

# Purposes of the Advent: To Take Away Our Sins

Text: 1 JOHN 3:5

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**Today, I would like to continue** the series of four messages I began two weeks ago. The focus of the series is the objective or the goals that God had in mind when He appeared as a human being almost 2000 years ago. I am calling this series of messages “The Purposes of the Advent.” Two weeks ago, I began the discussion by considering one purpose that is found in 1 JOHN 3:8. That verse says, “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.”

**Today we will focus our attention** on 1 JOHN 3:5. That verse says this: “But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And, in him is no sin.” Now, for some of us, these two reasons why God decided to become a man and be born in a stable and die on a cross—these two reasons have become all too familiar. Jesus came to destroy the devil’s works. Jesus came to take away our sins. For most of us, this is not new revelation. We often hear people teaching this truth. We often sing about these truths in our worship songs, especially during the Christmas season. And, we think to ourselves, “I know that.” And because we are so familiar with these purposes for the Advent, we let the thoughts pass quickly through our minds, and we get on to the more pressing and practical matters of Christmas like buying Christmas presents and preparing for special Christmas parties and special Christmas performances in our schools and in our churches.

But, today I want us to get a bit excited about these familiar things. And, in particular, I want us to meditate on the wonder of salvation, that is the wonder of Jesus Christ appearing to take away our sins. I like to expect miracles during the Christmas season, and I believe the greatest miracle that can possibly happen to a human being is the miracle of release from the bondage of sin. It is the miracle that happens when Jesus Christ takes away our sins. It is the miracle of salvation.

When I talked about Jesus coming to destroy the works of the devil, I began by defining what the devil’s works are. Today I will start the same way by trying to come up with a definition of sin. Between 1 JOHN 3:4 and 1 JOHN 3:10 the word “sin” is repeatedly used. John seems to have been very concerned that his readers understand that sin is lawlessness. And, he drives his point home with repetition. But, why did John want to emphasize the point that sin is

lawlessness? Perhaps it was because some of his readers had become indifferent to sin. 1 John 1:8 talks about people who claim to be sinless. Maybe some of John’s readers were claiming to be sinless. And, maybe some people, though admitting they were not sinless, would not see their sins as being that serious. Perhaps that is why John used the word lawlessness to describe sin. The word “lawlessness” is a very serious word. Sin is not something we should take lightly.

In my attempt to come up with a definition of sin today, I have to be careful. I need to make the definition broad enough to cover everything that sin is. Yet, at the same time, I have to be careful not to make the definition so broad and so complex that it fails to touch our emotions. If the terrible reality of what sin is does not cause us to be emotionally upset, then the definition we use is useless. So we have to work at both coming up with a good definition as well as making that definition touch our emotions.

**So let’s start with the definition of sin.** My thoughts begin with the word “lawlessness” taken from 1 JOHN 3. I understand lawlessness to mean anything and everything that does not conform to the moral law of God. But, I need to be more specific. What does this “everything” I am talking about include? My understanding of the Bible leads me to the conclusion that the “everything” that should be considered sin falls into three categories.

The first category (or kind) of sin cannot be seen with the naked eye. It has to do with the condition of a man’s spirit. It has to do with his state of being. It is a condition that every human being, with the exception of Jesus Christ, has experienced. Some Bible teachers call this category of sin “original sin.” It speaks of a state of separation between God and man that came about after the very first act of sin was committed. I like to call it a condition of bondage to the devil. Even before we were born—even while we were still in our mothers’ wombs—we were in bondage to the devil.

I know it is hard to imagine. Do you think the first thing that came to my mind when I saw my children born was that they were in bondage to the devil? When they were born, that thought was the furthest thing from my mind. I can’t imagine a parent looking at his newborn child and saying, “Wow, that kid is

under the bondage of Satan.” That is not what people think when their children are born, but that is their condition. And, that is one of the categories we must consider when we are trying to define sin.

The second category of sin is directly related to the first. It has to do with a tendency or an inclination to violate God’s moral law. When a certain person has a strong tendency to do something, we often call the inclination a habit. I think that is a good way of looking at this category of sin. A condition of bondage to the devil results in a disposition or a habit of breaking God’s moral law.

The reason why it is so hard to look at a newborn baby and say that he is bound to Satan, is that we cannot see it with the naked eye. We cannot see original sin. But, this tendency or this habit I am talking about is a bit easier to see.

I think many of us have seen babies acting very selfish and doing rather nasty things. When we see it, we wonder where it came from. Sometimes it can be traced to the infant’s environment, but many other times there seems to be no connection between his surroundings and the nasty behavior of the small child. The kid is simply prone to sin. He is disposed to doing wrong.

The third category of sin is the one with which we are most familiar, because it is the category that is most easily seen. Last week, as I was thinking about the definition of sin, I asked my seven-year-old daughter, Shannon, what she thought. She had no trouble giving me a long list of awful things that people do and think and say. I thought it was interesting that her list not only included deeds but it also included the bad things people say and the bad thoughts people have. I thought it was interesting, because I did not expect her to be so thorough in her definition of sin. She has learned a lot in her short life. She has learned that sin happens whenever a person violates God’s moral law in thought or in word or in deed. The only thing I could add to her definition of this particular category of sin is the fact that, when we are talking about thoughts and words and deeds, it doesn’t matter if our violation of God’s moral law is intentional or unintentional. Either way, it is still sin. All we have to do is miss the mark of perfection, and we have sinned.

So, if I could put everything I have just said into one sentence, the definition of sin I would like to emphasize today would go something like this. *Sin is a lack of conformity to the moral law of God, either in thought and word and deed or in disposition, or in state of being.* That is the broad definition of sin that I hope you will come to understand and appreciate.

***How does such a definition affect*** you emotionally? My guess is that our emotions are only partially affected by the sin that goes on around us. We are mostly affected by the sinful thoughts and words and deeds of people. We get angry when someone cuts in line or tries to cheat us. Even in church we become upset with each other when words are spoken that are out of character with God’s moral law. It is good that these things upset us. Sin should affect our emotions. But unfortunately most of us are only emotionally affected by one category of sin. Few of us feel emotionally upset over the condition of bondage that the majority of people around us are in. Few people get upset when they see others in the habit of living to please self instead of living to please God. We just look at the things we can observe, and if what we observe looks good, we say the people who are doing those things good people. But if what we observe looks bad, we say the people who are doing the things are bad people, even if they do profess to be Christian.

Most, if not all, of our thinking about sin and our emotions about sin are just limited to the one category of sin that is most easily observed. For this reason, it is possible for us to compare the behavior of a person who does not profess to be a Christian to the behavior of a person who does profess to be a Christian and conclude that the behavior of a certain non-Christian friend conforms more to the moral law of God than the behavior of a certain Christian friend that we have.

It is actually possible to make this kind of comparison; however, it is a very dangerous thing to do. As your pastor, I strongly discourage you making such a comparison. The truth of the matter is that all people, Christians and Non-Christians alike, sin in thought and in word and in deed. If we are with any person long enough, we will sooner or later see that person sin.

Fortunately, we do not make such comparisons with the other categories of sin, because people would think we were crazy if we did. Can you imagine someone saying, “I know a person who is in bondage to Satan who is kinder and more loving than another person I know who has been released from that bondage.” Such a comparison does not even make logical sense.

So, it is good to stay away from comparisons altogether. But, it is not good to suppress our emotions about sin. We should feel disgusted when we see people sinning. And actually, I don’t have to tell you this, because I know that it upsets you when you see people doing things that are wrong or hear people saying things that are not edifying. If there is any admonition I should give as a pastor, it should be to encourage all of us to use our emotions in a constructive way. Our tendency is to become so

disgusted with the sin that we see that we give up on the sinner. I don't like to be around people when they are sinning. And, I don't even like to be around myself when I am sinning. But, these emotions must never cause me to give up on people. As a person who is committed to building God's kingdom, it is my duty to remain committed to the church. We must never give up on the church. Likewise, our distaste for sin should not cause us to give up on the one with whom we are married or other people with whom we are obliged to love and support. Instead of giving up on people, we should use our emotions to think of ways to help people who are sinning to find salvation and go through the process of confession and repentance and restitution.

No, I do not need to admonish you to become more emotional about sins people commit in thought and in word and in deed. But, I do need to admonish all of us to become more emotional about the other two categories of sin. I am not saying that we should judge the condition of the souls of other people or we should judge whether or not a person is inclined to please self more than he is inclined to please God. But we don't have to judge to feel emotionally upset. There are plenty of people around who openly confess and even boast that they have no need of God or religion. Many of these people appear to be good on the outside, so we don't feel emotionally uncomfortable about their sin. But, we should be disturbed.

Only when we are disturbed can we appreciate what it means for God to take away our sins. 1 JOHN 3:5 says, "But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins." Our appreciation of this purpose of the Advent depends on our understanding of what sin is and how we emotionally relate to our understanding of sin. I know that you will have trouble appreciating what I am now going to say unless you have this understanding about sin and have experienced the kind of emotion I am talking about.

***The question I will now try to answer is this:*** How does Jesus take away our sins? The way Jesus takes away our sins is by first dealing with our state of being. He changes our condition. He releases us from the bondage of the devil. Our chains drop off. We become unshackled. Jesus brings us back into a state of fellowship with God. This is what it means to be born again.

I like the words of 2 TIMOTHY 2:26. There, Paul urged Timothy to instruct people in such a way "that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will." That verse describes well the first thing that happens when Jesus removes our sins. He causes us to come

to our senses so we can escape from the captivity of the devil.

Once we are free from the bondage of Satan, we are then freed from the habit of sin. We will no longer have a bent toward sin. This is what 1 JOHN 5:18 means when it says, "We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin..." When Jesus breaks our bondage to the evil one, He also destroys the proneness to sin. This does not mean that the person who is born again will no longer sin. It does not even mean that the person who is born again will never repeat a certain sin. But, it does mean that there will no longer be an inclination to sin. Sin will no longer be something that will feel natural to do. Instead, it will be something that will cause great grief and distress. Before salvation sin is a habit. After salvation sin is no longer a habit. It is something we struggle not to do.

As soon as Jesus deals with our state of being and our disposition to sin, He also begins to deal with the actual bad thoughts and nasty words and evil deeds that my daughter, even at a very young age, knows so well to be a part of human experience. Jesus gives us the power to improve as time goes on. But, even better than that, Jesus eventually removes sin completely from our experience when we enter into glory with Him. At that time every thought and every word and every deed that does not confirm to God's moral law will simply not exist as part of the human experience of the person who has been born of God.

I believe all this is included in the proclamation of 1 JOHN 3:5. "The reason He appeared is to take away our sins"—not just one sin or one category of sin, but all of our sins.

***At Christmastime we should be celebrating*** this very important purpose for our Lord's appearance. We should be taking time to marvel at the miracle of salvation, and we should be hoping and praying to see the miracle happen.

I get excited about Christmas presents. We now have a collection of them growing under our tree. I look at the gift-wrapped boxes and wonder what is inside. I can hardly wait for the moment when they are opened.

But, all of this excitement should seem very insignificant in comparison to the gift of salvation made possible by the appearing of God in human flesh almost 2000 years ago. The greatest gift that anyone of us can possibly receive is the gift of salvation. And if we have already received that gift, then the greatest gift that we can possibly receive this Christmas is the gift of witnessing someone else receive salvation. And the greatest gift we can give to someone else to tell

them how Jesus has released us from the bondage of the devil and given us such a strong desire to live our lives for Him.

More important than any material gift I can give to family and friends is the gift of letting them know how grateful I am to Jesus for setting Janiene and me free in January of 1972. To this day I marvel at the miracle of two people who were in the habit of pleasing themselves being released from that habit. We thought we were in love with each other, but our enslavement to the devil made it impossible for us to experience true love. And now, more than thirty years later, I can still marvel at what He did.

***Last Sunday I had the opportunity*** to listen to two people from our congregation share how God has set them free from the chains of the devil. Those chains come in many forms, so the stories are different. But when the miracle happens, there is no mistake about it. New visions that have God at the center replace old visions that had self at the center. Fear is replaced with confidence. Hope replaces doubt and hate is replaced by love. I hope you will have the opportunity to hear many testimonies of salvation from people in our congregation during 2004. But what I want you to know now is that, after I heard those testimonies last

week, I thought to myself "This is the best Christmas present I could possibly receive."

I think just about all of us are engaged in preparing presents to give away this Christmas. So I urge you to add something else to the list of things you are preparing. Add your own testimony of salvation to the list, and share it with someone else. Don't worry whether the person hearing professes to be a Christian or not. That may not be the most important thing. Both Christians and non-Christians need your gift.

Share your testimony. That is one practical application you can make to this sermon. Another thing you can do is to pray for and expect a miracle to happen in the life of someone this Christmas. Three days from now is Christmas Eve. Like always, we are expecting a large crowd. Some of the people who will come will be in need of salvation. Expect a miracle to happen and pray for one to happen.

***On behalf of the entire ministry*** team here at CCCNJ, I want to wish all of you the best Christmas and the most meaningful New Year that you have every experienced. May your hearts be filled with the joy and wonder of salvation, and may that joy and that wonder overflow to bless the lives of others.