

Answering *Life's* Ifs

Letters from John, Part 2

I John 1:5-10

Pastor and author, John Ortberg, wrote about our sinful human nature and the need for confession in a humorous story from his own family life. At the time, his daughter Laura was 4 years old and his daughter Mallory was 2/12.

He writes, many years ago, we bought our first really nice piece of furniture. It was a pink sofa – but for the money we paid for it – it was called a mauve sofa. The man at the sofa store told us all about how to take care of it, and we took it home. Since we had small children at the time, the number one rule in our home from that day on became, “Don’t sit on the mauve sofa! Don’t play near the mauve sofa! Don’t eat around the mauve sofa! Don’t breathe on the mauve sofa! On every other chair in the house, you may freely sit, but on the mauve sofa, you may not sit, for on the day you sit thereon, you will surely die.”

But then one day came the “Fall” – there appeared on the mauve sofa a stain – a red stain – a red jelly stain. My wife called the man at the sofa factory and he told her the bad news. So she assembled our children in the living room to look at the stain on the sofa. She said, “Children, do you see that? That’s a stain. That’s a red stain. That’s a red jelly stain. And the man at the sofa store says it’s not coming out, not for all eternity. Do you know how long eternity is, children? Eternity is how long we’re going to sit here until one of you tells me which one of you put the red jelly stain on the sofa.”

For a long time they just sat there until finally 1 ½ year old Mallory cracked and said, “Laura did it.” Laura said, “I did not!” Then it was dead silence for the longest time. And I knew that none of them would confess putting the stain on the sofa, because they had never seen their mother that mad in their entire lives. I knew they wouldn’t confess because they knew if they did, they would spend eternity in time out.

Ortberg writes, I also knew they wouldn’t confess because, in fact, I was the one who got the jelly stain on the sofa . . . and I wasn’t sayin’ nuthin’ . . . not one word.ⁱ

The truth is . . . we’ve all stained the sofa . . . somewhere . . . somehow.

Our hearts are stained daily . . . our hands are stained often . . . our consciences are stained repeatedly.

Red stains . . . like crimson, Isaiah wrote.

Unlike this frustrated and angry mother, God knows everything already. He knows who did what . . . when . . . and where.

In fact, John opens a discussion on the sin of Christians and what to do about it by first reminding us that God is able to expose everything.

We’re back in *1 John and chapter 1 – now at verse 5 – where John writes, “And this is the message we have heard from Him – Jesus Christ – and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him is no darkness at all.*

God is light . . . a reference to His holiness, His perfection, His glory – even his person.

By the way, the fact that John refers to God as light and throughout his Gospel Jesus claims to be the light all this equates the essence of Jesus to be equal to the Father.

In fact, when Jesus Christ pulled back the curtain of His human flesh at the mount of transfiguration, Peter James and John had to shield their eyes because the Lord’s face shone like the sun and his clothing blazed with brilliant white light (Matthew 17:2).

The future dwelling of the believer in the Father’s House will be a place marked by brilliant light and no darkness at all (Revelation 22:5).

John adds for emphasis – and in Him there is no darkness.

This would have been radically different from the gods of the Greeks and Romans.

Their gods cheated and lied; they were immoral and unchaste; they were spiteful and malignant towards mankind; quarrelsome and abusive to each other. Whenever men create their own gods, they create them in their own image.ⁱⁱ

But our God is different . . . there’s nothing evil, or shady, or deceitful . . . there’s not even the slightest shadow of moral or ethical change (*James 1:17*).

In God there are no dark corners or moral inconsistencies.ⁱⁱⁱ

He is the God of light . . . and light exposes everything – which means He’s able to expose all the dark stains on the sofas of our hearts and lives.

Even if you’re clever enough to turn the cushion over and hide the stain; there’s no hiding from this God of infinite light and new stains will appear.

So the question is . . . what are you going to do about those stains – not just old ones but new ones?

In fact, the greater question would be, “How in the world will the sinning believer ever hope to get along with God?”

Who is perfection and holiness and light.

In order to help the believer answer that question, John the old and experienced Apostle puts together 5 different scenarios, all beginning with the little word, “If” in verses 6-10.

Before we unpack them, circle that little word, “if” . . . each of the next five verses begins with *ean* (εαν) which is the Greek word for “If”.

Five conditional clauses that answer the ifs of the Christian’s life.

Each of these five scenarios will warn and encourage and rebuke and inspire the Christian with the news of what it’s like to walk with the God of holy perfection and glorious light.

I’ve put each of these five scenarios into five positive commands.

1. Be honest!

The first one, from *verse 6*, is simply, “Be honest.”

Notice *verse 6*. ***If we say that we have fellowship with Him and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.***

Some would say that John isn’t talking to believers here because, they say, it’s not possible for a Christian to walk in darkness or to lie or to not practice the truth.

Oh? I’d like to talk to their wives – or their children – or their parents.

Would you notice John is writing to us – he uses throughout this paragraph, “we and us” for a good reason.

John isn’t defining justification, he’s defining sanctification.

He isn’t telling the unbeliever how to experience sonship, by means of your faith; he’s telling the believer how to experience fellowship; by means of your walk.

It’s possible for fellowship to be lost . . . not sonship – fellowship/communion/joyful partnership with God.

Just as my young children might have disobeyed me and if I knew it at the time, the last thing we would enjoy would have been fellowship . . . but they’re still my children.

And if you don’t know it by now, you’ll learn soon enough that the children of God have sin problems too. In fact, the power of sin can be operative in the life of the Christian as well as a non-Christian.^{iv}

Read the Apostle’s Paul’s personal testimony where he talks about the power of the sin principle in his life and the battle that rages on (***Romans 7***).

Listen to him at the end of his life, refer to himself as the chief of sinners (***1 Timothy 1:15***).

While John is certainly exposing some of the teaching of the Gnostics and the Docetists, he’s warning and encouraging the believer.

This first warning is written to challenge the believer to get honest before God.

Stop living a double life. He knows. He saw you spill jelly on the sofa. Get honest about your walk . . . the path of your feet.

The word John uses for *walking* here – ***walking in darkness*** – refers to moral conduct. And the present tense indicates that it is becoming a habitual way of thinking and acting throughout daily life.

What he’s saying is, if you’re thinking and acting according to the world which is always trying to squeeze you into its mold (***Romans 12:2***)– don’t think that at the same time you are allowing yourself to be molded by the world that you are making headway with God.

If that’s the case – notice, he writes boldly to us all – in *verse 6*, ***you’re lying*** – notice – “***we lie!***”

We’re pulling the wool over everyone’s eyes – we’re saying one thing but living another.

He writes here, We are not practicing the truth.

There were false teachers who were telling the believers in the first century that your body was fallen and it didn’t matter what you did with it – you could never hinder your spiritual connection with God.

John would say to them, that’s a lie. What you do with your body has a direct impact on the communion of your spirit with God.

So be honest . . . make sure what you’re saying is in fact what you’re doing.

To put it another way, make sure your walk measures up to your talk.

2. Stay close!

There's a second scenario – we'll pull from it a second, positive command – this one simply says, “Stay close!”

Notice, if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.

Get honest (*verse 6*); now stay close (*verse 7*)

Walking in the light, one author wrote, is a conscious endeavor to live a life in conformity to the revelation of God who is light.^v

And John encourages the believer with two different thoughts a Christian might be tempted to believe.

One – that a transparent life will ruin fellowship with other believers.

John says, “the opposite is actually true.”

Open honest confession as you expose your life to the light of Jesus Christ actually forms the foundation for genuine, joyful fellowship with one another.

Honesty is the basis for harmony.

The second thing a believer might be tempted to think is that if he walked closely with the Lord, exposing his heart and life to the light of Christ's holy perfection, there would be something that Jesus would find out that would ruin everything.

Again – the exact opposite is true, he writes here, because the blood of Jesus Christ is strong enough to cleanse every red stain.

There isn't anything Jesus can find out about you that He can't cleanse and forgive.

Isaiah wrote, ***“Though your sins are as scarlet they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson – they will be like wool.” (Isaiah 1:18)***

In other words, don't be afraid to hold your life up to the light – no matter what you discover, Jesus Christ can cleanse every stain away.

William Cowper struggled terribly through his Christian experience; the son of An Anglican clergyman, he failed in his efforts to pass the bar exam – literally threw away his Bible and attempted to take his life.

He was placed in an asylum run by a committed believer by the name of Nathaniel Cotton and under his care, William recovered. In fact, it was in that asylum where the words of the Apostle Paul anchored his heart, ***“being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God displayed publicly as the way of***

satisfaction through His blood through faith. (Romans 3:24-25)

Cooper would write,
*There is a fountain filled with blood (say it with me)
Drawn from Emmanuel's veins
And sinners plunge beneath that flood
Lose all their guilty stains.*^{vi}
Be honest . . . and stay close.

3. Get real!

Here's a third command . . . simply put, Get real!

Verse 8. If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.

This phrase – that we have no sin – refers to denying personal guilt.^{vii}

It's effectively saying, “My sin wasn't really sinful.”

It really wasn't all that bad.

For clarification, you might circle that word “*sin*” and write in the margin of your Bible the word ***guilt*** – for clarification.

The Gnostic false teachers in John's day were teaching this very deception – there was no need to feel guilty in anything you did – godly or ungodly; holy or unholy – it really didn't matter.

Sin isn't really sinful and there's no need to feel guilty about anything you want to do . . . if you want to enjoy life, you got to get over this idea of guilt.

One popular advice column agreed, “The first step you must take is to stop blaming yourself because your behavior is not your fault; refuse to accept blame - heaping blame on yourself only adds to your stress, low self-esteem, worry, depression, feelings of inadequacy and dependence on others. Let go of your guilty feelings.”^{viii}

Listen if you start thinking like that, you're actually in trouble. You start thinking like that and you're not thinking the truth – John writes here, ***the truth is not in us*** . . . basically, the truth is not operative in our lives.

I can't tell you how many times someone has told me, “Stephen, what I'm doing isn't wrong. I had one guy tell me some time ago that I was being way too black and white about a particular sinful activity and that what I really needed to do was get out more.”

John would effectively say in response, “No, what you need to do is get real . . . stop the fancy word-smithing and the clever rationale to try and get around sin.

What's really happening, he writes here in *verse 8*, is the simple fact that this kind of thinking leads to *self-deception – we deceive ourselves*.

The verb *deceive* here is from the Greek word *planao* (πλαναω) from which we get our word, planet.

It's a verb that refers to erratically wandering around – many in the ancient world thought of planets this way – that they were random, erratic wandering bodies.^{ix}

They were wrong about that too.

There's a fourth command and this one remedies everything, frankly.

Be honest, stay close, get real . . . and now, fourthly,

4. Admit everything

Look at *verse 9*. *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just/righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*.

The word John uses here for *confess* is a verb that means *to agree with another . . . to say the same thing about something* –

And in this context, it means to say the same thing about our specific sins that God says.

It's actually, taking God's side against yourself.^x

It's as if you step out of yourself and turn around and say to yourself, "Self, I am agreeing with God on this one – what you're thinking or what you're doing or saying is nothing more or less than sin." Let me give you a concise definition of Biblical confession; admitting that we disobeyed God, then agreeing with Him that we don't have an excuse.

Confessing sin to God, of course, is becoming a thing of the past simply because sin is being redefined.

One author wrote, "What we used to call sin is now an array of disabilities. All kinds of immorality and evil conduct are now identified as symptoms of [some] disorder. Modern culture has created a new gospel – man is not a sinner, he's a victim."

Our culture is losing its ability or even desire to assign guilt.

One case in point was the man who was shot and paralyzed while committing a burglary in New York. He was shot by the store owner, but the attorney successfully convinced the jury that the man was first of all, a victim of society, driven to crime by economic disadvantages. He was further victimized by the insensitivity of the store owner who shot him

and he, the victim, now deserved payment. The jury agreed and the store owner was required to pay the victim a huge settlement. Several months later, this same burglar, now wealthy and in a wheelchair, was arrested while committing another armed robbery.

Another man won the same kind of settlement; he had mugged and brutally beaten an elderly New York man in the subway, and was shot by police while fleeing the scene. Permanently paralyzed, he sued and won \$4.8 million in compensation from the New York Transit Authority. The elderly man he mugged, a cancer patient, was still paying doctor bills, while the thief, whom the courts deemed the true victim – was now a multimillionaire.

In yet another case, a drug dealer shot and killed 8 children and 2 women at close range and without mercy; jurors however were led to believe and they so decided that drugs and stress "were a reasonable explanation for his actions." They ruled that he had acted under extreme emotional distress and the influence of drugs and they found him guilty on a lesser charge that brought only a light sentence.^{xi}

Today, someone gets in trouble and they go to rehab . . . they blame it on culture or education or unemployment or some kind of personality disorder.

Why? Because saying, "I am sick is a lot easier on your conscience and your reputation than saying, I have sinned!"

An outgoing CEO of a large corporation offered help to the new CEO. He told him that three envelopes had been prepared and placed in the top drawer of his desk. Whenever he made a big mistake, he was to open envelope #1 and follow the directions. He promised the new CEO that his advice would work every time. For several months, the new tenure of the CEO worked wonderfully. But then, he made his first mistake. It was costly and undeniable. He remembered those envelopes and opened the envelope marked with a number 1 and the brief message simply read, "Blame me." So he did. He blamed the former CEO for the problem saying that he'd inherited the problems of the former CEO and there was nothing he could do about the issue that he'd encountered. Everyone believed him and things went back to normal. Less than a year later he made another big mistake. He opened envelope #2 and it read, "Blame the Board." So he did. And again, it worked. Months later this CEO made another big mistake. It was costly and obvious to everyone. He opened the third envelope and it simply read, "Prepare three envelopes."

Eventually, everyone runs out of people to blame.

Frankly, that's part of the good news of this paragraph. John is effectively telling us good news . . . God doesn't forgive victims with excuses; He forgives sinners who admit they have no excuse at all.

This is genuine repentance . . . its honest confession . . . its open admission to everything.

C. S. Lewis wrote that fallen man is not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement; he is a rebel who must lay down his arms – this process of surrender is called repentance.^{xii}

You might have notice that John moved from the singular mention of sin, in verse 7, to the plural use of sins, in verse 9.

Verse 7 is referring to our status – that is, we are continually in a cleansed state by virtue of the cross of Christ.

Verse 9 is talking about specific sins which need addressing.

The Old Testament sacrificial system dealt with this concept.

The offerings of the Levitical law included the sin offerings and the trespass offerings. The sin offerings related to the principle of sinfulness while the trespass offerings related to specific sins.

One author wrote, "The sin offering dealt with who they were and the trespass offering dealt with what they'd done. The sin offering dealt with the root of sin and the trespass offering dealt with the fruits of sin."^{xiii}

In the New Testament, Jesus taught the same principle to His disciples in the upper room where He grabbed a towel and began to wash their dirty feet. When Jesus got to Peter, Peter said, "You'll not play the role of a servant and wash my feet." And Jesus said, "If I don't wash you, you want have any part of me." And Peter said, "Then Lord, wash my whole body."

I love Peter.

And the Lord said to Him, "***He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean.***" (John 13)

In other words, Jesus was referring to the all-cleansing bath represented by God's application of Christ's death on our behalf – that total and completed and eternal payment for our sinfulness – who we are – cleansed by the offering of Christ once and for all.

Washing feet, on the other hand, was a metaphor Jesus used to represent the ongoing, daily cleansing in the lives of believers for what we do . . . we're not yet delivered from the presence and even participation in sin – in fact, the more you grow in Christ the more aware you are of your sinful thoughts and actions; you don't have to be justified again every time you sin – or, saved again – but you do need your feet washed.^{xiv}

It's this kind of specific cleansing that John speaks of in ***1 John 1:9***.

In fact, he alludes to the cross. ***Notice his promise here, "if we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous or just . . ."***

He is faithful – that is, He will keep His word – made as much to God the Son as to us. If Christ's sacrifice was satisfactory, then God will be faithful in forgiving us. He won't go back on His word.

But He's also righteous or just to forgive us.

This also references the cross-work of Christ.

God is just – that is, He will never demand a second payment for your sins.^{xv}

Jesus paid it all really means Jesus paid it *all*.

And who is it that finds daily forgiveness and cleansing – the blessing of a clean conscience and the benefits from this ongoing cleansing of dirty feet?

The one who admits everything and accepts the blame and calls it what it is.

Let me show you one more scenario. The positive command is simply, get right!

5. Get right!

Notice verse 10. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us.

In this final scenario, John pulls the mask off the Gnostic teachers who claimed to have arrived to a sinless state.

John uses the perfect tense to refer to someone who actually says they haven't sinned in the past – and they don't sin now and they're not going to sin in the future.

This denies the word of God that ***all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23)***

For all have sinned. The literal Greek meaning of that word for ***all*** – is . . . *all*.

But they're saying here, "Not everyone" . . . which is effectively calling God a liar.

They're also denying that mankind even needs saving; I mean if we're really not sinners, after all, why do we need a Savior, right?!

Listen, the most popular preaching in any generation is preaching and teaching that minimizes the sinfulness of man and exaggerates the tolerance of God.

Represented well in this satirical prayer, written tongue in cheek by a very insightful author to represent the average individual's shallow view of sin and the holy character of God – here it is, “Benevolent Father – we have occasionally had some minor errors of judgment, but they're not really our fault. We've made some unfortunate choices, due to forces beyond our control; we have sometimes failed to act in accordance with our own best interests and be true to ourselves;; but under the circumstances, we did the best we could. We are glad to say to you that we're doing okay, perhaps even slightly above average. Be your own sweet Self with those of us who admit we're not perfect. Grant that we never lose self-respect and we ask all these things according to the unlimited tolerances which we have a right to expect from you . . . Amen.”^{xvi}

You go to God like that – even a Christian – who begins to redefine his sin and downplay his depravity – he will move through the stages to a lifestyle that knows nothing of the truth – he will be heading for discipline and a tragic forfeiting of his full reward (**2 John 1:8**), unless he gets right with God and confesses his sins for what they are.

One author put the downward, dangerous path in these terms:

- Denial . . .
- Minimization
- Normalization
- Rationalization
- Justification
- Celebration^{xvii}

Let me amplify that and repeat the steps:

- It begins with denial . . . that's not me
- Then it moves to Minimization . . . it really doesn't affect me – it's not that bad
- Then on to Normalization . . . everybody does it
- Then Rationalization . . . you know, it makes sense
- And even Justification . . . I think it's the right thing to do

- Finally, Celebration . . . hey, this is the life

I have dealt with people over the years in that tragic and dangerous stage of celebration where they've told me, “My life is better than it's ever been . . . I've never been closer to God”; while at the same time abandoning the church or living in some kind of sinful lifestyle.

Hey, God doesn't mind . . . you need to loosen up.

My friend, it's one thing to lie to yourself . . . it's a far more dangerous thing to make God a liar.

Even a Christian can reach that stage where they walk in such opposition to the truth that they twist what God says into what they want God to say, so they can embrace their sin.

This 80 year old Apostle would grab us all by the nap of the neck and say, “Get right with God.”

Who do you think you're fooling? God knows where that stain came from!

You're only penalizing your joy and binding your heart and your hands and stifling your spirit when you allow your life to be caught up with unrepentant . . . unconfessed sin.

Richard Hoefler, in his book on several of the miracles of Jesus, and I close with this, wrote about Jimmy – a young boy – who along with older sister – were spending a couple of days visiting their grandparents.

While they were there, they gave him his first sling-shot. I have no idea what his grandparents were thinking . . . why not give him matches and gasoline while they're at it! But they did tell him to play with it in the woods behind their house. He had great fun . . . taking aim and letting a little stone fly – he never hit one thing he aimed at.

On his way home for dinner, he cut through the backyard and saw his Grandmother's pet duck. He took aim and let a rock fly. To his surprise, the rock hit the duck in the head and instantly killed it. The boy panicked, of course. In desperation, he took the dead duck and hid it behind the woodpile.

As he turned to run into the house, he saw his sister, Ashley, standing over by the corner of the garage. She had seen everything. They walked into the house together, but she never said a word.

After dinner Grandma walked into the kitchen and said “Okay Ashley, let's clear the table and wash the dishes.” Ashley hollered from the dining room, “Grandma, Jimmy said he wanted to help you in the kitchen today; didn't you, Jimmy?” And she

whispered to him, “Remember the duck.” So Jimmy did the dishes.

Later in the day their Grandfather called the children to go fishing. Grandmother said, “I’m sorry, but Ashley can’t go – I need her to help me get supper. Ashley smiled and said, “Jimmy actually told me he wanted to help with dinner tonight . . . isn’t that right?” And she whispered, “Remember the duck.” This went on for several days. Jimmy ended up doing all the chores for both he and his sister. Finally, he couldn’t take his imprisonment and guilt any longer, so he went to his grandmother and confessed everything. To his utter surprise, his grandmother took him in her arms and said, “I know . . . I was standing at the kitchen window and saw the whole thing. And because I love you, I was already willing to forgive you several days ago . . . and I would never again have mentioned the duck.”^{xviii}

The thief of our joy and the enemy of our soul and our own troubled conscience persists in whispering . . . “never forget that moment where you sinned.”

Remember the duck.

- Peter . . . remember the rooster.

- Thomas, remember your doubts you expressed.
- Men, remember abandoning me in my darkest hour . . .

Remember! And Jesus Christ says instead, “Walk with me in the light . . .

- Be honest about your sin
- Stay close to the Savior
- Get real about the direction of your life
- Admit everything when you sin against God
- Get right with Him lest you waste your life messing around with sin.

And shock of all shocks . . . when you come clean . . . if you haven’t yet come for a bath of salvation, God stands ready; if you have, but your feet haven’t gotten dirty, God stands ready to wash your feet in sanctification . . . and cleanse your conscience and straighten out the steps in your path.

He has a way of washing those red jelly stains away . . . no one else can . . . but He washes them away forever.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/20/2013 by Stephen Davey.

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i Citation: www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2004/september/15543.html

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