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Practice Makes Perfect

1 John 3.4-10

Series: Blessed Assurance (Communion Series)

The Village Church

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I. Introduction

- A. Most of you know that I played in the NBA
 - 1. Now, before you get too exercised, you need to know that it's not the NBA you're used to hearing about
 - 2. No, I played in the NBA: the Noontime Basketball Association
- B. During my days at WVU, I was a professor in the area of sport sciences
 - 1. And my office was in the WVU Coliseum – the arena where they played basketball
 - 2. I was fortunate enough to be involved in a group of basketball wanna-be's, has-beens, and otherwise ne'er-do-wells as far as basketball is concerned
 - a. Mostly former good high school players, some ex-college players, and some coaches and Athletic Department personnel who still liked to mix it up on the court at noon
 - 3. What a great privilege to play on the main floor of a Division 1 University arena!
 - a. And we were able to do it multiple days every week
- C. Now, most of the players who played with us were, in their day, pretty good basketball players
 - 1. As I said – former college and high school players
 - a. And they all pretty much had good fundamental skills in playing basketball
- D. There was one exception, however
 - 1. He was a young man who was a graduate assistant with the swim team at WVU
 - a. A former first rate collegiate swimmer who was not entering the coaching profession
 - b. And for some reason, unknown to us, he became interested in playing basketball with us
 - 2. The problem was, he really didn't have much more than backyard basketball experience
 - a. And while he was certainly athletic enough, he really didn't have basketball skills
 - 3. And so, you know how that goes – pretty much no one wanted him on their team
 - a. In fact, we were quite happy when he was on the other team
- E. Now, being athletic, he picked up the defensive side of the game pretty easily

1. But offensively, well, that was another matter
 2. As far as shooting was concerned, as one of my former coaches once said, "He couldn't throw it in the ocean if he was on the beach"
- F. But one day, he came to me and asked for help
1. He knew that I was a teacher, and taught people how to teach basketball among other things
 2. So he came to me and said he wanted to learn how to shoot
- G. So we scheduled a time to get together
1. I got a ball, went to a basket
 - a. And showed him the proper hand and elbow and arm position
 - b. And showed him the proper release sequence
 2. I started him about 3 feet away from the basket
 - a. And got him to position the ball properly
 - b. And without moving any other body parts, had him simply release the ball so it would go through the basket
 - c. The goal was to make the basket so that the ball would go through the net without touching the rim
 3. Once he did that a few time successfully, I said to him, "Now, go do that 300 times a day"
 - a. And I left
 4. I figured he'd never do that!
 - a. I mean, he's a graduate student – doesn't he have better things to do?
 5. But he came to me after a week and said, "Ok, I did what you told me. What's next?"
 - a. I really couldn't believe it
 - b. So I went to the court with him and had him show what he could do
 - c. And by golly, he did exactly what I showed him to do, and essentially, didn't miss from 3 feet away
 6. So, I said, "Ok, let's back up"
 - a. So we went to, maybe, 8-10 feet away
 - b. We added bent knees and a slight lift from the lower body
 - c. And used the same positioning and sequencing I had shown him earlier
 - d. And I told him again, "Ok, do that 300 times a day"
 - e. I thought to myself, "No way he's going to do that!"
- H. Within two months, the boy could actually shoot!
1. Now, if he was on the other team, I'd have to guard him!
 2. And he wasn't the last player anybody wanted on their team!
 3. Because, well, as they say, "Practice makes perfect"
- I. But you know, it's not just "practice makes perfect"
1. Because if you just practice, and are not concerned with the quality of the practice, you would never even approach perfect

- a. In fact, if you make more errors in your practice than successful performance, you will get better and better at doing errors!
 - 2. And then, when you get with a real teacher, they will have to spend more time correcting errors than teaching more advanced skills
 - a. And that's a waste of valuable time!
 - 3. So the principle should be stated, "Perfect practice makes perfect"
 - a. That's why I made sure my young protegee was in the correct position for the shot mechanics, and made sure he could perform that movement successfully before I let him move to the next level
- J. But it's even more than that
 - 1. Once you've mastered the movement, and you are able to practice perfectly, then you've got to do it again, and again, and again
 - a. In fact, you've got to repeat it hundreds of times
 - b. So that the movement becomes second nature
 - c. So that it's harder to do the movement the wrong way than it is to do the movement the correct way
 - 2. So the principle should really be stated, "Plenty of perfect practice makes perfect"
 - 3. A number of years ago, Malcom Gladwell, published his best-selling book *Outliers: The Story of Success*.
 - a. In his book he argued that in order to become an expert in pretty much anything, you need about 10,000 hour of practice
 - 4. Now his 10,000 hour rule, as it came to be known, is really about the quantity of performance, not about the quality
 - a. And it turns out to be highly variable
 - b. For some experts it may have taken 10,000 hours, for others, 5,000 hours, and for others, 15,000 hours
 - 5. But the bottom line is – you need plenty of practice
 - a. So: "Plenty (quantity) of perfect (quality) practice makes perfect"
- K. As true as that principle is for learning skills, of pretty much any type, that's also how we're wired spiritually
 - 1. The more we engage in quality practice in biblical, spiritual exercise, the more like the master we become
 - 2. Now, there's more to becoming Christ-like than mere practice
 - a. We'll see how that works as we examine our text this morning
 - 3. But practice is certainly one of the necessary conditions for growing into the image of our Savior Jesus Christ
 - 4. It's really one of the values of the spiritual disciplines
 - a. Worship
 - b. Bible study
 - c. Prayer
 - d. Fasting
 - e. Fellowship
 - f. Meditation on scripture
 - g. Memorization of scripture

- h. Sabbath keeping
- 5. **1 Timothy 4:7–8** (ESV) —
 - a. 7 ... Rather train yourself for godliness;
 - b. 8 for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.
- 6. The word for training is **gymnazo (Gk) = training**
 - a. Which is where we get our word for gymnasium
 - b. Which is basically where we started this message!
- L. Text
 - 1. **1 John 3:4–10** (ESV) —
 - a. 4 Everyone who makes a **practice** of sinning also **practices** lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.
 - b. 5 You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.
 - c. 6 No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him.
 - d. 7 Little children, let no one deceive you.
 - e. Whoever **practices** righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous.
 - f. 8 Whoever makes a **practice** of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning.
 - g. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.
 - h. 9 No one born of God makes a **practice** of sinning, for God's seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God.
 - i. 10 By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not **practice** righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.

II. **Blessed Assurance**

- A. Now we're in a communion series entitled Blessed Assurance
 - 1. It's a journey through the first epistle of John
 - a. The theme of which is assurance
 - 2. The purpose statement of the epistle is **1 John 5:13** (ESV) —
 - a. 13 I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.
- B. As you recall – which may require some long-term memory since that last message in this series was in April!
 - 1. The way John accomplishes his purpose is by giving us a series of tests
 - a. Which, if we do well on these tests, we are encouraged in our walk of faith
 - b. And more assured of our salvation
- C. **Test of Obedience**
 - 1. **1 John 2:3–5** (ESV) —

- a. 3 And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments.
 - b. 4 Whoever says “I know him” but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him,
 - c. 5 but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him...
- D. **Test of Love**
 - 1. **1 John 2:9–10** (ESV) —
 - a. 9 Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness.
 - b. 10 Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling.
- E. **Test of Truth**
 - 1. **1 John 2:21–23** (ESV) —
 - a. 21 I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth.
 - b. 22 Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son.
 - c. 23 No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also.
- F. **Test of Abiding**
 - 1. **1 John 2:24–25** (ESV) —
 - a. 24 Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you.
 - b. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Son and in the Father.
 - c. 25 And this is the promise that he made to us—eternal life.
- G. Now, what John does in the remainder of this letter is he revisits each of these tests and elaborates on them and on their importance
 - 1. Which is, of course, what every good teacher does
 - 2. Just like plenty of perfect practice makes perfect
 - a. Plenty of repetition of key truths are crucial for learning
 - 3. And in our text this morning, John returns to the first of these tests
 - a. The test of obedience
 - b. Only in this text, he addresses the issue of obedience through a contrast
 - c. The contrast is between **Righteousness and Sinning**
- H. In addition, John approaches the subject in a rather unique way
 - 1. In vv 4-10 he addresses four aspects of righteousness and sin
 - a. And he does so twice
- I. So here’s the outline:
 - 1. **The Practice of Sin**
 - a. **1 John 3.4, 8a**
 - 2. **The Purpose of Christ**
 - a. **1 John 3.5, 8b**
 - 3. **The Provision of His Presence**

- a. 1 John 3.6, 9
- 4. The Power of Evidence
- a. 1 John 3.7, 10

III. The Practice of Sin

- A. So, the first issue John addresses is with the practice of sin
 - 1. In the first verse in the section, v. 4 he says this:
 - 2. 1 John 3:4 (ESV) —
 - a. 4 Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.
 - 3. John defines sin in this text with reference to the Law
 - a. There is a Law; the Law of God – as captured in the 10 Commandments – is rooted in the nature and character of God
 - b. And it defines what it means to have a right relationship with God
 - c. And also a right relationship with our fellow humans
 - d. The first table of the Law addresses our relationship with God – the supremacy of God, idolatry, the sanctity of the name of God, and the Sabbath, or the right worship of God
 - e. And the second table deals with our relationships with one another – honoring father and mother, the sanctity of life, the sanctity of marriage, stealing, bearing false witness, and coveting
 - 4. That's why the Westminster Shorter Catechism defines sin this way:
 - a. "Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the Law of God."
 - 5. Now, that is not the most comprehensive definition of sin possible
 - a. Paul, in our study of Romans, echoes that definition
 - b. Romans 4:15 (ESV) — 15 ... where there is no law there is no transgression.
 - c. But John takes it even further
 - 6. John says that sin is not just the breaking of a commandment
 - a. There is a spirit of lawlessness behind sin
 - 7. Paul also echoes that as well
 - a. Romans 5:13 (ESV) — 13 for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given...
 - 8. So even before the Law of Moses, there was rebellion in the heart of the human race
 - a. And that spirit of rebellion against the right of God to reign and rule is a spirit of lawlessness
 - 9. God, you see, is the One who determines where the moral lines are drawn in his morally responsible creatures
 - a. And, as even Ted Koppel once famously observed, the 10 Commandments are not the 10 Suggestions
 - 10. We all understand implicitly what that's about
 - a. Anyone who's had children know that when parents set down rules, children automatically test their limits

- b. Every parent knows the spirit of lawlessness!
 - c. And it's the same element with those who seem irrevocably driven to break the speed limit, to steal little things from one's employer, or to take advantage of another's property
 - 11. One Sunday school teacher once asked a class of children to define sin
 - a. And one youngster said, "Sin is anything you like to do."
 - b. And in our unredeemed state, that's really not far from the truth
 - c. Because we want what we want, and we don't want anyone else determining what that would be
 - d. And we especially don't want an eternal, all-powerful, all-knowing Deity determining what is right and wrong or good and bad
 - 12. So sin is the breaking of the Law of God
 - a. And the spirit of lawlessness that resides in our natures
- B. But John goes beyond that in the second part of this element
 - 1. 1 John 3:8 (ESV) —
 - a. 8 Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. ...
 - 2. John here identifies the origin of sin – that is emanates from the rebellion of the devil himself
 - 3. You know, our tendency is to minimize our sin, and to make excuses for our sin
 - a. And especially to blame others for our proclivity to sin
 - 4. John is certainly not playing the part of Flip Wilson here: "The devil made me do it."
 - a. But what John is doing is pointing to the seriousness of our sin by identifying those who practice sinning with the devil!
 - 5. Remember Peter's great confession, and his nearly immediate moral collapse that took place when Jesus spoke about His impending death
 - a. Peter was the one who spoke for the disciples and proclaimed that Jesus was "the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16.16-19)
 - b. For which he was congratulated by Jesus, who told him that this insight was given to him from God
 - c. Then Jesus told the disciples that he was to be delivered over to the Jewish authorities, condemned and then crucified, before rising from the dead three days later (Matthew 16.21-23)
 - d. Whereupon Peter said, "No, Lord! That will never happen to you!"
 - e. And that's when Jesus said, "Get behind Me, Satan!"
 - f. Ouch! Peter's identified with Satan!
 - 6. Well, those who practice sinning should feel the same sting as Peter did!
 - a. To make a practice of sinning is to identify oneself with the devil!
- C. One final observation about this point
 - 1. And I've alluded to it earlier
 - 2. Remember, "Plenty of perfect practice makes perfect"

- a. But I said, if you practice the errors more than the correct performance, you will learn the errors, and the errors will begin to dominate your performance
- 3. To practice sinning, to reinforce the spirit of lawlessness, is to dig a hole of unrighteousness with no way out!
- 4. So whoever makes a practice of sinning – and builds in a lifestyle of unrighteousness and disobedience – practices lawlessness
 - a. And separates oneself more and more from God, the only source of salvation!
 - b. And on top of that, identifies oneself with the devil!

IV. The Purpose of Christ

- A. The second issue John addresses in this area of obedience or righteousness is the purpose of Christ
 - 1. 1 John 3:5 (ESV) —
 - a. 5 You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.
- B. In a wonderfully succinct way, John affirms two critically important doctrines
 - 1. He establishes the sinlessness of Jesus – which he did earlier in this epistle as well when he affirmed that Jesus is the Son of God
 - 2. And he establishes that Jesus came to take away sins
- C. The issue of taking away sins is crucially important in light of the doctrine of justification by faith alone
 - 1. If we are saved by grace alone by faith alone, and God does not count our sin against us, doesn't that mean that we can continue to sin with impunity?
 - a. Of course not!
 - b. Why not?
 - c. Because Jesus appeared to take away sins!
 - 2. The whole purpose of Jesus coming is to rescue us, not only from the penalty of our sin
 - a. But also from the power of sin in us
 - b. And eventually the presence of Sin
 - 3. So Jesus came so that we would no longer be caught up in a downward spiral of lawlessness and unrighteousness
 - a. And that our lifestyles would be transformed to look more and more like the lifestyle of our sinless Master!
- D. 1 John 3:8 (ESV) —
 - 1. 8 ... The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.
 - 2. Here's the other half of the reason why Jesus came
 - a. Not only to take away sins
 - b. But also to destroy the origin of lawlessness, the works of the devil!

3. Just as in the prior point, where Jesus said that those who practice sinning are identified with the devil
 - a. Here He says that His very coming was designed to destroy the devil and his works
- E. This has been the purpose of God in the Redeemer's work from the very beginning
 1. Remember the curse on Adam and Eve back in the garden?
 - a. And remember the serpent, Satan, was also cursed
 2. **Genesis 3:15** (ESV) —
 - a. 15 "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring;
 - b. he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."
 3. The offspring of the woman, the promised Redeemer, would bruise the head of the serpent – the fatal blow that would destroy Satan himself!
- F. **Hebrews 2:14–15** (ESV) —
 1. 14 Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things,
 2. that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil,
 3. 15 and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.
- G. So our escape from the deadly practice of sinning is the person and work of Christ Himself!
 1. Christ alone can save us from our sin – it's penalty
 - a. And save us from it's power – the practice of sin
 2. That is why He came
 - a. He came to take away sins
 - b. And He came to destroy the one who was the origin of sin, the devil

V. **The Provision of His Presence**

- A. So, how does Jesus do that?
 1. How does he rescue us from the deadly practice of sin and its power?
 2. He does it through the provision of His presence
 3. **1 John 3:6** (ESV) —
 - a. 6 **No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him.**
 4. **1 John 3:9** (ESV) —
 - a. 9 **No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God.**
- B. Now here we have to be careful to clarify something
 1. At first glance, and in some early translations, it makes it seem like if we are believers in Jesus, we would never sin
 2. 1 John 3:6 (KJV) —

- a. 6 Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him.
 3. 1 John 3:9 (KJV) —
 - a. 9 Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.
 4. But here the ESV rightly captures the essential difference between the verb tenses in these two translations
 - a. The proper tense is present tense – which is an on-going action
 5. Earlier in John's letter we saw something similar
 6. 1 John 1:8–9 (ESV) —
 - a. 8 If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.
 - b. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.
 7. So Christians can, and do sin
 - a. And when we do sin, we can confess our sins and be forgiven and cleansed
 8. So what are we to make of this text in 1 John 3?
- C. Well, the issue is making sin a lifestyle, making sin a practice
 1. Or, to put it another way, “Plenty of imperfect practice makes a mess of one's life”
 2. 1 John 3:6 (ESV) —
 - a. 6 No one who abides in him **keeps on sinning**; no one who **keeps on sinning** has either seen him or known him.
 3. I mentioned that the word “practice” occurs six time in these 7 verses
 - a. But the concept occurs even more
 - b. The phrase “keeps on sinning” is a synonym for “practicing sinning”
 4. These are present tense verse indicating a continuing pattern of sinful, lawless behavior
 5. 1 John 3:9 (ESV) —
 - a. 9 No one born of God **makes a practice of sinning**, for God's seed abides in him; and he cannot **keep on sinning**, because he has been born of God.
- D. So, how is that possible?
 1. How is it possible that Christians can escape from the vortex of a sinful lifestyle, of the practice of sin?
 2. It's because in coming to faith in Jesus, something has happened to us
 - a. We have been born again!
 - b. Born from above
 - c. Born from the Spirit
 3. And as we've seen in our study of Romans, the Spirit of God indwells us
 - a. Indeed, the Spirit of Christ indwells us
 4. We can emerge from the vortex of sinning because the One who never sinned, and who came to take away sins, lives in us!

5. That is incredible!
 - a. A blessing beyond all blessing!
 - b. That God not only commands us to stop sinning
 - c. He gives us the desire to stop sinning
 - d. He gives us the capacity to stop sinning
 - e. He gives us the Holy One to “work in us both to will and to work according to His purpose” (Philippians 2.13)
- E. That’s the provision of His presence
 1. And by the way, that’s the only way “Plenty of perfect practice makes perfect”
 2. If you are not a believer in Jesus
 - a. If you are not born again by the Spirit of Jesus
 - b. Then all the practice of righteousness in the world will get you nowhere
 - c. Oh, it might be beneficial in some temporary, earthly way
 - d. You’ll get along better with others
 - e. You’ll benefit by having a right understanding of how the world works
 - f. But you’ll end up like the five foolish virgins who showed up to the wedding feast with no oil
 - g. You’ll be left out in the cold when it comes time for judgment
 3. Plus, you’ll find your attempted practice of righteousness unsustainable
- F. So dear friends, you must be born again!
 1. You must be born of the Spirit
 - a. So you can escape the vortex of a lifestyle of sinning

VI. The Power of Evidence

- A. Finally, John affirms these teachings with a reminder of what is true about you as you practice genuine righteousness with the spiritual resources that God has provided in Jesus
 1. 1 John 3:7 (ESV) —
 - a. 7 Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous.
 2. You can be assured that if you are born again, and if you practice righteousness, you are righteous!
 - a. So that when Almighty, Holy God looks at you He sees Jesus Christ
 - b. And your growing righteous life is confirmation that you belong to God’s family
 - c. That you have the family resemblance through Jesus Christ
 3. 1 John 3:10 (ESV) —
 - a. 10 By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil:
 - b. whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.

- B. So, there you have it
 - 1. You're either of those who are righteous
 - a. Or you're a child of the devil
 - 2. That's pretty classic John
 - a. Clear contrast
 - b. One or the other
 - c. One humanity or another humanity
 - d. One genuinely righteous
 - e. The other aligned and identified with the devil
- C. But if you can affirm that you are indeed practicing righteousness, there is great power in that evidence
 - 1. **2 Corinthians 13:5** (ESV) —
 - a. 5 Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves.
 - b. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!
 - 2. But if you do meet the test, there is great assurance
 - a. You can have confidence in your walk of faith