

How Can I Know?, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 5: When We Sin: Our Advocate and Confession

1 John 1:9–2:2

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, this passage carries some of the richest gospel content in the letter, and it bears directly on the assurance of the believer who sins. Three great truths meet here. First, the promise of confession: God is faithful and just to forgive and to cleanse from all unrighteousness, forgiveness grounded in His character and in the finished work of Christ. Second, Christ our Advocate, Jesus Christ the righteous, who pleads our case before the Father on the basis of His own sacrifice. Third, Christ the propitiation for the sins of the whole world, a clear witness against a limited atonement and a declaration that the gospel provision and call are universal. The teacher should let each of these speak plainly.

The pastoral task is to steer between two opposite errors, both of which destroy assurance. Sinless perfectionism claims that a believer can pass beyond the need for confession and an Advocate; John's realism in 2:1, 'if anyone does sin,' rules it out. Careless presumption treats forgiveness as permission to keep sinning; John's stated purpose, 'that you may not sin,' rules that out just as firmly. Many sincere believers in the room struggle far more with despair than with presumption, unable to believe God will keep forgiving them, especially over a recurring sin. They most need to see the present-tense advocacy of Christ and the completeness of the cleansing.

Beyond the doctrine, aim at formation. The goal is that students leave with a settled, honest confidence: quick to confess, trusting their Advocate, freed from both self-punishment and presumption. The heaviest doctrinal block belongs at Question 9, which names both errors and locates the believer's security outside himself in the finished work and ongoing advocacy of Christ. Let that question carry the weight, while the rest of the lesson presses the comfort of the Advocate gently into anxious hearts.

Question 1

Student Question:

John promises, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1:9). On what basis does God forgive, and why does John describe Him as both "faithful" and "just" in doing so?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with the two grounds John names. God forgives because He is faithful and just. Faithful, because He has promised to forgive those who confess, and He always keeps His word. Just,

because the penalty for sin has already been fully paid in the blood of Christ. God is not bending the rules or winking at sin; He is forgiving on a righteous basis.

This is profoundly reassuring. Our forgiveness does not finally hang on the intensity of our sorrow or the eloquence of our prayers. It hangs on the character of God, His faithfulness to His promise and His justice satisfied at the cross. When we confess, He forgives, because He has bound Himself to do so.

Underline the completeness of the cleansing: from “all unrighteousness.” Not most of it, not the respectable sins only, but all. For the confessing believer there is no sin so dark that the blood of Christ cannot reach and cleanse it. This is the direct answer to the conscience that fears it has finally gone too far.

Clarify that confession is the appointed means, not a meritorious work. We do not earn forgiveness by confessing; confession is simply the honest agreeing with God that opens our hands to receive what Christ has already purchased. The basis is always His work, never ours.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God’s faithfulness: He keeps His promise to forgive the penitent
- God’s justice: forgiveness grounded in the full payment of Christ’s blood, not in overlooking sin
- The completeness of cleansing, from all unrighteousness
- Confession as the appointed means of receiving forgiveness, not a work that earns it

Discussion Prompts

- Why does it matter that God is both faithful and just in forgiving us?
- How does the phrase “all unrighteousness” speak to a conscience burdened by a particular sin?
- How is confession different from trying to earn forgiveness?

Question 2

Student Question:

When you sin, what is your honest instinct, to confess and receive cleansing, or to hide, punish yourself, or try to earn your way back? Examine the pattern of your own heart after failure.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question surfaces the believer’s actual response to sin, which often differs from his stated theology. Many who fully believe in grace still instinctively withdraw, punish themselves, or attempt a stretch of extra-good behavior to feel acceptable again before they will return to God.

Help students see that self-punishment and self-justification are subtle denials of the cross. They say, in effect, that Christ's payment was not quite enough, that we must add our own suffering or our own good works to make things right. The gospel calls us instead to come empty-handed and receive.

Name the hiding instinct honestly. Like Adam in the garden, we withdraw from God precisely when we most need Him. The shame that should drive us to the Advocate instead drives us into the bushes. Recognizing this pattern is the first step to interrupting it.

Encourage a new reflex: to bring sin immediately and honestly to God, trusting the promise of verse 9 and the Advocate of 2:1. The aim is to train ourselves to run toward cleansing rather than away from it, and to let the gospel, not our guilt management, govern our response to failure.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Self-punishment and self-justification as subtle denials of the sufficiency of the cross
- The hiding instinct of shame, traced from Eden (Genesis 3:8)
- Coming empty-handed to receive grace rather than earning a way back
- Training the reflex to run to the Advocate rather than away

Discussion Prompts

- What is your honest first instinct after you sin?
- How can self-punishment actually be a way of denying the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice?
- What would it take to make confession, rather than hiding, your default response?

Question 3

Student Question:

John writes, "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin" (2:1). Why does John state this purpose, and how does it guard the promise of forgiveness from being twisted into permission to sin?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

John anticipates the very abuse his teaching might invite. Having promised cleansing for all who confess, he immediately adds that he writes "so that you may not sin." Forgiveness is never meant to make sin comfortable; it is meant to free us from sin, not to license it.

Explain the pastoral balance John strikes in a single breath. He aims at not sinning, holding up God's call to holiness, and yet he provides for the reality that we do sin, pointing to the Advocate. He neither lowers the standard nor leaves the failing believer without hope. Both truths stand together.

Address the presumptuous misreading directly. Some reason that if grace abounds when we sin, we may as well keep sinning. Paul confronts the same logic in Romans 6:1–2: “By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?” Grace is power to leave sin behind, never a permit to remain in it.

For assurance, this protects against a false security. The person who treats forgiveness as permission has misunderstood the gospel entirely. True assurance belongs to the one who, grieving his sin, aims not to sin and yet rests in the Advocate when he fails.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Forgiveness aimed at freeing us from sin, never licensing it
- John’s balance: a call not to sin alongside provision for when we do
- Against the presumption that grace permits continued sin (Romans 6:1–2)
- Grace as power to leave sin behind

Discussion Prompts

- Why does John immediately say he writes so that we may not sin?
- How does this guard the promise of forgiveness from being abused?
- What is the difference between resting in grace and presuming upon it?

Question 4

Student Question:

Many believers struggle far more with believing God will keep forgiving them than with presuming on His grace. Is there a sin you keep returning to, or a failure you cannot seem to forgive yourself for? How does the promise of an Advocate speak to that struggle?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question addresses the opposite ditch from the previous one: not presumption but despair. Many sincere believers are tormented less by carelessness than by the fear that they have exhausted God’s patience, especially with a recurring sin they cannot seem to shake.

Speak gently to the recurring-sin struggle. The promise of an Advocate is in the present tense; Jesus is continually standing for us. There is no sin counter that runs out. The same blood that cleansed the first confession cleanses the hundredth. This is not license, since we still aim not to sin, but it is real and durable hope.

Address the inability to forgive oneself. Often this is a subtle pride, an insistence on a standard for ourselves that we would never impose on another, or a refusal to accept a forgiveness we feel we have not earned. The cross says the debt is paid; to keep punishing ourselves is to argue with God’s verdict.

Point to the Advocate by name. When the accuser replays our failures, we do not answer with our own record but with His. Jesus Christ the righteous stands for us. Our confidence after failure rests on who is pleading our case, not on how well we have performed.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The present, ongoing advocacy of Christ for the believer
- No limit on God's willingness to forgive the penitent
- The subtle pride and unbelief hidden in refusing to forgive oneself
- Answering the accuser with Christ's righteousness, not our record

Discussion Prompts

- Is there a sin or failure you cannot seem to forgive yourself for?
- How does the present-tense advocacy of Jesus speak to a recurring struggle?
- Why is refusing to accept God's forgiveness sometimes a hidden form of pride?

Question 5

Student Question:

John calls Jesus our "advocate with the Father" (2:1). What does it mean that Jesus serves as our Advocate, and how does His advocacy give the believer confidence before a holy God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

An advocate is one who stands beside another to plead his case, a defender, an intercessor. John says that when we sin, we are not left alone before the bar of God's justice; Jesus Himself takes up our cause. He is, as Hebrews puts it, our great High Priest who ever lives to intercede for us (Hebrews 7:25).

Note the crucial phrase: He is "Jesus Christ the righteous." Our Advocate is qualified as no human could be. He is sinless, accepted by the Father, and He pleads not on the basis of our innocence but on the basis of His own finished sacrifice. He does not argue that we are not guilty; He presents that the penalty is already paid.

Distinguish this from the idea that we need other mediators. The New Testament knows one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5). We do not need a chain of intercessors or to earn an audience with God; we come to the Father through the Son, who is always interceding for us.

For assurance, the Advocate is everything. Our standing before God does not rest on the strength of our own defense, which would collapse, but on the One who pleads for us. As long as our Advocate stands, the believer who comes to God through Him is secure.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ as Advocate: defender and intercessor for the believer (Hebrews 7:25)
- His qualification as Jesus Christ the righteous, pleading His finished sacrifice
- The one mediator between God and men (1 Timothy 2:5), needing no others
- Assurance grounded in the One who pleads for us, not in our own defense

Discussion Prompts

- What does an advocate do, and what does it mean that Jesus is ours?
- Why does it matter that our Advocate is 'the righteous' one?
- How does Christ's advocacy steady your confidence before a holy God?

Question 6

Student Question:

Because Christ stands ready to forgive, we are freed to be ruthlessly honest about our sin rather than minimizing or excusing it. Where have you been tempted to soften, rename, or excuse a sin, and how would honest naming of it before your Advocate change things?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question connects the Advocate to honest confession. Precisely because we have a secure defender, we can afford to stop minimizing our sin. We no longer need to manage our guilt by calling it something smaller; we can name it plainly and bring it to the One who answers for it.

Expose the common habit of renaming sin: we call pride confidence, call gossip concern, call bitterness honesty, call lust curiosity. These euphemisms feel safer but keep us from the cleansing that only honesty receives. The Advocate frees us to drop the euphemisms.

Help students see the connection between security and honesty. People who feel they must defend themselves cannot afford to admit fault; people who have a perfect Advocate can. Confidence in Christ produces, rather than prevents, honest dealing with sin.

Encourage a concrete practice: take one sin currently being softened or excused, name it plainly before God in its true ugliness, and then receive the promised cleansing. The aim is honesty without despair, because the naming happens in the presence of the Advocate.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Security in Christ as the freedom to be honest about sin
- The danger of euphemisms that rename sin and block confession
- Honesty before God enabled by confidence in our Advocate
- Naming sin plainly and receiving cleansing as a practice of the secure believer

Discussion Prompts

- Where have you been softening or renaming a sin to make it easier to live with?
- How does having a secure Advocate actually free you to be more honest, not less?
- What would it look like to name that sin plainly before God this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

John says Jesus is “the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (2:2). What does it mean that Christ is the propitiation, and what does the phrase “the whole world” teach about the reach of His sacrifice?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Define the term plainly. Propitiation means a sacrifice that turns away wrath and satisfies the demands of justice. Christ, by His death, bore the penalty our sins deserved, so that God’s righteous wrath against sin is fully and justly satisfied for all who come to Him. This is the costly basis on which God can be both just and the justifier.

This anchors the whole passage. The reason God is just to forgive (1:9), and the reason our Advocate can plead effectively (2:1), is that the propitiation has been made. The Advocate is also the sacrifice; the One who pleads our case is the very One who paid our penalty.

Press the phrase “the whole world.” Christ’s sacrifice is sufficient for the sins of all humanity, not for a limited few. This is a clear scriptural witness against the idea that Christ died only for a predetermined number. The provision is universal; God desires all to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4–6) and Christ tasted death for everyone (Hebrews 2:9).

Distinguish provision from application. The sacrifice is offered for all, but its benefit is received by those who come to God through faith and obedience. The gospel call is genuinely universal, and human beings are genuinely able to respond. None are excluded by God; the invitation is open to the whole world.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Propitiation: a sacrifice that satisfies justice and turns away wrath
- The Advocate and the sacrifice are one and the same Christ
- Christ’s death sufficient for the whole world, against a limited atonement (1 Timothy 2:4–6; Hebrews 2:9)
- The universal gospel call and the genuine ability of people to respond
- The distinction between provision made for all and benefit received by faith

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that Christ is the propitiation for our sins?

- How does the phrase ‘the whole world’ speak against the idea that Christ died only for a select few?
- How does it move you that the One who pleads your case is the same One who paid your penalty?

Question 8

Student Question:

The assurance of forgiveness is meant to fuel a holy life, not a careless one. How has knowing you are forgiven actually shaped your pursuit of holiness, and where might you be tempted to let grace make you casual about sin?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question tests whether the believer has rightly received the passage. John holds two things together: he writes that we may not sin, and he assures us of forgiveness when we do. The healthy believer lets forgiveness fuel holiness; the unhealthy believer lets it excuse carelessness.

Help students see how assurance rightly fuels holiness. The one who knows he is loved and forgiven is freed from anxious self-protection and is able to pursue God out of gratitude rather than fear. Grace received deeply produces not laziness but love, the desire to please the One who has done so much.

Yet honestly name the temptation to casualness. Even sincere believers can begin to presume, treating a particular sin lightly because they know it will be forgiven. Invite students to examine whether grace has anywhere made them careless rather than grateful.

Point to the proper motive. The aim is neither fear-driven striving nor grace-abusing laziness, but grateful, love-driven obedience. The forgiven heart says with Paul, the love of Christ controls us (2 Corinthians 5:14), and pursues holiness as the natural response of gratitude.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Assurance as fuel for holiness rather than license for carelessness
- Grace producing grateful, love-driven obedience, not anxious striving
- The temptation to presume on grace and treat sin lightly
- The love of Christ as the controlling motive of the forgiven life (2 Corinthians 5:14)

Discussion Prompts

- How has knowing you are forgiven actually shaped your pursuit of holiness?
- Where might you be tempted to let grace make you casual about a particular sin?
- What is the difference between gratitude-driven obedience and fear-driven striving?

Question 9

Student Question:

This passage has been twisted in two opposite directions, toward sinless perfectionism on one side and careless presumption on the other. How does John steer between these errors, and where does he locate the believer's true security when he sins?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal heart of the lesson and deserves the fullest treatment. John's teaching on confession and the Advocate has been pulled toward two opposite errors, and assurance depends on refusing both.

The first error is sinless perfectionism, the claim that a mature believer reaches a state beyond sinning, so that confession and the Advocate become unnecessary. John has already demolished this: if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves (1:8). And notice the realism of 2:1, "if anyone does sin," John assumes believers still will. He provides an Advocate precisely because we have not arrived at sinlessness. Perfectionism actually cuts a person off from the cleansing only the honest receive.

The opposite error is careless presumption, treating forgiveness as permission to keep sinning, as though grace made holiness optional. John blocks this just as firmly: he writes so that we may not sin, and Paul thunders against the same logic in Romans 6. The grace that forgives is the grace that frees us from sin, never a license to remain in it.

Between these ditches runs the narrow road of true security. The believer neither claims he has stopped sinning nor treats his sin as harmless. When he sins, he confesses, and he rests not in his own performance but in the finished propitiation and ongoing advocacy of Jesus Christ. His security is located outside himself, in the faithful and just God who forgives and in the righteous Advocate who pleads for him.

Bring it home pastorally. This is the answer to both the proud and the despairing. To the one tempted to presume: grace is not a license, and a careless heart should not rest easy. To the one tempted to despair: the Advocate stands, the propitiation is made, and the confessing believer is genuinely, durably secure. Settled assurance lives on this narrow road, anchored not in us but in Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Against sinless perfectionism: 'if anyone does sin' assumes believers still will (1:8; 2:1)
- Against careless presumption: grace frees from sin, never licenses it (Romans 6:1-2)
- The continual cleansing of the blood and the ongoing advocacy of Christ as the believer's security
- Security located outside ourselves, in God's faithfulness and Christ's finished work
- The narrow road between perfectionism and presumption as the home of true assurance
- Assurance available to the honest, confessing, struggling believer

Discussion Prompts

- How does John rule out the idea that a believer can become sinless in this life?
- How does he rule out the idea that forgiveness is permission to keep sinning?
- Where exactly does John locate the believer's security when he sins?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across this lesson on our Advocate and confession. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these verses, and the single truth from 1 John 1:9–2:2 that you most need to carry into the coming week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers the lesson and turns it toward formation. Aim for a personal response, and give students space to reflect honestly rather than rushing to speak.

Listen for which ditch each person tends toward. Some need to hear the warning against presuming on grace; others, far more common in a sincere class, need to finally rest in the Advocate and stop punishing themselves. The same passage meets both.

Encourage something concrete: a sin to confess and release this week, a habit of self-punishment to lay down, or a phrase from verse 9 or 2:1 to hold onto when guilt accuses. Assurance grows as the promise is practiced.

Point forward. Having established what happens when we sin, the next lesson turns to the new birth and the marks of those born of God, deepening the picture of who the assured believer actually is. Reassure the class that the path continues toward grounded confidence.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personal formation as the goal of the study, not merely information
- The same passage warning the presumptuous and comforting the despairing
- Assurance grown through practicing the promise of confession and advocacy
- The Advocate and propitiation as the foundation for understanding the new birth that follows

Discussion Prompts

- What is the one truth from this lesson you most need to carry this week?
- Which do you more need to hear, the warning against presumption or the comfort of the Advocate?
- What sin or self-punishment is Jesus inviting you to release into His hands?