

1 John 3:4-7

"How do I get to Carnegie Hall?" asked the young musician who was obviously quite lost in downtown New York City. An older man standing next to him said, "Young man, the way to get to Carnegie Hall is really very simple: 'Practice, Practice, Practice.'" He's right, of course. To become accomplished in anything: music, athletics, scholastics...to learn a trade well, a skill...it takes practice, and a lot of it. What are you good at? Perhaps another way of asking this would be to say, "What do you practice?" Some people might respond that they're good at sleeping, or eating, or watching TV. You may have heard the typical response, "I'm a jack of all trades, but the master of none." It's easy for us to say that Tiger Woods is good at the game of golf; Peyton Manning is good at throwing a football; and we know why: they practice, practice, practice.

In our text the Apostle John speaks about practice. He mentions two things which are commonly practiced by people. In fact, everyone practices one or the other of these two things. One of the things practiced by some people, says the Apostle, is righteousness. But that's not very common. The other thing which is practiced by most, by far, which is what the vast majority of people are good at because they practice it day after day, is sinning. That's right...most, because they practice, practice, practice, are very good at sinning.

Have you ever heard someone, oftentimes a teenager, speak in such a way that at least once or twice in every sentence a curse word is used? And they don't even realize it! Using four-letter words has become a way of life. We all know of people who, when Sunday comes around, are never found in the House of the Lord. Their way of life is such that the concept of sitting in a pew to hear the Word of God doesn't even cross their mind. The same thing is true of listening to gossip, disobeying those in authority, living a sexually promiscuous life, being lazy, and self-centered. These and many other sins are practiced so often by so many, that people have become very good at them. It's become their way of life.

We may marvel at the ease with which Tiger Woods swings a club. He's done it so often that he doesn't have to consider every little detail when lining up a shot. It's become part of who he is to swing a golf club correctly. Or Peyton when throwing a football...he doesn't stop to think how to make it spiral through the air. He doesn't take time to calculate the distance, and velocity, and defensive coverage. All of these things are ingrained in him through much practice. Throwing a ball well is now a part of who he is. And it ought to amaze us also, though not in a good way, to see the ease with which sin is practiced by people. It's become a part of who they are. They do not stop to think twice before disobeying God. It's their way of life. It's ingrained in them to practice lawlessness.

That's what the Apostle John calls the habit of sinning--lawlessness. "Everyone who makes a practice of sinning," he writes, "Also practices lawlessness." To practice lawlessness is to despise God; to tell Him, in essence, "I reject Your Law...I want no part of who You are and what You have to say!" Such people are their own gods. They live by their own standards, and rules, and laws.

"Now pastor, before you go and condemn everyone out there, keep in mind that all of us are sinners as well! We all sin." But, do you practice, practice, practice sinning? In Acts 3, which we heard from the lectern, the Apostle Peter rebuked a crowd of people in Jerusalem for denying the Lord Jesus. You heard me correctly. Peter, who had denied Jesus on Maundy Thursday, rebuked a group of

people for their denials of Jesus! By what right, we are quick to point out, does Peter who sinned against Jesus by denying Him three times, rebuke and condemn others for their sins of denial?

True, the sin of denial was in Peter's past. But he did not "practice" denying Jesus. He stumbled and he fell, but it was not now a part of who he was. Peter was a Christian, a believer in Christ Jesus, who had denied Jesus publicly; but he repented and was forgiven, and now as a forgiven Christian he did not make a practice of denying Christ. He practiced confessing Him. He practiced righteousness. And so Peter, who now practiced righteousness, had every right as God's called servant to rebuke those in Jerusalem who were right then and there practicing, not righteousness, but sinfulness.

What John is writing in our text is that sinning is one thing, but the practice of sinning is in a league all its own. Peter was not, as a forgiven Apostle, in the habit of practicing the sin of denial. If he was, then he had no right to speak as an Apostle. Every called pastor today preaches from his pulpit week after week, and with the Law he rebukes his congregation for their sins. He has this obligation not because he is less of a sinner, but because he is called to serve and preach the Word. But if a pastor practices sin, so that he is an offense to his people by his refusal to repent, he should resign his office and leave town. To practice sin is to make it your way of life; to have no desire to leave that kind of life; to be content with disobeying God. Those who live like this, says the Apostle John, do not abide with Christ. "No one who abides in Him keeps on practicing sin."

And so again I ask, "What are you good at? What do you practice?" Friend, do not think that your sinfulness separates you from God. In your baptism Christ joins you to your forgiving Father. Do not think that because you sin daily you are one who practices sin. If you were, you would probably not be here today. You would despise the Word of God. You would reject His words of rebuke and have no use for His Word of Grace and Supper of Forgiveness.

You, dear child of God, are one of the few who practices righteousness, not because you sin less than others do; not because you never commit great and terrible sins...you practice righteousness because Christ your Righteousness abides in you. You practice righteousness because although you sin, you admit it, you confess your sins, and for Jesus' sake you believe you are forgiven of your sins. You practice righteousness because, for you, the Word of God is your life and salvation. Do you hear it and read it and study it as often as you should? No, nor does your pastor. We could all do better in this. But you trust that Word; and when that Word rebukes you for your sins, you do not close your ears...you repent. And when that Word forgives your sins, you believe it by faith.

To practice righteousness does not mean to live without sin; it means to live with Christ. All of us this coming week, as we move in and around Augusta, Missouri, will be tempted to practice sinning. We all struggle with this--the lust to forget about what God says and to live for ourselves. I will pray for you, and I ask that you pray for me. Pray that though we may fall like Peter did, we do not live in sin; we do not make it our life's practice, but that we repent and hear the words of forgiveness.

That's why Jesus came, and why He comes. Not to show us how to practice righteousness, but to be our Righteousness. To be the one who tells His Father continually, "Father, forgive them...I died for him, for her." Jesus comes to be your Righteousness this week in and around Augusta. To fight the power of sin within you; to lead you out of temptation. Jesus is here now for you, to be forgiveness for every sin in your past; not that you, like Peter, can go and rebuke others for the same sins you have done, but that you can live each day in confidence, at peace with God, knowing that heaven is already yours in Christ because you are forgiven. And so this week go out and practice, practice,

practice righteousness. Go in the peace of the Lord for He, your Righteousness, goes with you.
Amen.