

## FORGIVENESS

John A. Sproule, Th.D., 10/15/04

"If we confess our sins, He [God] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9, NKJV)

The point of this article is to concentrate on this one verse for it is so universally misunderstood by the evangelical church, esp. conservative evangelical churches. It is almost universally known and memorized by Bible-taught Christians, and yet its meaning is almost unknown to most churches, especially those who practice church discipline [a practice with which I agree, if carried out Biblically]. Much heartbreak and spiritual damage has been done by many who are zealously "Biblical" in their church pursuits, but who, in practice, almost totally ignore this marvelous passage or misunderstand its meaning.

*First*, this passage is not a salvation passage. It is not informing the reader on "how to get saved." The context makes it very clear that the issue here is *fellowship* (cf. vss. 3 and 7), not *justification*. I make this statement with great respect for I have known a few very godly N.T. scholars who do take this verse to be a salvation passage. With due respect, I join the consensus, and I disagree with those few scholars. John's purpose in writing is stated in 1:3, ". . . that you also may have *fellowship* with us; and truly our *fellowship* is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ." There is an important point here. John and those with him were separated from the addressees of this epistle by many miles. Yet, they could have fellowship with one another; but the only way they could have fellowship with one another was to have prior fellowship with the Father and the Son (cf. 1:7). And so in vss. 5-10, the issue is a believer's fellowship with the Father and Son, a believer's life as it can be marred by sin, and the only way of restoring that fellowship which is marred by sin is by "confession" of that sin to the Father.

*Second*, that brings us to the verb for "confess" in 1:9. The word is ὁμολογέω and it means (lit.) "to say the same thing," or "admit," or "declare." Most NT scholars will tell you that it has the idea of "saying the same thing" about one's sin as God would say about it. The confession of 1:9 is to be made to the Father (and the Son) and it means that the sinning Christian *agrees* with God about that sin. It is sin. It is not a "mistake," and that sin is to be abandoned! And it mars the fellowship between the Christian who has sinned and a holy God. It is only as every believer (all of whom sin daily in some way, either by commission or by omission) confess their sins daily to God that our holy God is able to maintain perpetual *fellowship* with His children. This text tells us that our heavenly Father not only *forgives* that sin which we confess, but the He "cleanses us from all unrighteousness," thus maintaining the fellowship. This is a marvelous thought . . . if we confess the sin of which God has convicted us and abandon it, God forgives all the other sins that we have committed and forgotten about. John doesn't tell us that the sin has to be a "big" sin, a "medium" sin, or a "small sin" (all of which every believer experiences in some way for all of us have "mud on our boots"); John just says "our sins." At the instant a sinning Christian confesses his/her sin to the Father and, in repentance, abandons it, that instant that believer is cleansed from all sin, and stands faultless before God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. He does not have to run to anyone else to confess, cry, or agonize to become perfectly clean and fully *forgiven* for his sin. He is fully forgiven the instant he, in repentance, "confesses" that sin to God.

It should also be stressed that this confession of 1 John 1:9 is not to be made to the church or any church group . . . if the sin is public, that may be proper and it comes later . . . but the confession of sin that is referred to in 1 John 1:9 is made to God only! That's where the forgiveness that really matters comes in. If that fully forgiven sin is of a married man in a sexual sin, he certainly is obligated to "confess" that sin to his wife, but he confesses that sin as a man ALREADY FULLY FORGIVEN BY GOD, a man who stands before his wife as divinely cleansed, whether his wife forgives him or not! He will earnestly desire to receive her forgiveness as well, but some women simply will not forgive. That does not change the man's status before his God, who has fully forgiven him. He is clean, may continue his work or ministry, unless the occurrence of this PAST, forgiven sin is spread abroad by his wife, some member of the family, or any church group or officials, and practicality (not unforgiveness!) dictates his life pursuits thereafter.

Unfortunately, the church, guided by fallible men, often with “private” interpretations, plus gossip mongers in the churches, perpetuate the failure of the man or woman, and in doing so show no evidence of the spirit and attitude of none other than our Lord Jesus Christ when a woman caught in adultery was dragged before Him ([John 8:3-11](#)). When our Lord asked that the one who was without sin cast the first stone, all of them, “convicted by their own conscience,” went out one by one. Then, one of the most beautiful scenes in all of sacred Scripture takes place, and it reflects the very heart of God.

“He [Jesus] said to her, **“Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?”** She said, “no one, Lord.” **“Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.”** (NKJV)

This is the heart of God Himself speaking. Jesus knew she had sinned. He did not say, “Well, stay away from the Temple for several months, don’t corrupt other good people by being in their company, and, then, after a while, come back and I will grant you forgiveness. Then, you might be able to live a good and happy life and the really good people will receive you back into their fellowship.” No, Jesus did not say what many church members or church groups often think or say; the One who was about to hang upon a gory, Roman cross and shed His precious blood for the vilest of sinners, *freely and fully forgave this woman and refused to condemn her.* That same God, because of who He is and what His Son has accomplished in His atoning death upon the cross, fully and freely forgives any believer who will turn from his sin, confess it to His God, believes that His God has not deceived Him in 1 John 1:9, and happily receives FULL FORGIVENESS at that instant, and walks away from that encounter fully cleansed and free from anything that would impede his fellowship with the living God! Hear me now . . . if God forgives, no one on earth, in or out of the church, has a right or a duty to condemn or to punish that forgiven saint!

One only needs to read again the account of David’s horrid sin in [2 Samuel 11-12](#). What an astonishing thing for David to write in [Psa. 51:4](#), when reflecting upon his sin of *murder* and *adultery*, “Against You [God], You only, have I sinned.” Nothing is said of either Uriah or Bathsheba or David’s wives. David remained on as king. David understood that any sin is primarily an affront against God and He is the first One to whom we are to turn in seeking forgiveness. [Psalm 51:1-4](#) finds its counterpart in [1 John 1:9](#). When David confessed his sin to God, he was forgiven *instantly*. Did his sin have *consequences*? Yes, indeed. But they were devised and imposed by an infallible God and even though He used human instrumentalities, God’s mercy, grace, and loyal love (*hesed*) remained continually upon David even during the “consequences.” Yes, sin has consequences . . . but too often they are humanly devised (with no real Biblical support) and far too many godly Christian people have been destroyed *needlessly* to satisfy someone’s “human thinking” about how to deal with a believer whom God has forgiven and fully restored.

*Third*, a problem arises when a genuinely repentant believer appeals to 1 John 1:9 and applies it. The problem lies with third parties. Since no one can actually *see* forgiveness occurring, few people will believe the penitent who believes and, in repentance, applies 1 John 1:9. One is reminded of the event recorded in [Mark 2:1-12](#), when our Lord, before He healed the paralytic, pronounced that the paralytic’s sins were forgiven. The onlooking crowd thought He was blaspheming God, since God alone can forgive sins. After all, they couldn’t *see* the sins being forgiven. So to prove that He had forgiven the man’s sins, He told the paralytic to do something that could be *seen*, “Arise, take up your bed, and walk.” Well, “seeing is believing” (someone has said), so when our Lord did this and the man arose and walked, they were all amazed and glorified God, evidently now believing that what they couldn’t *see* (the forgiveness of the man’s sins) actually had occurred also. When a forgiven sinner has applied 1 John 1:9 regarding a private sin, few will believe him because they didn’t see and don’t know that God has forgiven that person. Most think the person is “making it up” to avoid consequences. What they are also doing, unless there are very good reasons not to believe the person, is blaspheming God and His word in 1 John 1:9. God doesn’t say in that verse, “Gather a crowd, and I’ll do something spectacular so when I forgive you, everyone will know that God has indeed honored His Word.”

*Fourth*, and finally. What about “church discipline?” Should it be imposed? Yes, for any public sin by a professed believer *who insists upon continuing in sin*. One Scripture warrant for this is found in 1 Timothy 5:20, “Those [elders, from context] who are sinning [present tense, ἀμαρτάνοντας] rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest may fear.” This passage refers to Christians (prob. leaders fm context) who continue in known sin. They have not repented, nor made any appeal to 1 John 1:9. They are to be “rebuked” before all. The word “rebuke” (ἐλέγχω) is a very strong word and carries such meanings as *show someone his fault or error, show something for what it is, prove guilty, condemn, rebuke, reprove*. This passage applies to obstinate sinning Christians who continue in their sin, will not repent, and thus they must be dealt with by the church. Again, 1 John 1:9 is NOT in play here. Another instance is Paul’s admonition in 1 Corinthians 5:9-11. Again, the issue is continued, open sin with no repentance within the church. Also, again, 1 John 1:9 is not the issue here. The church is often warned in the epistles not to keep company with various categories of *unbelievers*, and, of course, 1 John 1:9 has no application.

In conclusion, I am open to instruction from any specific Biblical text where a believer is to be subjected to church discipline AFTER he/she has met the conditions of 1 John 1:9 and has received God’s full and free *forgiveness*, even though divine wisdom [not purely human wisdom] is imposing consequences. May God give us the grace and mercy to think more like our Lord Jesus Christ when a brother or a sister in the Lord falters (as we all do on occasion) and keep in mind the words of my good friend, the Apostle Paul, “Brethren, if a man [or a woman] be overtaken in *any* trespass, you who are spiritual *restore* such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted” (Gal. 6:1).

#### Questions Church Members Might Consider When Dispensing Discipline Upon a Penitent (One who has *already* received God’s forgiveness through 1 John 1:9)

1. How has this person’s life been characterized both before and after the lapse into sin? Has God’s hand obviously been upon this person in sacrificial and effective ministry for many years?
2. Is what we are doing *restoring* the person or effectively *destroying* their life and ministry?
3. Are we willing to meet often with this person to pray, go out of our way to show special kindnesses and understanding, and express our sincere love to her/him?
4. Do we regard this person trustworthy enough to be telling the truth about 1 John 1:9? Remember, if that person is not telling the truth, they must face their Lord at the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10). No one ever escapes the consequences of unconfessed and unabandoned sin.
5. Is our action designed in any way to *punish* this penitent who stands before us fully forgiven by God?
6. Do we, in any way, think of ourselves as any better than this penitent in our own lives, in the church, or in society? Do we not all have the same corrupt capability?
7. Since this person has claimed 1 John 1:9, are we requiring additional confessions before this person receives divine forgiveness?
8. How many sins has God forgiven me *today*? How do I know?
9. What Biblical text are you using to impose upon the penitent?