

## Q. Must we regularly confess our sins to receive God's forgiveness?

A. Many, perhaps most, preachers teach that when a Christian sins, he or she must confess that sin to receive God's forgiveness. They base this primarily on 1 John 1:9: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us the sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." But if it is true that we must always confess a sin for God to forgive us, it would seem to contradict the fact that God has already completely forgiven believers because of the finished work of Jesus Christ on the Cross. What, then, did John mean when he wrote 1 John 1:9?

### **The Common Teaching**

The common teaching is that we ought to routinely confess our sins to God to receive forgiveness. When pressed, preachers will give different reasons why this should be done. Some will say that we truly will not receive the benefit of Christ's atonement for a sin unless we confess it. For those worried about forgotten sins, these teachers usually say that God will bring these sins to our minds so that we can then confess them. But such a teaching is a blatant contradiction to the grace of salvation. It makes confession a work by which we receive justification. The Bible plainly teaches against such an interpretation: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9); "Not by works of righteousness, which we did ourselves, but according to his mercy, he saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5); "And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work" (Romans 11:6).

Other preachers, recognizing this problem, teach a variation that they believe eliminates the contradiction. They say that the sinner, upon trusting in Jesus Christ as Savior, immediately receives complete judicial forgiveness or justification from God as Judge. The sinner, now a believer, never has to ask for this again. But for the rest of his life,

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the believer must always confess his sins in order to receive God's "parental forgiveness."

For example, John MacArthur teaches that the answer to the dilemma of 1 John 1:9

is that divine forgiveness has two aspects. One is the judicial forgiveness God grants as Judge. It's the forgiveness God purchased for you by Christ's atonement for your sin. That kind of forgiveness frees you from any threat of eternal condemnation. It is the forgiveness of justification. Such pardon is immediately complete — you'll never need to seek it again.

The other is a parental forgiveness God grants as your Father. He is grieved when His children sin. The forgiveness of justification takes care of judicial guilt, but it does not nullify His fatherly displeasure over your sin. He chastens those whom He loves, for their good (Heb. 12:5-11).

"If We Confess Our Sins"

(<http://www.oneplace.com/ministries/grace-to-you/read/articles/if-we-confess-our-sins-9344.html>)

Where in the Bible is the idea of a "parental forgiveness" that does not forgive at the same time and in the same way as "judicial forgiveness"? John MacArthur seems to think it is in Hebrews 12.

Before looking at that chapter, I want to point out the implication of what John MacArthur and others are teaching. They are setting up two different standards: a standard by which God's righteousness as Judge can be violated and appeased, and a standard by which God's righteousness as parent can be violated and appeased. I say this because MacArthur says that God can forgive us as a Judge based on Christ's atonement while not forgiving us as a Parent until we confess the sin. So, according to these teachers, there are two standards, and Jesus Christ's atonement has satisfied only one of them. The other, we must satisfy with our work of confession.

If you read Hebrews 12, you will not find anything that supports the idea that we must earn God's "parental forgiveness" by confessing our sins. When the writer of Hebrews speaks of God chastening those He loves, he does not say that God chastens so that we will confess our

sin and God will parentally forgive us. This is nowhere stated as the goal of God's chastening.

This doesn't mean that there isn't a goal. There is, and the writer of Hebrews clearly states it: "All chastening seems for the present to be not joyous but grievous; yet afterward it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been exercised thereby" (Hebrews 12:11). The word "righteousness" is from the Greek word *dikaioSunē*, which can just as well be translated "justification." Contrary to those who teach that the goal of God's parental chastening is something they call God's "parental forgiveness," which they say is distinct from justification, the writer of Hebrews ties God's parental chastening to justification.

Notice, however, that he doesn't say that the chastening yields righteousness. Righteousness, or justification, comes from the finished work of Christ. The writer of Hebrews says that God's chastening yields "the *peaceful fruit* of righteousness." In other words, when we turn from behaving as saved Christians should, we begin to no longer experience the peace that comes with our justification. People often express this as losing assurance of their salvation. We don't really lose our justification or salvation, but we're no longer at peace. For our own good, God will then chasten us to turn us from the wrong way that's causing our misery, and His chastening then yields the fruit of justification, which is peace.

Returning to the original Scripture in question, 1 John 1:9, we can easily see that "parental forgiveness" as distinct from "judicial forgiveness" has no place in the verse: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us the sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." It might be argued that forgiving our sins is something a parent can do (but a judge can do so also), but cleansing us from all unrighteousness is not the work of a parent but is a plain reference to justification, something God declares as judge.

The elaborate fabrication "that divine forgiveness has two aspects"—one that "God purchased for you by Christ's atonement for your sin" and another that you must seek by confessing your sins—finds no biblical support.

So, what did John mean when he told us to confess our sins?

## **Meaning of Confess**

It will help with what I'm going to say if we first establish what "confess" means. The word "confess" in 1 John 1:9 comes from the Greek word *homologeō*. It literally translates as, "to say the same thing as someone else." It means "to agree," "to concede," "to not deny," "to admit (what one is accused of)." For example, it is the word translated "confess" in Romans 10:9: "That if you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord means that you agree with the proposition, "Jesus is Lord."

Jesus' sacrifice was once for all time. We receive the forgiveness He procured on the Cross when we confess our belief that His sacrifice paid the penalty for our sins, that He is our Savior. The confession that Jesus is our Savior logically includes the confession that we are sinners in need of a Savior. Since Christ's sacrifice a. forgives our sins that are past (Romans 3:25), and b. places us under the New Covenant under which there is no condemnation (Romans 8:1), there is never a need to do more. To believe that, even after we have put our trust in Jesus, we will continue to be under obligation to confess our sins to God for Him to forgive them (whether judicially or parentally) is a common error based on a serious misunderstanding of Scripture.

## **The Heresy John Was Addressing**

John was referencing issues that were troubling the assemblies of his time. Some were saying that they didn't need Jesus to cleanse them from sin because they didn't believe there was such a thing as committing sin. That's why John says, "The blood of Jesus Christ, his Son, cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:7b-8). He is trying to establish that we do indeed sin, and we need Jesus as our Savior. In verse 10, he says, "If we say that we haven't sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us." So, it is important to John to establish, contrary to the teaching of these heretics who were troubling the assemblies, that we sin and that God has provided a way to be cleansed from sin.

Lying between the two verses we've just seen, and obviously part of their context, is 1 John 1:9. In 1 John 1:9, John is saying that we must not deny our sinfulness but, instead, we must confess or admit to it. Instead of saying that we do not sin, we must humbly walk in the

understanding that, in and of ourselves, we are sinners to our very core. In speaking of our sin in these verses, John uses the plural "sins." Why? Because the heretics who taught that they did not sin also believed that the flesh was inherently sinful. This is why they also said that Jesus did not come in the flesh (1 John 4:2-3; 2 John 1:7). To them, for Jesus to come in the flesh would mean that He was inherently sinful. So, they said he took a form that *seemed* to be flesh, but was not.

These heretics believed that the flesh was inherently sinful, so, as they were in the flesh, they had sin. But their *actions* were not sinful. John wanted to clear this muddle up. Therefore, in 1 John 1:9, he doesn't merely say, "If we confess that we are sinful," because this might be misunderstood as being synonymous with saying, "If we say we are in the flesh." Instead, he says, "If we confess our sins." He is stressing that our actions are sinful, the very teaching that the heretics denied. He is saying, Look, despite what these troublemakers say, we do sin, but if we agree (confess) that we commit sinful actions, then God is "faithful and righteous to forgive us the sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Naturally, this fact of agreeing that we commit sinful actions and that God forgives our sins is something we keep agreeing to the rest of our lives. But it is not the formula for a ritual of confessing each sin we have committed each day before God will forgive us.

Once we have trusted in Jesus as our Savior, God forgives, removes, and forgets our sins—past, present, and future. Psalm 103:12 tells us, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us." Quoting Jeremiah's prophecy of the New Covenant, Hebrews 8:12 says, "For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness. I will remember their sins and lawless deeds no more" (see also Jeremiah 31:34; Hebrews 10:16-17). Thus, once God has forgiven, removed, and forgotten our sins, why would we ever remind Him?

Only a little later in this letter, John says, "Whoever is born of God doesn't commit sin, because his seed remains in him; and he can't sin, because he is born of God" (1 John 3:9). In 1 John 1, John was emphasizing our human perspective. We should admit that we are sinners. But here, John is writing of the way God sees us. He's pointing out that God sees us as cleansed from our sins and justified and with the righteousness of Christ imputed to us.

In 1 John 5:18, John tells us, "We know that whoever is born of God doesn't sin, but he who was born of God keeps himself, and the evil one doesn't touch him." On the one hand, we mustn't think that we are without sin, else we would have no need of a Savior (1 John 1:7-10). This would be arrogance and a denial of the work of Christ. On the other hand, we must also not think that we are still in our sins or that our forgiveness depends on our continuously confessing them, as this would also be a denial of the work of Christ. Now that we have believed and God has forgiven us, we should rest in the knowledge that, to God, we are without sin—past, present, and future—and, thus, do not sin. That's why John can say that the evil one can't touch the born again believer. The evil one is Satan the devil, the accuser. But he cannot accuse us when our sins are so forgiven, gone, and forgotten that, to God, we don't sin.

On a personal level, we see our flaws, and we most certainly should have sorrow for them. We should not want to repeat our mistake, but if we rely on our human resources, we probably will stumble again. So we look to God for the grace to become more like Jesus (Ephesians 4:15).

### **Confess to One Another**

Before ending, I want to very briefly address a Scripture that appears to be saying that we must always confess our sins to one another: "Confess your offenses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The insistent prayer of a righteous person is powerfully effective" (James 5:16). James does not say that the goal of the confession in this verse is God's forgiveness. If you read the verses around this one, you will see that James is talking mostly about our relationships with our brethren. Getting along with our brethren is also his topic in this verse. All James is saying is that if we sin against or offend someone, we should go to him or her and confess it. We should also have the well-being of each other in mind and pray for one another. The goal of both of these things, confessing offenses and praying for one another, is being "healed." I don't think this refers to physical healing but to relational healing as this fits the context. Patch things up with each other and pray for one another and the rift between you will be healed (see Colossians 3:12-13 and Ephesians 4:32). This is a private matter between the parties involved. James is not at all saying that we should stand up in church and publicly confess our sins to each other.

## **No Penance**

The Bible teaches that God, both as our Judge and our Father, forgives our sins because of the atonement of Christ once and for all time. Paul wrote, "Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whom the Lord will by no means charge with sin" (Romans 4:7-8). Does Paul mean that the Lord "will by no means charge" us with sin even if we don't daily confess it? Yes. Why? Because that sin—that brand new, fresh sin—is already covered by the blood of Christ. We must be careful not to set up a Protestant form of "penance" by thinking that our forgiveness depends on regularly confessing our sins. We must not lose sight of the fact that, as believers in Christ, our sins—all of them—are gone.

**Peter Ditzel**