

CONFESSION OF SINS IN THE SPIRIT-FILLED LIFE

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I. INTRODUCTION

Dennis the Menace is kneeling at his bedside, hands folded, his eyes looking toward heaven. With an imploring look on his face, he prays, “I’m here to turn myself in!” Dennis senses that for things to be right between himself and God, he must turn himself in. He must confess his sins.

Dennis’s prayer seems so simple, so innocent, so straightforward, that I feel a little guilty saying, “Let’s analyze and question what Dennis is saying in that prayer.” But having confessed my feelings of guilt, let’s proceed anyway: Is Dennis confessing his sins thinking he must do this to go to heaven? If he already has believed in Jesus and received forgiveness, why does he still think he needs to confess his sins for forgiveness? Is he sorry for his sins? Is he sorry enough to be forgiven? Has he repented? If he’s only confessing some of his sins, how does God feel about the ones he doesn’t confess?

While I wouldn’t want to overwhelm or discourage Dennis with questions like these, I think that answers to these and other questions are extremely important to his spiritual life and ours, too. This article will raise and attempt to answer ten questions about confession of sins.

II. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO CONFESS SINS?

The first question is “What does it mean to confess sins?” The term “confess” found in 1 John 1:9 means “to say the same thing, to agree, to admit, to acknowledge.” When I confess my sins to God, I simply admit to Him the sins that He already knows I have committed. To confess sins also involves a request for God’s forgiveness as evidenced by the words of Jesus when He taught us to pray, “Forgive us our sins” (Luke 11:4). To confess sins, therefore, involves an admission of sins and a request for God’s forgiveness.

III. WHO NEEDS TO CONFESS SINS?

That leads to a second question, “Who needs to confess sins?” Some suggest that confession of sins is something that unsaved people must do to be saved, citing 1 John 1:9 as proof, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” But there are some obvious problems with this view. First of all, John says, “If *we* confess our sins.” In the previous verses, John makes it crystal clear that the term “we” refers to himself, the other apostles, and his readers whom he assumes already have eternal life as evidenced in 1 John 2:12-14. A suggestion that “we” in 1 John 1:9 refers to neither the readers nor the writer is self-refuting. Who needs to confess sins? “We do!” John says, referring to himself, the other apostles, and his believing readers. Secondly, John’s Gospel was specifically written to tell us how to receive eternal life and never is confession of sins mentioned as a condition. Thirdly, Jesus taught believers to confess sins when He gave the model prayer, telling the disciples to pray, “Forgive us our sins” (Luke 11:4).

IV. WHY DO WE NEED TO CONFESS SINS?

But that leads to a third question, “Why do we need to confess sins?” 1 John 1:9 tells us, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” We need to confess sins in order to be forgiven of sins. “But,” someone might ask, “haven’t we already been forgiven of our sins? Didn’t that happen when we received eternal life? Doesn’t Eph 1:7 make that clear: ‘In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace’? And what about Col 3:13: ‘...Bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do’? Aren’t we insulting God to ask Him for something He’s already given us?”

These questions were perfectly and beautifully answered by Jesus on the night before His crucifixion as He met with His disciples in the Upper Room and attempted to wash their feet. Jesus carefully and clearly explained His actions with these words, “He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you” (John 13:10). If you and I lived in the days of Jesus

and the disciples, we could better relate to His illustration. On a given day, we would get up in the morning and take a bath. And at that moment, we are completely clean. We then leave our house and walk in open sandals down dusty unpaved streets to visit our friend. When we arrive, our feet are filthy. With dirty feet, we should not want to, or be allowed to, enjoy fellowship in our friend's house. So what do we need to do? Take a bath? No. Just as Jesus said, "He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean..."

But what did Jesus mean by this statement? Certainly he isn't talking about literal daily hygiene because He goes on to say, "...and you are clean, but not all of you. For He knew who would betray Him; therefore He said, 'You are not all clean'" (John 13:10-11). Obviously Jesus is not referring to Judas's personal hygiene in contrast to that of the eleven, but rather He is contrasting Judas's spiritual condition with theirs. The eleven had believed in Jesus for eternal life and received the bath of positional forgiveness of their sins; Judas had not. But the eleven still needed to let Jesus wash their feet. If the bath represents forgiveness of sins, then so does the washing of feet. The bath represents positional forgiveness of sins; the washing of feet represents daily, experiential forgiveness of sins. To paraphrase Jesus' words, "He who has received the bath of positional forgiveness of sins needs only to receive the foot washing of experiential forgiveness of sins."

Jesus startled Peter that night when He said, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me" (John 13:8). What did Jesus mean by that statement? Again, He obviously isn't talking about literal footwashing as a requirement to gain eternal life. To have a "part" with Jesus means to have fellowship with Jesus. Just as a visitor needed to wash his feet before having fellowship in someone's home, so we must be cleansed of daily sin in order to experience fellowship with God. To paraphrase Jesus' words in v 8, *If you do not allow me to cleanse your daily sins, you will have no fellowship with Me.*

In the Upper Room that night, Jesus didn't explain to the disciples what they must do to have their feet washed and receive daily, experiential forgiveness of sins. But that was by design. He knew that they wouldn't understand until a later time as He said, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this" (John 13:7). Jesus' prediction was fulfilled, as the disciples later understood what He had taught them that night and they are now zealous to share this truth with us. As John says in 1 John 1:3, "That which we have

seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ,” and he explains in v 9 that confession of sins is what we must do to have fellowship with God.

The term *fellowship* means sharing. John writes so that we may share the same spiritual experiences with the Father and the Son that the apostles experienced. John stresses the importance of confession of sins and fellowship in 1 John 1:4, “These things we write to you that your joy may be full.” The Majority Text leads us to translate, “These things we write to you that *our* joy may be full.” “Our joy,” John says; the joy of the apostles, is made full when they know that believers are confessing their sins to receive forgiveness and experience fellowship with the Father and the Son. Their joy is made full because they know that fellowship with God is what it’s all about. There is nothing in our lives that is more important than “turning ourselves in” to experience forgiveness and fellowship with God.

Our need for confession, forgiveness, and fellowship is based on a message about God that we need to understand. As John says in 1 John 1:5, “This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all.” God is perfect, free from any imperfection or impurity. How can we as sinful, impure people have fellowship with a sinless God? We must be completely cleansed of our sins; not only cleansed by our once for all bath, but also by the continual washing of our feet. Why do we need to confess our sins? To allow Jesus to wash our feet of daily sins so we can have fellowship with God in whom there is no darkness at all.

V. HOW DOES GOD RESPOND TO CONFESSION OF SINS?

Now a fourth question. “How does God respond to confession of sins?” “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). If we wonder whether or not God will forgive us, we need to remember that He is faithful; He must remain true to His promise. As John says, “He is faithful to forgive us our sins.” God is also “just” to forgive us. God does not compromise His justice when He forgives us because it is the shed blood of Christ that cleanses us. As John says in 1 John 1:7, “The blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanses us from all sin.” John does

not say “has cleansed us” (past tense) but “cleanses us” (present tense). This terminology reflects what Jesus said, “He who is bathed [past tense] needs [present tense] only to wash his feet.” The cleansing agent for our bath was the blood of Christ, the same blood that washes our feet of daily sin. You and I have never experienced one moment of fellowship with God apart from present cleansing by the blood of Christ. What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. What can make me whole again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. What allows me to have fellowship with God? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. As another songwriter says, “The blood that Jesus shed for me, way back on Calvary, the blood that gives me strength from day to day, it will never lose its power.” How does God respond to confession of sins? He forgives us and cleanses us by the shed blood of Christ.

VI. WHAT SINS NEED TO BE CONFESSED?

Now a fifth question, “What sins need to be confessed?” 1 John 1:9 answers this question, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” In this verse, John distinguishes between two categories of sins. First, he says that God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins. The term *our* is in italics in the NKJV rightly signifying that it is not in the original text. We could translate “forgive us the sins” meaning the sins that we confess. Obviously the only sins that we can confess are the ones of which we are aware. John refers to a second category of sins when he says, “and cleanses us from all unrighteousness.” This is a reference to the sins of which we are unaware. When we confess the sins of which we are aware, He cleanses us of all unrighteousness including the sins of which we are unaware.

Suppose I notice spots on the front of my suit and take it to the cleaners. When I pick it up days later the cleaner says, “Mr. Bryant, did you know there were spots all over the back of your suit as well?” “No,” I reply, “I didn’t notice.” “It doesn’t matter, Mr. Bryant. We cleaned the whole suit.” In a similar way God holds us accountable to turn ourselves in and confess the sins His light reveals to us. When we do, He not only forgives the sins we confess but He cleanses us from all unrighteousness, even the sins of which we are not aware, and, in turn, we are able to have fellowship with our sinless Father.

Samson is a classic illustration of these truths. Samson did a lot of things that he didn't know were wrong because after all, he lived in the days of the judges. "The word of the Lord was rare in those days" (1 Sam 3:1). "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judg 21:25). He married a Philistine girl probably not knowing it was prohibited in the Law. He had a weakness for ungodly women and may not have even known it was wrong. I say that because in spite of his sins and immaturity, the Spirit of God worked through him mightily, indicating that he was in fellowship with God. In fact, Samson is one of the heroes of faith recorded in Hebrews 11. Samson is a classic example of an immature believer who walks in fellowship with God. He has all kinds of sin in his life, but he isn't aware of these things as sin.

Samson is just like you and me. Each of us has more sin in our lives than we can even begin to imagine; sins that would keep us from ever having fellowship with God. But we can still have fellowship with Him based on only one condition: that we confess known sins. And when we do, He cleanses us of all the many sins of which we are unaware. Samson helps us to see that God can put up with a lot when our hearts are open to Him. We all underestimate the degree to which He forgives and overlooks things in us and the degree to which He still chooses to use us if we will simply confess known sins.

VII. WHEN SHOULD SINS BE CONFESSED?

Now a sixth question, "When should sins be confessed?" Jesus answered this question in what is popularly called "The Lord's Prayer." As Jesus introduced the Lord's Prayer, He made it clear that He was giving a model for private prayer, not public prayer, as He said, "But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place..." (Matt 6:6). When He said, "In this manner, therefore, pray" (Matt 6:9) rather than, "Pray this prayer," He made it clear that He was giving us an outline to follow rather than a prayer to recite. When He said, "Give us this day our daily bread," He made it clear that we should use this model as our everyday way to pray. And when He said, "Forgive us our debts," He made it clear that we should confess our sins at least daily as we spend time alone with God in prayer.

However, that only partially answers the question, “When should sins be confessed?” The Psalmist wrote, “If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear” (Ps 66:18). This verse implies that we should confess known sin as soon as we are aware of it in addition to confessing sins in our special daily time of prayer.

VIII. WHAT MUST PRECEDE CONFESSION OF SINS?

This leads to a seventh question, “What must precede confession of sins?” John answers this question in 1 John 1:7, “If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.” John says we must walk in the light to have fellowship with God. He doesn’t say we must walk “according to the light” which would require us to be sinlessly perfect as only God is. To walk in the light means to be open to God in prayer and open to His Word. We must be honest with God about everything He shows us, which means we must confess to Him the sin that He reveals.

When you go to the airport you are required to walk in their light. If you want to go to the gates, you must allow your carry-ons to pass under the x-ray machine and you must walk through a metal detector. If you refuse to open yourself up to this light, you forfeit the privilege of going to the gates. In the same way, to have fellowship with God we must open ourselves up to Him and be willing to confess any sins that His light may expose. If we refuse, we forfeit the privilege of having fellowship with Him.

The truth that walking in the light must precede confession of sins is also seen in the Lord’s Prayer. The order of the Lord’s Prayer had puzzled me for many years. I wondered why, “Forgive us our sins” came so late in this outline of prayer. But it now seems to me that Jesus gave us this order so that as we focus on “Our Father who art in Heaven” in His sinless glory, we might at times become aware of certain sins even as we are praying. This is similar to what Isaiah experienced when he saw the glory of the Lord, became aware of his sins, and said, “Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts” (Isa 6:5). As we pray “Thy kingdom come” and focus on the future kingdom, we may become aware of misplaced priorities that need to be confessed. As we pray “Give us

this day our daily bread” and elaborate on the needs we ask Him to meet, we may become aware of selfish desires and motives that need to be confessed.

Therefore, as we pray following the outline of the Lord’s Prayer, an elaboration of “Forgive us our sins” should be similar to what the Psalmist prayed, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps 139:23-24). What must precede confession of sins? An open, honest heart that walks in God’s light and is willing to confess whatever sins that light reveals. Following the order of the Lord’s Prayer helps us to have that kind of heart.

IX. WHAT MUST ACCOMPANY CONFESSION OF SINS?

The order of the Lord’s Prayer leads us to ask an eighth question, “What must accompany confession of sins?” Jesus taught us to pray, “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors” (Matt 6:12). This is the only part of the model prayer, which Jesus explained, as He said, “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt 6:14-15). Jesus is teaching us that forgiveness of others must accompany confession of sins. If we don’t forgive others, our Father will not forgive us. There is a difference between the condition upon which God forgives us and the condition upon which we are to forgive others. We must confess our sins to Him but never are we told that others must confess their sins to us. We are to forgive others regardless of their words and actions toward us. Since the Lord’s Prayer is our model for daily prayer, we know that Jesus wants us to open our hearts to our heavenly Father each day concerning whether there is someone we may need to forgive. Jesus taught this same truth in the Upper Room when He said, “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet” (John 13:14). His forgiveness of us (washing our feet) must be accompanied by our forgiveness of others (washing one another’s feet).

The Lord’s Prayer not only reveals that confession of sins must be accompanied by forgiveness of others, but also by a desire to not continue sinning, as evidenced by these words, “And lead us not into

temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” (Matt 6:13). A request for forgiveness is followed by a request for God to protect us from temptation as well as a request to be delivered from evil.

What must accompany confession of sins? Forgiveness of others as well as a sincere desire to not continue to sin.

X. WHAT MAY OR MAY NOT ACCOMPANY CONFESSION OF SINS?

Having considered what must accompany confession of sins, let’s now consider a ninth question, “What may or may not accompany confession of sins?” Two further questions explain what I have in mind here, “Must sorrow accompany confession of sins?” and “Must repentance accompany confession of sins?” It seems to me that the biblical answer to both questions is “No.”

To suggest that sorrow must accompany confessions of sins is to suggest something devoid of any scriptural support. Certainly, sorrow may accompany confession, but the Scriptures don’t demand it. Besides, how would one measure the amount of sorrow needed to qualify for God’s forgiveness? To suggest that sorrow must accompany confession of sins will only lead one to wonder if one is sorry enough, robbing that person of the assurance of forgiveness and fellowship with God.

To suggest that repentance must accompany confession of sin is to fail to see John’s usage of the concept in his writings. He never uses the term *repentance* in 1 John but he does use it in Revelation of those who are in a persistent pattern of sin which needs to be changed (Rev 2:5, 16, 21, 23; 3:3, 19). Confession of sins, however, seems to apply to an audience in 1 John that has nothing of which to repent, people who simply discover sin as they walk in the light. This is consistent with the Lord’s Prayer in which believers who draw near to God in daily prayer need no repentance, but do need to ask for forgiveness as God reveals their sins. While true repentance would certainly include confession of sins, daily confession of sins would not necessarily include repentance.

XI. WHAT SHOULD FOLLOW CONFESSION OF SINS?

Now a final question, “What may or may not follow confession of sins?” John tells us that fellowship with God is not identical to knowing God. Fellowship with God is based on confession of sins while knowing God is based on keeping His commandments. After John encourages the readers toward fellowship with God in 1:1–2:2, he goes on to encourage the readers toward knowing God in 2:3–11. Knowing God is the goal toward which fellowship should lead, but it is not identical to it.

Jesus made this distinction in the Upper Room. After washing the disciples’ feet, picturing forgiveness and fellowship with Him, He later says to Phillip, “Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Phillip?” (John 14:9). Obviously Jesus is not saying that Phillip is not saved. He had already said, “All of you are clean,” including Phillip. But He is saying that Phillip and the other disciples did not know Jesus as well as they could and would. To know Him better and better takes time and obedience to His commands. It follows fellowship, which is received by the washing of feet. As is His desire for us, Jesus wanted the disciples to experience fellowship as a foundation upon which they would come to know Him in a growing personal relationship. Even though it is not automatic, knowing Him should follow confession of sins.

XII. CONCLUSION

Dennis the Menace is a great example to us all. May we all continually turn ourselves in, confessing known sin to our Father in heaven that we may enjoy fellowship with Him.