

What Does 1 John 1:9 Really Mean?

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Introduction: What does 1 John 1:9 mean? The Apostle John writes, “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).

Views on what 1 John 1:9 means:

I have met pastors and other individuals who have told me one of the following views:

1. 1 John 1:9 was written to unsaved people and the “confession” of sin is for their salvation.
2. 1 John 1:9 is urging the Christian to think back to the day when he or she “confessed” his or her sins and was saved.
3. 1 John 1:9 is the Christian “confessing” a particular sin in order to get forgiveness and restored fellowship with God.
4. 1 John 1:9 is urging the Christian to “state the same things” God states about sin. In a real sense John is encouraging the Christian to have a “confession” or a “doctrinal statement” on sin. (Author’s view)

Notice the following facts about 1 John 1:9:

1. 1 John Is Written to Christians

There is little joy and value of the great jewels for Christians in chapter one, if they are written to non-Christians. The context of chapter one and two give a clear indication the epistle was written to Christians.

2. Traditional Views

There are two traditional interpretations of 1 John 1:9. First, traditionally, it has been said, “In order for us to have forgiveness, we need to confess the specific sin that we have committed to the Lord;” and Second, traditionally, it has been said, “When I sin, God is unhappy with me and His relationship to me is broken.” I believe both traditional interpretations are incorrect, and do not represent what John was saying in the text.

3. Christian Life Problems and the Traditional Views

The traditional views of 1 John 1:9 have created two doctrinal problems for believers in their Christian walk.

The first traditional view of 1 John 1:9 has perpetuated a spiritual merry-go-round. The spiritual merry-go-round goes like this, (1.) “confess” (2.) “forgiveness” (3.) “sin” then (4.) “confess” (5.) “forgiveness” (6.) “sin” then (7.) “confess” (8.) “forgiveness” (9.) “sin.” Christians are told that if they would just confess their specific sin to God, He would forgive them and everything would change. So after they have confessed a particular sin they have a good feeling because they get what think is forgiveness. Then, the next day or the next week they commit the sin again and believe they fell from grace. Then the cycle starts again but nothing really changes. Thus the traditional understanding of 1 John 1:9 has become a “secret formula for dealing with sin” but never seems to work. However, 1 John 1:9 was designed to stop the spiritual merry-go-round when one understands John’s original thoughts.

The second traditional view of 1 John 1:9 has perpetuated a view that God is angry at me when I sin, has changed His affection toward me, and has broken off His relationship with me. Many Christians believe that they are so sinful they could never repair the broken relationship with God. Some actually believe God hates them so much now that they have sinned that restoration is almost impossible. However, 1 John 1:9 was designed to correct views of ourselves, sin and God.

4. Doctrinal Problems with the Traditional Views (No contradiction in John)

The First Epistle of John does not doctrinally contradict other passages of God's Word.

Addressing the first traditional view, the Bible teaches that Jesus died on the cross for "all our sins" past, present, and future. Whatever John is stating, it can't be that we need to confess a particular sin in order to get forgiveness, when Jesus already forgave that sin.

Addressing the second traditional view, John states that we all have sin existing in us (1 John 1:8) and we all are still consistently sinning (1 John 1:10). Therefore, under this view God would never be happy with us and we would never be able to be in a state of fellowship with Him.

5. Difficulty in Translating

There is a certain amount of difficulty in translating 1 John 1:9 within the context of 1 John 1:5-2:2. If we just look at 1 John 1:9 we may think we know what it means, however, without actually doing the hard work of dealing with the original texts and the difficult structures of the Greek, we may very well miss John's true teaching. What usually happens is we accept the traditional understanding of 1 John 1:9 out of fear of changing our understanding. If we translate the passage literally according to Greek syntax and look at the context of the passage, I believe it doesn't say what we have traditionally made it say!

6. Greek Scholarship

There are six Greek "third-class conditions" ("ean" and the subjunctive mood) in the context from 1 John 1:6-2:1, and 1 John 1:9 contains one of them. Translators and commentators have essentially given done one of three main thoughts trying to deal with the third class condition in 1 John 1:9: (1.) they have ignored the Greek third class condition and emphasize the subjunctive mood of the verb making the "if" statement "supposed true, but not assumed" ("When I sin..."); (2.) They have changed Change the Greek third class condition into a first class condition, making the statement "assumed presently true" ("Since I am sinning..."); and (3.) They have changed the Greek third class condition into a second class condition ("I am not sinning now, but when I do sin...").

It is a tragedy to the Christian life not to deal properly with the "third class condition." Many Greek scholars and commentators do not want to do the hard work with the difficult construction for fear of what the reader would think in light of the traditional views of 1 John 1:9.

7. Context

- (1.) We are to work on our Christian lives so as not to continually fall into sin (1 John 2:1).
- (2.) We will always have sin present in our lives (because we are not yet glorified (1 John 1:8).
- (3.) We can't say that we have not sinned (1 John 1:10).
- (4.) We need to learn to say the same things God says about our sin (1 John 1:9).
- (5.) Even though we have sin in our bodies and have committed sins, Jesus is faithful and just to forgive us all our sins (past, present and future) and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:8,9).
- (6.) When we do sin, Jesus is our "advocate" and our "propitiation" for all our sins (1 John 2:1-2).

8. Results of this Study

Some will think I am advancing cheap grace or forgiveness, and that the believer doesn't need to confess or deal with his sin at all. This is not true. I do believe when the Christian sins, it is the Christian who changes by having guilt and it is not God who changes. John's "First Epistle of John" deals heavily with sin and the believer. When a Christian realizes: (1.) the translation of the Greek of the passage, (2.) the Greek syntax of the passage, and (3.) the context of First John, there will be a greater awareness of the Christian life.

What does 1 John 1:9 mean?

Let's look at the context (1:5-2:2) and the syntax of the passage (1:9) to get the correct meaning.

Insight #1 The word “if” in 1 John 1:9

The word “if” is a contingency statement. “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)

What are “contingency statements?”

In the Greek the word “If” is used in at least three major ways: (1.) a *First Class Condition*, which is assumed “true;” (2.) a *Second Class Condition*, which is assumed “false;” and (3.) a *Third Class Condition*, which assumes “doubt.”

In 1 John 1:9, we have what is called a “third class condition.” The “third class” condition in the Greek is a construction that contains the word “if” (“ean”) plus a “verb with contingency” (“subjunctive mood”). The “third class condition” (“if”) takes precedence over the mood of the “secondary” verbs such as the “aorist tense verbs.” The aorist verb tenses are “punctilular” or tend to look at a “point in time.” The “aorist verbs” are in 1 John 1:8 and 1:10 and are translated one way. The “third class condition” (“if”) changes with the mood of “primary” verbs such as “present tense verbs.” The present tense verbs are “progressive” or tend to look at “continual action.” The “present tense verbs” are in 1 John 1:7 and 1:9 and are translated a different way.

There are six contingency statements or “third class conditions” in the context (1 John 1:5-2:2):

- 1:6 “if we say” (“ean”+“eipomen”)
- 1:7 “if we walk” (“ean”+“peripatomen”)
- 1:8 “if we say” (“ean”+“eipomen”)
- 1:9 “if we confess” (“ean”+“homologomen”)
- 1:10 “if we say” (“ean”+“eipomen”)
- 2:1 “if we sin” (“ean”+“tis homarte”)

Note these in the context of 1 John 1:5-2:2,

“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. 6 If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and 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 Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. 8 If we say that 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 that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us. 1 My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. 2 And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.”

Translating “if” (“ean”) from Greek to English: (1.) *First Class Conditions* are assumed “true” and are translated “since;” (2.) *Second Class Conditions* are assumed “false” and translated “not;” and (3.) *Third Class Conditions* assume “doubt” and “uncertainty” meaning the statement could be “true or false, and are translated in some cases “may or may not.” The “if” is not directing or commanding us to do something, but rather it is pointing to the fact that we may or may not do something.

Summary:

The traditional translation-

“If we confess...”

The literal translation-

“We may or may not confess....” or “Whether we confess or not....”

Insight #2 The verb form of “confess” 1 John 1:9

“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 verbs that start each of the verses in the context (1:5-2:2) all sound alike in the English, however, they are not the same in the Greek. The “third class condition” (“if”) takes precedence over the mood of the “secondary” verbs such as the “aorist tense verbs.” The aorist verb tenses are “punctiliar” or tend to look at a “point in time.” The “aorist verbs” are in 1 John 1:8 and 1:10 and are translated one way. The “third class condition” (“if”) changes with the mood of “primary” verbs such as “present tense verbs.” The present tense verbs are “progressive” or tend to look at “continual action.” The “present tense verbs” are in 1 John 1:7 and 1:9 and are translated a different way. The verb “confess” in our text is a present tense verb and in Greek it has the thought of “continual action.”

Summary:

The traditional translation - “if we confess....”

1:6 “if we say” (“eipomen” second aorist subjunctive act. 1st. pl.)

1:7 “if we walk” (“peripatomen” present subjunctive 1st. pl.)

1:8 “if we say” (“eipomen” second aorist subjunctive act. 1st. pl.)

1:9 “if we confess” (“homologomen” present subjunctive act. 1st. pl.)

1:10 “if we say” (“eipomen” second aorist subjunctive act. 1st. pl.)

2:1 “if we sin” (“ean” + “tis homarte”)

The literal translation - “We may or may not continually confess....” or “Whether we continually confess or not....”

1:6 “if we say” (“eipomen” second aorist subjunctive act. 1st. pl.)

1:7 “we may or may not continually walk” (“peripatomen” present subjunctive 1st. pl.)

1:8 “if we say” (“eipomen” second aorist subjunctive act. 1st. pl.)

1:9 “we may or may not continually confess” (“homologomen” present subjunctive act. 1st. pl.)

1:10 “if we say” (“eipomen” second aorist subjunctive act. 1st. pl.)

2:1 “if we sin” (“ean” + “tis homarte”)

Insight #3 The actual word “confess” 1 John 1:9

“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)

In English the word “confess” means “to disclose one’s faults.” This is where the traditional view of this verse has derived its misleading interpretation. However, the English word “confess” does not translate the Greek word (Gr. “homologos”) properly.

The English word translated “confess” (Gr. “homologomen”) comes from two Greek words, “homos” meaning “alike or same,” and “logos” meaning “word or speech.” The actual word translated “confess” (Gr. “homologomen”) means “to speak in accordance with” or literally “to say the same thing.” John in essence is stating that God has a “confession” or “doctrinal statement” on sin. John is encouraging the Christian to get a handle on God’s “doctrinal statement” on sin. John in 1 John 1:9 is exhorting the Christian to “state the same things about sin that God does.”

The English word has the idea of “asking for forgiveness, however, the Greek word means “to use the same or similar words or speech.” Instead of translating the Greek word used as “confess” we should

literally translate it “to say the same thing.” And in the context we would be saying the same things as “God says.”

Also, the English word translated “confess” is used by John in his writings eleven times. In all the other uses, John makes Christ the object of the verse. In translating the Greek word as “confess,” 1 John 1:9 would be the only place John would direct “confession” the way the traditional translation is stated.

Summary:

The traditional translation-

“If we confess....”

The literal translation-

“We may or may not continually say the same things as God....” or “Whether we continually say the same things (as God) or not....”

Insight #4 The word “our” in 1 John 1:9

“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 word “our” is not in the original Greek, but the definite article (“tas”) is in the text. It is the “article of previous reference.” It is a subtle contrast between “the sins” and “all unrighteousness.”

Summary:

The traditional translation-

“If we confess our sins....”

The literal translation-

“We may or may not continually say the same things as God of the sins...”

Insight #5 The word “sins” in 1 John 1:9

“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)

Whatever 1 John 1:9 says about “sin,” it must be understood in the context of verses 8 and 10. (1.) 1 John 1:8 says, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. In verse 8, John addresses a “denial of the indwelling principle of sin.” God says it exists! (2.) 1 John 1:10, “If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us. In verse 10, John addresses a “denial of committing any specific act of sin.” God says we sin! John is addressing false views from several groups that were affecting the church’s view of sin.

In the context, John wants the believer to “know” the correct things about “sin.” John wants the believer to “say” the same things about sin as God says about sin.

Summary:

The traditional translation-

“If we confess our sins....”

The literal translation-

“We may or may not continually say the same things of the sins (as God)....” or “Whether we continually say the same things about the sins (as God) or not....”

Insight #6 The words “He is” in 1 John 1:9

“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 words “He is” is in the “present tense.” This means that the character and nature of “Jesus is continually...” Jesus’ character and nature do not change no matter what we do.

Summary:

The traditional translation-

“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just...”

The literal translation-

“We may or may not continually say the same things about the sins (as God), He is continually faithful and just...” or “Whether we continually say the same things about the sins (as God) or not, He is continually faithful and just...”

Insight #7 The word “to” in 1 John 1:9

“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 word “to” (“hina”) is a clause and should be translated “so that.” It is a “result clause” and can be translated in several ways to get the point of result across to the reader. Whatever follows the word “to” is the result of the previous words. In other words, forgiveness and cleansing are the “result” of God being faithful and just, not because we confess our sins.

Because He is continually faithful and just, He forgives and cleanses us.

Summary:

The traditional translation-

“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to...”

The literal translation-

“We may or may not continually say the same things about the sins (as God), He is continually faithful and just so that...” or “Whether we continually say the same things about the sins (as God) or not, He is continually faithful and just so that...”

Insight #8 The words “forgive and cleanse” in 1 John 1:9

“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 word “forgive” (Greek “aphe” second orist subj. act. sing.) comes from a root word which means “to send away” and is the orist tense showing a “point of time.” This point of time could refer back to what was done at the cross, which “forgave” the believer of all sins past, present and future “at that point,” or it could look at the whole life of the believer, who has all his or her sins past, present and future, “forgiven.”

The word “cleanse” (Greek “katharise” first orist subj. act. sing.) means “to purify” and is the orist tense showing a “point of time.” This point of time could refer back to what was done at the cross, which “cleansed” the believer of all unrighteousness past, present and future “at that point,” or it could look at the whole life of the believer, who has all his or her unrighteousness past, present and future, “cleansed.”

Again, in relationship to the “result clause” (“hina”), we learn that “forgiveness” and “cleansing” happen because God is faithful and just, and not based on if we confess our sins to Him.

Summary:

The traditional translation-

“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

The literal translation-

~~“We may or may not continually say the same things about the sins (as God). He is continually faithful and just so that He has forgiven us the sins and has cleansed us from all unrighteousness.”~~ or “Whether we continually say the same things about the sins (as God) or not, He is continually faithful and just so that He has forgiven us the sins and has cleansed us from all unrighteousness.”

Conclusion: Some may say, we can live however we want because I do not need to “confess” my sins to God. Not true. Because we are to “repent” meaning changing our minds about sin and changing our direction concerning our activity in sin. We can only do this if we “say the same things about our sin as God does.” When we sin it still costs us our blessings, our rewards, our crowns, our filling/control of the Holy Spirit. Understanding or translating 1 John 1:9 correctly does not change God’s Word on sin or dealing with sin.

There are two things 1 John 1:9 (and the context of 1 John 1:5-2:2) teaches us worth noting.

1. We need “to say the same things God says about sin.” What does God say about sin?

- I am capable of sin
- Jesus died for all my sins
- All my sins were forgiven at the cross
- I am to live a life apart from sin
- I still have a sin “nature” (the Adamic sin principle inherited from Adam)
- I have sinned since I was saved
- I will sin again in the future
- I need to stop choosing sin
- I need to make no provision for sin

God wants us to “say” what He “says” about sin, and make changes accordingly.

2. John gives us some insights into God’s view of sin

In 1 John 1:8, John says the Christian cannot say “I have no sin” (“sin” present active indicative 1st plural). Every Christian has sins (plural) presently in his or her life.

In 1 John 1:10, John says the Christian cannot say “I have not sinned” (“sin” perfect active indicative 1st plural). Every Christ has sinned somewhere along his or her walk with abiding results.

3. God is committed to fellowship with me even in my sin because of all that Jesus did on the cross.

When I sin, God doesn’t change, rather, I have changed. Sin doesn’t affect God, it affects me.

The word for “fellowship” (Greek “koinonia”), found in the context of 1 John 1:5-2:2, means “to have joint-participation with someone else in things possessed in common by both.” All the things Jesus did on the cross continue to be applied to us regardless of our sin. We hold and take part in all these things regardless of sin.

- Jesus redeemed us from all our sins, not just the ones prior to our salvation.
- Jesus died in our place for all our sins, not just the ones prior to our salvation.
- Jesus died to give us forgiveness of all our sins, not just the ones prior to our salvation.

- Jesus died as a propitiation for all our sins, not just the ones prior to our salvation.
- Jesus died to reconcile us to God due to all our sins, not just the ones prior to our salvation.
- Jesus died and rose from the dead to give us regeneration, new life, because our sins are gone.
- Jesus died and rose from the dead to justify us, meaning He declared us righteous, because our sins are taken care of through Him.
- Jesus died and rose from the dead to adopt us, meaning He gave us of all the rights of adult sons, because all our sins are taken care of through Him.
- Jesus died and rose from the dead to give imputation, meaning our sins are transferred to Him and His righteousness is transferred to us, because all our sins are taken care of through Him.

Jesus rose from the dead to give us glorification, meaning He will change us to conform to His likeness, because all our sins are taken care of through Him.

- Jesus is now our advocate, meaning He is pleading our case before the Father, when we do sin, (1 John 2:1-2)
- Jesus is now our propitiation, meaning not only did He die as our propitiation, but His present ministry is satisfying God when we do sin, (1 John 2:1-2)

The traditional way we have defined and understood “fellowship” is that we are rightly related to Him only when we do not have sin in our lives, because we have confessed all our sins. This is not the biblical understanding of fellowship. If you think there is a point in time when you absolutely have no sin, you are sadly mistaken. John tells us we all have sin, (1 John 1:8,10). So in effect, I have sin in my life and will always have some sin in my life, and based on the traditional definition of fellowship and confession, I could never have fellowship with Him. However, we fellowship with God, because He has done everything for us, including dealing with our present sins. Unlike any human relationship where one part of the couple affects fellowship between the both of them, God’s dealing with us on the cross, has taken care of both sides of our relationship.

God wants us to change and “walk in conformity to our position in Christ” sharing richly in the things Jesus died and rose again to give to us.

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