

Sermon 8, How to Deal with Sin, Pt. 1: The Way of Confession, 1 John 1:8-9

Proposition: The Christian deals with sin not by pretending he doesn't have any but by confessing that he does!

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the apostle John is continuing his sequence of hypothetical statements — if we say x, and if we do y. All three things we say are good things in some sense, but John shows that they are totally wrong in the context of the genuine Christian life. Instead of speaking the three boasts ("I have fellowship with Him, I have no sin, I have not sinned"), John demands that we undertake to perform the three actions (walking in the light, confessing our sins, and seeking the help of the advocate). We are looking today at the second boast, "I have no sin," and its antidote, true confession of sin. Essentially John is presenting to us two ways to deal with sin. The first one, the easy one, is the way of denial. It's the way of lying, and to go down that way is to ultimately lose the truth altogether. Much better is the other way, the way of confession; indeed, that way is the only way to actually

get rid of your sin. So what I hope to show you this evening is that the Christian deals with sin not by pretending he doesn't have any but by confessing that he does!

I. Dealing with Sin through Self-Deception, v. 8

We look first at the formally hypothetical but alas! All too real way of dealing with sin. This is a way that you have taken and I have taken. It is the method that the world around us still believes in taking. It consists of a simple statement, a mantra repeated until, in the face of overwhelming evidence, it is even believed. That statement is simply this: I have no sin.

A. "I Have No Sin"

This is a time-honored way of dealing with your sin! If you've ever tried to do street evangelism, you've heard a lot of variations on this one. "I'm good" is one of the classics. You wouldn't believe how many people have told me they're good, that they don't need Jesus because they are good enough to not want to talk to me about Him.

Brothers and sisters, obviously we in the church formally admit every week that we have sin. But do you actually believe that? If someone accuses you of a specific sin, do you get unbelievably angry and go on the offensive until that horrible pipsqueak offender gets on his knees and begs for your forgiveness? There's more than one way to say "I have no sin." You can say it in so many words, of course. But if you let yourself believe that you're better than another person, you're saying it just as much as the person who says it in so many words. If you think that God owes you something because of your heroic feats of self-denial and sanctification, you are thinking that for at least some intents and purposes, you have no sin. If you think that your child or your underling at work or the cashier at Walmart have no business pointing out your hypocrisy or other sin, you are in some sense subscribing to the phrase "I have no sin."

Well, that's one way to deal with sin. But it's a terrible way! To indulge in this kind of pride and let yourself think that because you're a Presbyterian, or a Reformed person, or a churchgoer, or not a drug user, or not a watcher of certain TV shows or consumer of certain cultural products, that you're a good person who has no sin is to deceive yourself, the apostle says.

B. Self-Deception

What is self-deception?

1. Lying to Yourself

Most of us would probably say something like "Lying to yourself." And so it is. But deceive is a transitive verb too. You can deceive *someone*. You can cause someone else to believe something false by deceiving him.

2. Believing Your Lie

And so though deception begins with lying to yourself, the act of deception is not really complete until you begin to believe your lie. I've said it before: Women will never be equal to men until a woman can walk down the street with a bald head and a beer gut and still think she's sexy. And brothers and sisters, a lie doesn't become true self-deception until you can commit adultery in the morning, poison people at lunch, swindle investors in the afternoon, and then go

home for dinner congratulating yourself on what a good fellow you are. In other words, lying to yourself really gets deadly when you begin to believe the lies! “Oh, this sin isn’t so bad. In fact, it’s quite harmless!” “It’s not wrong to watch PG-13 sexually titillating material.” “It’s not wrong to steal office supplies from work so long as I only take a little at time.” “It’s not wrong to be a lazy parent who doesn’t actually check up on my kids as long as I tell them ‘Hey kids, be good.’” Brothers and sisters, when you actually start to believe that kind of thing, your sin management scheme is really getting going — and really starting to bamboozle you.

3. Completely losing the truth

The result of believing your own lie is that you completely lose the truth. That’s what John means when he says “The truth is not in us.” Jesus and His Spirit leave you when you start lying to yourself and believing your own lies. They are the truth, and they can’t live with lies. If you insist on believing your own lies, soon you will lose touch with reality. You will no longer be able to tell the difference between fact and fiction, between the real and the artificial, between the fantasies of your own brain and the actual things happening right in front of you. I’m not going to take a position on this, because I honestly don’t know whether either side is correct. But I can guarantee you that large swaths of the American people see just such a man in President Donald Trump. Other large swaths saw just such a man in Barack Obama. And a few hearty souls see both Obama and Trump as victims of total truth loss. But if you can put aside your own politics for a moment and just imagine that all that their worst detractors say about Trump and Obama is true — that’s what John is saying about those who completely lose the truth. The truth is not in them. If they try to stop lying, try to cut through the confusion they’ve sown in their own minds and actually return to what’s real, they can’t. The truth is gone, flown right out of their minds, and they cannot get it back without actually dealing with their sin.

II. Dealing with Sin through Confession, v. 9

To actually deal with sin is to approach it in the way that John specifies here: to confess our sins.

A. Confession: Saying what God says about your sin

To “con-fess” is to say together. That’s also the etymological root of the Greek word translated “confession.” It means saying what God says about your sin. In other words, it means speaking the truth about your sin. “I have no sin” is emphatically not the truth. As my dad always used to say, if you say “I haven’t sinned” you just sinned — you lied. And that is exactly what John says here. If you say “I have no sin,” that’s a lie. Instead, you must speak the truth about your sins. You must say “Here’s what I did. I did it. It was wrong. I was wrong. Father, you condemn this sin and so do I.” That’s what confession means.

We are born with an extraordinary antipathy toward confession. We hate it! My three-year-olds crumple into sobs every time I tell them that they have to admit that they were wrong. They don’t want to admit any such thing! But confession requires that you say what God says, which is that your sin is evil, wrong, heinous, and your fault.

This way, the way of the confession, is the biblical way of dealing with your sin. This is how you and I ought to handle each and every one of our sins. Admit it to God and those against

whom you directly sinned, make it relationally right, and then make it financially right if possible too.

B. God's Action If We Confess

And when you do that, God will forgive and cleanse. Though you can't say that our confession obligates Him in the sense that it makes Him have to forgive us, it certainly is the appointed means through which He has promised to forgive us.

1. He Forgives

And that's exactly what He does. He forgives.

a) He does not hold our sins against us

In the first place, that means He takes away our sins. He does not hold them against us; He separates the sin from the sinner and removes the sin far away from us. You and I have a limited ability to do this. We can say, "Oh, that was the liquor talking; Charlie doesn't really think that." But God can take the most evil, dire, premeditated sins and separate them from us such that we can say, "God, I know you don't hold those words, that action, that thought against me. In fact, you have made me just as if I'd never done/said/thought that thing."

b) He does not exact from us the pain our sins cause

And so the most important aspect of forgiveness for our purposes this morning is that forgiveness means "I won't exact from you the pain that your offense caused me." Sin causes pain. Thus, when people sin against us, we want to get revenge and make them feel the pain so that we don't have to. Passing on the pain on somehow makes it not hurt as much. But forgiveness is the opposite of revenge. Forgiveness says "I will absorb the pain. I will suffer the pain in its entirety, and it will end here. I will not exact it out of you, even though you richly deserve it." Brothers and sisters, this is the amazing love of our God and savior. He forgives. He does not lay sin at our doorstep; He does not extract out of our hides the pain our sins caused, even when it is really bad sin that caused really bad pain.

2. He Forgives as a Result of His Character

But as glorious as that new of forgiveness is, the even better news is that He forgives us as a result of His character. His forgiveness is not an accidental thing, a side thing that He might drop at any time. Forgiveness is what He does because of who He is. Forgiveness is the result of His faithfulness and justice. In other words, when God stops being truthful and righteous, He will stop forgiving. God would have to stop being light. He would have to go dark before He would cease to forgive you and me.

a) Faithfulness/Truthfulness

God forgives us because of His faithfulness. The root word here in Greek is the one translated "faith," but in the Greek Old Testament it constantly translate the Hebrew "amen," which refers both to truth and faithfulness. God is faithful! That means that He is never going to recant or take back one of his promises. It means that He is never going to stop being true. It means that His word is good for eternity. When we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.

It is this faithfulness to His promise to forgive all who come to Jesus that gives us strong confidence to bring our sins to Jesus, no matter how bad and awful and evil they are!

b) Justice/Righteousness

But it's not as though our Father is unwillingly keeping a promise that offends His sense of propriety. Indeed, He tells us that He is righteous to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. The word here generally refers to justice as shorthand for every virtue and every right practice, thus its English translation "righteousness." God forgives because He is just. He also punishes because He is just. So how does He decide whether His justice will motivate Him to punish or to forgive? Brothers and sisters, the answer depends on one thing. God will punish all those who aren't covered by the punishment Christ underwent, and will forgive all those who are covered by the punishment Christ underwent. So you and I need to pursue justice and righteousness, yes — but when we fail, our hope is in the same righteousness of God that leads Him to punish sinners. Because He has already punished Christ vicariously for our sins, He can in justice do nothing but forgive our sins! That is the heart and soul of the gospel. Do you believe it? Do you know it? Are you confident that God will righteously forgive your sins for the sake of Jesus Christ?

3. He Cleanses Us

But glorious as forgiveness is, it is not the only aspect of Christ's work of salvation that's worth mentioning. John also provides another synonym describing what God does for us: He cleanses us from unrighteousness.

a) A removing of defilement

This cleansing is a removal of defilement. I spoke last week of taking the stain out of carpet. Our Father cleans us. Just like a hot shower takes the dirt and sweat off your skin, so God's forgiveness takes the defilement out of your character. You used to be a scumbag, a filthy rotten sinner. God came, and His forgiveness removed that defilement by cleansing your unrighteousness from you.

b) A removing of guilt

But secondly, this cleansing is a removing of guilt, a taking away of the liability to punishment. Forgiveness says "I won't take revenge." But cleansing says, "I see nothing in you deserving of condemnation or punishment." Do you see how glorious this is? God has cleansed you, and even in His infinite radiance there is no sign of anything worth condemning within you. Your iniquity is taken away, and your sin atoned for!

c) A result of fellowship

This faithful forgiveness, this righteous cleansing, is God's response to confession, and confession is a result of fellowship. You can't say what God does about your sin unless you know God well enough to know what He'd say. If you have nothing in common with God, if you don't share a love for Christ with Him, then you have nothing on which to build a relationship. You can't confess unless you've fellowshiped first — but of course, you can't have true fellowship without confessing.

Confession of sin comes from walking in the light. When you do that, you have fellowship with the Father, His Son, and His people. Won't you confess your sins this week, then? Every time you catch yourself sinning, say "No. I don't want to do this anymore. Father, I was just sinning against you. Please help me stop. Please forgive me for doing/saying/ thinking this thing that I ought not to have been doing/saying/thinking." And you know what? He will. He will forgive. He will cleanse. And you will be forgiven. You will be cleansed. Hallelujah — what a Savior! Amen.