

1 John 1:8

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

Analysis

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. This verse addresses a different error than verse 6—not claiming fellowship while walking in darkness, but claiming to be without sin entirely. "Have no sin" uses the present tense, indicating a claim to possess no sin nature or principle of sin. Some interpret this as denying indwelling sin; others see it as claiming current sinlessness. Either way, the claim is false and self-deceptive.

"We deceive ourselves" (heautous planōmen) uses the middle voice—we are both the deceivers and the deceived. This is not external deception but internal self-delusion. Sin blinds us to sin; pride prevents us from seeing our pride. The claim to sinlessness is itself evidence of sin's blinding power. Isaiah's vision of God's holiness produced conviction: "Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips" (Isaiah 6:5). Those who claim sinlessness haven't truly seen God or themselves.

"The truth is not in us" indicates more than intellectual error—it means the living reality of God's truth hasn't penetrated our hearts. Christ called Himself "the truth" (John 14:6). To claim sinlessness is to be estranged from Christ, who came to save sinners. This verse establishes that authentic Christianity requires ongoing acknowledgment of sin, not graduation to sinlessness.

Historical Context

Some Gnostic teachers claimed their spiritual enlightenment elevated them above sin. They redefined sin to exclude their behavior or claimed the physical body's actions didn't affect the enlightened spirit. This perfectionism has recurred throughout church history. The Pelagian heresy (early 5th century) denied original sin and claimed humans could achieve sinlessness through will and effort. The Council of Carthage (418 AD) condemned this teaching.

Medieval perfectionist movements and later Holiness theology sometimes claimed believers could reach "entire sanctification" or sinless perfection in this life. Reformed theology, following Augustine, teaches that believers remain sinful (though justified) until glorification. The mature Christian is characterized not by claiming sinlessness but by growing awareness of remaining sin coupled with assurance of Christ's complete forgiveness.

John's epistle provides balance: we must confess sin (1:9), not claim sinlessness (1:8), yet we can have assurance and shouldn't sin (2:1). This realistic assessment of continued sinfulness while celebrating complete forgiveness has characterized orthodox Christianity.

Related Passages

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Study Questions

1. Why is claiming sinlessness evidence of spiritual blindness rather than spiritual maturity?
2. How does growth in holiness actually increase awareness of remaining sin?

3. What's the difference between being justified (declared righteous) and claiming sinlessness?

Interlinear Text

ἐὰν εἴπωμεν ὅτι ἄμαρτίαν οὐκ ἔχομεν ἐαυτοὺς
If we say that sin no we have ourselves
G1437 G2036 G3754 G266 G3756 G2192 G1438

πλανῶμεν καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν ἡμῖν
we deceive and the truth no is in us
G4105 G2532 G3588 G225 G3756 G2076 G1722 G2254

Additional Cross-References

Romans 3:23 (Sin): For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;

James 3:2 (Parallel theme): For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body.

Ecclesiastes 7:20 (Sin): For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not.

Isaiah 53:6 (Sin): All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.

1 John 2:4 (Truth): He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

Job 15:14 (Parallel theme): What is man, that he should be clean? and he which is born of a woman, that he should be righteous?

1 John 1:10 (Sin): If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

Proverbs 20:9 (Sin): Who can say, I have made my heart clean, I am pure from my sin?

Psalms 143:2 (Parallel theme): And enter not into judgment with thy servant: for in thy sight shall no man living be justified.

Isaiah 64:6 (Parallel theme): But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.

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