

Why Believers Confess

1 John 1:5 - 2:2 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 do not 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 have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us. 1 John 2:1 ¶ 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. ² And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.

A number of times over the years I have heard or been asked this question, “What happens to a Christian who dies suddenly without having confessed his or her sins?” That question reveals one of the misunderstandings of why we confess our sins. There is a lot of confusion over this topic of confession. I know of some who say that every time you sin, you must ask God to save you all over again. Confession is being born again and again and again. Another man I heard of scorns confession as “The Protestant Confessional” and says it is a lack of faith if we confess our sins.

Not a lot of teaching is done on why we confess our sins. Sometimes, it is as if we've been given a new power tool, and we're not exactly sure how to use it. Oh, we can plug it in and start pressing buttons, but the chances are, we might get hurt. And in fact, that's exactly what happens when it comes to this truth about confession. All too often, people have read I John 1:9, pulled it out of its context, and made it mean things it does not mean.

As we study this passage in I John, we want to pause and answer this question: why do we confess our sins? For what reason? There are two major errors, that are pretty much opposites, but are equally devastating to the Christian life. Used wrongly, this power tool of I John 1:9 will land you in the spiritual emergency room. As we see these two errors, we'll examine our text again to see the biblical basis for and reason why we confess our sins as Christians.

Error # 1: We confess our sins, so we can sin more.

This is the idea that if it is true that we can sin and confess and sin and confess, well then, it doesn't matter what I do! I'll just sin as often as I like, confess it and claim I John 1:9.

Romans 6:1-2 What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? ² Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?

I heard of a man who professed to be a Christian, but was living in sin with his girlfriend. His reputation as an immoral man spread, while others knew he attended a church and claimed to be a born-again Christian. Finally, one believer approached him and said, “How can you do what you're doing and claim to be a Christian?”

The man replied. “I know it's wrong, but I just confess it afterwards.”

That is what is called antinomianism. It's a technical word for people who are lawless, people who believe they can live as they please. That's not very far from the teaching that suggested Mafia bosses could run drug cartels, kill their enemies, rob banks, launder money, and then go to confession, where a priest would absolve them. It's the idea that you can manipulate God, as if this confession thing is a loophole that you can keep using.

But this idea is completely foreign to this passage. Look at verse 1 of chapter 2.

1 John 2:1 My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin.

John has written what you've just read in verses 5 through 10 for the purpose of encouraging us not to sin. The idea that Christ's cleansing blood and the possibility of confessing our sins is a license to sin more is totally foreign to the Bible. The person who thinks that I John 1:9 is a ticket to unrestrained sin with the promise of eternal life, is still in darkness, and does not know God.

Titus 2:11-12 For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, ¹² teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age,

We do not confess our sins to give us license to sin more.

We confess our sins as a means of sinning less.

How so? Well, when confession is done, as we saw it in Psalm 51, it sensitises our consciences. It makes us more aware of sin, and more ready to spot it the next time we are tempted. You see, only false confession hardens us to our sin. False confession is just "Oh, I did it again, yes, Lord." But that is not a broken and contrite heart. That is not saying the same thing about the sin that God says. If you simply agree that you have sinned without saying and thinking and feeling about it as God does, you are doing no better than Pharaoh. You are doing no better than Judas. You are doing no better than Saul. That is not confession in the biblical sense, it is mere admission. If you just keep admitting you've sinned, but without calling it sinful and defiling and deserving of judgement and needing cleansing, your heart will harden, and you will become like the man who thought he could commit fornication and just confess each time.

No, says John. I write these things that you may not sin. The more you confess your sins the biblical way, the more your conscience is sprinkled clean, and becomes sensitive, lively. Your heart is that fleshy thing that responds to God's Word, not that hard thing that rejects it. Real heartfelt confession makes your heart feel like your skin does when you rip off a plaster. It's tender. It is not likely to run to that same sin again. Many Christians would find a steady victory over their sins if they had not made peace with them. Some Christians have secretly made this deal with themselves: I would rather feel a little bit guilty when I confess my sins, and still keep my sin, than to really see my sin like God does till it become too painful to keep it.

Think for a moment what would happen to our hearts if God told us that our sins are forgiven and we should never confess them again. What would happen to us? We would harden our heart, grow cold, and have no sensitivity to our sins.

Now God does tell us that our sins are forgiven. But He then tells us to keep confessing. It keeps us dependent. It keeps us walking by grace. It keeps our consciences tender.

But perhaps we would find more people battling the opposite error in our circles.

Error # 2 We confess our sins, so we can remain forgiven.

Error # 1 belongs to the antinomian, but error #2 belongs to the legalist. A legalist is someone who adds works to salvation. He or she adds some law-keeping, some legalities to free grace, by which he feels he is now guaranteed salvation: circumcision, Sabbath-keeping, baptism, speaking in tongues. There are degrees of legalism. Someone might not come out and say it, but the way they live shows that they believe God approves or disapproves of them based upon a set of laws they

have set up over the Scriptures. Whether or not he realises it, the person who does this adds confession as a means of keeping themselves saved, or at the very least, keeping themselves approved by God.

The legalist has this idea of forgiveness. He believes that God forgives us of our sins only as far as we confess them. To this way of thinking, when you first ask God for forgiveness at the point of salvation, God forgives you, but after that, it is up to you to confess every sin that happens. In other words, for the legalist, confession is a means of maintaining salvation.

Well, what does the Bible say about that?

Firstly, the Bible is very clear that God forgives us of our sins – all of them – at the point of regeneration.

What does verse 2 say?

1 John 2:2 And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.

“Propitiation” is a word which means God has been satisfied by the offering. God is angry at sin, God demands justice. Jesus Christ's sacrifice on the cross satisfied God's anger at sin. God's demands as a judge were completely satisfied in Jesus Christ. According to this verse, he is the propitiation for our sins. Question: how many of our sins is He the propitiation for?

Colossians 2:13 And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses,

Jesus Christ satisfied God's judgement on all of our sins. Notice, it is Jesus *Himself* that is the satisfaction for our sins. He did not send an angel, or arrange some other way. He Himself is the offering, even though he is also the High Priest.

Now If Jesus was going to lay down His life for us, how many of our sins did He intend to pay for? All of them. Indeed, the verse says, not our sins only, but also the sins of the whole world. Jesus Christ's offering was sufficient to pay for every sin that has ever been committed. Now that does not mean that Jesus paid every man's sin debt, because otherwise no one would go to hell. But it means there were enough merit and power and sufficiency in Christ's death to pay for the sins of the whole world. In Egypt on the night of the Passover, the lamb that was killed had enough merit to protect all the people in that house, whether it was 4, 7, 10 or 17. But the blood had to be applied. If you had killed the lamb, and not applied its blood to the doorposts, all the merit in the lamb's blood would not have applied to you. So, in the same way, Jesus Christ's death has enough merit to atone for every sin that has ever been committed. But His sacrifice must be applied to your life by faith. You must not simply admire Jesus Christ's death on the cross; you must come to Him by faith and ask Him to forgive you of your sins entirely, to be your propitiation. You must ask God to be satisfied regarding you because of Jesus. Once you have done that, how many of your sins are forgiven? All of them. If you think that confession is a means of increasing your forgiveness or keeping you saved, you are unwittingly adding works to Christ's death.

We don't confess our sins to get more forgiveness.

That idea, that somehow God forgives you of your sins only up to a point, but after that it is up to you, raises another point for the legalist to consider. How many of your sins are you aware of? If you are not aware of a large amount of them, then those sins go unconfessed. If you are a legalist, then that is real problem, because it is up to you to spot all the sin and apply the blood of Christ to

each stain you notice. But if you only grow in awareness of sin as you grow in maturity, there are vast amounts of sin we are not confessing.

But what does this passage actually teach? Who is it that applies the blood of Christ to our sins? Who is it that deals with each stain as it occurs?

The answer is in verse 1.

1 John 2:1 And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

Notice, if you sin, there is a solution. What is the solution? Is it your own works? Is it a routine you keep? Is it something you do? No. If anyone sins, we have an Advocate.

The word *advocate* is the same word translated Helper or Comforter in the gospel of John, when referring to the Holy Spirit. It literally means the one who is called alongside. The one who comes to your aid. The one who stands beside you. Who is it that does this for us? Jesus Christ the Righteous. Not some sinner who is himself disgraced, not a fallen angel, but Jesus Christ the Righteous, the glorified God-man, stands forever facing the Father. The Father is pleased with his Son, just as he is satisfied with His sacrifice.

And what do you think it is that Jesus does for us? Jesus Christ keeps applying the once-for-all sacrifice on our behalf. When does He do this? What does the text say? If any man sins. That's when He does it. He does not wait for our confession. He applies His own work on our behalf whenever we sin.

Hebrews 7:24-25 But He, because He continues forever, has an unchangeable priesthood. ²⁵ Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.

We do not confess our sins to manually and independently apply Christ's work to our sins. If that were the case, we would be in a hopeless situation.

Indeed, why did God forgive us in the first place?

1 John 2:12 I write to you, little children, Because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake.

If you have a legalistic view of confession, you think of it as a way of doing Christ's work for Him – spotting your sin, and getting more forgiveness, and keeping yourself saved. And that is a very Arminian idea of salvation. If I sin, and then die without confessing, do I go to hell? That leads to a kind of fear-based, guilt-driven Christianity, where you imagine you are only as good as your last confession. Then you drop 'out of fellowship' and have to re-attach. This leads to a kind of neurotic Christianity, where you are in and out, and in and out of fellowship. But what this passage teaches us is that it is Christ who continues to cleanse us.

1 John 1:7 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.

Our sins are completely forgiven. Jesus Christ Himself answers on our behalf all the time, applying His own cleansing work on our behalf, whether or not we know of them. So then why do we confess? We don't confess so we can sin more. We don't confess to get more forgiveness. So why do we confess?

Two answers from this passage.

- 1) Confession of sins is a sign of true salvation.
- 2) Confession of sins is how God's children please their Father

Confession of sins is a sign of true salvation.

We do not confess our sins because they are not forgiven. We confess our sins because that's what forgiven people do when they sin. Husband and wives do not renew their vows every time they fail each other. They confess their wrongs to each other precisely because they are in a permanent relationship which requires honesty, openness and taking responsibility for your actions.

The 'if' of verse 7 and 9 is not saying, "C'mon, Christians, do this and you'll be in the light, and you'll be cleansed." It is saying, if you are a Christian, you are in the light, and the blood of Jesus keeps cleansing you, and you will be confessing your sins. This is not a *condition* for cleansing, but a *characteristic* of those being cleansed. It is not a command, it is a statement. This is what the ones in the light do, and this is what God continually does for them.

We keep confessing our sins not because our cleansing and forgiveness stands in doubt, but precisely because we are not children of light who keep uncovering their sins to God, knowing that He keeps covering them with His blood.

The second reason we confess our sins is because **that is how God's children live to please their Father.**

Do you notice something about verse 1 of chapter 2? With whom do we have an advocate? With God the judge? No, with the Father. The Father is never going to judge His children as sinners again. The judicial penalty for our sins has been paid. Christ is our propitiation. Christ keeps applying that offering for us, meaning there is no wrath against us ever.

However, does that mean that God does not know when we sin? Does that mean God is never displeased with us? No, God does get displeased. He gets displeased the way a Father is displeased with a son who disobeys. There can be real anger. But it is the anger of love. God indeed gets angry with His children. God is able to be angry and delighted at the same time. We know a similar experience. When a child does something destructive to himself, physically, spiritually or otherwise, the parent's love will be very angry.

Hebrews 12:5-9 And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: "My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; ⁶ For whom the LORD loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives." ⁷ If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? ⁸ But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons. ⁹ Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live?

God gets angry with us when we sin. He is displeased. He will train us, chastise us, and get us to see the painfulness of sin. But there is a world of difference between a Supreme Court judge sentencing a serial killer to the death-penalty, and a father spanking his son for rebellion.

When we confess, we are not seeking forgiveness from judicial guilt. We are seeking forgiveness from Fatherly displeasure. We are seeking forgiveness for walking away from His embrace. We are seeking forgiveness from an accusing conscience, for breaking trust. We are returning to honesty, openness, sincerity, which are so fundamental to loving relationships.

This is illustrated by an incident in the gospel of John:

John 13:3-10 Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, ⁴ rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. ⁵ After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded. ⁶ Then He came to Simon Peter. And Peter said to Him, "Lord, are You washing my feet?" ⁷ Jesus answered and said to him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this." ⁸ Peter said to Him, "You shall never wash my feet!" Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me." ⁹ Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head!" 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."

Jesus explains the standing of a true Christian. He or she is 'bathed' that is, the penalty for their sins is paid, and they have been forgiven their sin debt. They are fully and finally reconciled to God. But as they go along, their feet pick up dirt. Their acts of knowing sin hurt the intimacy between Father and child. Wilful sin is a breaking of trust. Jesus says this is the sense in which you need to be washed.

Fellowship, the way John uses the term, is never broken. Intimacy suffers. Joy is lost. But true fellowship is what we have with Christ forever.

How quick is God to be pleased when we confess to Him? Verse 9 tells us He is not simply merciful and kind, He is faithful and just. He has promised to forgive and to keep cleansing His children. His own truthfulness is the guarantee here. If you honestly confess, His cleansing work which continues in the background regardless guarantees that the Father dismisses your sin.

We don't confess our sins so we can sin more. We don't confess our sins to get more forgiveness, to apply Christ's blood ourselves, or to maintain our salvation. We confess because Christ keeps us cleansed, and cleansed people keep bringing their sins into the light. We confess because reconciled children keep things honest with their Father and desire to please Him.

If only we could hear these words by Tozer, ringing in our ears, more often:

“The truth is that God is the most winsome of all beings and His service one of unspeakable pleasure. He is all love, and those who trust Him need never know anything but that love. He is just indeed and He will not condone sin; but through the blood of the everlasting covenant He is able to act toward us exactly as if we had never sinned. Toward the trusting sons of men His mercy will always triumph over justice...How good it would be if we could learn that God is easy to live with. He remembers our frame and knows that we are dust. He may sometimes chasten us, it is true, but even this He does with a smile, the proud, tender smile of a Father who is bursting with pleasure over an imperfect but promising son who is coming every day to look more and more like the One whose child he is.” A.W. Tozer, *The Root of the Righteous*