



# Can A Christian Sin?

DISCOVERING GOD'S WORD BIBLE STUDY SERIES

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Can a Christian sin? There are some who believe that it is impossible for an individual who has become a Christian to commit sin. Instead, they claim that if an individual commits sin after he/she becomes a Christian, it means that individual was never actually a Christian to begin with. However, what does the Bible teach? This question certainly has significant implications that affect everyone who is a Christian. Let's investigate the Biblical teachings of those who specifically addressed individuals who had become Christians to see whether they taught it to be possible for the Christian to sin.

## **John Taught That It Is Possible**

I want to begin by considering the teachings of the apostle John because some of his teachings have been used to claim that the Christian cannot sin. For instance, 1 John 2:18-19 includes John's warning about those who were antichrists. These individuals went out from the apostles, denying that Jesus was the Christ (see 1 John 2:22). In verse 19, John says, "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us." Though some use this passage to claim that those who sin were never really Christians, the context simply speaks of those who denied Jesus. This faction was not part of true Christianity.

Some also appeal to 1 John 3:6 and 1 John 3:9. Verse 6 states that whoever "abides in" Jesus "does not sin, but whoever sins "has neither seen Him nor known Him." Verse 9 states, "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." In light of John's teachings in chapters 1 and 2, these verses cannot mean a Christian can never commit sin. Rather, notice that the Christian will not sin whenever he "abides in" Jesus and when God's seed (the word) is working in him. But, if the Christian chooses to abandon Christ or His word, he can be guilty of transgressing the law of God (sin, 1 John 3:4).

Now, let's understand that these verses do not exist in a vacuum. They exist in the contexts in which they were written – and must be interpreted in harmony with all that is said. As you consider

the rest of John's teachings, it is irresponsible to conclude that these verses mean that the Christian cannot commit sin.

Within the 1 John letter, John taught (when writing to Christians), "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). Instead, we must confess our sins to God (1 John 1:9). We make God out to be a liar if we say that we have no sin (1 John 1:10). In fact, John was writing all of this "so that you may not sin" (1 John 2:1). The implication is that they could have sinned. And, "if anyone sins," John wanted Christians to know that they had an "Advocate with the Father" in Jesus Christ, who is both the propitiation for the sins the Christian commits as well as for the whole world (1 John 2:1-2). Furthermore, 1 John 5:18 indicates personal responsibility to refrain from sin. Though John states that the one who is "born of God does not sin," he also says that this one "keeps himself" and "the wicked one does not touch him." However, if he does not keep himself, the wicked one will touch him and he will sin.

John's writings also include the rebuke of an individual who had become a Christian and sinned, named Diotrophes (3 John 1:9-11). Then, when John wrote the book of Revelation, he recorded the words of Jesus to many Christians who had sinned (see Revelation 2-3). Some had left their first love, some had compromised the truth, some had been involved in sexual immorality and eating things sacrificed to idols, some had died spiritually, some had grown lukewarm in Christ's service. But, though Christ rebuked these Christians and told them to repent, He never said that they were not actually Christians. Furthermore, John recorded Christ's words to faithful Christians, instructing them to be faithful until death in order to receive the crown of life (Revelation 2:10) and saying that those who would overcome would not be blotted out of the Book of Life (Revelation 3:5). The implications are that those who would not remain faithful or overcome would not receive the crown of life and would be blotted out of the Book of Life (see also Revelation 22:18-19).

### **Paul Taught That It Is Possible**

Paul joins with John in teaching that it is possible for the Christian to commit sin. Like John, Paul wrote letters to those who were Christians – and his consistent message is one of warning that it is possible to sin. For instance, 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 records an exhortation about self-control. Paul, in using a comparison between the Christian life and running a race, encouraged Christians to run "in such a way" that they may obtain the prize. Then, he demonstrated that just as those who compete in physical races understand the need to exercise self-control, Christians must exercise self-control in order to be victorious. And, specifically, Paul said that he disciplined his body (bringing it into subjection), lest he "should become disqualified" even though he had preached to others. Now, if Paul could lose his salvation by failing to exercise self-control and commit sin, anyone who is a Christian can do the same!

Paul also teaches the possibility that the Christian can sin in many other passages in his writings to Christians. For instance, in 1 Corinthians 5, Paul distinguished the actions that should be taken against the Christian who sins and the sinner who is not a Christian. 2 Corinthians 2:11 warned about Satan taking advantage of the Christian (implying that the Christian can succumb to his temptations). 2 Corinthians 13:5 instructs the Christian to test himself in order to know whether he is in the faith or

not. Galatians 1:6-12 warned Christians who were “turning away” from Christ. Galatians 5:4 spoke about some Christians who had fallen from grace. Ephesians 6:10-18 exhorts the Christian to put on God’s armor in order to withstand Satan (implying that he will defeat the Christian if this is not done). In 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15, Paul instructs Christians to withdraw from other Christians who walk “disorderly and not according to the tradition” received from them – even though he was a “brother.”

### **Peter Taught That It Is Possible**

Peter joins with Paul and John in teaching that it is possible for the Christian to sin. First, consider what Peter told an individual who had become a Christian and sinned, in Acts 8:14-26. Simon (who had previously practiced sorcery) had become a Christian, believing and being baptized (see verse 13). However, when Simon saw that the Holy Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered the apostles money so that he could have that same gift. Peter identified this sin of trying to buy the gift of God with money and instructed him to, “Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you” (verse 22). Notice that Peter did *not* say that Simon had never actually been a Christian. Instead, the picture is clearly a Christian who had sinned, and needed to repent and ask God for forgiveness.

Second, consider what Peter wrote in his two letters to Christians. In 1 Peter 2:11-12, Peter begged that his Christian brethren live as “sojourners and pilgrims” by abstaining from “fleshly lusts, which war against the soul.” Now, if they could not sin, why did they need to be so diligent in abstaining from these things – and how could these fleshly lusts war against their souls? In 1 Peter 5:8-9, Peter encouraged his Christian brethren to be self-controlled and watchful because of the devil, who was seeking to destroy them. He told them to resist him and be steadfast in the faith. But, if it was impossible for the Christian to sin, why would they need to do these things? And, in 2 Peter 2:20-22, Peter described the Christian who goes back into sin as being like a dog returning to its own vomit and a washed pig going back to roll in the mud.

### **James Taught That It Is Possible**

James joins with Peter, Paul, and John in teaching that it is possible for the Christian to sin. Observe the clear teaching concerning this in James 5:19-20. James told Christians that “if anyone among you [a fellow Christian] wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.” So, it is clearly possible for a Christian to turn away from the truth and even become guilty of a “multitude of sins.” If not, this instruction makes no sense!

Other passages in James’ writings also indicate the same truth. James says that the one who “endures temptation” is blessed and will “receive the crown of life” (James 1:12-15). But, if the Christian could not sin, he would not need to endure temptation. James 1:27 instructs the Christian to keep himself “unspotted from the world.” The implication is that the Christian can fail to keep himself in this way and become spotted by the world (sin). James 4:7 encourages Christians to submit to God and resist the devil. But, this is a choice. If the Christian submits to the devil and resists God, he will have sinned.

## **Jude Taught That It Is Possible**

Jude joins with James, Peter, Paul, and John in teaching that it is possible for the Christian to sin. Even in his short letter to Christians, Jude was “very diligent” to write to them concerning their “common salvation,” finding it “necessary” to write to them and exhort them “to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3). Jude recognized that there were individuals who were working to turn people away from following Christ. But, notice that the need to “contend earnestly for the faith” implies that sin is a possibility for the Christian.

Toward the end of Jude’s letter, he exhorted Christians (in light of this danger) to “keep” themselves “in the love of God” (Jude 1:21). The instruction to “keep” themselves in God’s love implies that they could fail to remain in the love of God by sinning against Him.

## **The Hebrew Writer Taught That It Is Possible**

Finally, the writer of the book of Hebrews joins Jude, James, Peter, Paul, and John in teaching that it is possible for the Christian to sin. Consider two passages that plainly demonstrate this to be true. First, in Hebrews 2:1-4, the instruction is given to Christians to “give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away.” And, he asks how we will escape the consequences of neglecting “so great a salvation.” Both of these clearly imply that we can depart from the salvation that is in Christ Jesus!

Second, Hebrews 10 leaves no doubt that it is possible for the Christian to sin. Verse 26 speaks to Christians of the consequences when “we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth.” These are said to have “trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace” (verse 29). Please note that they had been sanctified by the blood of the covenant. Then, the Hebrew writer speaks of drawing back to destruction (verses 37-39). They had clearly drawn back from salvation to condemnation.

## **Conclusion**

All of the New Testament writers who addressed Christians warned that Christians could sin. These passages are just a sample of what they taught. So, we must not be deceived into thinking that a Christian cannot sin and make God out to be a liar! Instead, recognizing the real possibility of the Christian sinning, the Christian must work diligently to resist the devil!

### **Discovering God’s Word Bible Study Series**

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