



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Basic Bible Doctrine, John 3 & 4

"The Believer and Sin"

TRANSCRIPT

[Prayer] ...those who have had tragedies or who are having times of distress or puzzlement, we ask Lord, that Thou wilt minister to them out of the riches of the grace that is contained in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We commit the hour to Thee. We pray that Thou wilt guide us and direct us in it, each one of us. May our thoughts be subject to the Holy Spirit's teaching. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

[Message] Tonight our subject is, "The Believer and Sin." And we are going to turn, first of all, to John chapter 20, and I want to read verse 21 through verse 23. John chapter 20, verse 21-23, "Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you. And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Spirit: Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained." What I would like to do tonight, just to vary things a little bit in our Basic Bible Doctrine, is to consider the things that John has to say concerning the forgiveness of sins, and along the way answer the question of the believer and sin.

There are just three explicit passages in the Johannine writings in which he refers to the forgiveness of sins. When you read the literature of the Apostle John, you notice that the greatest stress of all rests upon the doctrine of eternal life. But John does, in three significant passages, mention the forgiveness of sins. Now, of course, this is not to say that there is not a reference to the idea of the forgiveness of sins in other expressions used by the Apostle John. He does speak of the cleansing of sin. For example, in 1 John chapter 1, verse 7. In that text, which is very familiar text to most of us he writes, 1 John 1:7, "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin." So, we can see that that is a very closely related teaching to the forgiveness of sins. It's certainly wrong to say that the apostle has little to say about the work of Christ in making propitiation for sin. This is really the peculiar stress of the first epistle of John, where in chapter 2, verse 2 and again in chapter 4, verse 10 he mentions making propitiation for sins. The idea of the removal of guilt of sin by our Lord is expressed in other ways in the gospel of John.

Remember when the John the Baptist saw the Lord Jesus coming, he said, "Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world." Now, that expression to take away sin contains within it the idea of the forgiveness of sins. Or even in John chapter 3, in verse 5, where we read that "Except a man be born of water and Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." The idea of the necessity of the removal of guilt is found there too. One of the best known of present day New Testament scholars has said, concerning some statements like these, "But these statements are so broadly formulated that it cannot be determined from these alone, just how in John's opinion, the death of Jesus benefits the world of his people." That, of course, is not true. The words that are given in the Gospel of John concerning the death of Jesus Christ and the results of that death are very plain and very clear, if we simply read them under the direction of the Holy Spirit with a believing attitude.

Now, the first occurrence of the expression, "forgiveness of sins" in John, the first of the three, is found here in John chapter 20, verse 21 through verse 23. Now, this text to which we will look first is found in that part of the gospel in which the risen Lord has appeared to the ten in order to commission them. They are given a work to do. Notice, that last clause or so of verse 21 of John chapter 20; Jesus said unto them after saying, "Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you." So, they are to confront men with Jesus Christ just as he confronted men with the Father. "As my Father has sent me to reveal to you the Father, so I am sending you in order that you might reveal to men, me." We read in John chapter 1 in verse 18, "No man hath seen God at any time, the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him." So, the commission that he received, "as the Father has sent me to reveal the Father," that he has accomplished. But we are also expected in these words to reveal the Son. Remember the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians chapter 5, speaking about believers in Jesus Christ are ambassadors says, "Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ as though God did beseech you by us. We beg you, in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God." So, the apostle regarded himself as an ambassador of the Lord Jesus Christ. It was his duty, he felt, to confront me with the Lord Jesus Christ. So, here in the first of the texts he says, "As my Father has sent me, even so send I you."

Now, since they have been commissioned for the work, they will now need equipment, and so in the next verse, verse 22 of John 20 we read, "And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Spirit." This is a rather interesting statement. First of all, because of the fact that we read, "He breathed on them." That word that is used here is used in the Old Testament in the Greek translation of the Book of Genesis, in chapter 2 when God gives the account of the process by which Adam was created. Remember, it states, "He took of the dust of the ground, he breathed into that dust the breath of life, and man became a living soul." It is, I think rather interesting that that is the same word that is used here in the New Testament in verse 22.

That, is the Greek word in the Greek translation of the Hebrew at that point is the same as the word John the Apostle has used here, "He breathed on them." So, just as in the Old Testament there was a kind of bringing to life of the dust, and the creation of Adam in the first creation. So here in John 20:22, almost as if he were saying here is a second creation but this one a spiritual creation, "Receive ye the Holy Spirit." There is a suggestion of the coming of the Spirit to bring life, and the forming therefore of a new creation.

Now, there have been different interpretations of the expression "Receive ye the Holy Spirit," which the Lord uses. Some have suggested that since no reference is made to the response of the ten that they did not receive the Holy Spirit. In other words, the Lord Jesus said, "Receive ye the Holy Spirit," but they did not receive him. Still others have said that here is the time at which men do receive the Holy Spirit. And those passages in the Gospel of John like chapter 7 and again in chapter 14, where the Lord Jesus promises the coming of the Spirit and his indwelling, have their first fulfillment right here. That's unlikely as well, but nevertheless that's the view of some. I'm inclined to think, in light of the fact that he's just given them a commission in verse 21, and in the light of the fact that the Bible seems to relate the coming of the Holy Spirit to the Day of Pentecost, that what we have here is a temporary endowment with power for the time period preceding Pentecost; because after all, the Holy Spirit is going to come at a specific time in fulfillment of the prophetic word of the Old Testament. But he's given them a commission and there is a period of time here where they do need enablement for the work to which he is calling them. And so, it would be reasonable to assume that they did receive the Holy Spirit but it was a temporary endowment with power. It was not the permanent indwelling which takes place on the day of Pentecost, but it was designed to sustain them in the witnessing that they would do from this period of time until the day of Pentecost.

Now, we come to what is perhaps the most difficult part of this section. He said, receive ye the Holy Spirit. And then we read, "Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained." So, here is the promise of the authority regarding sins. Now, this text has loomed large in the claims of apostolic succession. There are large religious organizations that do claim that they have apostolic succession, and that their leader of the church, their figure who is at the head of their church, is a distinct descendant of the Apostle Peter. Now, is that biblical? This text is a text, also, that looms large in the claims that the priest of Christian organizations have the authority themselves to forgive sins.

Now, the first thing that one must do when he comes to a passage like this is to be sure to interpret it in the light of the context. And I think that the first thing that we need to note is, just exactly was the context, the full context in which these words were spoken. When the Lord Jesus said, "Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained," to whom does he refer by the pronouns? When he says "ye" and "ye" to whom is he referring? Well, commonly it is said that he is referring only to the apostles, but if you will look at the context of this passage set in the context of the gospels, you discover that there were other people also present in this upper room. For example, in Luke chapter 24, in verse 33, describing the same period of time the writer of that gospel says this, "And they rose up the same hour, and returned to Jerusalem, and found the eleven gathered together, and those who were with them." So, the apostles, the eleven, had others who were together with them, and it is to these that the Lord Jesus spoke these words.

In fact John 20, verse 19 and verse 20 also mentions disciples. Verse 19, "Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled." Now, disciple is a broader term than apostle. And so, it is likely that in this group of people, to whom these words were found were not only apostles but ordinary Christians as well. Now, the power to absolve and to hold men's

sins is explicitly given to the Twelve, it has been said, but in the light of the context, that claim, if that is what was meant, that is the forgiveness of sins would be unjustified, because it would be a broader giving of authority. It would be giving of authority to a much larger group of people, inclusive not only of the apostles but also of other disciples. So, whatever this text means, it is something that is to be given to the church as a whole. Those who were present were not members of the Jerusalem ministerial association only, and composed therefore only of apostles. But they were ordinary Christians, just as you and I are ordinary Christians, in the company of the apostles. And it is to these that these words were spoken.

Furthermore, the Bible teaches in many places that only God can forgive sins. No where is it ever said in Scripture that anyone else may forgive sins. And even expressions that might imply that are to be understood in the light of the clear statements of Scripture that only God forgives sins. Now, when you look at the rest of the New Testament and discover the use that the rest of the New Testament makes of that authority that might bear on the meaning of this text, you discover that in the New Testament there is no evidence of any apostles forgiving sins on the basis of this so-called authority granted to them in the upper room. In fact, when the Apostle Peter, who was *Primus inter pares*, that is first among equals, we grant that; Peter was the leader of the twelve. When Peter stands by someone and speaks of forgiveness, he doesn't say, I forgive you. He tells Ananias, for example, "Thy money perish with thee;" that's verse 20 of chapter 8 of the Book of Acts. He says, "Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money. Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee." Now, I said a moment ago that this was Ananias. This was a reference to Simon the Sorcerer. But notice the expression, "pray God," and "perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee." Later on, the apostles, when they are in the presence of others

who need forgiveness, they do not say that they themselves forgive, but they again affirm that it is God who brings forgiveness.

In the case of Aeneas, later on in the 9th chapter, Peter says with reference to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ maketh thee well: arise, and make thy bed. And he arose immediately." So the text then, so far as we can tell from the context, is a context addressed to the whole of the church. So far as the rest of the Bible is concerned, no apostle ever forgave sins. The Bible teaches that God alone forgives sins, and so consequently the general teaching to the effect that a priest on the earth has power to remit sins is unsubstantiated by this text. What does this text mean? "Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained."

Now, it will help if we notice the tense of the verbs that are used in this verse. And if you have an Authorized Version, you might miss this, but if you have a New American Standard Bible you will notice it. I am going to translate it as it is found in the original text. Now, when we read, "Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them," the tense of the verb in the Greek text is a perfect passive. It's a perfect tense, and it's in the passive voice. "Whosoever sins ye remit, they shall be remitted to them." And then, "Whosoever sins ye retain, they shall have been retained."

Now, notice the force of the perfect passive. So, what does this mean then? "Whosoever sins ye forgive, they shall have been forgiven to them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they shall have been retained." Well, when it's all put together, the statement is simply this; the church has not been given the authority to forgive sins. She has been given the authority to proclaim forgiveness to the believing and judgment to the unbelieving. And as long as the church is faithful to the word of God, her pronouncements do simply reveal what has already been determined in heaven. In other words, God has set forth the conditions by which forgiveness, and by which no forgiveness may take place. And therefore, the decisions that count are made in heaven, not upon the earth.

Now, on the basis of what is stated in heaven, individuals in the church of Jesus Christ on the earth may pronounce that an individual is forgiven or not forgiven in the light of the plain teach of the word of God on those points. So, "Whosoever sins forgive, they have been forgiven to them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they have been retained." And the church has authority to point out the terms of forgiveness and the terms of judgment in its mission to the world. Therefore, any Christian has the right to say, for example, "If you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ your sins are forgiven." If you were to say to me, "I have believed on the Lord Jesus Christ." I would have authority to say to you, "Then your sins are forgiven you." I would not be forgiving them, and I would not have any special relationship simply because I often stand up and teach the Bible.

But I would be simply conveying to you the biblical terms on which forgiveness takes place, and acting simply as a mediator of that message; and the same with no forgiveness; if you say to me, for example, "Well, I've never really believed in Jesus Christ, but I'm trusting in my good works to get me to heaven, and I've joined several churches. In fact, I was baptized by a famous preacher right here in the city of Dallas." Then I would say to you, "Well, then your sins are not forgiven you." And I could say that on the authority of the word of God. That's all that text means. It was addressed to the whole church, and any individual in the body of Christ has the right to lay down the conditions which are set forth in the word of God for the forgiveness of sins, or for judgment. So, "Whosoever sins ye remit, they have been remitted; and whosoever sins ye retain, they have been retained."

Now, there is a text in the Apostle Paul that I think is somewhat parallel to this, and it is the great statement that he makes in 1 Timothy chapter 3 and verse 15, where the church is called, notice these words, "the pillar and the ground of the truth." The church is the pillar and the ground of the truth, that is, it is the church, it is in the church that the truth is to be found. And the church is the pillar and the ground of the truth; it is the responsibility of the church of Jesus Christ to guard the deposit of the truth that God has

given to them. That is why, in Believers Chapel, we have sought from the beginning to teach the word of God faithfully, and to teach it doctrinally, because it is of, I say, the greatest importance that the church be the pillar and ground of the truth, and this particular commission bears on that.

Now, there is a similar authority, only in this case it's related to Ecclesiastical discipline within the church, in Matthew chapter 18, in verse 18. And I'll just read this text, it really doesn't bear on what I want to say later on particularly, but since it's such a parallel to this, I would like to read it. "Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven." A minute ago I mentioned, I think, the perfect passive there. Well, this is something that's really like a future perfect passive. "Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven." So, again the same principle is before us here, the church's authority to set forth the conditions for the forgiveness of sins and for judgment.

Now, let me come to the point that I want to make in conclusion of our study of this passage. It is evident from this passage that the meaning of the forgiveness of sins is the remission of the penalty of sin. That is, the initial forgiveness that brings one into right relationship with God. In the light of that, let me read you the translation of the New International Version; this is the way verse 23 is translated in this version. I'm not too happy about this, frankly, although, I participated in the translation of the New International Version. In the translation of a version, translators work on certain sections. I did not work on this particular section in here, and I would not necessarily have been able to change it anyway, because when men sit down around a table, and there are seven people there and decisions are made by virtue of voice vote, sometimes some of them you win, some of them you lose. You think, of course, you're always right, but nevertheless you may be overruled by some other reader of the text who thinks that the text means something else.

But the New International Version reads, "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them," that's an ambiguity right there, because the "them," you don't know whether that refers to sins or to the individuals. That's a poor translation as well as possibly a wrong one. "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them," does that mean their sins or them individually? "They are not forgiven." As you can see, they have failed to recognize the fact that *afientai* used in that passage is a perfect tense of the verb *aphiemi* which means "to forgive." And they also have failed to recognize the significance of the verb *krateo*, which is used in a perfect passive form in that verse as well.

Now then, let's turn to our second passage in which we have the expression, "the forgiveness of sins." And this one bears more directly on the sins of believers, in 1 John chapter 1, in verse 9; 1 John chapter 1, verse 9, forgiveness and 1 John 1:9. This is the second occurrence of the term, "the forgiveness of sins" in the Johannine writings. We read, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." The force of the expression "to forgive sins" here is bound up in a rather warm debate that has gone on over the interpretation of 1 John 1:9. There actually are several view points that have been set forth in the interpretation of 1 John 1:9.

There are many interpreters who've espoused the interpretation that refers this text to believers and to their sins. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." And these interpreters think of this forgiveness as being a forgiveness that applies to believers. That is, it does not have to do with the forgiveness of the eternal judgment which results from the penalty of our sins, but they rather think of this as referring to the forgiveness of believers' sins. And thus, the forgiveness is a temporal forgiveness, not an eternal forgiveness. The restoration spoken of when he says, "He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins" is by them related to unfettered communion with God, and not salvation.

So, they read it, "If we believers, confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us, "that is us who are believers," our sins." And furthermore he goes on to say, "To cleanse us, believers, from all unrighteousness." So, "If we believers confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us believers of our sins, and to cleanse us believers from all unrighteousness." And the sin is believer sin, and the judgment is not forgive in the sense of give you eternal life, but restore you to communion with the Father, because once we have been forgiven through faith in Jesus Christ, we cannot lose our salvation, but we can lose our communion with the Father when we do things that are displeasing to him.

Those who have held to this interpretation represent very significant interpreters. For example, among ancient ones John Calvin held this view. Among more recent ones who write on the Greek text of this epistle, AE Brooke in the *International Critical Commentary* holds to this view. John Stott, a modern expositor of the Bible, one of the better expositors of the Bible, preaching the word today, a Britisher who is now retired from his ministry in London and is engaged in Bible teaching all over the world really. John Stott holds to this. This is the view expressed in the Scofield Bible. In the notes in the bottom of the page we read, "Sin interrupts fellowship, but cannot change relationship. Confession restores fellowship, and immediate confession keeps the fellowship unbroken."

Now, we cannot deal in detail with this, because to analyze all of the aspects of the problem would take us entirely too long and after all, we want to cover all of the passages in John, in which the term "forgiveness of sins" occurs. Suffice it to say that even if we come to the conclusion that 1 John 1:9 does not affirm this type of theology, the question of the teaching of the whole of the Bible on the point remains. In my opinion, you can make a good case for the claim that a believer's sin does disturb his communion with God. Otherwise, the divine discipline in the family loses force. If we should teach, for example, that when we sin as believers nothing happens between us

and the Lord, what do we say with reference to the contrast that the biblical teaching on discipline should exercise in our lives.

Suppose a child, for example, should be told that if he disobeys his father he will never be punished. Why, it's obvious that would make quite a bit of difference in the behavior of the child. At least, it would have made a great deal of difference in my case, because I knew that when I disobeyed my father there was a razor strap. Now, that was a long time ago, you know, but razor straps used to hang in bathrooms and other places used by fathers, and my father didn't hesitate to use the razor strap. I felt the razor strap more than once, and can still remember it, and consequently the threat of discipline by a loving father, for I never felt anything about my father but that he loved me, that threat of discipline had a great deal of effect on my life. That's why I've been such a perfect man ever since, you understand. [Laughter]

But seriously, it's very plain that if we are to say that we may sin against the Lord God, and it doesn't make any difference in our fellowship with him, then clearly we are doing damage to what the Bible teaches concerning discipline. So, if we do come to a different interpretation of 1 John 1:9, and I do not want it understood by that that we are saying therefore, that that teaching that when a man sins he loses fellowship with and communion with the Father, and that that fellowship and communion may be restored through confession. I don't want to suggest that that's not the teaching of the Bible.

The question really is does 1 John 1:9 teach that? The Bible teaches it. That is, that is a biblical doctrine, but is it taught in this particular text? That's the question. And I think it's well for us to remember that many doctrines in the Bible are like this. There are many texts that teach certain doctrines, and the weight of the teaching of the Bible on this particular doctrine is so heavy that the doctrine is clearly taught in the Bible. But individuals may differ over whether it's taught in this particular text or not. And so, we are not talking about the validity of that teaching. We are talking whether this particular text teaches that if a believer sins, and if he confesses his sin, God is faithful and just to

forgive his, believer's, sins and to cleanse him, a believer, from all unrighteousness. That's the question.

Now, in order to show you that the other thing is taught in the Bible, let's for a moment turn over to 1 Corinthians chapter 11, and let me read verses 31 and 32. Here there had been disorders at the Lord's Table, and as a result of the disorders at the Lord's Table in Corinth, discipline had taken place. Some of those believers were weak, Paul wrote in verse 30 of 1 Corinthians 11. Some of them had persisted in their sin long enough for him to inflict physical sickness upon them. "Some are sickly among you." And then using the special Christian word for a believer's death, which is sleep, the apostle says, "And many sleep." Now, that means that their sin was such that God had to take their physical life, not their spiritual life, their physical life. They had become a reproach to the name of the Lord, and so in order to preserve the testimony, he had taken them to be with him. So, the things that were done at the Lord's Table were disorderly, and brought reproach on the name of God. "For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep." There are three stages in discipline. There is weakness, sickness, death.

Now, the Father has these degrees of discipline that he exercises when his children get out of line. That means that when we disobey him, and we persist in our sins, do not confess them, keep on our wayward path away from him; no matter what that sin may be, just simple gossip, that's enough to bring you under the discipline of God, and if you persist in it you might find physical difficulties. And if you persist in it, you do not respond to the difficulties, there may come a time when God must say, "Well, he's good enough for heaven, because he's trusting in the merits of Jesus Christ, and he's justified by faith in him, but he's not good enough for earth." He's a reproach upon the name of the Lord God. He's doing damage to the testimony of God, and so he takes that life home to the Lord.

Now, notice verse 31 of 1 Corinthians 11. "For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged," Paul says. "But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world." Now, when he writes in verse 31, "For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged," when he says judge ourselves, that's confession of sin. That's looking at our life and saying, "Ah, I have been guilty of gossip. I have been guilty of lasciviousness. I have been guilty of uncleanness. I have been guilty of unlove or whatever it may be." If would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. So, the Bible teaches plainly that when we sin our relationship with the Lord is disturbed, and confession is necessary. And when confession takes place, then we do receive forgiveness, a temporal forgiveness and a restore to communion.

In Psalm 32 after David's great sin and he struggled with it for a year, "Day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me. My moisture was turned into the drought of summer." Then in verse 5 of Psalm 32 he said, "I acknowledged my sin unto Thee, and mine iniquity have I not hidden. I said I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord, and Thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin." Well, there is a man of God who had sinned, his sin was the sin of adultery, and for a lengthy period of time he struggled with the discipline of God. And then finally he said that he acknowledged his sin, he confessed it, and the Lord forgave him.

Now, that's the teaching that these say is found in 1 John 1:9. So, it's not a question of whether that teaching is biblical or not. It's perfectly all right to say, "If we confess our sins as believers, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins." It's perfectly all right to say, as my friend Bob Theme does in Houston, that this text teaches "Rebound and keep moving." That is, confess your sin, you're restored to fellowship, and go on in your Christian living. That's perfectly all right. In fact, that's not only perfectly all right, but that's what's demanded by the Bible. Dr. Louis Sperry Chafer used to tell us at the seminary, "Men keep short accounts with God." And what he meant by that was that we

should, as we have come to the knowledge of the fact that we have sinned against the Lord God, it is then that we should confess our sins.

There was a black fellow who was listening many years ago to a preacher speaking on 1 John 1:9, and he was told that he should confess his sins when he sinned against the Lord God. And so afterwards, being puzzled, he came up to the preacher, and he said, I'd like to ask you a question. "Do you 'fess 'em as you doez 'em or duz you bunch 'em?" [Laughter] Well, the biblical teaching is we don't bunch them. We don't wait until the end of the day and say, "Well, I have four sins I need to commit tonight." But as we commit sin and come to the sense of the fact that it is a sin against God, it is then that we should confess the sin.

I remember hearing a message many years ago by Dr. Chafer, which he entitled, "First Aid for Sinning Saints." And he expounded this text. Well, it's a little more than first aid, because it does restore us to fellowship with the Lord God. Now, there is one other warning that I should give you if this is what you've been taught concerning 1 John 1:9. Let's just assume this is what you've been taught, or else that you understand this is a biblical doctrine even though it may not be taught by 1 John 1:9. If we do hold that it is important for us to confess our sins as we have committed our sins in order to be restored to fellowship with the Lord God, we must be careful to avoid a kind of Pelegian view of confession. Now, that is on the one hand to think of confession as a work that we do, because it is not a work that we do. It is the work of God the Holy Spirit to give us the sense upon dependence upon the Lord God that brings us to the sense of the need of confession of sin. It's not a work. We're not forgiven because we've accomplished a particular work.

And then also, we should not think of this as a mechanical thing. It has been often taught as something mechanical. That is, all you need to do is just to say after you've committed the sin, "Well Lord, I've sinned. Thank you for forgiveness." And go on and sin again; that's not the sense of this text. It's not to be used as a little formula,

which you just utter, but it is the expression of a person who has come to realize that he's offended a holy God. And because he's offended a holy God, he's not in right relationship with him, just like a little child who loves his father and realizes he's displeased his father, and he's very broken up over the fact that he's displeased his father, who has tears in his eyes, and who falls upon his father and confesses to his father that he's sinned against him.

I can remember my children occasionally, one particular time one of my children said something she was not supposed to have said, and I was lying on the bed taking a nap. And suddenly she burst into the room in tears, and just fell on me, and sobbing explained to me what had happened. Well, I think that's the kind of thing that's meant by "If we confess our sins." That is, confession is not a mechanical thing. It's something into which we enter with real feeling and understanding. Unfortunately, it's often been taught as simply a little formula, a little expression that you use, and you shouldn't be concerned over your sin particularly. We ought to be concerned over our sins. And our sins are sins that are not to be committed again.

Now, having said all of that, I'd like to suggest to you that there are other very sound interpreters who have espoused the view that 1 John 1:9 does not refer to believers and their sins, but unbelievers and their sins. The text is a part of a passage suggesting tests by which those who have affirmed the apostolic teaching may determine whether they really have life. Why was 1 John written? Well, now in chapter 5, verse 13 the apostle tells us why he wrote his epistle. He says in verse 13, "These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life." So, the epistle then was written that men that men might know that they have eternal life. It's generally held that the tests represent the views of false teachers influence by teachers who were touched by some form of early heresy, something similar to Gnosticism.

Now, it might be interesting for us to precisely identify that heresy, but it's not really important for our purposes. The question really turns upon the interpretation of the purpose of this first epistle, the context of this passage, and the usage of the term "forgive sins" in John. The decision's not an easy one, but in spite of the fact that it's not easy, in spite of the fact that the other interpretation is the very common one, I'd like to say that I lean to the second interpretation, although, I do not lean to it so strongly that I'm willing to risk my neck on it; if you understand what I mean.

Now if you've been around a theological seminary or around a Bible institute, a Bible college, you'll understand exactly what I mean. In other words, here is a disputed passage, and there are good men who have taken both of these interpretations. Taking 1 John 5:13 as a setting for the author's purpose, that is the epistle was written to believers that they may know that they have life unsettled by false teaching. They are, by the tests that are set forth in the book, to come to the assurance of the possession of life. Well, if that's so then it's not communion but life that is John's perspective. In other words, he's written an epistle in order that by certain tests you may know that you have eternal life. So, just for you, for example, if I'm the Apostle John and you're the readers to whom he addressed his letter, he writes to you as professing believers, and he says, "This is the way that you can know that you have eternal life. Here are some of the tests." We know that we pass from death unto life if we love the brethren. That's a test that's to be applied. So, you are to ask yourself, "Do I really love the brethren?" Well, if I can honestly say I love the brethren, then I have passed that test.

Now, he also says, "Little children, let no man deceive you, he that doeth righteousness is righteous even as he is righteous." Do we do righteousness? Well, if we can pass that test, that's another test, by which we can know that we really have life. So, a series of tests are set forth in the Gospel of John in order to determine or in order that a person may determine that he has life. There is no indication, so far as I can tell, that there are two kinds of Christian life in view in 1 John. So, now this immediate context

has some tests. It's characterized by three tests of an antithetic nature. They are laid down in the form of the false claim of the heretics. Verse 6 of chapter 1, "If we say," now, he's not using the "we" of believers. He's using the "we" of the heretics. If we say, it's like we were discussing something about the Cowboys, for example. Their offensive line is not the greatest offensive line in the National Football League at the present moment. In fact, when they line up against the opposing line, that other line is just like a brick wall. There is no way, it seems, for our men to get through. Now, someone might say, "Well, that's not really the problem at all." And I might say, "Well now, if we say that that's not the problem, then we just don't understand football. And what I'm doing is using the "we" in the sense of a statement that's been made. If we say such and such, or if we say the offensive line's not bad, then we don't know much about football. Something like that, you know.

Now, that's the sense, and I realize I have to be careful because there might be a Cowboy lurking in the auditorium, and he might come up afterwards and let me know what the real truth is. In which case, I acknowledge I am an amateur. It's only an illustration Randy. Verse 6, "If we say," now notice verse 6, here is the first test, "If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth:" That's a test that he sets forth derived from the teaching of the heretics. "If we say that we have fellowship with him and walk in darkness," see these men were saying that they had fellowship with him, but they were walking in darkness.

Now notice verse 8, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." There actually were people who were saying, "We don't have sin." Now verse 10, "If we say that we have not sinned," an active sin, "we make him a liar, and his word is not in us." So, the immediate context is characterized by three tests of an antithetic nature laid down in the form of a false claim of these heretics. Each is followed by the truth, which is its antidote. The issue at stake is fellowship with the Father and the Son. Verse 3 and 4, "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye

also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ." But that is eternal fellowship, not temporal fellowship. So, it would seem then that he's not talking about two kinds of Christian life, but he's talking about Christian life as over against the lack of Christian life.

And finally, and I think this is even more important than what we've said previously. This expression, "to forgive sins" occurs three times in Johannine literature. Now, you've already seen two of them. In John chapter 20 and verse 22 and 23, it was there, but there it was it was clearly a reference to the forgiveness of the penalty of sin, a forgiveness that applies to an unbeliever. Will you turn over to chapter 2 and verse 12 in this same first epistle? Here we read, "I write unto you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake."

Now, what kind of forgiveness is that? Practically every commentator would admit that the forgiveness referred to here is not the forgiveness of a saint, but the forgiveness of an unbeliever. "I write unto you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake." That's the forgiveness of unbelieving sin. The forgiveness in John 20 is the forgiveness of unbelieving sin. Is it not then reasonable that the Apostle John should use that same expression in the same sense? And therefore, in 1 John 1:9 when we read, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." He's not talking about believers' sins; he's talking about unbelievers sins.

And he's talking about an unbeliever who comes into the presence of the Lord as the gospel is, or has been, preached unto him and acknowledges that he is a sinner, that he has sinned against the Lord God. He is worthy of eternal death because of the guilt and penalty of sin, and he calls upon the Lord God to forgive him in the light of what Jesus Christ has done. And therefore we read, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just." Faithful to his word, because he says if you come and plead Christ, "I will forgive your sins." And just because the law is meted out upon Christ and the penalty is paid.

He's faithful to his word, and he's just in light of the fact that Christ has paid the penalty to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all the guilt and stain of our sins. The text is, in my opinion, more likely a gospel text than any other explanation of this text, more likely than the other interpretation.

Now, the third passage is 1 John chapter 2, verse 12, and we have already referred to that. This is patently the same sense of the term. It's a reference to the forgiveness of unbelievers' sins. Now then, as we close with just a minute, let me just remind you that while I doubt that 1 John has the sense of forgiveness of believers' sins and restoration to communion, that is a doctrine taught in the Bible. I just think that when we are teaching it we should go to other passages, like Psalm 32 and verse 5, or like 1 Corinthians chapter 11, verse 30 and 31; and perhaps, it's implied even in the famous passage in John chapter 13. And there are other passages that teach that when a believer sins, communion is broken, and that confession is needed for the restoration of communion.

Now, most of you in this audience no doubt are believers. When you sin, communion with the Father is broken, and in order for that communion to be restored, confession of sin is necessary, meaningful confession, confession with the intention of not falling into that same sin, with the desire, with the plea to the Lord that you be delivered from that particular sin. The promise of forgiveness and restoration to communion is something that the Bible teaches as well. Let's close with a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for the privilege and the opportunity that we have of studying the word of God. And we do pray that if there are some here who have never believed in Christ, that they may confess their sinful state before Thee, and flee to the cross. For us, Lord, who are believers, deliver us from our daily sins. Enable us to keep short accounts with God. And as we sin and as our relationship of communion with Thee is disturbed, oh God...

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[RECORDING ENDS ABRUPTLY]