

Be Sure: Confident Living from 1 John

That You Are Forgiven

1 John 1:5-2:2

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⁵ This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. ⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸ If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. ¹ My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. ² He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 1:5–2:2).

I want you to think of a time when you heard these words: “I forgive you.”

As you think back on that moment, I’m sure it is filled with a lot of loaded emotions. The fact that you had to ask for someone’s forgiveness means you did something wrong and probably hurtful. To have uttered the words “will you please forgive me?” required a lot of humility and a deep-seated brokenness. When the person granted you forgiveness, it was probably a relief. The moment was probably filled with unusual grace as the relationship turned toward reconciliation.

But saying the words “I forgive you” doesn’t end the journey. The forgiver has to regularly put that forgiveness into practice by treating the person in a way that they don’t deserve. And the forgiven person must embrace the truth of forgiveness, believing their sin no longer stands as a barrier toward reconciliation.

Complicated and Essential Forgiveness

Forgiveness between two people is beautiful. But it is also complicated. When forgiveness is granted, the forgiven person must often live in the insecurity of wondering if they are really forgiven, working toward reconciliation, and dealing with the nagging question: “Are we okay?”

What about forgiveness when it comes to our relationship with God? The core message of Christianity is the hopeful message that a holy and righteous God grants complete forgiveness to sinful human beings. This is the reason Jesus died. This is what makes grace amazing. And it is this forgiveness that makes the difference between heaven and hell.

But it also transforms a Christian’s identity. It changes relationships with others. It informs how we handle hurts and pain. Your understanding of forgiveness is foundational to your relationship with God and with other people. Get this wrong, and it negatively affects a host of issues.

It is critical that we know we are forgiven.

We are making our way through 1 John in the months of April and May in order to look at the issue of spiritual confidence or assurance. We began this series on Easter with three verses in chapter five which serve as the theme for the entire book. For that matter, they serve as the theme for the entire Bible:

¹¹ And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. ¹² Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. ¹³ I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life (1 John 5:11–13).

Last week Brad Merchant, at North Indy, and Eric Swanson, at Castleton, helped us understand what it means to belong to God. How is fellowship with the Creator of the universe even possible?

Today we are going to cover foundational ground regarding forgiveness. We'll be looking at a text that helps us understand the importance of a biblical view of God, life, ourselves, and Jesus. These are the core elements related to forgiveness

A View of God: Perfection

The book of 1 John was written to help people know what is true, and John starts with the foundational concept of revelation and the character of God. In other words, God is delivering truth about Himself to us.

John wrote this letter because there were people promoting false teaching. The effect was not only that people began believing things that weren't true, but it also caused them to have doubts. Human beings are terribly impressionable, and it is very easy for us to begin to flirt with ideas that we normally wouldn't. Or perhaps we begin to doubt something we used to pretty strongly believe.

You've surely had it happen where the opinion of a group of people caused you to second guess what you believe—even in something small. The advent of social media has only made this more challenging, as anyone can be a publisher of what they believe.

By the way, this is one of the values of being together as God's people in worship. As we sing together, pray together, and listen to the Word of God together, we are reminded of what is true. When you actively listen or when you are "all-in" in singing, it helps other people who might be struggling. And their engagement no doubt helps you as well.

If I encounter someone who is struggling with assurance and doubt, I will often probe regarding a number of things. One thing, in particular, I'll ask about is their connection to a local church. You see, the failure to regularly engage with God's people and to hear the truth about God will result in a lack of assurance. Distance from the Word of God creates doubts.

John begins this section with a reminder to his readers about where truth is coming from. Notice in verse 5 he says, "This is the message we heard from him and proclaim to you . . ." John is delivering to

us truth that he received from Jesus—that is the “him” to which John is referring. Jesus taught many things while on earth, and John is simply telling his readers what Jesus said. The false teachers and our false internal narratives have their own sources. John identifies that the message *he* proclaims came directly from Jesus.

What is that message? ***God is light and in him is no darkness at all.*** John starts by establishing who God is and what He is like. This is an important starting point.

John loves the metaphor of light. He uses it frequently in 1 John and in his gospel (see 1 John 1:7, 2:8-9, 2:10; John 1:4-9, 8:12, John 12:46). We don't have time to explore all the ways that John uses it, but let me give you two examples:

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. ⁴ In him was life, and the life was the light of men (John 1:1–4).

¹² Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12)

Notice the connection between “light” and “life.” John is pulling language from the creation narrative in Genesis 1, where the first act of creation was God saying, “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3). By using this language, John is saying three things:

1. **God is the source.** To say “God is light” is to connect God’s nature to the source of everything human beings need. Everything in life proceeds from the light of the God of existence. But He means more than physical life. He means spiritual life as well.
2. **God is the revealer.** Light has the capacity to reveal what is true and what is not. John uses “light” as a word for the God-centered consistency that should be a part of the believer’s life. Light exposes what is wrong, and it reveals what is right.

By referring to God as light, John is reminding his readers about the foundational truth of God as creator, the giver of life, and the revealer of what is true and what is not. Light, in this respect, is a powerful metaphor to use. But there is one more thing that John says here.

3. **God is perfect.** John says that there is no darkness in Him at all. The word “darkness” is connected to what is wrong with the world and passing away (1 John 2:8). It is also connected the immoral behavior of people—like hating one’s brother (1 John 2:11).

Do you see what is happening here? There is an important foundational point from which our entire understanding of forgiveness flows. God is the source of what is right. God is the revealer of what is right. God embodies what is right. Holiness, truthfulness, glory, righteousness, beauty, and perfection are all words that we could use to describe Him. Everything flows from Him, and nothing that emanates from Him is compromised in any way. God is perfect in His essence: in character, in actions, and in motives. He is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all.

If you understand that God is holy, perfect, and life-sustaining, it determines how you think about the concept of forgiveness. A wrong view of God undermines our view of forgiveness. It changes how we think about confession of sin. It impacts our connection between what we believe and our actions.

Your view of God matters! For many of us, our sense of God is probably too small, too limited, too tame, and too much like us. A low view of God causes us to dabble with sin, tolerate hypocrisy, justify our short-comings, and spend very little time confessing our sins to Him. Just think of all the things that you prayed about this week. What percentage of time was spent asking God to change your circumstances or to meet a need versus spending time in worship or confession?

How you view God determines how you approach the subject of forgiveness. That leads to the second element.

A View of Life: Consistency

The second truth John highlights here relates to the connection between what we believe and how we live. John turns our attention from the essence of who God is toward a careful look how we “walk.” His message is simply that there is a critical connection between our relationship with God and one another in light of our actions. In other words, what you do matters.

In verses 6 and 7 John uses the word “walk” to describe the manner of a person’s life. Throughout the Bible, this term is used this way. We do as well. You can tell a lot about a person by their walk. The way a person carries himself or herself reflects something more than the physical act of walking. So too here.

This word captures the totality of a person’s existence. To walk is to live. John highlights a contrast between “walking in darkness” and “walking in the light.”

In verse 6 his words are blunt and to the point. There is a major problem if we say that we have fellowship with God (the light-giving, no-darkness God), but we walk in darkness. A person cannot “walk in darkness” and claim to have fellowship with God. In fact, John is so bold as to say, “we lie and do not practice the truth.”

A person cannot verbally profess to have fellowship with God while perpetually living in darkness. There must be a consistency between what they know to be true about God and their lives. You cannot claim to be united to God while living in a manner that doesn’t fit with who He is or with the purpose of redemption. I asked you a few minutes ago to think through what percentage of your prayers are non-confession oriented. Let me ask you another question: What percentage of professing believers in our church are not genuinely converted? Sometimes people struggle with assurance because their lives are consistently incongruent with the gospel that they believe. These people should struggle with assurance. They should wonder if they are genuine. John says they are lying!

Verse 7 offers us hope as a contrast. The other way to live is by walking in light as God is in the light. In other words, we are to live in a manner that fits with the righteousness, or the light, of God. John is

arguing for a consistency between what God is like and what we are like. It's the same thing we hear in 1 Peter 1:16—"Be holy, for I am holy." The beauty of the gospel is that it offers to us the life of God.

This kind of life affects our relationships with one another. We not only have fellowship with God, but we also have fellowship with other believers. There is nothing more beautiful than seeing people have fellowship with one another because of their common relationship with God.

However, this is only possible because of the sacrifice of Jesus which cleanses us from all sin. The wording in the original text suggests something that is continually applied or effective. It is the application of the liberating power of the death and resurrection of Jesus to our actual lives. The blood of Jesus creates a new way for us to live.

John's point here is simply that there must be a connection between the application of the sacrifice of Jesus and how we live. Walking in the darkness, while claiming to be in the light, means you are lying. This is one of the reasons we practice church discipline at College Park. We are obligated to warn people that you cannot have a blatantly inconsistent life and be a member of this church. Walking in the darkness doesn't fit with what true forgiveness is all about.

Parents, let me encourage you—even exhort you—with something related to this. It is very important for you, by God's grace, to give your children a model of consistent Christianity. I'm not saying that you need to be perfect, but I am saying that consistent inconsistency between what you sing about and say "amen" to with your life is dangerous to the souls of your children.

John's view of the Christian life involves a basic commitment to consistently live what we believe.

View of Ourselves: Imperfect

I realize that I'm only now specifically getting to the subject of forgiveness. But what we've talked about so far is a vital part of this issue. If you don't understand what God is like or the problem of an inconsistent life, you'll not see the need for forgiveness.

Verse 8 states this outright: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." There were some people who were denying that they were sinful. This was likely a product of a teaching that separated what a person did with their body with what was true about their soul. This heresy was called Gnosticism, and it was a frequent problem in the church.

John takes this head-on, identifying a core aspect of Christianity—denying one's sinfulness is self-deception. The hope of Christianity is not that we are better than others or that we are perfect. Rather, the hope of the gospel is that broken, sinful people can be restored.

But there is one very important condition, and it is found in verse 9: confession.

1 John 1:9 is an incredibly hopeful verse:

⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

The biblical word for *confess* means to say the same thing God would say about our sin. No excuses. No explanation. Confession is a simple declaration of what we've done wrong, both in our hearts and in our actions. It is to acknowledge that we are not like God. He is light, and we are in darkness.

Verse 10 reiterates this even further. This confession is vital to what it means to be Christian. If we say that we have not sinned, we make God a liar and His word is not in us. Do you see how important this is? John is using strong words here! This is how important confession is.

Why would confession be this important? Because it is the tangible step where we acknowledge that God is right. Confession acknowledges the holiness of God. It acknowledges His rightful place in our lives. It admits that we are imperfect. It embraces the fact that we are not okay. It submits to the belief that we need God's help.

Now notice the hope of this step that follows the confession. Notice who the focus is on: "He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Our confession welcomes the cleansing of a faithful and just God.

This is what makes Christianity so unbelievable and transformative. This why the gospel transforms people from the inside out. As we humbly admit we have sinned and need help, God releases us from the condemnation, guilt, and penalty of our sin. And He cleanses us so that we are no longer unrighteous. He makes sinners righteous, the guilty forgiven, and the dirty clean.

How do you know you are forgiven? More than your feelings, and more than some other objective reality, the question is whether or not 1 John 1:9 is in fact true. Knowing you are forgiven is based on your belief in what this text says. Do you know God is holy? Do you know that you are a sinner? Have you admitted your sin to God? Then you are forgiven! You are cleansed. The key is not denying your sinfulness but embracing it while looking to God for your deliverance.

Martin Luther gave this advice to a young man struggling with the assaulting lies of the devil:

"When the devil throws our sins up to us and declares we deserve death and hell, we ought to speak thus: "I admit that I deserve death and hell. What of it? Does this mean that I shall be sentenced to eternal damnation? By no means. For I know One who suffered and made a satisfaction in my behalf. His name is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Where he is, there I shall be also."

Be sure you are forgiven, not by denying your sinfulness. Admit it. And then run to Christ.

View of Jesus: Advocate

John concludes this section by calling believers to live differently. In 2:1 he wants them to know that his purpose in writing to them is so that they can avoid sin. He's not inviting them to more sinful activity. What we are talking about should serve as a motivator for righteousness. John's aim is to produce godliness. But notice that his emphasis on personal godliness does not rest on us.

¹ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/luther-on-five-actions-for-struggling-believers>

The hope of forgiveness is not our perfection. Our only assurance is in the faithfulness of Christ as our advocate. Our hope of forgiveness comes from the righteousness of Christ, not our own.

He is our advocate. He stands between the just demands of the law and our failures. He makes the case for our forgiveness. He comes to our defense. Jesus is the one who takes our penalty and our guilt. His righteousness is applied to our account.

That is what the Bible means when it says that He is our propitiation. It means that Jesus is personally the one who pays for our sin debt. Jesus is the one who provides the forgiveness that we so desperately need. Jesus makes it possible for sinners to be made righteous.

John seeks to remind us that these things are true. This is important because doubts can plague us. We may wonder if we feel certain or if we really do believe. We may still feel guilty. We may still feel ashamed. But the hope is simply and powerfully—Jesus is the propitiation for our sin. And we must preach this truth to our hearts over and over. We must hold our doubts at bay by preaching the truth of the gospel to our hearts.

We must believe what the Bible says about God—He's perfect. We must believe the truth about ourselves—we're not perfect. And we must run to Christ. Our hope for forgiveness comes from our confidence in Jesus.

And this is not just the hope for those who already know this to be true. This hope of forgiveness is available to anyone who would put their faith in Jesus today. It's available to you.

No matter what you've done. No matter how long you've been doing it. No matter how weak you feel. No matter how hypocritical you've been. No matter how much you doubt. The Bible says if you confess your sins, God is faithful and just to forgive you.

You see, the most glorious and important word as it relates to the Christian faith is something we desperately need but can never earn: forgiveness.

And the glorious news is that it comes to those who acknowledge their need of rescue. How do you know you are forgiven? You know that you are forgiven because you've come to believe the promise of God's word.

And what could be more hopeful than for a holy, righteous, perfect and sovereign God to say, "I forgive you."

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