

How Can I Know?

Lesson 5: When We Sin: Our Advocate and Confession -- 1 John 1:9-2:2

Picture a courtroom. The charges against you are real, not trumped up. You did the things written on the page, and you know it. The evidence is solid, the law is clear, and the verdict should be obvious. Your stomach sinks as you wait. And then someone rises to stand beside you, someone with authority the court cannot ignore, and He says, in effect, "I will answer for this one. The penalty has already been paid. Let him go free." That is not a fantasy. That is what the Bible says is happening for every Christian who sins, because we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

John has been teaching us to walk in the light, to live honestly before God and confess our sins. But a tender question hangs over all of it: what happens when a Christian actually sins? Not the careless person who never cared, but the sincere believer who stumbles, who wakes up ashamed of last night, who wonders whether he has used up God's patience. Does each new failure put our salvation back in jeopardy? Does God grow weary of forgiving? John writes these very verses to answer that fear, and his answer is some of the most comforting news in all of Scripture.

He gives us two great gifts here. First, the promise of confession: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Forgiveness is not a reluctant favor God grudgingly grants; it is something He is faithful and just to give, because the price has been paid. And second, the gift of an Advocate: when we sin, we are not left to defend ourselves before a holy God. Jesus Christ Himself stands as our defender, and He is also the propitiation, the sacrifice that turns away wrath, not for our sins only but for the whole world.

Now, this glorious truth has to be held carefully, because it can be twisted in two directions. Some take it as permission: if Christ keeps forgiving, why not keep sinning? John has an answer for that, and it is firm. Others take the opposite road, sinking into despair, unable to believe God would really forgive them again. John has an answer for that too, and it is tender. This lesson walks the narrow road between presumption and despair, and shows the sincere believer where his security truly rests: not in his own performance, but in the finished work and ongoing advocacy of Jesus Christ. Read these verses slowly, and let your conscience rest.

Group Discussion: John assures believers that when we sin, "we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (2:1). When Christians sin, where do they most often turn, and how do most people instinctively try to deal with their guilt? How is having an Advocate different from those instincts?

Personal Reflection: Think about how you typically respond after you have sinned. Do you run to God in confession, trusting your Advocate, or do you hide, punish yourself, or try to make up

for it on your own? What does your response reveal about where you believe your forgiveness comes from?

Read 1 John 1:9–2:2

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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.
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?

6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Hebrews 7:24–25, Jesus always lives to make intercession for us; Romans 6:1–4, dead to sin, we cannot go on living in it; 1 Timothy 2:3–6, one mediator who gave Himself a ransom for all; Hebrews 4:14–16, drawing near with confidence to the throne of grace; Psalm 103:8–14, the Lord who is compassionate and removes our transgressions far from us.