

# The Meaning of 1 John 3:9



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### Four Views That Appeal To This Verse

#### 1. The works-righteousness view

This view teaches that one earns or keeps salvation by good works, and thus that the person who chooses to sin has forfeited any right to heaven. This view contradicts the Bible's clear teaching on salvation as God's gift through faith (Ephesians 2:8–9), purchased for us not by our works but by the sacrifice of Christ upon the cross (Romans 3:24–25, 2 Corinthians 5:21, 1 Peter 2:24).

#### 2. The instantaneous sanctification/Wesleyan view

This view states that it is possible for a believer to have an experience following conversion in which the principle or root of sin is removed and replaced by love for God. 1 John 3:9 does not support this view but, rather, argues against a second work of grace by implying that one who sins has never been born of God.

#### 3. The progressive sanctification/perseverance view

This view recognizes that believers occasionally sin but argues that, because they have been regenerated, it is impossible for believers to habitually practice sin. This view has much to commend it but is not entirely satisfactory upon consideration of a literal rendering of the verse (see Five Factors, 1. The text).

#### **4. The sinless seed/new nature/Holy Spirit view**

This view argues that it is not the believer who is sinless but rather God's seed that remains in each believer. This view has much to commend it as well but is not entirely satisfactory because it fails to distinguish in this verse between God's seed and the one who has been begotten of God.

Conclusion: NONE of these views is completely satisfactory. I believe a correct understanding of verse nine must incorporate elements from both of these last two views.

#### **Five Factors to Consider in Developing a Correct Understanding**

##### **1. The text: 1 John 3:9**

This author's literal rendering of this verse says, "Each one having been begotten (or born) of God does not do sin because His (God's) seed in him remains, and he (or it) is not able to sin because He (or it) has been begotten (or born) of God."

##### **2. The context: 1 John 3:4–10**

4 Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness. 5 And you know that He was manifested to take away our sins, and in Him there is no sin. 6 Whoever abides in Him does not sin. Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him. 7 Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous. 8 He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil. 9 Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God. 10 In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother. 11 For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, 12 not as Cain who was of the wicked one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his works were evil and his brother's righteous.

##### **3. The identity of the "sin" the verse is talking about**

- a. Sin as lawlessness - verse 4. This verse is not describing a failure to obey a particular law but the general attitude of lawlessness.
- b. Sin as failure to practice righteousness - verse 6. The present tense of the verb and its participle support the idea that this is not describing an occasional sin but the practice of sin.
- c. Sin as failure to love one's brother - verse 10. Most interpretations overlook the fact that often in 1 John 3 the "sin" being referred to is actually failure to love one's brother (see verses 10–23).

##### **4. The phrase "HE [or IT] is not able to sin"**

In 1 John 3:9 two distinct identities are described: (a) the one having been begotten of God and (b) God's seed. In sorting out what is being said in this verse about each of these two things, it should be noted that the third person singular ending on a verb can be translated, "he," "she," or "it."

This being the case, verse 9 could be interpreted: "Whosoever is born of God does not commit sin . . . because he is born of God." The omitted words would refer to God's seed and would explain why the one born of God cannot do [poiev] sin: "for God's seed [which is the Holy Spirit or new nature] remains in him and it [God's seed] is not able to sin."

## **5. The truth that believers are able to practice sin and become enslaved to it.**

1 John 1:7–10 states, "7 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. 8 If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and his word is not in us."

Elsewhere in Scripture it is clear that believers can choose to practice sin. In Romans 6:12–13 Paul admonishes his readers, "12 Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. 13 And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God." Paul's admonition shows that it is possible for a believer to let sin reign in the body, but it also shows that it is possible for a believer to refuse to let sin reign. And in verses 14–16 Paul makes it clear that, while sin cannot cause God's law to send believers to hell, choosing to sin can cause believers to become enslaved to it. He says, "14 For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under the law but under grace. 15 What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not! 16 Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness?"

Paul's admonition, however, does NOT imply that there is no observable difference in the behavior of a believer and that of an unbeliever. 1 John 3:10 explains, "10 In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother." But this verse also explains that the primary observable difference between the behavior of a believer and that of an unbeliever involves love (or concern for the wellbeing) of other believers. 1 John 3:11–19 supports this understanding.

**Conclusion:** Because true believers possess God's seed and it is not able to sin, their behavior will be observably different from that of unbelievers. This difference will be especially evident in their love and concern for other believers.