

How Can I Know?, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 2: Walking in the Light vs. Walking in Darkness

1 John 1:5–10

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, this passage carries some of the heaviest weight in the opening of John's letter, and it bears directly on assurance. At least four great truths meet here. First, the holiness of God, who is light with no darkness at all, and whose character sets the terms for fellowship with Him. Second, the continual, present cleansing of the blood of Christ for those who walk in the light and confess their sins, a present and ongoing cleansing rather than a one-time event with no further application. Third, the twin errors John exposes: claiming fellowship while walking in darkness, and claiming to have no sin at all. Fourth, the faithful and just God who forgives the penitent on the righteous basis of the cross.

For a study on assurance, the central pastoral task is to correct a widespread misunderstanding. Many sincere believers assume that walking in the light means walking flawlessly, and since they know they fall short, they conclude they are not truly God's. The teacher must show that walking in the light means living honestly before God, not sinlessly, and that the very light which exposes our sin is the light in which we are cleansed. The lesson must steer firmly between sinless perfectionism on one side and careless presumption on the other, locating assurance in honest confession and the continual cleansing of Christ's blood.

Beyond the doctrine, aim at the formation of an honest heart. The deepest work this passage does is to coax people out of hiding. Many believers are exhausted from managing an image, even before God, and many have lost their assurance to a perfectionism the text never taught. The heaviest doctrinal block belongs at Question 9, where both errors are named and the true ground of assurance is set out. Send students home lighter, having seen that the God who is light is also, in Christ, the God who takes their sin away.

Question 1

Student Question:

John builds everything that follows on a single declaration: "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (v. 5). What does this teach us about the character of God, and why does John make it the foundation for the whole question of fellowship and assurance?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

In Scripture, light stands for truth, purity, and holiness, and also for revelation, what God makes known. To say that God is light with no darkness at all is to say He is perfectly holy and perfectly

truthful, with no hidden shadow, no secret compromise, nothing false in Him. John says this is the message he received directly from Christ.

Notice why John puts it first. Everything that follows about fellowship, confession, and cleansing depends on who God is. Because God is light, fellowship with Him cannot coexist with a love of darkness. The character of God sets the terms. We do not get to define holiness; He is holiness, and we either come into His light or we do not.

This guards against a sentimental view of God that magnifies His love while quietly forgetting His holiness. God's love is real and will fill this passage, but it is the love of the holy God, not an indulgent overlooking of sin. The cross will display both at once: holiness that cannot wink at sin, and love that bears it away.

Help students feel that God's holiness is good news, not bad. A God with darkness in Him could not be fully trusted. Because He is utterly light, His promises are sure, His judgments are righteous, and the fellowship He offers is clean and safe. Our assurance rests on the character of a God who cannot lie.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The holiness of God: perfect purity, truth, and the absence of any moral darkness
- The character of God as the foundation and standard for fellowship with Him
- The danger of magnifying God's love while neglecting His holiness
- God's holiness as the ground of His trustworthy promises, and therefore of our assurance

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean for daily life that God is light, with no darkness at all?
- How does a right view of God's holiness change the way we approach Him?
- Why is God's holiness actually good news for the believer seeking assurance?

Question 2

Student Question:

Walking in the light means living honestly before God rather than pretending. In what area of your life are you most tempted to keep up a good appearance while hiding what is really going on? What would honesty before God look like there?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Clarify first what walking in the light does and does not mean. It does not mean sinless living, for John will say in the next breath that anyone who claims to have no sin deceives himself. It means living in the truth, refusing to pretend, letting God's light fall on our actual lives rather than on a polished image.

Most of us are practiced image-managers. We curate how we appear to others, and more dangerously how we appear to ourselves and even to God, as if He could somehow be fooled. Help students gently locate the area where the gap between appearance and reality is widest.

Honesty before God is not informing Him of something He does not know; it is agreeing with what He already sees. That agreement is the beginning of freedom. The energy we spend hiding is exhausting, and it keeps us from the very fellowship and cleansing God offers.

Encourage a concrete move from pretense to honesty: naming a specific sin plainly in prayer, ending an excuse we have been rehearsing, or bringing a struggle into the light with a trusted believer. The point is to stop performing and start walking honestly with God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Walking in the light as living in truth and honesty, not as sinless perfection
- The futility and exhaustion of hiding from a God who sees all
- Confession as agreeing with God about our sin
- Honesty before God as the doorway to fellowship and cleansing

Discussion Prompts

- Where is the gap widest between how you appear and how you actually are?
- What does it cost us, spiritually and emotionally, to keep hiding?
- What would one honest step into the light look like for you this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

John says that if we walk in the light, “we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin” (v. 7). What does this verse teach about how the blood of Christ goes on working in the life of someone who is already a Christian?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Notice the tense of the verb. John says the blood of Jesus “cleanses” us, present and continual, not merely cleansed us once and then fell silent. For the one walking in the light, there is an ongoing, moment-by-moment cleansing as we live honestly before God. This is one of the most reassuring truths in the letter.

This guards against two errors at once. It refutes the idea that a Christian, having been forgiven once, has no further need of cleansing, and it refutes the despairing idea that each new sin throws us back to square one. The blood keeps cleansing the one who keeps walking in the light.

Connect this to the believer’s ongoing life in Christ. We came into Christ and into the cleansing of His blood at our baptism, when we were buried with Him and raised to new life (Romans 6:3–

4; Acts 22:16). But the relationship did not end there. As we walk with Him, His blood continues to keep us clean, so long as we keep walking in the light and confessing our sin.

Press the assurance home. The believer does not have to live in terror that some unconfessed stumble has instantly severed him from God. As he walks honestly in the light, the cleansing is continual. This is not license to sin; it is the security that lets an honest, struggling believer rest.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The continual, present cleansing of the blood of Christ for those walking in the light
- Against the idea that a forgiven Christian has no further need of cleansing
- Against the despair that treats every stumble as a return to square one
- Entrance into Christ's cleansing in baptism and its ongoing application in the Christian walk (Romans 6:3-4; Acts 22:16)

Discussion Prompts

- Why does it matter that John says the blood "cleanses," in the present tense, rather than only "cleansed"?
- How does the promise of continual cleansing guard against both presumption and despair?
- How does this truth steady your assurance when you stumble?

Question 4

Student Question:

When the light of God exposes something in you, what is your first instinct, to run from God in shame or to run toward Him in confession? Describe how you typically respond when you become aware of sin.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question gets at a deep pattern in the human heart. Ever since Eden, the instinct of guilt has been to hide. Adam and Eve sewed fig leaves and ducked behind the trees. We do the same, withdrawing from prayer, avoiding worship, going quiet with God precisely when we most need Him.

Help students see that this instinct, though natural, is exactly backward. The light that exposes our sin is the very light in which we are cleansed. To run from God in shame is to run away from the only place where the sin can be dealt with. To run toward Him in confession is to run into the cleansing.

Distinguish shame from conviction. Conviction says, "You did wrong; come home and be cleansed." Shame says, "You are wrong, beyond help; stay away." The first is the kind voice of the Spirit drawing us back; the second is the accuser's lie that drives us off. Learning to tell them apart is freeing.

Encourage a new reflex. The goal is to train ourselves, when the light exposes something, to turn immediately toward God rather than away. Invite students to name the specific way they tend to hide, so they can interrupt the pattern the next time it begins.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The instinct of guilt to hide, traced from Eden onward (Genesis 3:8)
- The difference between shame that drives us from God and conviction that draws us to Him
- Confession as running toward the light rather than away from it
- Training a new reflex of turning to God when sin is exposed

Discussion Prompts

- What is your usual first move when you become aware of sin?
- How can you tell the difference between healthy conviction and toxic shame?
- What would it take to make confession, rather than hiding, your first instinct?

Question 5

Student Question:

John exposes a contradiction: “If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth” (v. 6). What is the difference between occasionally stumbling and habitually “walking in darkness,” and why does John treat the second as evidence of a false claim?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John draws a sharp line, but it is important to draw it where he draws it. He is not saying that a single sin proves a person has no fellowship with God; the whole passage assumes that those in the light still sin and need cleansing. He is describing a settled direction of life, a habitual walking in darkness, paired with a claim to be in fellowship with God.

The key word is “walk.” In the New Testament, to walk somewhere is to live there, to make it the steady direction of one’s life. The person John exposes is not someone who trips on the path of light but someone who has set his face the other way and yet still claims fellowship with the God of light.

This is one of John’s tests of genuine faith. A profession of fellowship with God that leaves the life comfortably settled in sin is, John says plainly, a lie. The claim and the conduct contradict each other, and the conduct tells the truth. This is sobering for anyone tempted toward careless presumption.

Yet hold the reassurance alongside the warning. The honest, struggling believer who grieves over his sin and keeps turning back to the light is not the one John is describing. The very fact

that his sin troubles him and sends him back to God is evidence that he is walking in the light, not in the darkness.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The difference between occasional stumbling and a settled direction of life in darkness
- “Walking” as the habitual direction of one’s life in New Testament language
- A profession of faith contradicted by a settled life of sin as a false claim (the test of conduct)
- Reassurance for the grieving, struggling believer who keeps turning back to the light

Discussion Prompts

- How would you describe the difference between stumbling in the light and walking in darkness?
- Why does John say that conduct, not merely profession, tells the truth about us?
- How does this test warn the presumptuous while reassuring the honest struggler?

Question 6

Student Question:

Is there a sin or area of compromise you have quietly made peace with, telling yourself it is not really a problem? What would it mean to stop calling the darkness light and bring that area honestly before God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the previous truth into the conscience. Most of us have a region we have learned to live with, a habit, an attitude, a relationship, a private indulgence, that we have quietly reclassified as acceptable so we do not have to deal with it. The light of God renames it.

Help students see that calling darkness light does not make it light; it only deepens the self-deception John warns about. The danger is not merely the sin itself but the lie we tell ourselves about it, which dulls the conscience over time.

Be pastoral and specific. The goal is not to manufacture guilt over every imperfection but to invite honesty about a genuine area of settled compromise. Often simply naming it accurately, refusing the comfortable euphemism, is the first liberating step.

Point toward the remedy, not just the diagnosis. The same God whose light exposes the area stands ready to cleanse it the moment we bring it honestly to Him. The aim is not to leave students in despair but to move them from hiding to confession to cleansing.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Self-deception that reclassifies sin as acceptable

- The hardening of conscience that comes from calling darkness light
- Naming sin honestly as the first step toward cleansing
- God's readiness to cleanse what we bring into the light

Discussion Prompts

- Is there an area you have quietly relabeled so you would not have to deal with it?
- What does ongoing self-deception do to the conscience over time?
- What would honest confession of that one area look like for you this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

John gives the great promise of the passage: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (v. 9). What does true confession involve, and what does this verse teach about why God can be trusted to forgive?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Confession in Scripture means more than a mumbled, general apology. The word means to agree with God, to say the same thing He says about our sin. It is naming the specific wrong honestly, owning it as ours, and turning from it, rather than excusing, minimizing, or blaming.

Notice the two grounds on which John says God forgives: He is "faithful and just." Faithful, because He has promised to forgive the penitent and He keeps His word. Just, because the penalty for our sin has already been paid in the blood of Christ; God is not overlooking sin but forgiving it on the righteous basis of the cross. Forgiveness is not God bending the rules; it is God honoring the price His Son paid.

This is enormous for assurance. Our forgiveness does not finally rest on the depth of our sorrow or the eloquence of our prayer, but on the faithfulness and justice of God. When we confess, He forgives, not because we have earned it, but because He has promised it and Christ has purchased it.

Underline the sweep of the promise: He cleanses us "from all unrighteousness," not some, not most, but all. For the honest, confessing believer there is no sin so dark that the blood of Christ cannot reach it. This is the answer to the anxious conscience that fears it has finally gone too far.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Confession as agreeing with God about our sin, not a vague apology
- God's faithfulness: He keeps His promise to forgive the penitent
- God's justice: forgiveness grounded in the righteous payment of Christ's blood, not in overlooking sin
- The completeness of the cleansing, from all unrighteousness

- Assurance grounded in God's character and Christ's work, not in the quality of our sorrow

Discussion Prompts

- How is biblical confession different from merely feeling bad or saying a general "sorry"?
- Why does it matter that God is both faithful and just in forgiving us?
- How does the phrase "all unrighteousness" speak to a conscience that fears it has gone too far?

Question 8

Student Question:

Confession is meant to be a regular rhythm of the Christian life, not a rare emergency measure. How healthy is your own practice of honest confession before God? What keeps you from bringing your sins to Him more readily?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the great promise of verse 9 into a habit of life. John writes "if we confess" in a way that pictures an ongoing practice, a continual keeping of short accounts with God, rather than an occasional crisis confession when guilt finally becomes unbearable.

Help students examine their actual rhythm. Some never really confess specifics, offering only a daily blanket "forgive me for all my sins" that never touches anything in particular. Others wait until guilt has piled so high that prayer feels impossible. Both patterns rob the believer of the steady cleansing God offers.

Name the common obstacles: pride that hates to admit fault, shame that fears to look, busyness that never slows down enough to reflect, and the quiet unbelief that doubts God will really forgive again. Each of these can be gently challenged with the truth of verse 9.

Encourage a practical rhythm. Many believers are helped by a brief daily review with God, honestly naming the day's sins and receiving His promised cleansing. This is not morbid introspection; it is walking in the light, keeping the relationship clear and the conscience clean.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Confession as an ongoing rhythm of the Christian life, not a rare emergency
- The weakness of only vague, general confession that names nothing specific
- Common obstacles to confession: pride, shame, busyness, and unbelief
- Keeping short accounts with God as a practice of walking in the light

Discussion Prompts

- How would you describe your current rhythm of confession before God?

- Which obstacle most often keeps you from confessing readily?
- What simple practice could help you keep shorter accounts with God?

Question 9

Student Question:

John warns twice about denying our sin: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves" (v. 8), and "If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar" (v. 10). How does this passage steer us between the error of sinless perfectionism on one side and careless presumption on the other, and where does true assurance rest?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal heart of the lesson, and it deserves the fullest treatment. John is closing off two opposite escape routes from honest dealing with sin, and assurance depends on refusing both.

The first error is sinless perfectionism, the claim, in one form or another, to "have no sin." Some hold this as a doctrine, teaching that a believer can reach a state beyond sinning. Others hold it practically, simply unwilling to admit any particular fault. John is blunt: such a person deceives himself, and the truth is not in him. To claim sinlessness is not high spirituality; it is self-deception, and it actually cuts a person off from the cleansing that only the honest receive.

The opposite error is careless presumption, the attitude that treats sin so lightly it need not be confessed or forsaken at all, as though grace made holiness optional. John has already exposed this in verse 6: to claim fellowship with God while walking in darkness is to lie. Grace is never a license to keep sinning; the same blood that cleanses us calls us out of the dark.

Between these ditches runs the narrow road of assurance. The honest believer neither claims to be sinless nor treats his sin as harmless. He walks in the light, confesses his sin, and trusts the continual cleansing of the blood of Christ. His confidence does not rest on a perfection he does not have, nor on a presumption that ignores how he lives, but on the faithful and just God who forgives the penitent. Notice that verse 10 raises the stakes to their highest: to deny our sin is finally to call God Himself a liar, since His whole gospel assumes that we are sinners in need of a Savior.

Bring it home. The most assured Christians are not those who think they have stopped sinning, nor those who have stopped caring, but those who have learned to live honestly in the light, quick to confess and quick to trust the cleansing. That is where settled assurance is found, and it is available to every believer willing to come out of hiding.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Against sinless perfectionism: the claim to have no sin is self-deception (v. 8)

- Against careless presumption: claiming fellowship while walking in darkness is a lie (v. 6)
- Denying our sin ultimately calls God a liar and rejects the premise of the gospel (v. 10)
- True assurance grounded in honest confession and the continual cleansing of Christ's blood
- Grace as power to walk out of darkness, never as license to remain in it
- The most assured believers are the most honest, not the most self-satisfied

Discussion Prompts

- What are the practical signs of sinless perfectionism and of careless presumption in real life?
- Why is the claim to have no sin actually a barrier to cleansing rather than a mark of maturity?
- How does walking honestly in the light produce a deeper assurance than either perfectionism or presumption ever could?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across this lesson on light and darkness. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these verses, and the single truth from 1 John 1:5–10 that you most need to carry into the coming week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone question gathers the lesson and turns it toward formation. The aim is a personal response, not another fact. Give students space to answer honestly, and resist the urge to fill every silence.

Listen for where each person is. Some need to be coaxed at last out of hiding, to bring one long-concealed area into the light. Others need to be freed from a perfectionism that has stolen their assurance for years. The same passage meets both needs.

Encourage something concrete and carry-able: a specific area to confess, a habit of honest daily confession to begin, or a single phrase from verse 7 or verse 9 to hold onto. Formation happens as truth is practiced, not merely admired.

Close by pointing ahead. Having established that assurance grows in the honest light of confession, the next lessons will examine John's tests of genuine faith, beginning with obedience. Reassure the class that these too are meant to deepen assurance, not erode it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personal formation as the goal of the study, not merely information
- The same passage ministering to both the hider and the perfectionist
- Assurance deepened through the practiced habit of honest confession
- Walking in the light as the foundation for the tests of faith that follow

Discussion Prompts

- What is the one truth from this lesson you most need to carry this week?
- Where is Jesus inviting you out of hiding and into the honest light?
- What practice of confession could you begin this week?