

**March Q & A:**  
**When Does Sin Separate a Christian from God?**

Franklin Church of Christ Edwin Crozier March 9, 2008 PM Assembly
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**Introduction:**

Our tradition has become to devote the second Sunday night of each month to questions and answers submitted by members and guests. Sometimes we are able to cover several. Other times only one. In this lesson, we will only be able to grapple with one question. It is perhaps the thorniest question with which we have dealt. On one level, I'm leery of dealing with it because of the potential for my being misunderstood. However, because I think many Christians are asking this question and because misconceptions about it have caused unwarranted fear for some and unwarranted comfort for others, I think it is important for us.

Question: *When does sin separate a Christian from God?*

As we begin, let me say that my basic answer to this question is rather simple. **I don't know.** I can talk a great deal about this subject, however, in the end, I will come back to saying that I don't know the exact line on when God says He has had enough sin out of any one of His children such that we are no longer in fellowship with Him. Part of me wishes I could give you this line. However, I am convinced, as with any line that God did not explicitly draw, He doesn't want us drawing close to a line. He wants us drawing close to Him. I believe **Philippians 2:12** gives us the explanation. He wants us working on our salvation with fear and trembling. That phrase carries the idea of working hard but always having a healthy fear we haven't done enough, so we continue to work even harder. He doesn't want us working on it until we get to a certain line and then think we have done enough.

So, my basic answer is I don't know. However, I don't want to leave us there. I want to share some things about this question that I do know. In doing so, I hope to provide fear for those who are satisfied in unwarranted comfort and comfort for those who are living in unwarranted fear.

**Discussion:**

- I. If we Christians try to act like we never sin, we are liars and the truth is not in us.
  - A. When I was on the radio in Texas, one of our callers informed me he never sinned. Why would he, he queried, if sinning would cost him his soul? While I appreciate his fear of sin and what it would do to his soul, that man was simply not being honest with himself.
  - B. **I John 1:8** is clear. The apostle John is speaking. John says if he made the statement my radio caller had made, he would be lying. What then do we think about the radio caller or any person saying they never sin? It just isn't true. While I agree that we can choose not to sin and therefore not sinning is a technical possibility, the Bible clearly teaches that we were so wrapped up in sin before we came to Jesus that none of us will in practicality be able to say we have reached a state of sinless perfection. Even Paul said, he was not already perfect in **Philippians 3:12-13**. But he pressed on for the goal, forgetting what was behind him and looking ahead.
  
- II. Sin can separate Christians from God.
  - A. Some people answer this question by declaring that sin never separates them from God. We here of the Calvinistic position of "once saved, always saved." This teaching comes in two forms. Some say that if a person is really a Christian, they will never sin so bad as to lose fellowship with God, which was John Calvin's position. On the other hand, some teach that it doesn't matter how badly Christians sin, they will never lose their fellowship with God, which is Charles Stanley's position in his book ***Eternal Security***.
  - B. The Bible however is quite clear. A real Christian can in fact fall from grace and be severed from Christ. **Galatians 5:4** is quite clear that any Christian who tries to go back and be saved by the Law will fall from grace and be severed from Christ. In **Romans 6:23**, Paul tells Christians that if they resubmit themselves to be slaves of sin again, the wages of their sins will be death. Finally, in **II Peter 2:20-22**, Peter is quite clear. If we become again entangled in the ways of the world, our latter state is worse than the first.

- III. God does not delight in the death of sinners and is patient and not willing that any should perish but that all come to repentance.
- A. One of the questions often asked in this discussion is “What if someone pulls out in front of me and I slip with a cuss word as I crash into them and die, will I go to hell?” I can’t answer this question with a blanket yes or no for every person. However, I will respond by asking in what kind of God do you believe? Do you believe in a God who is looking for the opportunity to cast you into hell? Or do you believe in a God who wants you to go to heaven and is doing what He can (apart from overthrowing your free will) to get you there? I believe in the God who wants us to go to heaven.
  - B. **Ezekiel 18:20** says the soul who sins shall die. However, **Ezekiel 18:23** follows that up saying, “Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live” (ESV). God wants us to turn from our sins and repent. He doesn’t want us to be judged for our sins.
  - C. Further, **II Peter 3:8-9** says God is patient, not wanting anyone to perish. He wants to give everyone opportunity to repent. This comforts me. It says to me if sin has separated me from God, He will not let me die right away but will give me time to repent and be restored to fellowship with Him.
  - D. Finally, **Romans 5:6-11** provides me with great comfort. It points out that if God would send His Son to die to save us while we were yet sinners, how much more, now that we have been reconciled is God going to work such that we will be saved. Add to that **Philippians 2:12-13** which encourages us to keep working no matter how much we have done but adds that we can have the encouragement to do that because we know God is working in us. We are not working on our own. God wants us to go to heaven. He sent His Son to die for us so we could go to heaven. How much more is He going to work through us so that His children will not end up going to hell because of some slip in the car?
  - E. I’m not saying we don’t need to work on controlling our language. I am merely saying that this whole question mistakes our God for some God who doesn’t care about us. And is willing for His children to make a little slip and then slam them into hell for it. Praise the Lord, that just isn’t our God.
- IV. God is looking for growth, not perfection.
- A. If God were looking for perfection in us, then there would have been no need for Jesus’ sacrifice. As it is, God recognizes what we did to ourselves while in the world. According to **Ephesians 2:1-3**, we so sinned that sin became second nature to us. Through baptism God has cleansed us so we can walk in good works. However, God does not remove the habits we have had. Rather, we start the process of growing in His grace and knowledge. Take note of **II Peter 1:5-11**. In this passage, Peter explains how we can make our calling sure and ensure our place in the heavenly kingdom. Notice however, the surety does not come from perfection. It comes from growth. When it explains that we must have virtue, godliness, self-control, perseverance and all these qualities must be increasing, it states there is still some lack of virtue, godliness, self-control and perseverance.
  - B. The question we have to ask ourselves is not whether we ever sin, but whether we are growing. If I am sinning just as much as I always have and making absolutely no headway in any area of sin, then I have no assurance of fellowship with God. On the other hand, if I am improving in the fruit of the Spirit and removing the works of the flesh (**Galatians 5:16-25**) then I am doing what God wants from me.
- V. Willful, deliberate, rebellious sin removes the sacrifice of Jesus.
- A. Having said that God is looking for growth and not perfection, we do need to understand that willful, deliberate, rebellious sin removes the sacrifice of Jesus. I do not wish to make it seem like there are levels of sin. The Roman Catholic church has developed layers of sin, if you will, claiming some are mortal and some are venial. Only Jesus can save us from the mortal sins, but we can save ourselves from the venial. I do not wish to leave that kind of impression. At the same time, I do believe the Bible teaches there is a difference between Christians who slip and fall during times of attack, duress and stress or Christians who, in their present point of growth,

are ignorant about some matter and the Christian who knows something to be a sin and willfully, deliberately and rebelliously pursues sin.

- B. **Hebrews 10:26-27** is very clear. “If we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries” (ESV). As far as I can tell, that takes only one infraction. Think about this, don’t we treat our own children in the same way? Don’t we see a difference in our children between those who are ignorant of some issue, those who are striving to get better at something but slip up and those who defiantly ignore our parenting and deliberately go against our direction? God is the same. Ignorance needs education and enlightenment. Slipping up needs discipline. Rebellion warrants punishment.
- C. Before we move on, lest anyone suggest I am teaching it is better to let new Christians be ignorant so their sins won’t be held against them, I will remind you that God is looking for growth in knowledge according to **II Peter 1:5, 8**. I cannot quantify God’s patience with our ignorance as we grow. It is important that we study and grow in knowledge so we can repent, confess and turn from the sins we are committing through our ignorance. I have no doubt that there is a point at which the lack of growth in knowledge is in itself seen as rebellion and therefore every sin committed because of that ignorance will also be seen that way. Thus, there is a difference between deliberate rebellious sin and sin committed in ignorance, but don’t use that as a license to wallow in ignorance.

VI. We must walk in the light and not walk in the darkness.

- A. Perhaps **I John 1:5-2:6** most directly addresses our initial question. On the one hand, it draws no lines for us, but it does provide a picture of what God wants from us. He wants us to walk in the light, not walk in the darkness. Does walking in the light equal sinless perfection? Are we walking in darkness the minute we have committed any sin? Apparently not, because as John talked about walking in the light, he said he would be lying if he said he never sinned. Thus, the picture of walking in the light is not of sinless perfection but of what governs our lives in general. If we strive to submit to God’s will as best we can, growing in His grace and knowledge, confessing our sins as we learn of them or recognize them, we are walking in the light. On the other hand, if sin is the general rule of our lives, then we are walking in the darkness.
- B. There are really two sides to this passage. The one side of it explains that we do not have to fear for our souls if in our striving to walk in the light we commit the occasional sin. On the other side, it explains that we should not be comforted by Jesus’ sacrifice if we are not concerning ourselves with following the commands of God. In that case, the occasional obedience does not make up for the general sin.
- C. We need to understand one aspect of this picture. I think we have often mistaken the place of confession. In the context of this picture of those who walk in the light, **I John 1:9** does not mean we jump to the dark side with each sin and then back to the light when we finally confess each sin. I think that is the picture many of us have. I think it ironic that many Christians look with disdain on the Roman Catholics who treat the confessional as if they are catching up on their sins and getting rid of them when they finally confess to their priest, when many Christians have a similar picture with God. Christianity is not a system of perfect confession anymore than it is a system of perfect living. The point within this context is that confession is part of walking in the light. The Christian who is growing in knowledge and virtue, striving to live by the commands and word of God examines self and lives a life of confession. It is not an issue of catching up on our sins through confession, but it is an issue of a life that recognizes our sinfulness and our sins when they occur, it admits our sinfulness and admits our sins when we recognize them, turning to God for help and forgiveness. I can’t help but think of the tax collector who was justified not because he specifically named all his sins, but because he admitted his sinfulness and need for mercy (**Luke 18:13**), he went away justified. Consider this, if the tax collector had prayed again an hour later, but hadn’t sinned in between, would he be able to proclaim his righteousness or when he went before God would he still need to confess what a sinner he was and how much he needed mercy? The point is not that I have just committed a sin and therefore need to confess. The point is I have been a sinner and therefore I must always confess that I need God’s mercy no matter how long it has been since my last sin.

D. Thus, **1 John 1:5-2:6** doesn't draw any specific lines for us, but explains that whether rebellious or not, if our life is one that walks in sin, then we have lost our fellowship with God. However, if our life is one that walks in the light, where sin is the exception not the rule, and in which we confess our sinfulness and our sins as we recognize them, then we are walking in the light and God cleanses us of our iniquities.

VII. If we allow grace to be a license to sin, then we will die in our sins.

- A. Finally, we need to recognize that all sin is dangerous. My big fear with what I have said is that someone will mistake me for saying that God's grace means some sin is ok. That is not my point at all. **Romans 6:1-2** is very clear. We are not allowed to use God's grace as a license to sin. God's grace means when we are walking in the light, He will forgive us when we sin. It does not mean that we can be unconcerned about sin. It does not mean we are allowed to just let sin slip by. It does not mean some sin just doesn't matter. If we allow grace to be a license to sin, then we will die in our sins.
- B. There are really two points to this within the context of **Romans 6-8**. One is a doctrinal aspect that letting grace be a license to sin is just doctrinally incorrect. We have crucified ourselves to sin. We who have died to sin are not supposed to live in it any longer. We are supposed to submit ourselves as slaves to righteousness (**Romans 6:15-18**).
- C. However, Paul actually also makes a practical point. The natural consequence of just letting sin slide is that sin will once again take over our lives. We were slaves of sin when we were out in the world. God has cleansed us and set us free from that slavery. However, if we begin to so bank on His grace that we don't worry about striving to overcome sin and let some sin slide in our lives, then sin will regain a foothold and will eventually take over again. That will again lead to our death in sin (**Romans 6:11-14, 23**).

### Conclusion:

Our question: When does sin separate the Christian from God? My simple answer is, "I don't know." However, I hope I have accomplished two things tonight. If you have simply been resting in God's grace allowing sin to slide in your life, I hope I have taken your comfort and filled you with the fear of God that you may learn to overcome your sins and walk in the light. On the other hand, if you have been striving to serve the Lord, growing in His grace and knowledge but lived in the fear that somewhere along the line you might die before you confessed some particular sin, I hope I have provided you with the comfort that we have a God who loves us, wants us to go to heaven and is working to get us there, not waiting for us to mess up and send us to hell. Let us always remember this: God loves us. If we love God, He will work all things out for our ultimate good (**Romans 8:28**). Let's have faith in that God.