." "If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me," {John 13:8b KJV}. Peter, in his impetuosity, always plunging himself to the full in everything said, "Lord, if that's the case, then wash me all over," {cf, John 13:9}. Again the Lord has to correct him. "No, Peter, he that is bathed does not need to wash again," {cf, John 13:10}. That first cleansing of redemption, that coming to Christ which washes away the guilt of the past, the Adamic guilt, that is "bathing all over." Jesus said he that is so bathed does not need to wash all over again, but he does need to wash his feet. This is what John is talking about – this repeated washing of the feet.

Whenever we are aware of having fallen into a fleshly reaction, into sins, then let us stop right there and in our hearts before God agree with God about it and experience anew this wonderful cleansing, this faithful and righteous cleansing of our lives, "cleansing from all unrighteousness." That is keeping the feet clean.

Do you know what happens when you do not keep your feet clean? You become very unpleasant to live with. As a schoolboy in Montana I endured many bitter Montana winters when the temperature would sometimes go down to 60 degrees below zero for a week at a time. In those homes, where we had no running water, no indoor plumbing, and no electricity, taking a bath was relatively akin to major surgery. We had to go out and get the *c o l d*, galvanized iron washtub off the wall, bring it in, and put it on the kitchen floor, then pour heated water into it from the stove. Where the water touched it, the tub was hot, but where it didn't, it was cold. In that painful setting, we performed our ablutions. It was difficult enough, and distressing enough, that some people did not think it necessary to bathe at all during the winter months. If

you went into the heat of a one-room schoolhouse on a cold winter's day, with about 50 or 60 sweating bodies there, you became very much aware of this fact.

Now, I do not mind living with someone who thinks his feet get dirty and who therefore frequently washes them, but it is terribly distressing to live with someone who thinks his feet never get dirty!

That is what John is saying. If we say we cannot get dirty feet, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But if we face up to it, and confess it, and agree with God about it, (and that is sometimes hard to do because we want so desperately to get him to agree with us) well then, the cleansing that the Lord Jesus has fully and abundantly provided for on the cross is immediately ours, and we are as though we had never sinned.

Now let us thank God for that.

Prayer

Our Father, in what practical terms to these verses of Scripture reveal to us the tendency of our own heart to deceive ourselves, and also the readiness of your heart to cleanse us and to fit us for fellowship with the Lord Jesus, holding everything in common with him. What a tremendous thing this is. May we, by thy grace, understand it more and more, and understand ourselves better and better, until we learn to walk in fellowship, and in fear and trembling, knowing that the next moment our hearts can trick us into falling back into walking in darkness again. May we walk softly before thee, looking to you for cleansing love, in Christ's name, Amen.

Copyright © 1995 Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.