

THAT YOU MAY KNOW: A STUDY OF FIRST JOHN

LESSON 2: “Assurance and the Confession of Sin”

TEXT: 1 John 1:5–10

One of the great classic works of Christian literature is Augustine’s *Confessions*. Written AD 397–401, Augustine’s autobiography details his search for contentment and relief from the burden of his guilt—a search that culminates in his conversion to Christianity.

One of the most vivid accounts in his testimony is his description of his sinfulness before his conversion. In Book 2.4 of his *Confessions* Augustine writes,

Theft is punished by thy law, O Lord, and by the law written in men’s hearts, which not even ingrained wickedness can erase. For what thief will tolerate another thief stealing from him? Even a rich thief will not tolerate a poor thief who is driven to theft by want. Yet I had a desire to commit robbery, and did so, compelled to it by neither hunger nor poverty, but through a contempt for well-doing and a strong impulse to iniquity. For I pilfered something which I already had in sufficient measure, and of much better quality. I did not desire to enjoy what I stole, but only the theft and the sin itself. There was a pear tree close to our own vineyard, heavily laden with fruit, which was not tempting either for its color or for its flavor.

Late one night—having prolonged our games in the streets until then, as our bad habit was—a group of young scoundrels, and I among them, went to shake and rob this tree. We carried off a huge load of pears, not to eat ourselves, but to dump out to the hogs, after barely tasting some of them ourselves. Doing this pleased us all the more because it was forbidden. Such was my heart, O God, such was my heart—which thou didst pity even in that bottomless pit. Behold, now let my heart confess to thee what it was seeking there, when I was being gratuitously wanton, having no inducement to evil but the evil itself. It was foul, and I loved it. I loved my own undoing. I loved my error—not that for which I erred but the error itself. A depraved soul, falling away from security in thee to destruction in itself, seeking nothing from the shameful deed but shame itself. —Augustine,

Augustine’s words resonate with each of us. We have all felt the same impulses he described as he reached for the pears. Indeed, *sin is foul*, but in the act, *we love it*. The greatest question we ever face is, *how can we be healed from this evil and all its consequences?*

1 John 1:5–10 – “Assurance and the Confession of Sin”

Immediately after his prologue (1:1–4), the apostle John introduces a primary theme of his letter—the **perfect righteousness of God set against the reality of human sinfulness (1:5–10)**. But John’s concern here is not necessarily about resolving the enmity between God and *lost* sinners; John dealt with that fundamental issue in his Gospel (see the Gospel of John, esp. 3:16–18; 20:30–31). Instead, here in 1 John, **John’s concern is about resolving broken fellowship between God and saved sinners**. The reality is that those who have believed in Jesus Christ and had their sins propitiated (1 John 2:2) will still commit sin until they reach final glory (3:2). These acts of sin will harm the Christian’s daily fellowship with God and erode the assurance of his salvation. But there is a remedy: **true confession**. John wants his readers to know that through the right kind of confession, the joy of salvation is restored. Conversely, the absence of such confession suggests that salvation was never possessed in the first place. John writes,

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. If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; 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. If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us.

The passage is comprised of two literary components: (1) an *assertion* about the character of God (v. 5); and (2) the *application* of this assertion to two kinds of responses to the reality of sin by those who profess to know God (vv. 6–10). In this second component of the text, these two kinds of responses are also contrasted with

each other: (1) the one ignores or denies sin, proving that such professors do not truly know God (vv. 6, 8, 10); and (2) the other recognizes sin for what it really is, responds appropriately, and receives restoration to fellowship (vv. 7, 9). This second response belongs to the one who should rest assured in his salvation.

I. The Cause of True Confession (1:5)

John begins with a keynote affirmation: **“This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you.”** Having just emphasized the historical veracity of the incarnation of Jesus Christ in 1:1–4, John now proceeds to convey an important emphasis of this Incarnate One’s teaching: **“God is Light.”**

The language of this declaration is quite unique. It parallels two other assertions that John makes about the character of God elsewhere in his writings: “God is spirit” (John 4:24), and “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16). Taken together, these assertions crystalize in simple yet profound language the nature of God.

What does John imply when he asserts here that **“God is Light”**? There are three possibilities. Elsewhere in Scripture, the analogy of “light” with reference to God refers to His “glory” (e.g., 1 Tim 6:16; Rev 21:23). The analogy of “light” was also used to refer to God as a God who “reveals” (e.g., Psalm 36:9; Prov 6:23; John 1:9). But a third option is best: **“light” refers to God’s moral perfection.** John asserts here that God is *perfectly pure*.

This conclusion is supported by the overall context of vv. 5–10, but particularly by the denial that immediately follows: **“and in Him there is no darkness at all.”** As the antithesis of “light,” “darkness” here refers to *moral impurity*. By this added denial, John is speaking forcefully. In fact, the language of this denial is in its own right emphatic. It can be translated as “and darkness in Him there is not, none.” There is not even the smallest trace.

So why does John begin the main section of his letter about the assurance of fellowship with God with an affirmation and denial about the character of God? For one thing, this was crucial considering the context in which he was writing. False teaching—either in the form of early Gnosticism or Docetism—was directly contradicting biblical teaching on the character of God. False teachers were seeking to corrupt the thinking of the Christians of John’s time and draw them into unbiblical behavior and associations. John intends to provide his readers with the antidote—an essential reaffirmation of God’s character.

But there is more. As John begins writing this treatise on the assurance of salvation, he starts his reasoning at *the necessary starting point*. If we are to enjoy genuine assurance, we must understand God and His relation to sin. In other words, ***theology must come before introspection—the study of God before the study of self and even before the study of sin.*** John’s approach reminds us that many wrong ideas about assurance spring from wrong ideas about sin, which in turn have their roots in wrong ideas about God. The 19th century American theologian William Plumer explains this well:

We never see sin aright until we see it as against God. . . . All sin is against God in this sense: that it is His law that is broken, His authority that is despised, His government that is set at naught. . . . Pharaoh and Balaam, Saul and Judas each said, “I have sinned”; but the returning prodigal said, “I have sinned against heaven and before Thee”; and David said, “Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned.”

II. The Contrast of True Confession (1:6, 8, 10)

Having established the standard of comparison in v. 5, John then describes three “confessions” (or better, three “anti-confessions”) that are each inconsistent with the truth (vv. 6, 8, 10). These “confessions” are all indicative of those who have no right to claim fellowship with God and His people, nor assurance of life in Him.

It is important to note that each of these confessions begin with **“If we say.”** The formula suggests that John is referring to the claims made by the false teachers of his day. But wording these confessions in this way also allows John to provide timeless truths that apply to other contexts. The content of each of these confessions is general, allowing for broad application, and the denunciation he provides in response to each one is universal in application. These three “anti-confessions” can be summarized as follows:

- 1) **A confession that sin doesn't matter (v. 6).** This first confession explicitly claims to have eternal life: **"We have fellowship with Him."** The term "fellowship" (used also in vv. 3 and 7) is the claim to possess "shared life" and "mutual interests." It is a claim to *salvation*. But the inconsistency comes in the description that follows: **"yet walk in the darkness."** John used the verb "walk" to describe a lifestyle, with the sphere of "darkness" being the very antithesis to the moral purity represented by "light" of God in v. 5. What is John's assessment of such a confession? **"We lie and do not practice the truth."** In other words, the confession is utter hypocrisy. It is a claim that is refuted by one's life.

In response, Robert Yarbrough writes, "John puts his finger on perhaps the oldest syndrome of human fallenness in all of Scripture, and certainly one of the grimmest: claiming spiritual or moral high ground when from God's viewpoint we languish in some pit" (1–3 *John*, 55). This is the professor who claims to possess eternal life, while simultaneously loving and living in the foulness of sin which Augustine described in his *Confessions*. This is the confession of the one who talks big and boldly about his status as a "Christian," utterly ambivalent to the contrary message proclaimed by his life. Such a professor simply does not care about the presence and practice of sin in his life. To him, *sin doesn't matter*.

- 2) **A confession that sin no longer exists (v. 8).** This second confession boldly claims that one has arrived at sinless perfection: **"We have no sin."** Although sin might have been a problem earlier in life, this professor believes he has arrived at a level of spirituality wherein sin has been eradicated and the world's defilement is no longer a threat. Such a claim was consistent with the heresies circulating in John's day but is not unheard of in our day either. In fact, it may not even be something explicitly claimed. Such a confession can be more of a subtle conviction—never stated publicly but assumed in one's practice.

How does John assess such a claim? He responds with emphatic language: **"We are deceiving ourselves."** Such a confession is the product of self-deception. The professor has intentionally blinded himself, and he remains fully culpable before God. To claim sinless perfection automatically means **"the truth is not in us."** John's assessment here is even stronger than in v. 6. In reality, claiming sinless perfection means that what is in us are "fictions, fables, myths, self-made fancies" (R. C. H. Lenski).

- 3) **A confession that sin hasn't been committed (v. 10).** This third and final confession is like the second one but emphasizes freedom from sin in a more absolute sense: **"We have not sinned."** The language suggests that the one who makes this confession believes that he *has never sinned at all*. Perhaps John has in mind those who believe that they were never in any need of salvation to begin with. It is the climax of John's three "anti-confessions."

John's denunciation of this confession is emphatic: **"We make Him a liar."** The first false confession was guilty of *lying to others* (v. 6). The second was guilty of *lying to self* (v. 8). This third one is guilty of *making God a liar* (v. 10). God has declared that all men "have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23; see also Gen 8:21; 1 Kings 8:46; Job 4:17; 9:2; 14:4; 25:4–6; Psalm 14:1–3; Prov 20:9; Eccl 7:20; Rom 5:12; etc.). Consequently, anyone who makes the claim that *he has not sinned* cannot be considered a Christian, for as John states, **"His [God's] word is not in us"** (see James 1:21; 1 Peter 1:23).

III. The Character of True Confession (1:7, 9)

In contrast to these false confessions, John also describes what *true confession* looks and sounds like in response to the moral perfection of God and the reality of our sin.

- 1) **A confession that turns to the light (v. 7).** In contrast to the confession that sin doesn't matter (v. 6), John describes what a real confession *looks like* in practical life. The clause **"If we walk in the light"** describes this confessor as pursuing a lifestyle that does not flee from God's revealing and convicting light (see v. 5) but turns to it. This true confessor seeks the *truth* and *transparency* that are found in the light of God's moral perfection. Doing so necessarily means turning *away from* the transgression that left the stain in the first place. As **Proverbs 28:13** states, **"He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion."**

As a result, John states that **“We have fellowship with one another.”** Why doesn’t he say, “with God?” That is assumed. John affirms here that sin has *social*—not just *individual*—implications. Sin wreaks havoc on relationships. But the one who turns from his darkness to the sterilizing light of God’s holiness will find many practical benefits. He will naturally be brought back into “shared life” with God’s people.

But how is this possible? John identifies the cleansing agent: **“The blood of Jesus.”** John’s language symbolizes the atonement Jesus achieved through His death on the cross. This atonement not only has paid the penalty for our sins “once and for all” (Heb 9:12, 28; 10:10; 1 John 2:1–2) but is sufficient for the stain of sins committed *after conversion*. John states that Jesus’ atonement **“cleanses us”**—a description that refers to ongoing *purification* simultaneous with the ongoing *walking* in the light (v. 7a). Amazingly, such cleansing is **“from all sin”**. The power of the once-for-all sacrifice of the Savior is sufficient to deal with every single sin of His people—both for salvation, and to restore from momentary broken fellowship.

- 2) **A confession that acknowledges sin accurately (v. 9).** When John says, **“we confess,”** he is referring to the act of “saying the same thing.” In other words, “to confess” in the biblical sense is to describe one’s sins—note the plural, **“sins,”** referring to their plurality and diversity—in the terms that God uses. Biblical confession refuses to blur the lines, minimize, or downplay. It is “to acknowledge a fact as it is in reality, according to God’s definition.” Biblical confession is always characterized by this readiness to label one’s sin according to God’s terms (for example, see David’s confessions in Psalm 51:6 and 32:3–5).

In response to true confession, John adds that God **“is faithful and righteous.”** God is not *only* “Light” (v. 5); He is also “faithful” (committed and able to keep His promises) and “righteous” (morally perfect in keeping those promises). What are His promises? **“To forgive us our sins,”** that is, to “release from moral obligation or consequence” of our *many* and *diverse* transgressions. And it is **“to cleanse us from all unrighteousness,”** that is, to “cleanse us” (same verb as in v. 7) from the stain of our sinfulness.

This raises the all-important question: How can a perfectly righteous God do this? The answer was already stated back in v. 7: **“the blood of Jesus His Son.”** God is perfectly faithful and righteous in forgiving the sins committed by His redeemed people because the penalty—both for ultimate salvation and for temporal restoration—has already been paid by His Son Jesus Christ.

For Discussion

1. In the effort to determine whether the assurance of salvation is appropriate in one’s life, why is it essential to study God’s character first before studying one’s own self?
2. Define the biblical term “confession”? How does this definition affect how you acknowledge sin to God?
3. Sinless perfectionism usually isn’t confessed openly. But how can this false confession be affirmed secretly in a person’s life? How is this mindset manifested in practical life?
4. Is there secret sin in your life? In light of John’s teaching in this text, what are you instructed *not to do* with this sin? What are you instructed *to do* with it instead.
5. Why do the rituals of Roman Catholicism present such an affront to the blood of Jesus Christ?
6. Pray for the others in your group, that the revealing and sterilizing light of God’s holiness would lead each of you to the right response to your sin. If there is something that needs to be confessed, do so.

For Further Study

1. **Memorize** 1 John 1:9, Psalm 32:5, and Proverbs 28:13.
2. **Read** the entire letter of 1 John in one sitting, five different times over the coming week. Take notes about the themes the apostle John emphasizes in his letter. **Read** Psalm 51 and David’s example of confession. Note the ingredients of this exemplary confession.
3. **Sing** “There Is a Fountain” (#301 in *Hymns of Grace*).

Audio, video, and handouts for this session are available at www.gracechurch.org/motw.

Next meeting: September 24, 7pm – “The Pillars of Marriage, Overview” (2025–26 mini-series)