



# Confession in 1 John

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**Revised 11/13/13**

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Published by Torn Veil Publications

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# An Introduction

In the study of the Bible several initial thoughts might prove helpful. First, the Bible came to us from God. It is an inspired book. In fact, it is the only book ever written by God through human instrumentation. Second, the Bible tells a single *Story*. This *Story* has six broad “acts”: God, Creation, Rejection, Redemption, Re-Creation and Joy through Worship. Third, at the center of this *Story* is Jesus. He is God’s means of rescuing the fallen, reversing the curse and restoring everything back to its original design. Fourth, in reading the Bible different approaches can be employed. They are as follows.

1. Historical theology looks at theological thought within its historical **development**. It provides a snapshot of thought. It speaks to what people thought during a specific period within church history.
2. Biblical theology considers thought as presented by a **single book** of the Bible or by a **single author** such as the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts or the 13 Letters written by the Apostle Paul.
3. Systematic theology seeks to take all of the various categories touched on by the various books and **catalogue** common themes.
4. Finally, dogmatic theology gives **labels** to groupings and presuppositions made by Systematic theology such as Dispensational or Covenant Theology and Reformed and Arminian Theologies.

Our study of 1 John has as its platform biblical theology. Two of our topical studies, however, expand on the literature exclusively found in 1 John and incorporates the

larger evidence given by systematic theology. Those two studies are CONFESSION and SIN AND THE BELIEVER.

Nothing we encounter in our handling of these two studies falls outside of biblical orthodoxy. Each of them provides a thorough reading of various New Testament passages. Although it might prove daunting, the return on this small investment is notable.

So enjoy. May the following readings drive you into the text and then through the text to Jesus. Truly, He is beautiful.

# Confession in 1 John

<sup>8</sup> *If we say that we have no sin,  
we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.*

<sup>9</sup> *If we confess our sins,  
He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins  
and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”  
(1 John 1:8, 9).*

## **THE** *Story*

God's *Story* restores/reverses the Fall. It is not **from** work **for** work. It is from **work to rest**. If nothing we do can merit God's favor **prior** to God's fullest and final redemptive act, then nothing we do can merit God's favor **after** His fullest and final redemptive act. Anything conditional in the Christian life is counter to the cross.

## **AN INITIAL COMMENT**

Many are familiar with and perhaps practicing a model of the Christian life that looks something like this.

“Get saved, walk in the freedom secured by the cross, sin, break fellowship with God, no longer walking in the Spirit, no longer bearing the fruit of the Spirit, confess sin and thus restore fellowship with God, am now walking in the Spirit, bearing the fruit of the Spirit and enjoying all that He is for me and I am in Him.”

What if, however, the foundation on which such thinking is based is wrong? Is there not another way of looking at this?

Initially, I considered this topic because of what I perceived to be an “abuse” of its meaning. After many years of looking at this idea, I am perhaps more resolved in the “rightness” of the perspective offered in this short booklet. Part of our problem is in our approach. We wonder what to do as believers when we sin. Our approach is to look to 1 John 1:9 as the answer. **Yet 1 John 1:9 is not dealing with the issue of sin in the believer, but rather the denial of sin as a principle needing Jesus as the answer.** The question of a believer who sins is addressed in 1 John, but it is not found in 1 John 1:9. Rather it is found in 1 John 2:1, 2 and 1 John 3:4-10. There is an answer to the question of sin in the life of the believing, but we have “missed it by *that* much.”

The question of those who sin as believers is the subject of another study. This study will only focus on the idea as it is misappropriated by the misunderstanding and misapplication of 1 John 1:9.

For example, the word for **confession** in 1 John 1:9 is the common word **homologeō**. It is a compound word meaning “to say the same.” John uses it five times in 1 John.

“If we **confess** our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

“Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who **confesses** the Son has the Father also” (1 John 2:23).

<sup>2</sup>“By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that **confesses** that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; <sup>3</sup> and every spirit that does not **confess** Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world” (1 John 4:2, 3).



“Whoever **confesses** that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God” (1 John 4:15).

Working synonyms for “confession” in 1 John would be “believe” and “faith.” Such a cluster simply means accepting God’s record or word concerning who you are as a sinner and your need of a Savior whose name is Jesus. It has nothing to do with the manner in which confession of sin is presently expressed from many Bible believing churches. Thus, the very idea of 1 John 1:9 as used to support this idea is unsustainable. In fact, it is wrong and undermines the very gospel we claim to cherish and celebrate. Foundations matter. If you build your house on the foundation of being “in and out of fellowship,” you will have a cracked foundation. But if you build on the foundation of the gospel, you will stand.

Our current study takes the mishandling of the idea held to by many and submerses it in the finished work of Jesus Christ. This is its strength and this is its glory.

“Confession in 1 John,” is a work made up of two sections. Part one is in response to specific questions asked concerning the topic under consideration. Part two is a treatment of 1 John 1:9 in context.

For whatever reason most Christians live in a state of perpetual bondage because of their inability to embrace a complete forgiveness from God resulting in a full fellowship with God that is merited by grace alone and maintained by grace alone. Most have tragically drawn a sharp distinction between their standing before the Father in Christ [i.e. positional justification] and the Christian life [i.e. progressive sanctification] in the world.

It is my prayer we would once more rest in a finished work where our greatest strength is our weakness and our greatest boast is His cross.

## **QUESTIONS & ANSWERS**

Through the years I have been asked the following questions concerning forgiveness.

1. "If I understood right, you said that we do not need to ask God for forgiveness when we sin, but rather confess and thank Him for the forgiveness given. What about the Lord's Prayer? Did not Jesus teach his disciples to ask for forgiveness?"
2. "Since we know that at the point of salvation we receive full forgiveness from past, present and *future* sin, how are we to understand Matthew 6:14, 15?"
3. "Do Christians have to confess and ask forgiveness for the sins they commit after salvation?"
4. "Is the purpose of confession for our benefit to declare to God that we are going to turn from sin? If we are already forgiven then why does 1 John 1:9 say he will forgive our sins *if* we confess?"
5. "How does God's holiness fit in with the idea that our sin does not break fellowship with God? If He hates sin, how can we still have fellowship with Him if we are in sin?"

6. "In relation to how God sees me, which is through His Son's blood, can He see my sin? I know God is all-knowing and can see anything and everything, but in relation to how God sees me, this is my question."

In the spirit of the preceding questions one author notes, "A word of encouragement for those who have slipped – and who has not? The only remedy is to confess your sins at once."<sup>1</sup> This, unfortunately, is how many believers are taught and come to believe.

The answer to these questions intersects several times with other doctrinal truths. I am grateful for the hard questions. It is essential we become *Bereans* (Acts 17:11). It is not enough for us to blindly accept all that we have been taught. Even if what we come to believe runs contrary to the tradition taught, we must have the fortitude to stand, even if alone. Our Bible is always the final court of appeal.

There are several issues involved in the answer.

- First, what is the idea of fellowship with God?
- Second, how full is the payment in the area of sins forgiven?
- Third, what is the true believer's present standing in Christ?
- Fourth, what is the larger context of Matthew 6:9-15 and how does it affect my understanding of this idea?
- Finally, what is the larger context of 1 John 1:9 and how does it affect my understanding of this idea?

I am convinced if we examine the above thoughts, a biblical response can be found to the questions being addressed.

**Closely tied to the idea of our forgiveness by God is our fellowship with God. Salvation establishes our fellowship with God.** Some would suggest our sin breaks this fellowship and can only be restored after our sin is confessed and hence forgiven. Some would equally suggest our fellowship with God is also contingent on a walk of faith or obedience or by being led of the Spirit or walking in the Spirit. Because of the tie that binds fellowship with forgiveness, it is impossible to separate the two ideas. We will begin this study by noting our fellowship with God.

## **FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD**

As already noted, this area is problematic for most Christians. In a popular Counseling Ministry, those who teach their material make the following statements:

Guilt through unconfessed sin interrupts our fellowship with God (1 Jn. 1:1-10).

Guilt is removed through confession and repentance (1 Jn. 1:9; Ps. 32:5).<sup>2</sup>

On one hand the group notes how, "Guilt for believers was removed eternally at the cross (Col. 2:13-14; Heb. 10:1-18),"<sup>3</sup> yet on the other hand they make the previous two statements in the same listing on the same page.

Our challenge is to face a misunderstanding of such ideas as fellowship and forgiveness. Part of our initial problem is the basis from which we evaluate fellowship. Fellowship is often described as a "feeling." "I don't feel my relationship with God is right." If we can draw a parallel between the cutting of the marriage covenant and that of salvation

perhaps we can understand where we've gone wrong. When one cuts a covenant with another, it is not based on emotion. To be sure, emotion is involved, but the emotion is not the basis for the cut covenant. If the basis is emotional, then when one no longer "feels" in love they will break the covenant. Yet many of us see the folly of basing our relationship in marriage on emotion for such a basis proves unstable. So also is it to be considered folly to assess whether or not we have fellowship with God based on how we "feel."

We will begin with some initial thoughts concerning our fellowship with God.

**First**, our fellowship with God was lost when Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden. Prior to the Fall, Adam had unhindered fellowship with God. After the Fall, his fellowship with God was broken. God restored fellowship by offering up a blood sacrifice. If the fellowship after the blood sacrifice was temporal, it is only because the offering brought was temporal. This animal blood sacrifice was a temporal type of a future permanent antitype found in Jesus Christ. We will note this idea in the next section.

In commenting on 1 John 1:3, Charles Spurgeon makes the following statement:

They who have by his grace believed, and have by the precious blood been washed, have peace with God through Jesus Christ our Lord, they are "no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints and of the household of God," and they have access with boldness into this grace wherein we stand. **So they, who are in the kingdom, and under**

**the dispensation of the second Adam, have restored to them in all its fullness that fellowship which was lost to them by the sin and disobedience of their first federal head.<sup>4</sup>**

This is the essence of our justification before God by the person and work of Jesus Christ. Our justification “involves the forgiveness of sins, and restoration to divine favor. The Bible clearly teaches that the fruit of justification is much more than pardon. They who are justified have ‘peace with God,’ . . .”<sup>5</sup>

**God not only completely pardons but equally accepts.** He is not like King David inviting his son Absalom back into the kingdom, but refusing to meet with him (2 Sam. 13, 14 [Note 14:24, 28-33]).

**Second,** fellowship with God under the First (i.e. Old) Testament was contingent (thus tentative) on the offering of blood, whereas in the New Testament (i.e. Covenant) fellowship is permanent because of the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

**Third,** because fellowship with God is a consequence of His cross work, nothing we do can break [i.e. undo] this fellowship. This is a point of Hebrews 4:14-16.

<sup>14</sup> “Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. <sup>15</sup> For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. <sup>16</sup> Therefore **let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need**” (Heb. 4:14-16).

Believers come with confidence to the throne of grace. Neither our obedience nor rebellion bars us from this throne. If the throne was marked by justice, then none would come. But it is a throne characterized by grace.

Pastor John Piper of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis Minnesota makes a summary point from 1 John 1:1-4.

Through this incarnation we obtain fellowship with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. <sup>6</sup>

**Fourth**, we can fail to enjoy our fellowship with God by neglect or willful choice. If we can understand fellowship to be a synonym for salvation, then perhaps we can understand how we might fail to enjoy and appreciate our fellowship/salvation by neglect or willful choice. This enjoyment, however, does not break fellowship (i.e. lose salvation); it is only a failure to enjoy what is true.

**Finally**, if obedience maintains fellowship and rebellion breaks fellowship, then we will never rest from our work, since we will never know if we have done enough obeying or too much rebelling.

## **THE EXTENT OF OUR LORD'S DEATH**

The second question concerns the extent of our Lord's death, "How full is the payment in the area of sins forgiven?" It is unfortunate believers can sing a song such as *It Is Well with My Soul*, then turn right around and not understand the full extent of Christ's work on the cross in behalf of sin. Consider the third stanza:

*My sin - oh, the bliss of this glorious thought, My sin - not in part, but the whole, Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more, Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul! It is well with my soul, it is well, it is well with my soul.*

Why do so many believers still bear the burden of sin? It is not because they are sinners. That truth will not change until the loss of the old man. It is because they do not understand the full extent of Calvary's work on sin.

If you've been taught all of your life that the way to get forgiveness is by going to a confession booth or responding to an altar call, don't expect that habit to disappear overnight. 'Why am I walking down this church aisle to get my sins forgiven all over again?' 'Why am I constantly asking for what I already have? Could it be unbelief in what God said is finished?' <sup>7</sup>

Consider the following passages. Throughout the book of Hebrews, the intent of the author is to show the superiority of Christ as the fulfillment of all First Covenant shadows. One of those areas accented is that of His sacrificial work. Within the book there is constant reference being made to the *once and for all* nature of His sacrificial act (Hebrews 9:12, 26, 28; 10:10, 11, 12).

<sup>12</sup> "and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. . . <sup>26</sup> Otherwise, He would have needed to suffer often since the foundation of the world; **but now once at the consummation of the ages He has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. . .** <sup>28</sup> So Christ



also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him" (Heb. 9:12, 26, 28).

<sup>10</sup> "By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ **once for all**. <sup>11</sup> Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; <sup>12</sup> **but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time**, sat down at the right hand of God" (Heb. 10:10-12).

Because this sacrifice paid for sin in full, the impact forgave *all* sin forever. This appears to be the clear teaching of Scripture. Consider the following passages as they relate to the impact of Christ's death on sin (Acts 13:38, 39; Col. 2:13; 1 John 1:7, 9; 2:12).

<sup>38</sup> "Therefore, let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, <sup>39</sup> and **through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things**, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses" (Acts 13:38, 39).

"When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, **having forgiven us all our transgressions**" (Col. 2:13).

<sup>7</sup> "But if we walk in the Light, as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one with another, and the blood of Jesus **His Son cleanses us from all sin**. . . <sup>9</sup> If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins, and **to cleanse us from all unrighteousness**. . . <sup>12</sup> I am writing to you, little children, **because your sins have been forgiven you for His name's sake**" (1 John 1:7, 9; 2:12).

Those who come by faith and appropriate the provision of Calvary for themselves have their sins forgiven: past, present and future.

“The power of Christ's death  
*pays in full* God's outrage  
against it.”

In fact, in eternity past when such an act was considered and then manifested in time, all of our sin was still yet future. **He died for our sin**

**before it was ever committed.** The only thing lacking was an expression of our faith that would take God at His Word. If *all* sin has been forgiven, then for what sins are we asking to be forgiven?<sup>8</sup> Instead, we should be thanking God daily for the fullness of His forgiveness. This does not negate the necessity to be forgiven on a daily basis, but it does negate the idea that such forgiveness is conditional or somehow breaks my fellowship with God.

When a Christian asks God for forgiveness of his sins, he implies that Jesus' work on the cross isn't finished even though Jesus clearly said that "it is finished."<sup>9</sup>

If you forgive someone for some wrong committed, but the person persistently comes time and again to ask for forgiveness when such has already been granted we would consider such a scenario wrong.

If Christ only acted as my  
advocate when I asked,  
then I would be of all men  
most miserable.

The power of His forgiveness continues to this day. He is even now interceding in our behalf, providing a forgiveness that is unmerited and unconditional (1 John 2:1, 2; Rom. 8:34). Such a picture is beautifully acted out in John 13 when our Lord washed the feet of the disciples. Jesus told Peter that even with soiled feet he was *still* clean even though his

feet were soiled (John 13:10). The stunning element in the story is how Jesus washed Peter's feet even though Peter *never asked!* Jesus washed his feet unconditionally, without being asked. If Jesus forgave us *only* when we asked, there would still be unforgiven sin in the life of the true believer. Such an individual, as identified by our Lord, "has no part with Him" (John 13:8). This person is not saved.

We can right now rejoice in a forgiveness that is full and sufficient. We can enjoy a forgiveness that is lacking in nothing. We can, as a believer, rejoice in the fact that we are forgiven.

To ask for forgiveness indicates that we don't really believe we are forgiven people. Friend, *there is nothing more that God is going to do about your sin* [emphasis his].<sup>10</sup>

Friend, there is nothing about the cross that is tentative or partial. The cross is radical and exhausting. The cross work "spent" or "depleted" God's sentence against sin. The work of Jesus is so thorough there is nothing left. You still sin, but God does not input sin to your account. Sin has an intrinsic demerit placed in it by God, but God does not punish you for your sin. This He did at the cross.

## **THE BELIEVER'S IDENTITY IN CHRIST**

"Sin has no inherent power to act on us. It has no authority over us. It cannot dictate or direct. Its reign over us has been broken."

The third area of application is as follows, "What is the believer's present standing in Christ?" According to Romans 6, believers have been baptized into Christ (v. 3) and now walk in newness of

life (v. 4). Because of this fact, they are now dead to sin (v. 2) and the body of sin is destroyed (v. 6). Thus, they no longer have to serve sin (v. 6). They are freed from sin (v. 7) and no longer have to obey its dictates (v. 9). Colossians 3:1-4 speak of this same truth. They are dead (v. 3). The life they live in the flesh is according to Jesus Christ (Gal. 2:20; Col. 3:3, 4). Jesus Christ is their life. They have no existence apart from Him. He has become their all and all. He is their sufficiency and satisfaction. The fact of the matter is this: in our position our life has been swallowed up by, and into the life of Christ. God the Father sees us in His beloved and blessed Son. **In Him, we are as received, accepted, and satisfying to the Father as His only begotten Son.**

There are two aspects of sin needing to be addressed.

- First, sin's dominion
- Second, sin's demerit

As a believer, we are no longer under sin's dominion. Though we are no longer under the dominion of sin, we will still face the inherent demerit of sin. Thus, when we sin we are not under sin's dominion though facing its demerit. We cannot deny the power of sin to enslave believers, but such control or authority over the believing individual is unnatural.

Also coming into play is the whole area of two primary doctrines: justification and imputation. The doctrine of justification sees the sinner as being **declared** righteous. It is the canceling of sin's debt against him and then treating him as such. In the doctrine of imputation, the righteousness of Christ is **placed into the sinner's account** so that God now

sees him as having the righteousness of Christ. Both doctrines have tremendous import on this area.

Unfortunately, we fail to practice positional truth. Though we have been declared righteous, given the righteousness of Christ and are positionally in Christ, we continue to live as if it all depended on us. The act of making the truth experiential is mapped out for us in Romans 6:6-13 and 12:1. Do you know the truth of your position? Are you considering it true? Yet is it something that is merely theoretical, or can it actually become experiential?

There is always a need to clarify what it means to “experience the victorious life.” **One’s experience might never change. Circumstances, events, and experiences do not determine whether someone is having victory.** Victory is in one’s position, not in one’s performance. Victory is seeing His victory as being our victory. Victory is when we rest knowing He is victorious, despite our debilitating circumstances. Victory is seeing past the moment, and finding rest knowing He is performing His perfect will. Experiencing the victorious Christian life is in mind renewal, not behavioral modification or circumstantial amendment.

It is only as we follow the pattern of victory implementing positional truth that we can experience our position in Christ *in* and *through* our earthen vessel. Yet, let us not fall into the trap of thinking this is in any way dependent on us. Philippians 2:12 and 13 assures us of God’s providential working in and through us.

<sup>12</sup> “So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; <sup>13</sup> **for it is God who**

is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12, 13).

The outworking of positional truth is also seen in the area of personal sanctification. We understand sanctification, like salvation, to be a monergistic work. In other words, it is the work of one. God is working in us and through us His good pleasure (Phil. 2:12, 13; Heb. 13:21).

<sup>20</sup> "Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord, <sup>21</sup> equip you in every good thing to do His will, **working in us that which is pleasing in His sight**, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen" (Heb. 13:20, 21).

Faithful is He who calls us who will also do it (1 Thess. 5:23, 24).

<sup>23</sup> "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>24</sup> **Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass**" (1 Thess. 5:23, 24).

God will glorify that which He predetermines (Rom. 8:30).

<sup>29</sup> "**For those whom He foreknew**, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; <sup>30</sup> and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, **He also glorified**" (Rom. 8:29, 30).

This does not negate our responsibility but it does help us to put a proper slant on the whole issue. It lifts the burden of looking at our Christian walk from a man-centered

perspective to that of a God-centered perspective. God, not man, will maintain their walk with Him, and the basis for fellowship is not found in man but in Christ alone. We are “responsible” to believe all that God has said is true. We are to yield ourselves up to His truth.

## **THE LORD’S PRAYER**

When considering the Lord’s Prayer, it is necessary to put it into the larger context of the Book as a whole. The Gospel of Matthew is very much a summary of our Lord’s instruction to His disciples.<sup>11</sup> As most acknowledge, Matthew 6 is part of the larger context of Matthew 5-7 which forms what is commonly called our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount. Here are some initial observations.

**First**, the Sermon on the Mount describes life under the King. It has direct application to those who will inherit the earthly [millennial] kingdom of God. This does not mean there is no application, but it does mean we are obligated to understand the idea inside of God’s overarching *Story*.

It’s important to remember when Jesus was talking about this prayer to His disciples; they were still living under the [first] covenant – under the Law (i.e. a different chapter within the one *Story*).<sup>12</sup>

**Second**, the Sermon is a compilation of the teacher’s instruction to his disciples. It is not a continuous sermon from start to finish, but rather the continual instruction taught to His disciples as they sat under the Rabbi’s teaching.<sup>13</sup>

**Third**, the descriptions found throughout Matthew 5-7 are the characteristics of those [who] exist under the direct and immediate reign of the King.

**Fourth**, there is a sense we have misappropriated the Lord's Prayer and recite it without thinking what our Lord meant by what He said. As it relates to the idea of forgiveness, verses 14 and 15 use a first class condition construction. Such a construction assumes the truth of the statement. It might not be true, but it will be assumed true for the sake of the argument. The "if" could be understood as "since" in a first class condition. Hence, verses 14 and 15 are simply saying "since you forgive, God forgives." Such a statement is true of all believers.

**Fifth**, Luke's passage brings this out even better when it says, "And forgive us our sins; *for we also forgive every one that is indebted to us*" (Luke 11:4). All true believers forgive, because they have been forgiven. The principle illustrated in Matthew 6:14, 15 is that those who have experienced God's forgiveness forgive (Eph. 4:32). Thus, we forgive the same way God forgives: unconditionally and without merit.

**Finally**, the same is true with reference to Mark 11:24-26. Colossians 3:13 gives us the "grace" twist to such a principle as found in Mark 11:24-26. Mark 11 makes it conditional, whereas Colossians exhorts us to forgive even as we have been forgiven. The principle of forgiving without limit or condition is clearly stated by our Lord when discussing the issue with Peter in Matthew 18:21 and 22. How often do we forgive others? Only as often as he asks or is truly repentant and sorrowful? NO, we forgive without limit.



In many ways the Lord's Prayer is a statement of faith. Verse 12 affirms God is a pardoning God; it is an affirmation of what God does and who God is. Just as God forgive; so also we forgive. If you have been forgiven, you then forgive. **An unforgiving person is an unforgiven person.** Nowhere in the New Testament, after the crucifixion, is the concept of asking God's forgiveness even mentioned. Paul flips the paradigm. The apostle Paul never broached the subject - he didn't have to. He stood firm in the fact that he was a forgiven person and that those to whom he wrote were forgiven people.<sup>14</sup>

## **1 JOHN 1:9**<sup>15</sup>

Although I attempted earlier to straighten out what is crooked, we will continue to take a look at 1 John 1:9. Perhaps without exception very few evangelical Christians are unaware of 1 John 1:9.

<sup>9</sup> "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9)

Most are able to recite the verse from memory. And many have been taught how sin breaks fellowship with God and the only way to restore such fellowship is to confess their sins in order to receive His forgiveness and thereby restore their walk/fellowship with God. Our desire has been to consider the text of Scripture in its biblical context and what drove the author to write (i.e. historical context). I am of the opinion that 1 John 1:9 has been mishandled and thus misappropriated by the church. This mishandling and misappropriation instead of liberating the people of God has minimized the gospel and enslaved God's people to

senseless introspection, anxious uncertainty and a misguided defining of the Christian life.

**First**, with any text it is necessary to find what the author's intended meaning is. Sometimes we come to a text with the wrong question. If we are asking the wrong question, then we will come up with the wrong answer. First John 1:9 is not providing the Christian with a formula for dealing with their sin/failure. As our study will show us, the context is not Christians confessing their sin to restore fellowship, but rather those who deny their sin and are unsaved without this confession of sin and Jesus as the singular Savior.

**Second**, I believe John's use of fellowship has more to do with the larger idea of God's redemptive work and the resultant body produced by that redemptive work and one's relationship to both. It is not addressing the sins of the confessor.

**Third**, I believe saving faith recognizes one's own sinfulness and the sole solution for that sinfulness in JESUS who is the INCARNATE CHRIST. This is biblical confession. Anything other than this is non-redemptive.

**Fourth**, once the believer confesses [agrees with God] JESUS as the INCARNATE CHRIST he is placed in JESUS and thus lives/walks/practices JESUS.

**Fifth**, as a consequence of being IN CHRIST His people walk, fail and agree with God concerning their sin and Jesus as their Savior. The good news in all of this is, "HE IS MY ADVOCATE WHO SATISFIES (i.e. PROPITIATES) GOD'S JUDGMENT AGAINST ME AND MY SIN."

I have written and studied extensively on 1 John partially out of the need to respond to what I understand to be the misapplication of 1 John 1:9 and what results in CONFSSIONALISM. For us to understand 1 John 1:9 we need to place the text in its historical and biblical context without necessarily accenting what I believe is a mishandling of this text.

I trust the Holy Spirit will use this study to open eyes to the beauty of God's redemptive work in the person and work of JESUS the INCARNATE CHRIST.

The paragraph containing 1 John 1:9 runs from 1:5 through 2:2. Pastor John's big idea is found in 1 John 2:1, 2.

<sup>1</sup> "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; <sup>2</sup> and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world" (1 John 2:1, 2).

Pastor John is writing to encourage his churches. He is speaking counter to a prevailing mindset concerning sin and Calvary. Thus there are two groups of people being identified by Pastor John.

First, there is the "we" group (1:5-10).

<sup>5</sup> "This is the message **we** have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. <sup>6</sup> If **we** say that **we** have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, **we** lie and do not practice the truth; <sup>7</sup> but if **we** walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, **we** have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses **us** from all sin. <sup>8</sup> If **we** say that **we** have no sin, **we** are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in **us**. <sup>9</sup> If **we** confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive **us** our sins and to cleanse **us** from all

unrighteousness. <sup>10</sup> If **we** say that **we** have not sinned, **we** make Him a liar and His word is not in **us**" (1 John 1:5-10).

The second group are the "My little children" group (2:1, 2).

<sup>1</sup> "**My little children**, I am writing these things to **you** so that **you** may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; <sup>2</sup> and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world" (1 John 2:1, 2).

One is either in the group who do not agree with God concerning sin and Jesus or one is in the group making up those who do agree with God concerning their sin and Jesus as their Savior.

### JOHN'S THESIS (v. 5)

- As the **incarnate CHRIST** (vv. 1-4),
  - He is **still without** darkness **AT ALL** (v. 5)

### JOHN'S ASSUMPTION

- **Just as** Jesus is without darkness at all, **so also** His people.
- If Jesus is the **INCARNATE CHRIST**.
  - You cannot walk in sin (v. 6)
  - You cannot say you have no sin (v. 8)
  - You cannot say you are not sinning (v. 10)

### REMEMBER

- **IN CHRIST** is the **cause**.
- **WALKING** in the **LIGHT** is the **consequence**.
- The flow is always (and only) one way. Being **IN CHRIST** changes one's walk. One's walk cannot change being **IN CHRIST**.

- Walking (v.7), confessing (v. 9), sinning (2:1) cannot change one's relationship to God; but one's relationship to God **IN CHRIST** changes one's walking, confessing, and sinning.

### APPLICATION/PROOF (1:6-2:2)

- 6 **GNOSTICS** – the error
    - 7 **THE LOCAL CHURCH**
  - 8 **GNOSTICS** – the error
    - 9 **THE LOCAL CHURCH**
  - 10 **GNOSTICS** – the error
    - 2:1, 2 **THE LOCAL CHURCH**
- Notice why 2:1, 2 complete the “**If/Then**” structure.
  - Each falsehood is met with a direct response.
  - Notice how it becomes intimate and pastoral (“My little children”).
    - Q - “I am one of the confessors and yet I still sin, what am I to make of this?”
    - A - John answers that question in 2:1, 2.

The answer to the sin issue is Jesus as our Advocate. It is not confession of sin.

The group identified as not agreeing with God is noted by their practice and their confession. This group . . .

- 6 Walking in darkness; practice darkness.
  - 8 “**NO SIN**” - We have no personal guilt, no principle of sin.
    - 10 “**NOT SINNED**” - Perfect active indicative. This is a denial of any specific acts of sin.

Our answer in handling any text is **CONTEXT, CONTEXT and CONTEXT.**

We run into significant problems, **IF** we do not keep this text in its historical context. The sloppiness of verses 6, 8, and 10 are positions maintained by the Gnostics [i.e. the deceivers/liars]. The “attack” by Pastor John on the Gnostics is not directed at those within the local church. First John 2:1, 2 are the verses directed at those within the local church. Notice three key words: **Practice** (v. 6), **Deceive** (v. 8) and **Liar** (v. 10). The idea of **Practice** is synonyms in 1 John with walk, abide, keep and love. The **Deceivers** and **Liars** are those who **deny** Jesus as INCARNATE CHRIST (Deceiver - 1 John 1:8; 2:26; 3:7; 4:6 / Liar - 1 John 1:6, 10; 2:4, 22; 4:20; 5:10)

There are a series of parallel ideas in this paragraph contrasting the two groups. One is either in the deceiving and lying group or one is in the confessing and believing group.

The issue in 1 John is what group are you in.

- You either **confess** JESUS as the INCARNATE CHRIST  
Or
  - You **reject** such a claim.
  - Thus, you are either **lost** without JESUS  
Or
- You are **IN JESUS**.

Do you recognize who you are in light of who He is? You are a sinner in desperate need of THE SAVIOR. As believers

we are not to sin . . . But when we sin we have an ADVOCATE and His name is JESUS. JESUS is the only one who can satisfy God's justice against us.

In light of this, we should no more single out 1 John 1:9 than we would 1 John 1:7 or 1 John 2:1. Each of those elements celebrate a single truth. JESUS IS ENOUGH.

The message of our complete forgiveness in Christ is so clear. Yet invariably, after all those hours of teaching, someone raises his hand to ask, "What about 1 John 1:9?" For many believers this is the only verse they have memorized that deals with forgiveness.<sup>16</sup>

I believe that through an improper understanding of what this verse really means [1 John 1:9] we have negated the power of the cross of Jesus Christ.<sup>17</sup>

We often look at 1 John 1:9 as *the* verse for maintaining one's relationship with God, and to consider an alternative look is difficult. The desire is not to stir up controversy but to know truth. To see the magnitude of God's forgiveness and love and to understand His Word more intimately so that we might know Him more personally is the end of all Bible study. God has provided for us a salvation that is fathomless in scope.

If we constantly have to monitor our sin, we have unknowingly shifted our focus away from Him to our sin. Moreover, such a focus is wrong. We are to be looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith, not making checklists of sins committed.

Like many other passages, we have tried to make 1 John 1:9 say more than is there. The only way we can enjoy fellowship with the Father and His Son is if we are in the light. Calvary is the only way to become a child of the light.

According to vv.6-10, there is really only one condition that must be met if we are to enjoy fellowship with God: we must be born-again. If we have not come to Him with the acknowledgement of our sin and thus receiving from His gracious hand full and complete forgiveness and as a result of His enabling ministry are now walking in truth, then we are self-deceiving liars and know not the truth. We are lost.



# ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> L.E. Maxwell, *Born Crucified* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1945), 82.

<sup>2</sup> *Foundations of Biblical Counseling*, Biblical Counseling Center, 3233 N. Arlington Heights Rd., Suite 302, Arlington Heights, IL 60004, 60.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, *Fellowship With God*, Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, (Sermon No. 409 delivered on Sunday September 15, 1861); available from <http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/0409.htm>; Internet.

<sup>5</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (new ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 513.

<sup>6</sup> John Piper, *Eternal Life Has Appeared in Christ*, Desiring God Ministries, (Sermon No. 475 delivered on Sunday January 27, 1985); available from [http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/1985/475\\_Eternal\\_Life\\_Has\\_Appeared\\_in\\_Christ/](http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/1985/475_Eternal_Life_Has_Appeared_in_Christ/); Internet.

<sup>7</sup> Bob George, *Faith that Pleases God*, (Eugene: Harvest Publishers, 2001), 87

<sup>8</sup> William Ames correctly notes how, "Not only are past sins of justified persons remitted but also those to come, Num. 23:25. God sees no iniquity in Jacob or perverseness in Israel. Justification has left no place for condemnation." However, he does, incorrectly, continue with, "Yet those who are justified need daily the forgiveness of sins." William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, trans. John Dykstra Eusden ([Latin 1629] Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1968), 163, 164.

<sup>9</sup> Steve McVey, *Grace Rules*, (Eugene: Harvest House, 1998), 150.

<sup>10</sup> George, *Faith that Pleases God*, 126. In addressing 1 John 1:5-10, Pastor John Piper makes the following comment, "Some people say that a Christian should never pray for forgiveness because his sins are all forgiven in Christ. It is finished in the cross and no more forgiveness is possible. There is truth in this, but to me it smacks of artificiality. At least we should say, 'Father, I have sinned and am not worthy to be called your child. Please apply the blood of Christ to this my sin and count it among those which you forgave when he died for me on the cross.' But if that is too complex, I am sure the Father would gladly receive the words, 'Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.' From this author's perspective, John has the right idea but fails to connect the theological dots.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 6:12 and the experiences of the Psalmists are consistently used to justify the action to pray daily for the forgiveness of sins (Cf.

Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 514). Such usage of the aforementioned passages is a misuse of the text against the larger context both biblically and systematically. His treatment of daily confession and forgiveness is a typical presentation of the material. It is scripturally unsubstantiated and theologically illogically. Ibid, 514, 515.

<sup>12</sup> For a further expansion on this idea see George, *Faith that Pleases God*, 112.

<sup>13</sup> For further study on this idea see THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT, (Taken from THE DAILY STUDY BIBLE SERIES "the Gospel of MATTHEW", Volume 1, Revised Edition by William Barkley, p83 to p118) <http://www.catholic-church.org/stfrancis-cfn/beatitudes.html>

<sup>14</sup> George, *Faith that Pleases God*, 105.

<sup>15</sup> "This text is a theological conundrum: It could be treated as purpose, result, or purpose-result." Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 474.

<sup>16</sup> George, *Faith that Pleases*, 102

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 103.

# Studies in 1 John

## 6 of 11

God's *Story* restores/reverses the Fall. It is not **from work for work**. It is from **work to rest**. If nothing we do can merit God's favor **prior** to God's fullest and final redemptive act, then nothing we do can merit God's favor **after** His fullest and final redemptive act. Anything conditional in the Christian life is counter to the cross.

"Confession in 1 John," is a work made up of two sections. Part one is in response to specific questions asked concerning the topic under consideration. Part two is a treatment of 1 John 1:9 in context.

For whatever reason most Christians live in a state of perpetual bondage because of their inability to embrace a complete forgiveness from God resulting in a full fellowship with God that is merited by grace alone and maintained by grace alone. Most have tragically drawn a sharp distinction between their standing before the Father in Christ [i.e. positional justification] and the Christian life [i.e. progressive sanctification] in the world.

It is my prayer we would once more rest in a finished work where our greatest strength is our weakness and our greatest boast is His cross.

