

Teaching Series: The Glory of Righteousness

Title: Session 15 – Confession of Sins in 1 John 1:9

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Confession of Sins

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1 John 1:5–2:1 (NKJV)

⁵ This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all.

⁶ If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and don't practice the truth.

⁷ But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son **cleanses us from all sin.**

⁸ If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

⁹ **If we confess our sins**, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and **to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.**

¹⁰ If we say that we haven't sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.

¹ **My little children**, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And **if anyone sins**, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

The question we should ask ourselves about 1 John 1:9 is this: Is this verse addressing believers or unbelievers? In the context of everything we have seen so far, this passage cannot be addressed to believers in Christ because, if it refers to believers, then it undermines the whole Gospel. If all our past, present, and future sins have been forgiven, there is nothing else to forgive. ***If we became righteous at the moment of salvation, then there is no more unrighteousness to be cleansed of.*** We cannot say that we have been cleansed of all sin and that we are still being cleansed, both in the same time. When Jesus washed the feet of the disciples, He said to Peter in John 13:10:

John 13:10 (NKJV)

¹⁰ Jesus said to him, "He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you."

Based on this verse, many Christians wrongly conclude that, as born-again believers, they are completely washed and clean in a sense, but they still need to wash "their feet" by asking for forgiveness for the sins they do. Such a conclusion is inconsistent with what Jesus did on the cross, and it has nothing to do with the context of the washing of feet, which was about servanthood to each other.

Coming back to 1 John 1:9, this Scripture was written to a congregation of believers, but it was meant for

unbelievers, and we will see why. We see this kind of address in the epistle of Romans as well, which was written mainly to believers. However, we find Romans 10:9-10 addressing the unbelievers who might have been in the church among believers, and tells them how to be saved. Moreover, in our churches today, preachers usually use the expression “brothers and sisters” to address a congregation, but not all in the congregation may be true brothers and sisters. Some can be just nominal Christians while others can be unbelievers altogether. In the same way, especially the first chapter of 1 John was written to the church as a whole, but it addresses a certain context and a certain issue of the day, that was happening in the church, and that was Gnosticism.

Gnosticism comes from the Greek word “*gnosis*,” which means knowledge or insight. We know from church history that near the end of the first century, and in the early second century, proto-Gnosticism, specifically Docetism, arose within the church. Docetism was the doctrine that Jesus Christ didn’t come in the flesh, that He didn’t have a physical body, and that therefore His sufferings were only apparent. In later years, this developed into a theological system known as Gnosticism. By the middle of the second century, this philosophy blossomed into full expression and its advocates were producing their own gospels and epistles, of which the Gospel of Thomas and Gospel of Judas are some examples. John appears to have anticipated Gnosticism’s development and threat to the health of the church and he wrote 1 John to counteract its influence.

Gnosticism blended Greek dualism with Eastern mysticism. It adopted the dualistic view that only the nonmaterial, or the spiritual, was good while anything material was evil. Along with this, came Eastern mysticism’s focus on a secret spiritual knowledge reserved only for the chosen few. The Gnostics were trying to fellowship with believers in the church and that’s how their ideas and thoughts infiltrated Christianity. They were saying things like the following: “It’s great that you are a Christian, it’s great that you are acquainted with Jesus Christ, but now let me lead you into a deeper knowledge of some deep spiritual truths that will secretly unlock more meaning and purpose for you.” As I already mentioned briefly, two primary beliefs marked the Gnostics concerning Christ and Christianity and these were what John was concerned about. First, Gnostics didn’t believe that Jesus Christ came in the flesh or having a physical body. Second, they didn’t believe that sin was real at the spiritual level, so they were ultimately sin deniers or deniers of the sin nature transmitted from Adam to all people at the spirit level. Here is why they reasoned that sin was not real in the human spirit. Gnostics believed that any sort of sins or appetites, be it sexual sins or other addictions, occurred only in the physical world. However, they thought they were

living at a spiritual level, and not a physical one, because of the secret deeper knowledge they thought they possessed. As such, anything that happened in the physical realm was less important and it was even considered a fabrication of reality, an illusion, because reality happened at the spiritual level where sin didn't exist. That is why Gnostics believed Jesus didn't have a physical body. It would have been too low, too base for Jesus to be tight to a physical body, so Jesus had to be purely spiritual according to Gnostics.

Therefore, the uncharacteristic opening of the first chapter of 1 John shows clearly that the initial address was not meant for believers but for Gnostics, who didn't believe that Jesus came in the flesh. There was no greeting to believers, unlike what we find in John's second and third epistles. Instead, the apostle John opens up his first epistle with a direct address to the serious heresy of Gnostics:

1 John 1:1 (NKJV)

¹ That which was from the beginning, which **we have heard**, which **we have seen with our eyes**, which **we have looked upon**, and **our hands have handled**, concerning the Word of life.

Later in chapter 4, John mentions that anyone who does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God and has the spirit of Antichrist, again counteracting the Gnostic heresy:

1 John 4:1-3 (NKJV)

¹ Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

² By this you know the Spirit of God: **every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh** is of God,

³ and **every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh** is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.

John emphasizes that Jesus had indeed come in the flesh, because John, himself, and his fellow disciples had heard, seen, and touched Jesus. Why was it so vitally important the fact that Jesus came in the flesh? Why any spirit confessing the opposite was called the spirit of Antichrist? If Jesus hadn't had a physical body, then He wouldn't have been a real Son of Man. And if He hadn't been fully man, then He could not have identified with humans and pay the penalty of their sins, and ultimately He would not have been the Christ, the Messiah the Savior. Denying Jesus' physical body was the same thing as denying Him as Christ, as the Messiah. Then in verse 9 of chapter 1, John attacks the second heresy of Gnosticism – the sin denial – and attempts to compel the Gnostics to acknowledge and confess their sins, so that God would forgive them and cleanse them from all unrighteousness. It's only in chapter 2 of John's first epistle that we see the phrase "my little children" for the first time, implying that from this chapter onwards, the apostle John will be addressing believers.

Now, let's go through each verse of the context of 1 John 1:9 and explain it. 1 John 1:5 says that "God is light and in Him is no darkness at all." There are only two realms or kingdoms in which people can be located: in the LIGHT (the saved) or in DARKNESS (the lost). The following verse says that, "If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and don't practice the truth." The Gnostics were great at claiming that they were also saved, but in reality, they were still in the realm of darkness because of their wrong beliefs. They were lying both to themselves and others without even being aware of it, and were not living the truth. Consequently, in verse 7, John tells them, "But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin." Many Christians interpret "walking in the light" as walking "according" to the light or "up" to the light in terms of morality. However, this verse doesn't talk here about the light in terms of moral behavior and deeds, but in terms of which realm people are walking and living in, or in terms of the nature of their spirit. It's not so much about HOW they are walking, but WHERE they are walking. They cannot go IN and OUT of the light. Let's read a few passages explaining these two realms:

1 Thessalonians 5:5 (NKJV)

⁵ You are all **sons of light** and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor **of darkness**.

Colossians 1:13 (NKJV)

¹³ He **has delivered us from the power of darkness** and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love.

2 Corinthians 6:14–15 (NKJV)

¹⁴ Don't be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And **what communion has light with darkness?**

¹⁵ And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has **a believer with an unbeliever?**

Many believers think that light means knowledge and information about the Law (the moral law, or the Ten Commandments, more specifically), and that walking in light means that they have to live and walk according to the level of knowledge and revelation that they have from the Law. In other words, walking in the light to them means simply living a moral life. However, if we were to understand the meaning of LIGHT in verse 7 as HOW to live (meaning our behavior), then we, as believers, should live according to the LIGHT in the same way as God Himself lives according to the LIGHT – that is, perfectly. Are we fully living according to the light in our deeds as God lives according to the light, that is, perfect holiness? Of course not. So then, light doesn't refer to behavior, but to a nature, to a realm. Moreover, if we understand walking in the light in terms of behavior and of HOW to live, then verse 7 would read as follows: "As long as we don't sin (meaning we walk according to the light), the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin." What

does the blood of Jesus cleanse us from, if we don't walk in sin anymore already? The truth is that we, even as genuine believers, may still perform sinful deeds in our body and soul, but because of our new spirit nature, we will never walk in the realm of darkness again. Going to a McDonalds doesn't make a person into a Big Mac, as well as going to a garage doesn't make a person into a car. The blood of Jesus cleanses us of all sin the moment we enter the realm of light, as verse 7 concludes, even though we may still do sinful actions after we were cleansed. At the moment of salvation, the blood of Christ cleanses both the sin at the spirit level and all the sinful deeds done in time (past, present and future) at the soul and body level. ***Believers never experience a time, during day or night, when they are not clean from all sin.***

Sin doesn't cause the saints' fellowship with God to be broken, either. God is not waiting for you to restore your relationship with Him after you sinned, because it was never broken to begin with. We think our fellowship with the Father breaks when we commit a sin, because the whole world around us functions that way. For example, whenever spouses make mistakes and hurt each other, they don't immediately get a divorce, but those mistakes affect the fellowship between the two and the person responsible needs to ask for forgiveness for that fellowship to be restored. And we transfer this way of thinking in our relationship with God and we believe that God is like humans, waiting for our apology before He can forgive us and fellowship with us again. But God is not like humans. He took the initiative of paying for our sins through His Son's sacrifice even before we were born or ever existed. From God's point of view, we never come out of fellowship with Him. Only our mind and conscience tell us that we are out of fellowship with Him and we feel like we need to do something to rectify that. Yes, we may grieve the Holy Spirit and frustrate the grace of God, as Ephesians 4:30 shows us, but He never interrupts His fellowship with us because of this.

Let's suppose for a moment that you would come out of fellowship with God when you sinned. How would that state look like? Let's define it together. Does that mean that God is so upset with you that He will not help you with anything unless you confess your sin, even if you ask Him in prayer? Does that mean that you cannot rely on God for anything and that you are on your own until you confess your sins? No, of course not. Oh, the devil loves it when you think that way and that is actually his purpose in condemning you: to think that God is angry with you because of your sin and that you should not even dare to talk to Him or ask Him for anything. That is a completely wrong and unbiblical thinking in the New Testament. That was true only in the Old Testament. People would experience defeat and calamities when they sinned against God. But that was happening because Jesus Christ had not paid yet the penalty of their sins. For

Israelites to experience the blessings of God on a regular basis, there was a way: they had to either always obey the Law (which we know they couldn't keep all the time), or bring animal sacrifices and ask for forgiveness immediately when they sinned. That is no longer true in the New Testament thanks to the eternal sacrifice of Jesus, that forgives us once and for all.

As I mentioned before in other places, grieving the Holy Spirit is not the same thing with offending or upsetting Him. The Holy Spirit would be offended and upset if either there was no love and care for believers on His part, or there was no blood sacrifice to atone for those who believed. Grief refers to a suffering and a pain caused by love. The Holy Spirit grieves because He loves us and He suffers seeing how we destroy ourselves and allow death to manifest in our lives through sin.

The word "confess" from 1 John 1:9 is the Greek word "*Homologeō*," which means "to say the same thing as someone else, to agree with someone, or to acknowledge." Therefore, to confess our sins is to say the same thing about our sins as God does: that sin is real, but that our sins have been forgiven and washed away by the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ (Revelation 1:5). When we realize that we have sinned and that we were actually born in sin and in rebellion to God because of the adamic sin, true confession is agreeing with God's Word about His solution for sin and expressing our gratefulness to Him for the reality of our forgiveness in Christ.

Based on this verse, many Christian churches teach that those who already believed in Christ must confess their sins on a regular basis to be forgiven. They teach that believers can go in and out of fellowship with God, as mentioned before. They say believers must keep short accounts with God. The reason for short accounts is so they would not forget the sins they committed and thus, not be out of fellowship with God for an extended period of time. If this verse indeed talks about confessing sins on a regular basis, then it must refer to all sins, both KNOWN and UNKNOWN, because the verse doesn't say to confess only KNOWN sins, and there is no other verse in the Bible that would say that. Every sin needs to be recognized and confessed, otherwise based on this verse, we are still unrighteous. We cannot just pick and choose what we want to confess. We cannot confess only the sins we remember. And as we all know, it's not humanly possible to confess every sin in thought, word, or deed. Can we know and remember always every single sin and confess it, including the sins of omission? ***If forgiveness of sins depends on our regular confession of sins, then we have a serious problem to overcome, an impossible one.*** You may wonder: "What should I do though when I sin? Should I just simply ignore the sin and never say to God that I am sorry?" Not

necessarily, but I will explain more about this later.

In the two instances where we see the word “sins” in 1 John 1:9, it’s the Greek noun “*Hamartia*” that is used. Two common words are translated from Greek as “sin” in the New Testament, but have different connotations. The two words are *Hamartano* (a verb) and *Hamartia* (a noun). Both words mean literally “to miss the mark when shooting an arrow.” However, the verb *Hamartano* is used in the Bible in the sense of sinful behavior that misses the mark of holiness (“a thing we do from time to time”), while the noun *Hamartia* depicts the inward sinful condition that is off the mark and not the actions. According to well-known Bible scholar William Vine, the noun *Hamartia* indicates “a principle or source of action, an inward element producing acts, a governing principle or power.” In other words, the noun *Hamartia* refers to the sin principle and to our inherited sinful state passed down from Adam after the fall. It’s interesting and important to note that Paul uses one of these two words far more predominantly than he uses the other one. Do you know which one it is? In the entirety of his epistles, Paul uses the verb *Hamartano* only 14 times, compared to an astounding 55 uses of the noun *Hamartia*. These two words appear mostly in the book of Romans, where the ratio is even more astounding: 6 uses of the verb *Hamartano*, compared to 39 uses of the noun *Hamartia*! Most of the time, when we encounter the word “sin” in the book of Romans, Paul is not talking about sinful behavior, but about the sin condition. By using the noun form of this word, John (like Paul) was clearly not referring to our committing of individual acts of sin in time, or otherwise he would have used the verb form “*Hamartano*.” Although he used the plural of noun *Hamartia* (which would translate into sins), John was referring to the sin nature inherited from Adam at the spirit level, together with the totality of sinful actions generated by that nature at the soul and body level for all time (past, present, and future). In light of this, I believe we are now in a better position to understand that 1 John 1:9 is not talking about confessing our sins every time we sin in thought or deed. John was speaking about the need to acknowledge and confess to God that we are sinners because of Adam’s sin, and to receive the total forgiveness for all our sins through Jesus’ finished work. How often do we need to do this? Only once, at salvation. That is why 1 John 1:9 is a salvation verse that encourages sinners to acknowledge and confess their sinful state or “sinnerhood,” be born again by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and have their sinful nature from Adam replaced with a new righteous nature through Christ. To be fully convinced that this is what John had in mind, let’s take a look at three more passages from the Gospels, where the same noun *Hamartia* was used in plural form and analyze its meaning in those contexts. The first one is Matthew 1:21:

Matthew 1:21 (NKJV)

²¹ And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for **He will save His people from their sins (gr. Hamartias)**.

Surely, Jesus has not saved His people from all sinful actions and deeds in the sense that they don't commit them anymore in time after salvation, but He saved them from their sins in the sense of the nature inherited from Adam and the sinful actions that are generated from that nature in time. Luke 24:47 illustrates the same thing, in conjunction with repentance; it reflects the same meaning of state or condition:

Luke 24:47 (NKJV)

⁴⁷ and that **repentance and remission of sins (gr. Hamartias)** should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

The third passage is found in Matthew 3:5-6, where it says this:

Matthew 3:5-6 (NKJV)

⁵ Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him

⁶ and were baptized by him in the Jordan, **confessing their sins (gr. Hamartias)**.

As mentioned previously, it is safe to assume that these people coming to John the Baptist were not confessing to him their individual sins, but their sins in a cumulative sense. Now, coming back to 1 John 1:9, the heretical Gnostic doctrine was not acknowledging man's sinful state. John addressed this heresy head on in the first chapter of 1 John, and He was encouraging those affected by Gnostic thinking to confess their sinful state and receive Christ's complete forgiveness and total cleansing from all their unrighteousness, through His finished work at the cross. **Once believers become righteous at the moment of salvation, they cannot have unrighteousness to be cleansed of again.** Only unbelievers need to be cleansed from all unrighteousness.

"Then what does apostle John say about our committing of sins in time, at the soul and body level, after we have become believers?" Just two verses later, in the second chapter of the epistle, John answers this question as he begins his address to believers:

1 John 2:1 (NKJV)

¹ My little children, these things I write to you, so that **you may not sin (gr. Hamartano)**. And **if anyone sins (gr. Hamartano)**, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

This time, the words “sin” and “sins” are represented by the Greek verb *Hamartano*. John is now referring to believers’ committing of sins—their sinful thoughts and deeds. What does John say regarding this? He reminds us that, when we fail as believers, we have an Advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ. He is our Lawyer employed by the Father Himself, Who represents and defends us against all accusations of the devil. He is the best Lawyer that we could ever have and He has the best defense in our favor: His precious blood that speaks redemption for eternity! Because of our Lord Jesus and of what He has accomplished at the cross, we have forgiveness and we stand righteous before God, even when we sin. As the apostle Paul reminded the Corinthian believers, who had failed multiple times through sin, that they were still the temple of the Holy Spirit, John reminds us of who we are in Christ and of Who we have representing us at God’s right hand. Then, in verse 12 of the same chapter 2, John reinforces what he said in verse 2:

1 John 2:12 (NKJV)

¹² I write to you, little children, because ***your sins are forgiven you*** for His name’s sake.

What does he say here? He reminds spiritual children, who still feel condemned, that their sins are already forgiven them for His name’s sake, and not because of their confession.