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

Confess Your Sins

Central Truth: God forgives every person who confesses sin.

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Topic: Sin: Confession of; Confession: Of Sin.

This week we begin a series of studies based on I John, II John, and III John. Those three epistles are rich in doctrine and devotion. Our study will be rewarding!

The writer of the three epistles was John the apostle. Religious writers following his time testify that he was the author. There are thirty-five passages which are common between the Gospel of John and the first epistle of John. The spirit of love pervades all four books. The style of writing is the same. We confidently ascribe the authorship to John, the apostle of love.

The original readers of the first epistle of John are not identified. It is not addressed to a church or a person. Terms like brethren, fathers, and little children abound, but no personal names are to be found. The epistle is to be dated between A.D. 70 and 96, but the absence of reference to any historical event makes positive dating impossible. Neither is there evidence where the writer lived at the time the epistle was written.

The key word of the first epistle of John is *know*. It is to be found some three dozen times in five chapters. Assurance is the great emphasis of the book.

Assurance begins with forgiveness. So the epistle breaks immediately into the subject of forgiveness by confession of sin. It might be considered a commentary on Proverbs 28:13, *“He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy.”*

I. CONFESS TO HAVE FELLOWSHIP (I John 1:1-7)

Fellowship means mutual sharing, friendly association, companionship. Sharing wholesome fellowship encourages the spirit and strengthens the heart.

Christian fellowship experiences its joy from two directions: fellowship with believers in Christ and fellowship with God himself. Think about that! To fellow Christians we can say, *“I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, . . . for your fellowship in the gospel”* (Philippians 1:3-5). But that fellowship is possible only because we have fellowship with God the Father through Jesus Christ His Son. Our horizontal fellowship with other people is dependent on our vertical relationship with God.

Fellowship with God and those who trust God is possible for two reasons. (1) God has come in the flesh and made himself known to us. We have *“heard, . . . seen with our eyes, . . . looked upon, and our hands have handled . . . the Word of life”* (I John 1:1) in the person of the incarnate Christ. Because we have met God and share His fellowship, we can fellowship with all those who have met Him also.

The blessing of such fellowship is spiritual joy (I John 1:4). It is not like the temporary pleasures of the world, but it remains as long as God lives.

There is one hindrance to fellowship with God and the people of God. That is sin (I John 1:5-7). To say that one fellowships with God while he is practicing sin is to lie in word and deed. God is of too pure eyes to look on evil (Habakkuk 1:3). The person who abides in Him does not practice sin (I John 3:6). So confess your sins, receive His forgiveness, and enjoy the blessings of fellowship with God and His people.

The most difficult statement one can make is to say honestly, “I was wrong; I am sorry; please forgive me.” But as difficult as those words are to say to God or man, they are essential to forgiveness and to spiritual health. God forgives sin only when it is confessed (Proverbs 28:13).

II. CONFESS TO BE HONEST (I John 1:8, 10)

Sinners make two great errors when faced with the demand to confess their sins. (1) Some say, “We have no sin which we need to confess” (as in verse 8). (2) Others say, “We never have sinned and so do not need to confess.” Both statements are grievously wrong. Notice how John deals with the first in verse 8 and with the second in verse 10 of chapter 1.

We must confess the truth of present sin if we would be honest (verse 8). Sinners make the claim, *“We have no sin.”* That is because they are pure

in their own eyes, even though they are not washed from their filthiness (Proverbs 30:12). They deceive themselves by such a statement. It indicates that the truth of God is not in them, which is a great sin in itself.

We must confess the truth of past sin. To say, "*We have not sinned*" means that we are not sinful people. It denies that the human race has a sin problem. It may view sin as a mistake or as a nonentity. The error involved in such a statement is that it makes God a liar. God has said, "*All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God*" (Romans 3:23). To deny that statement of God indicates that His Word is not in the person who denies it. It means that Jesus died in vain, for there is no sin for which He needs to atone. It means that the Bible is untrue. It means that God is in error. What a monstrous sin!

He who would deal honestly must confess that he has sinned in the past and has a sin problem which must be dealt with now. The person who denies his sin will one day stand to be judged by the very God whom he has declared to be a liar on the subject of sin. There is a witness in each person that he has sinned against God and needs God's forgiveness. It is wise to deal honestly with the sin problem by confessing and forsaking sin and receiving forgiveness from God.

III. CONFESS TO BE FORGIVEN (I John 1:7, 9)

What does it mean to confess? The English word comes from the combination of two words: *com-* means "together," and *fateri* means "to acknowledge." *Com-fateri* (to acknowledge together) is brought into English as confess. It means to admit or acknowledge faults; to own up to one's guilt.

God gives repeated calls for sinners to confess. He appeals, "*Only acknowledge thine iniquity, that thou hast transgressed against the LORD thy God*" (Jeremiah 3:13). In Hosea 14:2 the way to confess is given: "*Take with you words, and turn to the LORD: say unto him, Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously.*" God's repeated calls to confession and His clear description of how confession is to be made indicate His willingness to hear and forgive.

Is it necessary to name every sin in order to receive forgiveness for it? No. The publican in the temple said, "*God be merciful to me a sinner.*" Jesus said, "*This man went down to his house justified*" (Luke 18:13, 14). King David confessed to Nathan, "*I have sinned against the LORD.*" Nathan replied, "*The LORD also hath put away thy sin*" (II Samuel 12:13). It is the fact of sin, the personal guilt for sin, which God requires to be confessed. However, if the Holy Spirit calls a particular sin to mind, it is

appropriate to call it by name before God. That act of humility is a true sign of repentance.

Two great benefits come upon confession of sin. John states them in these words: *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”* (I John 1:9). Our part is to confess — agree with God that we have sinned. Then He does two great things: forgives and cleanses. Read I John 1:9 again.

The basic meaning of the word forgive is “to send away.” It was pictured on the ancient Day of Atonement when the priest confessed sins upon the head of a goat before it was taken far away into the wilderness and released. It bore the sins of the people on its head and carried them away from the camp. God promises to blot out the record of our transgressions and remember our sins no more (Isaiah 43:25). He promises to have mercy on the sinner and to abundantly pardon him (Isaiah 55:7). He raises the repentant sinner to new life in Christ and forgives all his trespasses (Colossians 2:13). That is what forgiveness means.

But God cleanses as well as forgives. He not only forgives sin, but He also cleanses from unrighteousness. Not only does He take away the guilt of sin and its terrible penalty, but He also cleanses the conscience from the stain which sin leaves. He promises, *“Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you”* (Ezekiel 36:25). No wonder salvation is spoken of as *“the washing of regeneration”* in Titus 3:5. No stain of sin remains when God has forgiven and cleansed.

How can one be sure that God will forgive and cleanse if he will confess his sin? First John 1:9 has two words that are the basis of assurance: “faithful” and “just.” Both are applied to God.

God is faithful. Deuteronomy 7:9 calls Him *“the LORD thy God, . . . the faithful God”* and affirms that He keeps His covenant promises for a thousand generations without wavering. He makes a promise and not one word of it fails. He is dependable, trustworthy, and true to His word. It is safe to trust Him. His promises are as certain to be as that which has already been. If you confess your sin to God, you can be certain that He will forgive and cleanse you. He is faithful.

God is just. Therefore, He will always do what is right. Zephaniah 3:5 calls Him *“the just LORD”* and says, *“He will not do iniquity: every morning doth he bring his judgment to light, he faileth not.”* If you confess your sins to God, He will be just about them. In view of what Jesus did in His death and resurrection, the right thing for God to do is to forgive you and to cleanse you. And He does! .

Confession of sin may be difficult, but it will be the most rewarding spiritual exercise you will ever perform. That is the way — the only way to be forgiven and have peace with God.

Questions for discussion

1. What do you know about the writings of the first epistle of John?
2. What is the key word to this epistle?
3. What does it mean to “confess” sin?
4. How is confession of sin related to Christian fellowship?
5. Why does sin break fellowship with God and man?
6. How would you summarize I John 1:8, 10?
7. How is confession related to forgiveness of sin?
8. What two benefits come when sin is confessed to God?
9. How does I John 1:9 give assurance that God forgives when we confess?
10. Memorize I John 1:9.