

Growing in Christ

Lesson 3: Confession

Notes for the leader: This is the third in a series of lessons about "Growing in Christ." This lesson focuses on the importance of repentance and confessing our sins quickly whenever we realize we have sinned or fallen short of what God wants of us. It also touches topics that are often of great concern to prisoners -- "Can I lose my salvation?" and "Have I committed the Unforgivable Sin?"

Introduction

The first lesson in this series focused on the important step of faith that you must take to become a follower of Jesus Christ and a member of his Church and his Kingdom. The second lesson focused on dealing with temptation -- a reality that all of us have to deal with every day, even after we make a commitment to follow Jesus! We studied God's promise that **He will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we can bear, but when we are tempted, he will always provide a way out.** (1 Cor 10:13) We learned that we need His help to avoid sinning -- if we try to do it on our own spiritual strength alone, we're going to fail.

This lesson focuses on what happens when someone sins after he becomes a Christian. This is a subject that we are often asked about, both in prison ministry and outside of prisons. Many people get worried that their sins may not be forgiven, and that they may lose their salvation. This is a serious subject -- one that Christian teachers have had different opinions about over the centuries. This is a subject that needs to be studied and understood!

First, let's review some of the promises that Jesus made to those who follow him:

John 5:24

I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.

John 6:37-39

All that the father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away.

For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but the will of him who sent me.

And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day.

These verses promise that **if you make a sincere commitment to follow Jesus, you become part of his Kingdom forever.** He has **set you free** from the power of sin. **You don't have to sin any more!** And he has promised to protect you from temptations that are too strong for you; he has promised that he will make **sure there will always be a way out!**

So, then -- what happens when we sin? Are we **always** forgiven, no matter how many times we sin? If so, **why can't we just go ahead and do whatever we feel like?** Why do we need to worry about sin any more?

Look at 1 John 1:8. This letter was written by Jesus' disciple John when he was a very old man. **It is written to believers** and it talks about this very subject.

1 John 1:8 – 2:6

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense —Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.

He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands.

The man who says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him:

Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.

There are two important principles that John is giving us here:

- **you must never sin deliberately.**
- **you must never fool yourself into thinking that you are no longer a sinner.**

There is a big difference between **sinning because of weakness** and **sinning deliberately!** You must never fall into the trap of saying, "I can go ahead and do this ... then I'll confess it to God, and he'll forgive me!" **If you do that, you are taking God to be a fool!** And that is a **very** dangerous thing to do! God **knows** what's in your heart. He **knows** if you're sincere or not. **You can fool other people, but you can't fool Him!** The greatest danger is that **you may fool yourself.** That's what John is warning us about in this passage.

***Notes for the leader:** Hand out copies of the Small-Group Discussion Questions to each person. Depending on the size of the group, have them break into small groups of four to ten. Make sure that each group has a capable leader, who can keep the discussion moving and well-focused. Make sure the groups understand how much time they have. 15 minutes should be a minimum. 20 minutes is better. Give each group a time warning three or four minutes before they need to reassemble as a large group, so they can bring their discussion to an orderly conclusion.*

Follow-up Discussion

Notes for the leader: The main purpose of the follow-up discussion is to make sure that each small group has grasped the main ideas of the study. You can skim quickly through the answers if it seems clear that everybody understands them. If not, pick a group that "got it" and have them explain the answers.

If circumstances permit, it's a good idea to walk around and listen to each group discussion so that you know who "got it" and who didn't.

1. If we, as Christians, pretend that we never sin, how does this affect our relationship with God? (*1 John 1:10*)

We make God out to be a liar, and his truth is not in us!

2. If we fall into sin and quickly confess our sins to God, how will he deal with us? (*1 John 1:9*)

He is faithful and just, and will purify us from our unrighteousness...

3. Why is God willing to forgive our sins? (*1 John 2:1-2*)

Because of the atoning sacrifice of Christ, which God had planned from the very beginning of the world.

There is **always** a penalty for sin. God **never** says, "Sin doesn't matter." But **He** has paid the penalty for our sin **Himself!** All we need to do is to **surrender** ourselves to Him and make Jesus Christ the Lord of our lives.

4. How can we test ourselves to see if we are living a Christian life? (*1 John 2:3-6*)

We must make sure that we are obeying his commands, that we are walking as Jesus walked. It does no good to "**talk the talk**" if you're not "**walking the walk**"!

5. Is it possible to be sure that you have eternal life? (*1 John 5:12-13*)

Yes! That's why John says he is writing this letter! He doesn't want the young Christians to worry about losing their salvation. As long as they are sincere in their commitment to Christ, they (and we) are safe. Remember the verses we read earlier?

Whoever comes to me I will never drive away ... And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day.
(*John 6:37,39*)

Now let's deal with two more questions: **really tough questions:**

- Is it possible for someone who has proclaimed his faith in Christ to lose his salvation?
- How can you be sure you haven't committed the "unforgivable sin" that Jesus talks about?

What happens when someone who seems to believe in Jesus returns to sin, and ends up rejecting the faith? Is he saved, or not? Does Jesus' promise still hold – that he will lose none of those the Father has given him?

Perhaps the person who turns away from Jesus was never really sincere in the first place. Perhaps he was. Here's the heart of the problem: we're dealing with something that is **private, only between God and that person**. We can't tell if he was sincere ... but **God** knows!

The question of whether someone who is really saved can ever lose his salvation is a question that theologians have argued about for centuries. Here's a "middle-of-the-road" answer: If you were **really sincere** in your comment to Jesus, **you will come back** to him, even if it takes many years to do so, and he will wait for you. If you **weren't sincere, you won't come back**.

Sometimes people ask, "What if I get killed before I come back to Jesus." The best answer to this is, "Why take that chance? Come back now!"

Now, what about the "unforgivable sin" that Jesus talks about in these verses:

Matthew 12:31-32

And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.

Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

To understand why Jesus is saying this, you must read the earlier part of this chapter. The religious leaders have been following Jesus around, watching him heal the sick, the blind, and the crippled. They have been accusing Jesus of breaking the Jewish Law, because he even heals people on the Sabbath! The poor "sinners" have been rejoicing and following Jesus, but the religious leaders have become more and more opposed to Jesus and have begun to plot to kill him.

Finally, in a major confrontation in chapter 12 of Matthew, the religious leaders accuse Jesus of doing these miracles by the power of Satan! Jesus first points out to them that their argument is completely absurd -- it makes no sense that Satan would allow his own power to be used to destroy himself. But then Jesus warns the religious leaders with some of the strongest words in all of the Bible: "If you, even though you are the religious leaders, are **so far gone spiritually that you can no longer tell the difference between the work of God and the work of Satan, then there's no longer any hope for you!**"

Jesus **never** said anything like this to ordinary people -- only to the religious leaders who **thought they were not sinners and didn't need to be forgiven**. To the people **who knew that they were sinners, and were willing to admit it**, Jesus gave a message of **encouragement, hope, and power**.

So here's the answer to the question of whether you have committed the "unforgivable sin": **If you know you're a sinner, that is proof that you haven't committed the unforgivable sin!**

Notes for the leader: Before the group leaves, make sure everyone has a copy of the "Take-Home Thoughts" handout. This will help them remember the things discussed in the lesson. Some of them may also use these handouts to explain the lesson to a cell-mate or in a letter they write to their families. You never know how far the lesson materials may travel, or whose life may be affected by them!

Small-Group Discussion Questions

Confessing Our Sins *(1 John 1:8 - 2:6; 5:12-13)*

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2. If we fall into sin and quickly confess our sins to God, how will He deal with us? *(1 John 1:9)*
3. Why is God willing to forgive our sins? *(1 John 2:1-2)*
4. How can we test ourselves to see if we are living a Christian life? *(1 John 2:3-6)*
5. Is it possible to be sure that you have eternal life? *(1 John 5:12-13)*

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Take-home Thoughts About ...

Confessing Our Sins

Many Christians worry about "losing their salvation" when they sin. This is a serious issue, which Bible teachers have argued about for hundreds of years. **Will God always forgive us**, no matter how many times we sin? If so, **why can't we just go ahead and sin all we want**, knowing that He will just forgive whatever we do?

First, remember what Jesus promised: *All that the Father gives to me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away.... And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day.* (John 6:37-39)

If you make a **sincere commitment to follow Jesus**, he **sets you free from the power of sin**, so that **you don't have to sin any more**. **He protects you from temptations** that are too strong for you, and makes sure there is always a way out.

But you still have **freedom to choose** whether to follow him or not. **He will never drive you away** – but if you choose to do so, **you can walk away from him**, as the son did in Jesus's story (*Luke 15*). He will let you go, then wait for you to decide to **come back to him**. Don't take the chance that you may die before coming back! If you need to come back to him and start over, **do it now!**

God knows the difference **between sins we commit out of weakness** and **sins we commit deliberately**. How can we tell who is really sincere in their commitment to follow Jesus? We can fool each other. We may even fool ourselves. **But we can never fool God!** So don't try! If you ever find yourself saying, "I'll just go ahead and do this, then ask God to forgive me later," **fall on your knees** right then **and ask him to protect you** from thoughts like this! (*See 1 John 1:8 – 2:6.*)

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