

...FOR THOSE SEEKING THE EMPOWERING PRESENCE OF THE *Holy Spirit*

# LutheranRenewal

Number 239 • January 2007

## Stop Sinning!

By Paul Anderson

Jesus spoke these strong words to the woman caught in adultery, "Go and sin no more." Why would He say this to a woman who clearly had a problem with sin? An unrealistic command could have left her in hopeless depression. And after healing the paralytic at the pool of Bethesda, Jesus told him, "Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you" (John 5:14). Apparently, sinning had helped to get him into his mess, and Jesus wanted him to understand that he needed a drastic change of direction. It was the loving thing to do, lest sinning take him deeper into sickness, and thirty-eight years of paralysis was no joy ride. Neither was the lifestyle of this woman encountered by Jesus.

We might have shown more tolerance of their past, acknowledging that it would take some time to transition into a life of holiness, providing them with a support system to sustain their new venture. Not Jesus. He called them to change—and expected to be obeyed, and the very call contained the promise of power.

The apostle who lived closest to Jesus while on earth, then walked in obedience to the exalted Lord for the longest, came to know His heart. He shared the conviction of the Master about sin and righteousness in the letter he wrote at about ninety years of age: "My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin" (1 John 2:1). He has just told us that "if we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar..." (1:10), that "if we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves" (1:8), so John knew about the deceptiveness of sin and the human attempt to hide sinful behavior

behind a pretense of holiness. But he seems also to believe that we can avoid sinning. And he, like His Lord, called his readers into it. In fact, his purpose in writing included this high call.

Not sinning isn't an option most of us have heard about or entertained realistically. Many of us have spoken more about grace and forgiveness than about truth and obedience. And unfortunately, the lack of Biblical proportion has lowered the bar for the expectation of righteous living. People hear John calling people to a life without sin and wonder who he is talking about. When we have taught on First John, we have probably camped on the Scriptures that follow the alarming invitation to holiness: "But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One" (2:2). That is familiar territory, and thankfully so. We must know the grace that forgives. And he has already made it clear that "if we confess our sins," we are purified of all unrighteousness. Good news!

### Amazing Grace?

And yet the grace that forgives also empowers.

Grace is not the willingness of God to lower the standards because of our predisposition to sin. It is the power of God enabling us to overcome sin. Paul's great announcement to the Christians in Rome centers on empowering grace: "For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace" (Romans 6:14). In Lutheran circles we have taken the option of forgiving grace, which John says is available through our advocate. But we have reckoned less



### Lutheran Renewal

(Independent of North Heights Lutheran Church)

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with the miracle of transforming grace, the power that never leaves us unchanged. That is why Paul says that “the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “no” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age” (Titus 2:11,12). These Scriptures, and the whole letter of Titus, address the issue of holy living, not forgiveness.

It is strange that Lutherans have struggled with the call to sanctification, since that stands as the very purpose of grace. God not only declares us righteous through the Righteous One, but He also goes about changing us “from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:18). Paul continues with the Romans, “Now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness” (Romans 6:22). The call to holiness cannot be presented as a remote option. “Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14). And the writer is not speaking of imputed holiness, but of imparted holiness. He has just said that we undergo discipline, “that we may share his holiness,” a discipline that “produces a harvest of righteousness” (v. 10,11).

When John says, “I write this to you so that you will not sin,” he doesn’t then leave this theme and trail off into Christian realities more attainable, as if he has just thrown out a sentence hoping the heavyweights pick it up. Two verses later he writes, “We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands” (1 John 2:3). He takes obedience so seriously that it becomes the telling mark of our assurance. In other words, if we are not obeying, he questions that we have the real virus. A disobedient Christian for John is an oxymoron. We react at such black and white sketches; we want room for some gray. We think, “Where does he live? He must not be married. He certainly doesn’t have kids. He’s probably a eunuch who lives on an island,” which says much more about us than about John. Have our congregations become so conditioned by selective preaching and poor coaching as to believe in a wimpy Jesus and a sweet and tame Holy Spirit? We have pitted unswerving obedience against love as if they are mutually exclusive. But John says that “if anyone obeys his word, God’s love is truly made complete in him (2:5). Then he adds for good measure, “Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did” (2:6). He said we “must,” which also means that we can.

A coach who convinces a team that they have a good chance at the state championship calls them to their destiny. Their identity shapes their

behavior; they become who they are. “As a man thinks in his heart, so is he.” They ponder championship, not as a dream but as a distinct likelihood. When they win the conference division, their captain declares, “I knew we could do it. This is what we aimed at all season.”

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**“...if anyone obeys his word, God’s love is truly made complete in him.”**

1 John 2:5

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By contrast, the man who coaches a bunch of losers, who acknowledges they possess no chance of a league title, and who makes no attempt at inspiring his players to achieve will settle for a mediocre season—and get just that. And if you happen to think that a coach makes no difference in how a team plays, look at the astounding record of John Wooden and read about his strategy. A great coach who called his players to achieve their full potential amassed a record that is virtually untouchable—unless someone comes along like Mr. Wooden.

I grew up hearing these two definitions of grace: “God’s unmerited favor” and the acronym “God’s riches at Christ’s expense.” The former definition sounds more like mercy than grace and was applied more to God’s forgiveness than to His empowering. The law of proportion would cause us to at least equal the score. In *The Satanward View*, James Kallas makes the observation that 20% of the Apostle Paul’s writings focused on the forgiveness-reconciliation motif, while 80% focused on the theme of Christ’s victory over the demonic powers (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966, p. 32). Larry Christenson shared that this kind of emphasis “makes as an excellent counterpoise to the over-emphasis on grace, the pious insistence that recognizing and admitting our sinfulness is more biblical than declaring Christ’s victory in our lives.”

### **Grace as Power**

No one could rightly accuse Paul of triumphalism. He simply believed radically in the power of the cross. I have discovered that most of those accused of triumphalism, an unbalanced emphasis on the resurrection over the cross, are, in fact, drawing upon the power that the cross offers, taking seriously Pauline soteriology. By contrast, understanding “God’s unmerited favor” as unconditional grace, always available to all people in all circumstances, cheapens the grace of God by pulling out the forgiveness card, expecting God to wipe out our “sins and shortcomings” so we are off the hook again. We end up excusing sin rather than overcoming it. We turn God into a doting father who can do nothing with His children, but fortunately for us, He is, alas, forgiving.

Consider this: “If grace is unmerited favor, why is it that only the humble get it? And if nobody deserves grace, why are the proud denied it?” (Guy Chevreau, *Turnings*, p. 59).

#### For Pastors:

- Are we calling people to die to themselves, knowing that “death works in us, but life in you?”
- Are we giving them a balanced diet of grace and truth? Do our people know of the grace that empowers as much as the grace that forgives?
- Have we given them a picture of holiness that makes them want to pursue it, confident in God?
- Have we tolerated sin as inevitable, or have we said like Paul, “Put off your old self” (in other words, “Stop it,”) and “Put on your new self”?

John was not afraid to call his readers into a high and holy calling, and that is where he lived.

He talked about love and obedience in the same sentence. When John talked about not sinning, he was not looking for some kind of religious façade, a righteous smile. John believed that the cross of Jesus Christ grants us a power that puts sin under our feet. Sin is not our inheritance from Christ. It is not willed to us with our new nature. It is a curse from our past, our fleshly side that has gone to the cross. And he tells the Galatians that “those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires” (Gal. 5:24). Then he adds, “Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other” (v. 25,26). The life lived by the Spirit allows us to overcome conceit and envy and the like; otherwise, the exhortation means nothing.

**“Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.”**

Psalm 37:3

Then where does Romans 7 come in? Aren’t we speaking to a few super saints who don’t have the same temptations that I do? Certainly John is not talking to average Christians, is he? In fact, he is addressing all of us—or the cross of Jesus Christ is powerless. Jesus died, as he goes on to say, “to destroy the works of the devil.” The cross makes victory over sin and Satan my inheritance in Christ. I am not just a conqueror—I am more than a conqueror.

Romans 7 reminds us that none of this is accomplished by working harder or by trying more, as if we can pull it off by sheer grit. The Christian life cannot be reduced to personal effort. Only the Spirit can produce the fruit of

the Spirit. The words “I” and “me” occur 41 times in Romans 7. The words “Spirit” and “Holy Spirit” occur 22 times in Romans 8. Paul gives us an answer to the frustrated Christian who is trying to live an impossible life; let the Spirit live it for us. This is not a lesson in morality; it is a call to surrender. The frustration over personal failure we find in Romans 7 will either cause us to give it up and go back to sinning or to give it over and trust in the power of the cross.

Gordon Fee writes, “Nowhere does Paul describe the Christian life, life in the Spirit, as one of constant struggle with the flesh. He simply does not speak to that question. His point rather is the sufficiency of the Spirit for God’s new end-time people” (*Power, Holiness and Evangelism*, essays compiled by Randy Clark, p. 17).

John is not mocking us when he says, “I write this to you so that you will not sin.” He is simply taking the work of the cross and the presence of the Holy Spirit seriously. He is being neither naïve nor unrealistic. He knows the Coach well, and he is living the truth he invites us to experience. But he is quick to add the word about advocacy, knowing that as we set our sights on a holy life that brings God’s favor, we will fail and fail on our way to it. Otherwise the condemnation would send us spiraling into guilty despair and keep us forever from the place of victory.

Later he writes, “Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness. But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin. No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him” (1 John 3:4-6). John never treats sin lightly; some of us do: “Hey, we’re all sinners. What’s the big deal? We sin every day.” John never talks that way, because the cross not only deals with the penalty of sin but also with the power as well. Sin produces guilt, and we don’t do well with guilt. It drives us crazy. Forgiveness deals with the penalty of sin, freeing us from guilt. But John here is speaking of sin’s power to keep us in its grip, which the context confirms. That’s doubly good news. The penalty issue frees me from a guilt-ridden past, granting me a new identity. The power issue gives me hope for today that sin will not be my master (Romans 6:14). That is the sense of John’s words, “...so that he might take away our sins.” Sin becomes less and less a power in our lives. We are becoming more like Jesus, and it is not simply a declared truth—it is a realized truth, because “no one who lives in Him keeps on sinning.” The elder apostle has walked with Jesus for over six decades, and he speaks from experience, not from theory.

He then writes, "He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God" (1 John 3:8,9). John calls Satan a sinner. He would not call himself or anyone walking in Christ a sinner. The devil's work makes us sinners like himself and convinces us that we can't be anything else, so we keep sinning. But the work of Jesus in coming and dying reverses that process. The context once again shows that John is not talking about the work of forgiveness but about the work of transformation. If John speaks with such consistency about the work of sanctification, should not pastors and leaders likewise speak of the powerful work of grace that brings internal change, not just a declaration of forgiveness?



The truth of forgiveness is required for us to be and, therefore, to see ourselves as new creatures, washed and clean by the blood of Jesus: "Neither do I condemn you." What powerful words! But let

us not stop there. The cross of Christ not only cleanses—it also transforms: "Go and sin no more!"

Some might think this leads to a kind of camouflage, a holy pretense, far more damaging than just realizing

**"Be holy, because I am holy."**

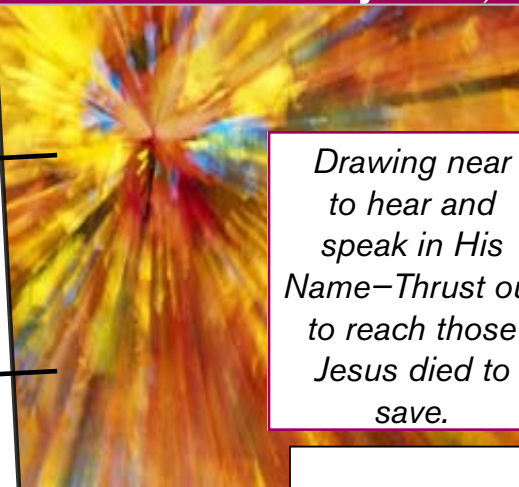
1 Peter 1:16

that we're not made of the stuff that brings holiness. It can.

It did for the Pharisees, who preferred looking good to the real thing, who were content to fool the masses, to gain their favor—and to have God opposing them. But John, by contrast, went for the challenge held out by Christ for the righteousness that exceeded the Pharisees: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48), or in Peter's words, quoting from Leviticus, "Be holy, because I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16). Christ was not calling us to climb a mountain that no one could scale, to forever attempt but to always fall short, in other words, a hopeless endeavor. He was inviting us to live in God—letting God change us, to model His very character, to "participate in the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). What frustrated the religious leaders opposing the early Christian movement was that the bold disciples looked, spoke, and acted just like Jesus (Acts 4:13). Would that we could be similarly accused.

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