

Teach Us to Pray, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 5: Confession and Cleansing

1 John 1:5–10; Psalm 51:1–12

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This lesson teaches the place of confession in the life of prayer, and it requires careful doctrinal handling. The central truth is that God is light, perfectly holy, and that those who would have fellowship with him must walk in the light, which means dealing honestly with sin rather than hiding it. First John 1:9 promises that God is faithful and just to forgive and cleanse those who confess, and the ground of that forgiveness is named in verse 7: the blood of Jesus. Confession does not earn forgiveness; it receives the cleansing Christ purchased. Psalm 51 supplies the model of heartfelt, specific, God-centered repentance. Make sure the class sees confession not as groveling or as a payment, but as the honest prayer by which God's children stay in close fellowship with their Father.

Guard two boundaries clearly. First, 1 John 1:9 is written to Christians. John is describing how believers, who will still sin, keep walking in the light, not how an unbeliever is first saved. We must not turn this verse into a "sinner's prayer" that saves an unsaved person apart from the gospel response Scripture lays out. When someone first comes to Christ, Scripture calls them to hear the gospel, believe in Jesus as Lord and Christ, repent, confess Christ, and be baptized into him for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3-4; Galatians 3:27). Confession in prayer is the ongoing cleansing of those already in Christ. Second, hold the line between despair and presumption. This passage rebukes both the person crushed by guilt who doubts God will forgive, and the person who, claiming to have no sin or presuming on grace, stops confessing altogether. The faithful Christian neither despairs nor presumes; he keeps short accounts with God.

The formational aim is to lead the class out of hiding. Almost everyone in the room is concealing something, minimizing something, or carrying a low-grade guilt they have never brought into the open with God. The lesson should feel less like an accusation and more like an invitation to relief, the relief David found and described in Psalm 32. Aim to make confession feel safe, ordinary, and freeing, and aim to send students home having actually confessed something specific, tasting again the joy of being clean and close to God.

Question 1

Student Question:

John says, "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all," and then calls us to "walk in the light, as he is in the light" (vv. 5-7). What does it mean that God is light, and why does walking in the light require honesty about our sin rather than pretending we have none?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with the great statement, “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.” Light here speaks of God’s holiness and truth. There are no shadows in God, no hidden corners, no duplicity. To have fellowship with such a God, we cannot live in the dark, which is to say we cannot live in pretense, deceit, and unconfessed sin.

Clarify what “walking in the light” does and does not mean. It does not mean we are sinless; verse 7 says that as we walk in the light the blood of Jesus keeps cleansing us, which assumes we still need cleansing. Walking in the light means living honestly and openly before God, bringing our sin out into the open with him rather than hiding it. It is a posture of transparency, not a claim of perfection.

Show why honesty is the hinge. Sin loves the dark; it thrives on being hidden, rationalized, and unnamed. The moment we drag it into the light of God’s presence and call it what it is, its power begins to break. Confession is simply agreeing with God about our sin, refusing to keep it in the dark.

Connect light to fellowship. The goal of all this is relationship: “fellowship with one another” and with God (v. 7). Honesty about sin is not an end in itself; it is the way the wall comes down so closeness can return. Frame confession from the start as the road back into nearness with the Father.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God as light: his holiness and truth, with no darkness in him
- Walking in the light as living honestly before God, not as sinless perfection
- Ongoing cleansing by the blood of Jesus while we walk in the light (v. 7)
- Confession as agreeing with God about our sin
- Honesty about sin as the path back into fellowship with God

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that there is no darkness at all in God?
- How is walking in the light different from claiming to be sinless?
- Why does sin lose its grip when we bring it into the open with God?

Question 2

Student Question:

We all have practiced ways of avoiding the truth about ourselves, calling sin a mistake, blaming circumstances, or simply not thinking about it. What are your habits of self-deception, and where might you be “walking in darkness” while telling yourself everything is fine?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question asks students to examine their habits of self-deception, and it works best with gentle honesty rather than dramatic confession. We are all expert at managing our self-image: we rename sins as mistakes, personality, or stress; we compare ourselves favorably to others; we stay too busy to reflect. Help the class recognize their particular strategies without piling on shame.

Make the point that self-deception is itself dangerous. Verse 8 says that to claim we have no sin is to deceive ourselves. The most spiritually perilous condition is not the sin we are fighting but the sin we have stopped seeing. A tender conscience is a gift; a numb one is a warning.

Prescribe a practice of honest self-examination. Encourage students to ask God this week, as the psalmist does elsewhere, to search them and show them anything in the dark (Psalm 139:23-24). The aim is not morbid introspection but the willingness to let God turn the light on in rooms we usually keep shut.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Common forms of self-deception about our sin
- The danger of a numb conscience versus the gift of a tender one
- Self-examination that invites God to search us (Psalm 139:23-24)
- Honesty with ourselves as the prerequisite for honest confession

Discussion Prompts

- What are your usual ways of avoiding the truth about your own sin?
- Where might you be telling yourself everything is fine while walking in some darkness?
- What would it look like to ask God to search you this week?

Question 3

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" (v. 9). Why does John call God not only faithful but "just" to forgive, and how does the blood of Jesus (v. 7) make forgiveness an act of justice and not merely of leniency?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question goes to the doctrinal heart of confession: why John calls God "faithful and just" to forgive. We might expect "merciful" or "kind," but John says "just." That word should make us pause. How can it be just, and not merely merciful, for a holy God to forgive guilty sinners?

The answer is in verse 7: “the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.” God’s forgiveness is just because the penalty for our sin has been fully paid in the death of Christ. God is not sweeping sin under the rug or pretending it does not matter; he is forgiving on the basis of a price already paid. The cross is what makes pardon righteous. This is why the gospel is good news and not merely divine leniency.

Draw out “faithful” as well. God is faithful to his promise and to his Son’s finished work. When we confess, we are not hoping God might feel generous that day; we are leaning on a God who has bound himself to forgive those who come through Christ. Forgiveness rests on his character and his covenant, not on our mood or our merit.

Apply this pastorally. Many believers confess the same sin again and again and secretly fear that God’s patience must be running out. Verse 9 answers them: God is faithful and just to forgive, every time we confess, because the basis is Christ’s blood, which does not run low. This does not license casual sinning, but it does free the genuinely repentant from the fear that they have finally exhausted God’s willingness to forgive.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God as “faithful and just” to forgive, not merely lenient (v. 9)
- The blood of Jesus as the just ground of forgiveness (v. 7)
- The cross making pardon righteous rather than a setting aside of justice
- Forgiveness resting on God’s character and Christ’s finished work, not our merit or mood
- Assurance for the genuinely repentant who fear they have used up God’s patience

Discussion Prompts

- Why does John say God is “just” to forgive, and not only merciful?
- How does the blood of Jesus make forgiveness an act of justice?
- What comfort is there in knowing forgiveness rests on Christ’s work and not your worthiness?

Question 4

Student Question:

Confession can stay vague (“forgive me for all my sins”) or become honest and specific. When you confess, which is more your pattern? What might change in your relationship with God if you named your sins to him honestly and specifically rather than in general terms?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question contrasts vague confession with honest, specific confession. Many of us pray “forgive me for all my sins” as a kind of blanket statement that lets us avoid actually looking at

any particular sin. Help the class feel the difference between a general gesture and the cleaner, costlier honesty of naming a sin for what it is.

Explain why specificity matters. Naming a sin breaks its power to hide; it forces us to own it rather than keep it abstract. It also lets us experience real forgiveness for a real thing, rather than a vague absolution for a vague guilt. David in Psalm 51 does not pray about sin in general; he prays about his sin.

Add a wise caution: specificity is for honesty, not for wallowing. The goal is to name the sin, receive forgiveness, and move on in freedom, not to circle endlessly in self-reproach. Encourage students this week to confess one specific sin by name, and then to thank God for the specific cleansing he gives.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The difference between vague and specific confession
- Naming sin as a way of owning it and breaking its hiddenness
- Receiving real forgiveness for a real sin rather than vague absolution
- Honesty without wallowing: confess, receive, and move on in freedom

Discussion Prompts

- Is your confession usually general or specific, and why?
- What might change if you named your sins to God honestly and specifically?
- What is one specific sin you could confess by name this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

John warns twice, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves” and “if we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar” (vv. 8, 10). What are the ways we deny or minimize our sin, and why is honest confession, rather than denial, the only path to genuine fellowship with God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Take up the two warnings in verses 8 and 10. To say “we have no sin” deceives ourselves; to say “we have not sinned” makes God a liar, since his word everywhere declares that all have sinned. John is exposing denial in its various forms: outright claims of innocence, but also the subtler refusals to admit specific wrongs. Help the class see denial as not merely a private quirk but as contradicting God himself.

Show that denial blocks fellowship. As long as we maintain our innocence, there is nothing to forgive, and so we hold God at arm’s length while imagining we are fine. Confession is the only

door, because it is the only honest response to a God of light. We cannot walk with the God of truth while lying about ourselves.

Distinguish conviction from condemnation. The Spirit's conviction of sin is specific, hopeful, and aimed at restoration; it leads us toward the open door of confession. The enemy's condemnation is vague, crushing, and aimed at despair or denial. Teach the class to welcome conviction as a kindness that calls them home, not to flee it.

Land on the goodness of admitting sin. It seems backward, but the path to peace runs through honest confession, not through maintaining our innocence. The person who freely admits sin and receives forgiveness walks in far more joy and freedom than the person working hard to seem sinless. Truth, not pretense, is the way into fellowship.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The forms of denial: claiming innocence and refusing to admit specific sin (vv. 8, 10)
- Denial as contradicting God's own word about our condition
- Denial as a blockage to fellowship with God
- Distinguishing the Spirit's hopeful conviction from crushing condemnation
- Honest confession, not maintained innocence, as the path to peace and freedom

Discussion Prompts

- What are the different ways people deny or minimize their sin?
- How does denial keep us from real fellowship with God?
- What is the difference between conviction that leads home and condemnation that drives to despair?

Question 6

Student Question:

It is far easier to see and name others' faults than our own. Where are you most tempted to minimize, rationalize, or shift the blame for your sin? What would it look like to take full and honest responsibility before God this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the spotlight from sin in general to the student's own characteristic ways of dodging responsibility. We are quick to see and name others' faults and slow to own our own. Invite honest reflection on the particular move each person tends to make: minimizing ("it wasn't that bad"), rationalizing ("anyone would have"), or blame-shifting ("if they hadn't...").

Recall Adam and Eve in the garden, who, when confronted, blamed each other and the serpent and even God. Blame-shifting is as old as the fall and as current as this morning. Naming our

particular pattern is a major step toward repentance, because we cannot confess what we will not own.

Call for full responsibility before God this week. Encourage students to take one situation where they have been excusing themselves and to confess their part of it plainly, without the usual qualifiers. The freedom of saying “I was wrong, with no excuses” to God is often a turning point.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Characteristic ways we dodge responsibility: minimizing, rationalizing, blame-shifting
- Blame-shifting traced to the fall (Genesis 3:12-13)
- Owning our sin as a prerequisite for confessing it
- The freedom of taking full responsibility before God

Discussion Prompts

- Which is your default move: minimizing, rationalizing, or blaming?
- Where are you currently excusing a sin you need to own?
- What would it feel like to confess your part with no qualifiers this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

In Psalm 51 David prays, “Against you, you only, have I sinned,” and asks God to “create in me a clean heart” and “renew a right spirit within me” (vv. 4, 10). What does David’s prayer teach us about true repentance, including how sin is ultimately against God and how genuine confession longs not just to escape consequences but to be changed?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Move to Psalm 51 as the model of true repentance, and let David’s words instruct the class. Notice first his honesty: no excuses, no spin, just “have mercy on me” and “blot out my transgressions.” True repentance does not bargain or minimize; it casts itself on mercy.

Draw out the striking line, “Against you, you only, have I sinned” (v. 4). David had sinned grievously against people, against Bathsheba, against Uriah, against the nation. Yet he sees that all sin is ultimately against God, an offense against the holy One whose law and character it violates. This vertical dimension is essential. Until we see sin as against God, we treat it as merely a mistake with social consequences rather than a breach in our relationship with our Maker.

Highlight what David asks for: not just forgiveness but transformation. “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me” (v. 10). The verb “create” is the word used for God’s work in Genesis; David asks for a fresh act of God in his inner life. Genuine repentance

longs not merely to escape consequences but to be changed, to have the very desires that led to sin replaced. This is the difference between worldly regret, which is sorry about the fallout, and godly sorrow, which wants a new heart.

Apply it to confession in prayer. David's prayer teaches us to confess God-ward, honestly, and with a longing to be made new. When we confess, we are not just filing for a pardon; we are asking the God of light to keep remaking us into people who love what he loves. That is the deeper aim of all true confession.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- True repentance as honest casting upon mercy, without excuse or bargaining
- All sin as ultimately against God (Psalm 51:4)
- Repentance that longs for transformation, not only forgiveness (a new and clean heart, v. 10)
- Godly sorrow versus worldly regret (2 Corinthians 7:10)
- Confession that asks God to keep remaking our desires

Discussion Prompts

- Why does David say his sin is ultimately against God alone?
- What is the difference between wanting forgiveness and wanting a clean heart?
- How is godly sorrow different from simply regretting the consequences?

Question 8

Student Question:

David asks God to “restore to me the joy of your salvation” (v. 12), showing that unconfessed sin had stolen his joy. Have you experienced the way hidden sin drains the joy out of your walk with God? What would it look like to seek not just forgiveness but the restoration of that joy?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question connects unconfessed sin to lost joy, using David's plea, “restore to me the joy of your salvation” (v. 12). David had not lost his salvation, but he had lost its joy; the gladness of fellowship with God had drained away during his months of hiding. Many in the class will recognize that flatness, that dullness in their walk with God, without realizing its cause.

Help them make the connection. Hidden or unconfessed sin does not usually announce itself; it shows up as a quiet loss of joy, a reluctance to pray, a sense of distance. The remedy is not to work up more religious feeling but to deal with the sin honestly, after which joy often returns on its own.

Encourage them to seek the joy, not just the pardon. Suggest that when they confess this week, they go on to ask God, as David did, to restore the gladness of walking closely with him, and then to thank him for the fellowship that confession reopens. The goal is not just a clean record but a glad heart near to God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Unconfessed sin as a thief of joy in our walk with God (Psalm 51:12)
- The symptoms of hidden sin: flatness, distance, reluctance to pray
- Confession as the path to restored joy, not merely a cleared record
- Seeking renewed fellowship with God, not only legal pardon

Discussion Prompts

- Have you noticed your joy in God fading during seasons of hidden sin?
- What is the difference between seeking forgiveness and seeking restored joy?
- How could you ask God to restore your gladness this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

John addresses these promises to Christians, those already walking in the light, describing the ongoing cleansing God's children receive as they confess. Why is it important to understand confession as the continuing rhythm of a faithful Christian's life, rather than either a one-time prayer that saves an unbeliever or a presumption that, once forgiven, we no longer need to confess? How does this passage keep us from both despair over our sin and complacency about it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal high point of the lesson, and it requires you to set confession in its right place. John addresses these promises to people who are already God's children, already walking in the light. He is not telling unbelievers how to be saved; he is telling Christians how to keep close fellowship with the Father while they still struggle with sin. Getting this right protects the class from two errors at once.

Guard against the first error: turning confession into a means of initial salvation, a kind of "sinner's prayer" by which an unsaved person is forgiven and saved simply by praying. That is not what this passage teaches, and it is not how Scripture says a person comes to Christ. The New Testament is consistent: one hears the gospel, believes in Jesus as Lord and Christ, repents of sin, confesses Christ, and is baptized into him for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3-4; Galatians 3:27). First John 1:9 describes the ongoing cleansing of those who are already in Christ, the family rhythm of confession, not the doorway of new birth. Be ready to make that distinction kindly and clearly if it comes up.

Guard against the second error: presuming that, once forgiven in Christ, we no longer need to confess. The very fact that John writes “if we confess” to Christians shows that confession is the continuing practice of the faithful, not a one-time event. The Christian who imagines he has outgrown confession has slipped toward the self-deception of verse 8. We keep short accounts with God precisely because we are his children and want to walk in the light, not at a distance.

Finally, show how this passage steers between despair and complacency. To the one crushed by repeated failure, it says: God is faithful and just to forgive, and the blood of Jesus goes on cleansing; you need not despair. To the one growing casual about sin, it says: walk in the light, confess, take sin seriously; do not presume. This is the healthy middle the whole study aims for, the confidence of a forgiven child who still hates sin, neither paralyzed by guilt nor careless about holiness. Christians can fall away if they harden their hearts and abandon the faith, so confession is not optional; but the repentant child always finds the Father faithful to forgive.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- 1 John 1:9 addressed to Christians: the ongoing cleansing of God’s children, not a sinner’s prayer for the unsaved
- The biblical response by which one first comes to Christ: hearing, believing, repenting, confessing Christ, and baptism into him (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3-4; Galatians 3:27)
- Confession as the continuing rhythm of the faithful, not a one-time event
- A guard against the presumption that the forgiven no longer need to confess
- A path between despair over sin and complacency about it
- The seriousness of sin and the real possibility of falling away if the heart hardens (Hebrews 3:12-14)

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it important that 1 John 1:9 is written to Christians rather than to unbelievers seeking salvation?
- How is the ongoing confession of a believer different from how a person first comes to Christ?
- How does this passage keep us from both despairing over our sin and growing careless about it?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across 1 John 1:5-10 and Psalm 51:1-12, with their honest naming of sin, their confidence in God’s faithful forgiveness through Christ, and their longing for a clean heart and restored joy. Name one specific sin or area you will bring honestly into the light this week, and one way the God who is “faithful and just to forgive” is freeing you to stop hiding.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone draws both passages together and asks for a concrete act of honesty. Trace the movement once more: God is light, so we walk in the light by confessing rather than hiding (1 John 1); and true confession, modeled by David, is honest, God-centered, and longs for a clean heart and restored joy (Psalm 51). Together they map the road out of hiding and back into nearness.

Press for specificity and hope. Ask each student to name, at least to themselves, one specific sin or area they will bring into the light this week, and to identify how the truth that God is “faithful and just to forgive” frees them to stop hiding. Keep the tone hopeful; the destination is freedom and joy, not shame.

Close by giving the class a moment of quiet, guided confession, followed by a clear declaration of the gospel promise of forgiveness in Christ, and then thanksgiving. Let them leave having actually confessed and having heard again that in Christ they are truly cleansed, so the lesson ends in relief and gladness rather than heaviness.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Synthesis: walking in the light through honest, God-centered confession
- The assurance of cleansing through Christ for the one who confesses
- Spiritual formation: becoming a person who keeps short accounts with God
- Confession ending in restored joy and nearness, not lingering shame

Discussion Prompts

- What specific area will you bring into the light with God this week?
- How does God being “faithful and just to forgive” free you to stop hiding?
- How can this class create an atmosphere where honesty and grace go together?