

"HEAR YE HIM"

A Devotional Series For Radio

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Program Number 267
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World Headquarters: The Auditorium, Independence, Missouri

The Sermon: HE CANNOT SIN

Scripture: I John 3:1-10, Inspired Version

Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law; for sin is the transgression of the law. And ye know that he was manifested to take away our sins; and in him is no sin. Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not; whosoever continueth in sin hath not seen him, neither known him. Little children, let no man deceive you; he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous. He that continueth in sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil. Whosoever is born of God doth not continue in sin; for the Spirit of God remaineth in him; and he cannot continue in sin, because he is born of God, having received that holy Spirit of promise. In this the children of God are manifested, and the children of the devil; whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother.

We know that whosoever is born of God continueth not in sin.

One of the most controversial verses in the Bible is the one which reads in the King James version, "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him, and he cannot sin, because he is born of God." Can a man who has been born again sin? And if so, can he sin to the extent that he may be lost although he was once saved?

The first epistle of John was written for the explicit purpose of combatting the heresies of Gnosticism. It is therefore unfortunate that the verse in question should be used as an argument in favor of one of those Gnostic theories. The Gnostics started with the premise that all matter was evil, and that evil was inherent in matter, therefore the physical body was the source of evil in man. They went on to argue that if the Spirit of man had been born again, and was clean and pure, he could not sin -- that what the body did had nothing to do with the purity of the spirit. In the actual practice of Gnosticism this became a license to commit all manner of sin and immorality while the "born again" spirit remained aloof and unsullied.

The Antinomians' views were similar to this extent: they held that under the gospel dispensation the moral law was no longer obligatory. Men who have been born again may do as they please -- but no matter what they do, they cannot sin if they have been born again.

As is so often the case with dangerous half truths, there is just enough truth in these two propositions to make them attractive and appealing. It is true that if man's nature is completely godlike as a result of the new birth, he will not, perhaps even cannot sin. Insofar as sin exists in any man, to that degree the spiritual intuition and knowledge of God and the nature of God do not exist in him. It is also true that men who are completely possessed by the life and nature of God are above the law. The law against murder does not restrict or hamper or hinder the man who doesn't want to kill because he loves all other men. The law against wife-beating doesn't bother the man who loves his wife.

The trouble with both of these concepts is that they overlook completely the fact that a spiritual re-birth does not destroy the carnal, sensual man or the body in which and with which the spirit has to live. It merely puts the new spiritual life in control. The two natures continue to exist side by side, and to struggle one against the other. If the carnal man is allowed to rule, then sin, rebellion, and lawlessness come naturally. The natural man is an enemy to God. He is unrepentant. He turns from God; he shuns, evades, and fears him, preferring to walk in darkness that his sins may not be made manifest. The man who has been spiritually born again, and who chooses to be ruled by the new Spirit

and life of God within him is a friend of God. He turns his face towards God. God's Spirit convicts him of sin when he inadvertantly does evil. He sorrows for that sin; he repents of it. Because of his sorrow and repentance, the redemption of Christ is applied to forgive his sin and restore him to full fellowship of God.

Even a saved man may be surprised or betrayed into sin if he allows the new life principle which has been born in him to lie dormant and neglected and unheeded. Sin is ever active, but it never reigns where Christ reigns. If Christ reigns, his life and power will always pull us back, just as the magnetic power of the pole always pulls back the compass needle which is easily deflected by even a small piece of iron. The pole never varies, but its principle can be rendered inactive in the individual life by accumulated sin.

The unregenerate man rebelliously refuses to repent. The regenerate man shows the reality of his regeneration by confessing, repenting of, and seeking forgiveness for any sin into which the old carnal nature has betrayed or tricked him. He renews the battle daily. Martin Luther once said of the regenerate man: "The child of God in this conflict receives indeed wounds daily, but never throws away his arms or makes peace with his deadly foe."

To assert that a "born again" man "cannot sin" is contrary to all experience. The saved person can sin and does sin daily. He does those things which he should not have done, and leaves undone those things which he ought to have done. But he does not sin lawlessly, or rebelliously. He does not claim the right to disobey. He never boasts of sin; he is ashamed and wretched until sin is confessed and forgiven.

Several other translations somewhat modify the statement in the King James version that the born again man "cannot sin." They say that whosoever is born of God doth not practice sin, or keep on sinning, or live in sin, or go on sinning, or continue in sin. He may inadvertently sin, but he does not continue.

Gnostics and Antinomians believe

that nothing a "saved" man can do can be called sin, even though the nature of the spiritual life supposedly within and the deeds of the body are mutually incompatible. The answer to that idea is given by John himself. "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." "If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us." "He that doeth righteousness is righteous."

Can a saved man ever be lost? The answer to this hinges not on the number of Bible verses which can be quoted on both sides, but on the question of agency. There is no doubt, and no lack of scripture to prove God's willingness to save, or his power to save. That we readily admit. There is one school of thought which holds that God simply will not permit one who has once been saved to be lost -- that if a man is in danger of falling, God will even remove a man from earth, or kill him to save him. If God has and uses this power, why should he permit anyone to be lost? Why doesn't he compel all men to be saved? Because he respects man's agency. Jesus atoned for the sins of the whole world -- past present, and future. Men are not lost because they have sinned, but because they will not accept the redemption offered. "This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil." In accepting or rejecting Christ and his redemption, men are allowed to exercise free moral will and agency. Does agency cease after conversion? "Whosoever will may come." Whosoever will not, is not forced to come. If God will not force any to be saved, will he force any to remain saved against his will?

Are you a friend of God, deploring your sin and seeking forgiveness and reconciliation, or are you a rebellious and unrepentant enemy of God? Who rules your life? The limitless powers of God are available to save and keep the man who is willing to let Jesus rule his life, but even the omnipotence of God will not force any man to be saved, or to remain saved against his will. He that is born of God can sin, but if he is truly born again he cannot and will not continue in sin.