

INTRODUCTION

No one would deny that keeping clean is a good habit. Sometimes my wife complains that I have an obsession over cleanliness. From my point of view I just prefer to keep things clean and tidy. There is a difference between perceived-clean and actual clean. The cleaning supply industry is quite smart in selling products that make customers feel that things are clean. For example, if your trash can at home smells stinky the most thorough way to deal with it is to take out the trash bag and wash the bin. However, if you are in a hurry or you are somewhat lazy you can spray some air freshener over the trash to cover the bad odor temporarily. Though it may smell good does it make the trash can really clean? We can apply this illustration to spiritual matter. Every now and then new believers would ask me a critical question: am I still a sinner? In other words, how effective is the death of Jesus Christ on the cross over my sins? I think not only new Christians have this question in mind, all Christians at one point would have the same doubt. After Jesus saved us does it mean that we are no longer sinners? If that is so, then how come we are still struggling in sin? Do you constantly feel that too? In our message today we will deal with that important issue. To put the question in another way: to Christians, is sin a past or present tense? We will answer that question from four angles.

EXPLANATION

1. 永远或暂时? Permanent or Temporary?

The first question we need to ask is: which part of our sins are forgiven when we accepted Christ? Let us look at **Romans 8:1-2 - 1** Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, **2** because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. The phrase “those who are in Christ Jesus” is another way to describe those who have accepted Christ. Paul says that all who are in Christ will not be condemned. In other words, when we put our faith in Christ and accept Him as our Savior and Lord all of our sins have been forgiven. By “all” it means past, present and future. You may remember when Jesus was nailed to the cross there were two criminals who were also crucified with Him. One of the criminals begged Jesus for mercy. How did Jesus respond? **Luke 23:43** records: Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.” Jesus meant that He was willing to grant forgiving grace to that man. When he passed away that day he would go to heaven. Jesus did not say: “You have to get baptized, finish discipleship training, read the Bible once and attend church then your sins are forgiven.” All those elements are means for our spiritual growth, but not the prerequisites for God’s forgiveness. While still hanging on the cross all the sins of the criminal were forgiven by Jesus instantly and completely. The apostle John also tells us in **1 John 4:17-18** that - **17** This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. **18** There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. As Christians we do not live in fear but in love, knowing that God has forgiven all of our sins. Jesus had paid the price that we could never afford. Just as Jesus told the criminal on the cross Christians should be confident that any moment we depart

from this world we will be in heaven with the Lord. Once God has established an eternal relationship with us nothing can reverse that. Salvation is priceless and complete. Such assurance will give us peace and joy. We should always be grateful to our Lord for the gift of salvation.

2. 跌倒或沉沦? Stumbled or Condemned?

Having all of our sins – past, present and future – forgiven by Christ is a great news. But then it immediately leads to the key question: if our sins have been forgiven once and for all why do I still struggle with sins, and often commit sins, even after I became a Christian? That is a very valid question. But you know what: you are not alone in this struggle, even the great apostle Paul had the same struggle! Listen to his lament in **Romans 7:18-19 - 18** For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. **19** For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do - this I keep on doing. I expect many of you to say “amen” after hearing Paul’s sharing. We can identify with Paul’s dilemma. As Christians, we will keep struggling with sins the rest of our life. We will still keep on sinning because of internal and external factors. Internally, just as Paul describes, there is still a desire in us that we want to do things our own way that is contrary to what God requires. Also, externally, we live in a fallen world manipulated by the devil. **1 John 5:19** reads: We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one. The devil is controlling all sorts of temptation to lure us into sin. But here is the good news: when a person accepts Christ, Jesus also forgives the sins that this person will commit in the future. Otherwise, when this person departs from the world any moment he will be held accountable to the sins he committed. The result is eternal condemnation. When a Christian commits sin he only stumbles momentarily. I often use the relationship between parents and children to illustrate this point with brothers and sisters. When a child disobeys his parents the rebellious act would not automatically sever their relationship. However, the defiance grieves the parents’ hearts and can distant their relationship. What needs to be done to repair the relationship are confession and forgiveness. The same principle applies to our relationship with God. A familiar passage in **1 John 1:9** says: If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. Notice that John wrote this statement to Christians rather than non-believers. The forgiveness Christians seek after God is not the forgiveness from eternal condemnation, but forgiveness from sins that may distant our relationship with God. God’s grace is sufficient. He understands that we will continue to stumble and fall. But God is always willing to forgive us whenever we turn back to Him.

3. 得胜或偷生? Victors or Victims?

Our struggle with sin is a life-long battle. How can we overcome temptation so that we can be victors and not victims in sins? Paul encourages us in **Romans 6:13** that: Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. Paul reminds us that as Christians we now have a new Master. We should make up our minds whom we will serve, whether it is God or Satan. Christian life is a matter of constant and gradual yielding of ourselves to our Lord. When we look at sins the way God does then sin will look less and less enticing to us. Instead, we will have a growing desire to love God and do what pleases Him. God does not only give us freedom to obey Him, He also empowers us

with strength from above to live for Him. In **Ephesians 6** when Paul concludes his letter with the description on the armor of God he says in verses **10-11** that: **10** Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. **11** Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. Any time we rely on ourselves we are destined to lose in the spiritual battle against Satan's temptation. Instead we should always pray to God: Lord, I am weak, but by Your strength I can be strong. In the spiritual battle lie is one the most effective tactics Satan uses. He lies to us that we can be blessed without obeying God's will and we can cut corners to accomplish our goals. When Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness he made up different lies. He tempted Jesus to turn stones into bread. Jesus answers in **Matthew 4:4** ... "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" When Satan tempted Jesus to jump down from the pinnacle of the temple Jesus responds in **Matthew 4:7** ... "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Then when Satan tempted Jesus with the riches of this world Jesus reacts in **Matthew 4:10** ... "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" Three times Jesus quoted the Scripture in His answers: "It is written." Jesus set up a good example for us that if we are familiar with the Bible then we can separate truths from lies. Today, we are so blessed with the full Bible. When we read it we can understand God's will. When we rely on God's strength our knowledge about God will be transformed into action.

4. 感恩或濫用? Grateful or Indulgent?

Jesus Christ has taken away the penalty of our sins. Even when we stumble in sin temporarily He continues to grant us forgiving grace. Also, God promises to strengthen us to resist temptation when we come to Him. So far so good. But then another question arises: since Christians have been freed from eternal condemnation does it mean that we can keep on sinning, knowing that we can always go back to God to ask for forgiveness? Paul poses a rhetorical question in **Romans 6:1** - What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? He gives the answer in the **next verse** - By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? If we truly understand what grace is and the fact that Jesus had to sacrifice Himself to endure all the pain and shame on the cross to accomplish salvation for us then we would never dare to squander His grace. Let me explain with the following illustration. In recent years, the overseas students who come to study in U.S. are generally far richer than 20 years ago. Well, actually those students are not rich, it is their parents who are rich. Many of them left home with a credit card from their parents. Some of those students just swipe their card casually to buy this and eat that. After all, they will never see the bills! The way they spend money does not reflect a healthy and loving relationship with their parents. Similarly, if a Christian waste God's grace by indulging in sins they still live for themselves and do not really understand grace. The Bible says that when we sin it saddens God's heart. **Ephesians 4:30-31** read: **30** And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. **31** Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. In a love relationship there is expectation. Parents would be sad if their children cherish their money more than their relationship. God loves us so much that He does not want us to live like we have no relationship with Him. Since Christ has saved us we should live for Him. Paul says in **2 Corinthians 5:14-15** that: **14** For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. **15** And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. We

now belong to Christ. We should no longer indulge in sins as if we were still our own master. We can live differently because we are already made new in Christ.

CONCLUSION

To Christians sin is a past tense. Jesus bore our sins on the cross and God now sees us as sinless. However, sin is also a present tense. As long as we are still living in this world we will continue to struggle with sin. But God is our constant help in times of need. Whenever we rely on Him we can triumph over temptation. Just like our struggle with sin, spiritual growth is also a life-long process. In Christ, we can be more like Him and further away from our sinful past. In Christ, God sees us as sinless. That is our past. In Christ, we can also sin less, and that should be our present spiritual status.