

What About 1 John 1:9?

Day 8

from

Are We Preaching “Another” Gospel? ¹

Every Bible teacher understands how easy it is to misinterpret Scripture by lifting one verse out of its context and developing a doctrine around it. Most work diligently toward not being guilty of doing this when we prepare a teaching.

Yet, the church *has* done this with 1 John 1:9. It has become the core of our understanding of how it is we are forgiven of sin now that we are believers. We make many conclusions based on this *one* verse setting aside the clear evidence within 1 John and in the whole of the New Testament Scripture that we are forever and continually cleansed by the one-time sacrifice of the blood of Jesus. We don't need to *seek* forgiveness. We are already forgiven. Let's look at this again.

Hebrews 10:11-14 NASB

*Every priest stands daily ministering and offering **time after time** the same sacrifices, which can never **take away** sins; ¹² but He, having offered **one** sacrifice for sins for **all time**, sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³ waiting from that time onward until His enemies be made a footstool for His feet. ¹⁴ For by **one offering** He has **perfected for all time** those who are sanctified.*

Animal sacrifices offered by fallible priests were unable to “take away” sin, and they could not make the worshippers holy. That's why forgiveness under the law had to be obtained again and again. When Jesus atoned for sin, however, He atoned *one* time for *all* sin, taking away our sins—forever making us perfect in regard to sin. There is no other sacrifice for sin. *We* can do nothing to obtain forgiveness. It is already ours.

However, we ignore this information when reading 1 John 1:9. The first false assumption made is that while Jesus provided forgiveness through His blood, this forgiveness is not automatic, but must be *obtained*. The second notion is the formula itself: that if we sin, we *must* confess our sins *in order* to be forgiven and cleansed of that particular sin. Then come the conclusions based on these false assumptions: that if we *don't* confess our sins, we are *not* forgiven and that if we are not forgiven, we

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are obviously not right with God until we confess our sins; many adding that in this state we could end up in hell!

However, as my husband often points out, 1 John 1:9 must itself be interpreted by Scripture and not Scripture by 1 John 1:9.

For many years I resisted what I am about to write and with good reason. 1 John 1:9 was a sacred practice for me most of my life. I'd been taught that when I sinned, I could go to the Father and confess my sins and be not only forgiven but cleansed of all unrighteousness (in that area, I would add in my mind). In my thinking, this was a freedom I enjoyed as a believer in Jesus Christ. I could go *directly* to God and ask for forgiveness unlike *other* religions that taught one had to go to a spiritual leader in order to obtain forgiveness. I had *direct* access for forgiveness. I practiced 1 John 1:9 so many times, that I cherished this formula. It "worked" for me, so it had to be true, I thought. I found comfort in *doing* something to gain forgiveness. I saw it as *my* part in the equation. In my mind I was truly trusting in the blood of Jesus to forgive me. I didn't think that confession alone provided forgiveness. I didn't believe for one moment that I was doing any more than obeying the method I had been taught. I didn't understand, because no one ever taught me, that **I was already forgiven, and that this continual confession, even with the understanding that only by His blood could I be forgiven, was not necessary.**

What I could not see because I was blinded by the tradition I held, was that the first chapter of 1 John was written primarily as a testimony to *non-believers*. I fought this idea because 1 John 1:9 was my personal holy tradition passed down to me from all those who taught me. How could so many people be wrong? Now before going into automatic convulsions about the topic as I used to do, please hear me out.

One evening as I sat in my office I opened my Bible and, as we'd done with so many treasured topics over the years since we woke up to His grace, bowed my head and said, "Lord, I just don't get what people are saying about 1 John 1:9. If I am missing something, please show me personally." What happened next surprised me and shook me to the core! I honestly did not expect to see *anything* I had not seen previously, but there it was in plain sight. John was *witnessing* to sinners not instructing believers. Formerly, I had only been able to conclude that "we" and "us" were used to include the intended audience which I thought to be Christian. Suddenly I saw that "we" and "us" were the ones testifying to "you", those who did not yet believe.

1 John 1:1-82

That which was from the beginning (attesting to His deity), which we³ have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, (affirming that John personally could testify that Jesus, prior to and after His resurrection, had a body and was not a spirit being) concerning the Word of life—² the life was manifested, and we (those who walked with Him personally) have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you (to those of you who don't know or who still doubt) that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us (those who believe)—³ that which we (those who believe) have seen and heard (Jesus) we declare to you, (John is preaching the gospel to the lost) that you also may have fellowship with us; (those whom John is addressing this chapter did NOT have fellowship with them yet because they were not yet born again) and truly our fellowship (speaking of himself and those who were also believers with him) is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ (attesting that he and those with him were believers).⁴ And these things we write to you that your joy may be full. (Our joy is full. We know the Savior. We want you to know Him so you may have the same joy.)

Suddenly, I saw it clearly: John is addressing non-believers⁴ in Chapter One, but let us continue.

⁵ This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you (those of you who do not know the message), that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all (John is attesting to God's perfect character and holiness).⁶ If we say that we have fellowship with Him (if we say we are born again), and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth (those to whom he was speaking were walking in darkness—not saved. If someone claims to be a Christian, and is walking in darkness, that person is a liar.)⁷ But if we walk in the light as He is in the light (if we are Christians), we have fellowship with one another (only believers have fellowship with each other), and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses (is cleansing) us (believers) from all (ALL) sin.⁸ If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth

² As with all quotations from the NKJV, comments within parenthesis not found in the original text are added for clarification.

³ "We" refers to those who heard and saw and touched Jesus.

⁴ It is important to note that John does not address *believers* until chapter two unlike 2nd and 3rd John where he immediately identifies his audience as believers.

*is not in us (he is implying that some among them, the **unbelievers** whom he is addressing, were saying they had no sin).*

We know and trust that faith in the real Jesus is essential to salvation. Some have written that John is addressing *believers* who did not believe Jesus came as a human being, and yet he goes on to say later in his letter that if we do not believe that Jesus came in the flesh we are not saved. So, anyone holding this view could not be a believer.

1 John 4:1-3

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.

We also know from verse eight that the people John is addressing are not believers because the truth is not in them. It reads, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” If the truth is not in someone, that person is not a believer.

Then we read verse nine, the solution to *unredeemed* man who does not think he has sin. “If you confess your sins,” that is to say, if you “agree with God” that you have sin, “He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from *all* unrighteousness.” This describes initial salvation perfectly. We are forgiven of sin and cleansed of *all* unrighteousness, so much so that we are made the very righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21).

While belief in and confession of the risen Jesus as the Lord is what is essential to salvation, it is clear to all that redemption/salvation includes forgiveness of sin. John’s audience denied their need for forgiveness, even that they had sin. What I’m saying is that even though confessing sins formally is not a *prerequisite* for salvation (Rom. 10:9-10); the awareness that we need and receive forgiveness is certainly present since Jesus died to save us from our sins.

Since I understood this truth, I’ve read substantiating arguments about this from writers more eloquent and detailed than I, but in my opinion the strongest argument goes back to basic hermeneutic principles. **We must not use one verse to form a doctrine, but must allow the verse to be interpreted by its context and the whole of Scripture.**

So, let us consider the following very important information about the historical context. John wrote 1 John around 90 AD, long after Paul died; obviously after all of his letters were written; letters which form our understanding of the gospel. **It is of weighty significance to note that**

while Paul did correct believers about their behavior, he never once expressed in any of his letters that a believer needed to confess his sins in order to be forgiven. Instead, he always affirmed that our sins are already forgiven—all of them. If it is essential for us to confess our sins *in order* to be forgiven and cleansed, then why did Paul not include this crucial information in at least one of his letters (if not in all of them)?

How irresponsible it would have been for Paul to not mention such a crucial formula! By not doing so, he would have condemned all of his followers to having thousands of sins that were not “put under the blood”. Surely, he would have brought it up in Romans 6, that great chapter about our freedom from sin. Why didn’t he say, “You are free from sin, and you can get further forgiveness when you confess your sins”? Shouldn’t he have expressed the formula of confession leading to forgiveness and cleansing to the erring Corinthians? He didn’t discuss it because he didn’t believe it to be necessary. Paul spoke of sin as something that is *already* forgiven.

Ephesians 1:7

In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace.

Colossians 2:13-14

*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,** ¹⁴ having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.*

Paul reasons with his readers to walk worthy of what they had already been given. He reminds them that since they are forgiven of *all* trespasses and are seated with Christ, to set their minds on heavenly things not earthly. Because they already died, were hidden in Christ, and raised with Him, they should not sin. When Christ appeared, they would appear with Him in glory because of what Jesus did. Paul never taught that believers needed to confess every sin to get forgiveness because he viewed believers as already forgiven.

Ephesians 4:1

*I, **therefore,** the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called.*

Colossians 3:1-4

*If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. ² Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. ³ **For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ***

in God. ⁴ *When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.*

Then there is the proof within John's first letter. When he clearly is addressing the believers in chapter two, he affirms that they are already forgiven.

1 John 2:12

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

Then, later in his letter, he has something very different to say about a believer who sins than what we assume he is saying in 1 John 1:9. There is no formula, only a statement of fact.

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.***

This is very important to notice. John *does not say*, "If anyone sins, simply confess your sin and you will be forgiven and cleansed." He says to the *believer*, "If you sin, you have an Advocate." Our Advocate's blood is cleansing us continually from ALL sin. Read it one more time.

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 (is cleansing) us from all sin.

We have been forgiven for *all* sin. If we sin we are cleansed, not because we confess to get forgiveness, but because our Advocate, Jesus Christ, already paid the penalty for all of our sins, which at the time He died were all in the future. His blood reached across our entire lifetime and across all of history. That's how complete His sacrifice was.

Now, some will agree that according to 1 John 1:7 His blood continually cleanses us from all sin, but then insist that 1 John 1:9 teaches us that we need to seek "relational" forgiveness with God (which in no way is indicated by the context of that chapter). This comes from the conclusion based on false assumptions that I mentioned previously—the false belief that when we sin, our relationship with God is somehow strained, and for this reason, we must confess our sins in order for our relationship with God to be "restored". This idea cannot be substantiated based on the fact that "**our sins and our lawless deeds He remembers no more**". Our relationship with God is never in jeopardy.

Now of course, when we offend someone, we apologize. There is nothing wrong with expressing our regret to God for something we have thought or said or done; but not *in order* to be forgiven, and certainly not *because* our relationship with Him needs mending. God does not sit offended and brooding when we sin. On the contrary, when we sin, His grace and compassion and love superabound to us, and He begins to work all things together for our good—yes, even our mistakes!

Some of us, even understanding that we are perfectly forgiven forever, might hesitate to teach this glorious truth because we fear that the flock will run off and go on a sinning binge. Yet, this good news does not promote freedom *to* sin, rather, freedom *from* sin, so that the *opposite* of what we fear, occurs in the heart of someone who truly understands His grace. When we realize that we are *forever* forgiven of *all* sin, we do not desire to sin, instead, our hearts rise up in worship!

If you doubt that teaching perfect forever forgiveness will result in less sin than more sin, reflect on the scene of the sinful woman who washed Jesus feet with her tears and dried them with her hair in the house of Simon (Lk. 7:36-50). He was disgusted that Jesus would allow such a sinner to touch Him. So, knowing his thoughts, Jesus told him a parable about two men, one who owed much and one who owed little who were both forgiven for every debt when they were unable to pay. Jesus then asked Simon, “Who do you think loved him more?” Simon correctly answered, “The one who was forgiven more.”

Can you hear this? This woman, who was a sinner, was clearly the person who owed “much”. Jesus knew that this woman was not going to go out that door and continue in her sin because she had a clean slate to fill again with sin. The joy of knowing she was forgiven completely would cause her to love Jesus all the more and cause her to forsake sin and this person was not even born again.

When we, those who are born again, understand how greatly and completely we are forgiven, it doesn’t cause us to love less, but more! It doesn’t cause us to sin more, but rather to forsake sin.

Oh, the joy of peace with God; the clear understanding that nothing, not even sin can separate us from our Father’s love!

