

Sin and Forgiveness

Devotional Reading: [Isaiah 59:1–8](#)

Background Scripture: [Genesis 3:1–24](#); [1 John 1:5–2:6](#)

1 John 1:5–10

⁵ This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out 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, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

⁸ If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.

1 John 2:1–6

¹ My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. ² He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

³ We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands. ⁴ Whoever says, “I know him,” but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person. ⁵ But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him: ⁶ Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.



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Key Text

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.—1 John 1:8–9

Enduring Beliefs of the Church

Unit 2: Grace and Reconciliation

Lessons 5–8

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize the gospel using the terms *light* and *darkness* as used in 1 John.
2. Explain the significance of confession.
3. Celebrate Christ's pardon from sin by walking in the light and seeking fellowship with other believers.

Lesson Outline

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- A. Talk vs. Walk
- B. Lesson Context

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- B. Walking in the Light (vv. 6–7)
Light and Dark

II. Necessary Confession (1 John 1:8–2:2)

- A. Our Sin and Us (vv. 8–10)
- B. Our Sin and God (2:1–2)

III. Obedient Walk (1 John 2:3–6)

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The Christian's Uniform
- B. Proof of Abiding (v. 6)

Conclusion

- A. Talk = Walk
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Docetism	Doe- <i>set</i> -iz-um.
epistles	ee- <i>pis</i> -uls.
Gnosticism	Nahs -tih-sizz-um.
heresy	<i>hair</i> -uh-see.

Introduction

A. Talk vs. Walk

When our children were younger, one of our sons, then a preteen, burst into the house to report a fire he had seen in a vacant lot nearby. We immediately contacted the fire department and managed to contain the fire with a garden hose before firefighters arrived. Upon arrival, the fire chief expressed his gratitude to our son. Later, they awarded him a certificate in recognition of his alertness and for preventing what could have been a much larger disaster.

As parents with experience raising seven children, we understood that initial reports might not always be accurate. Upon questioning him, it became clear that the details of his account were untrue. His body language contradicted his words, indicating that something was amiss. Eventually, he admitted to accidentally starting the fire while playing with a lighter he'd found. He felt relieved after confessing.

The next step was challenging for our son and us, yet it was necessary. We visited the home of the fire chief, who lived in our neighborhood, where our son “came clean” about the incident. The chief scolded him and required the return of the certificate. Following the reprimand, the chief forgave him, cautioning him about the potential severity of his actions. In today’s lesson, we examine the implications of when our talk (what we say we believe) conflicts with our walk (how we conduct ourselves).

B. Lesson Context

In his Gospel, the apostle John avoided using his own name, instead identifying himself as the disciple whom Jesus loved ([John 19:26](#); [20:2](#); [21:7](#)). This profound love significantly influenced John’s life and writing. The dozens of uses of the word *love* found in the Gospel that bears his name exceeds that of the other three Gospels combined!

No one knows exactly when John wrote his Gospel and his three epistles. Our best guess is the latter part of the first century. This places John’s writings several decades after he experienced the love of Jesus personally—an experience he wanted others to accept as true ([1 John 1:1–5](#)).

There are four listings of apostles in the New Testament, and John’s name occurs in the first third of the 12 names in all listings ([Matthew 10:2–3](#); [Mark 3:16–19](#); [Luke 6:14–16](#); [Acts 1:13](#)). Regarding his personal experience with Jesus, John is recognized as having been one of the “inner circle” of disciples. We see this designation in his being one of only three disciples to have witnessed Jesus’ transfiguration. This was a profound experience, as he saw Jesus’ face and attire radiantly shining, emitting a brilliant white light similar to the sun ([Matthew 17:1–8](#); [Mark 9:2–8](#); [Luke 9:28–35](#)). Some commentators propose that that event profoundly influenced John’s use of light and darkness metaphors in his writings, including the passage we examine today. While this may be speculation, the profound imagery is no less poignant in John’s writings.

In the opening verses of the epistle we call 1 John, the writer emphasizes his tangible interactions with Jesus. This emphasis may be a response to false teachings that were beginning to take shape. One such teaching was Docetism. Docetism taught that Jesus did not possess a physical form but merely appeared to. This belief stemmed from the notion that material substance was inherently evil, making it inconceivable for the divine to be associated with it. But John will have none of this! His in-person interactions with Jesus form the basis of all he has to say in this letter.

I. True Fellowship

([1 John 1:5–7](#))

A. God Is Light (v. 5)

5. This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.

The *message* to which John refers was not a revelation to a singular individual. Rather, the plural pronoun *we* suggests it was confirmed by many witnesses. While the Gospels do not provide a direct

quote of Jesus speaking the particular message *God is light; in him there is no darkness at all*, it is understood that not all of Jesus' words and actions were documented ([John 21:25](#)). In fact, the phrase "God is light" is found nowhere else in the Bible (compare [Psalm 104:2](#); [1 Timothy 6:16](#); etc.). This statement indicates that light is not just a characteristic of God but a fundamental part of his being, similar to how "spirit" and "love" are essential attributes ([John 4:24](#); [1 John 4:8](#)).

Those in the original audience who were familiar with the Hebrew Bible—what we now know as the Old Testament—would have interpreted John's use of light and darkness metaphors as representing good and evil, respectively, as they saw parallels with texts such as [Isaiah 5:20](#); [50:10](#); [59:9](#); and [Micah 7:8](#). John uses "light versus dark" imagery also in [John 1:5](#); [3:19](#); [8:12](#); [12:35](#), [46](#); and [1 John 2:8–9](#). His audience dare not miss the message: spiritual darkness and light are incompatible. If God embodies light, it logically follows that God possesses no aspect of darkness.

B. Walking in the Light (vv. 6–7)

6. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth.

This verse introduces the first of five consecutive, and six total, *if we* clauses in today's text ([1 John 1:6–10](#); [2:3](#)). To *have fellowship with* God implies a profound relationship or communion with him. However, a lifestyle that is inconsistent with God's nature and expectations results in a false representation—a *lie*. Such a lie may or may not fool other people, but it won't fool God. To *walk in the darkness* is to sin habitually ([Acts 26:18](#); [2 Peter 2:4](#)). Sin has consistently severed the bond between God and humanity ([Genesis 3:24](#); [Isaiah 59:1–2](#); etc.).

The true nature of a person's beliefs, declarations, and position of the heart is revealed through behavior that aligns with Jesus' teachings ([John 13:35](#); [14:15](#), [23](#)). These actions do not result in salvation but result from it ([Ephesians 2:8–10](#); [James 2:14–19](#)). The internal transformation becomes visible externally, guided by the work of the Spirit ([2 Thessalonians 2:13](#); [1 Peter 1:2](#)). An emerging heresy of the time claimed that the actions of a person's physical body could not taint a person's spirit. We're not sure if John is opposing this particular heresy as he writes. But he leaves no doubt that it's "either-or," not "both-and."

What Do You Think?

What evidence would point to someone walking "in darkness"?

Digging Deeper

How can you become aware of whether you are in danger of walking in darkness?

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, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

We come to the second of the five consecutive *if we* clauses. We might assume that walking *in the light* would represent a renewal of fellowship with God. That's true, but it's not John's aim here.

Rather, John challenges the reader by stating that walking in the light is not separate from having *fellowship with one another*. Fellowship with God and with other believers go (or should go) hand in hand (Psalm 55:14; Isaiah 2:5; John 13:34–35; etc.).

The light of God reveals sin (John 3:20; Ephesians 5:11–13). As such, it also reveals our need for cleansing from that sin. That’s exactly what *the blood of Jesus Christ* does in paying the penalty for sin we owe. John comforts his audience in this regard (compare Hebrews 9:12–14, 22; 13:12). This serves as a reminder that salvation is not achieved by our own efforts to walk in the light; instead, it is the cross of Christ that pays sin’s penalty, enabling that walk.

What Do You Think?

What does it look like to “walk in the light”?

Digging Deeper

How might you encourage fellow believers to walk in the light?

Light and Dark

My husband and I served as missionaries in Ukraine in the 1990s. During those years, Ukraine was experiencing a financial crisis after the fall of the Soviet Union. Inflation was high, and resources were low. To cope, the government restricted the amount of electricity, water, and gas people could use, which resulted in rationing utilities.

The impact of this rationing resulted in hours of darkness every night. We were never sure exactly when the power would turn off, but we knew it would happen around dinner time. We scrambled to get things done before the lights went off, but inevitably the outages caught us off guard. I still remember the feeling of being right in the middle of writing an email or putting dinner on the table when suddenly we were plunged into absolute darkness, without even the light from street lamps or the hum of appliances to fill the pitch-black silence. What a relief when, several hours later, the electricity suddenly turned back on. What had been a darkness so deep we could not see our hands in front of our faces became a blinding light. Not a bit of darkness remained.

Light is a “something”; darkness is not. Instead, darkness is a “lack of something.” Light drives out darkness. If you’re experiencing a darkness of the soul right now, what is missing?

—L. M. W.

II. Necessary Confession

(1 John 1:8–2:2)

A. Our Sin and Us (vv. 8–10)

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

We now arrive at the third of the five consecutive *if we* clauses. Some commentators view this verse as addressing an error that certain false teachers have been promoting. By claiming to be in the

light while behaving contrary to it, they deny their sinfulness. This amounts to self-deception; not only do false teachers fool others, but they also fool themselves.

We should not miss the fact that *truth* is extremely important to John. The word *truth* appears (in Greek) more than 100 times in the New Testament as a whole, with more than 40 percent of them occurring in John's Gospel and epistles. This is noteworthy given the relatively small percentage of the New Testament that these books comprise.

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

In the fourth *if we* clause in today's text, John highlights the stark contrast between the self-deluded people of the previous verse and those who have received forgiveness from God. Whereas sin was stated in the singular there, here it is plural: *sins*. Some commentators propose that this distinction underscores the idea that those who admit to their personal sins are fully aware of the seriousness of their condition apart from God's pardon (compare [1 Timothy 1:15](#)).

The language used implies that sins are confessed to God, who is the one who forgives sins (see [Psalm 32:5](#); [Luke 11:4](#); compare [James 5:16](#)). Furthermore, the forgiveness offered by God transcends mere pardon; it involves a cleansing of the believer from all acts of unrighteousness ([1 Corinthians 6:11](#); [Titus 2:14](#); [1 John 1:7](#)).

10. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.

Again, some commentators see a corrective to claims by false teachers. Opinions along that line vary on how this *if we* clause differs from the one in [1 John 1:8](#), above. One proposal sees that verse opposing denials of humanity's sinful nature, whereas the verse now before us is seen to deny having engaged in sinful behaviors at the individual level. Ultimately, however, we must conclude that (1) sin is a real thing, (2) we are guilty of committing it, and (3) to disbelieve makes God *a liar* in our eyes as we sink deeper into self-deception.

What Do You Think?

In what ways do we tend to claim that we have not sinned?

Digging Deeper

How can relationships help us recognize our need for God's forgiveness?

B. Our Sin and God ([2:1–2](#))

1. My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.

Confess your sins and be made pure!



Visual for [Lesson 5](#). Display this visual as you ask, “What is the connection between confessing sin and walking in the light of God?”

The term *dear children* is a favorite way for John to address his audience; he uses this designation also in [1 John 2:12, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4](#); and [5:21](#). It occurs on the lips of Jesus as well, but only in John’s Gospel, though the *New International Version* does not add “dear” here, it is the same Greek term ([John 13:33](#)). A slightly different Greek word, translated “children” (without “dear”), is much more common, occurring about 100 times in the New Testament; John uses this word as well ([1 John 5:2; 2 John 1, 4, 13; 3 John 4](#)). John appears to view his role as that of a father figure to his readers.

John explains Jesus’ ongoing role in heaven as *an advocate with the Father*. The word translated *advocate* is also a term unique to John, occurring in the New Testament only here and in [John 14:26; 15:26](#); and [16:7](#). It refers to a mediator or intercessor who speaks on behalf of another. After Jesus offered himself as the sacrifice for sin and rose from the dead, he took his place at the Father’s right hand. There he continuously advocates (intercedes) for believers ([Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25](#)). The unique sinlessness and righteousness of Jesus enables our purification from sin ([2 Corinthians 5:21](#)).

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

John builds on his previous statements with the rare word translated as *atoning sacrifice*. This indi-

cates something that “turns away wrath.” This term appears twice in this epistle (here and [1 John 4:10](#)). Closely related words are found in [Romans 3:25](#) and [Hebrews 9:5](#) (as nouns) as well as [Luke 18:13](#) and [Hebrews 2:17](#) (as verbs). The foundation of Jesus’ serving as our mediator lies in his sinless offering of himself on the cross, which paid the penalty for the sins of all who would believe. This doctrine is often referred to as “substitutionary atonement” (compare [John 1:29](#); [Colossians 1:20](#)).

III. Obedient Walk

([1 John 2:3–6](#))

A. Proof of Knowledge (vv. 3–5)

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

Here we have a sixth *if we* clause in the second half of this verse. Keeping *his commands* is evidence *that we have come to know him*. Perhaps John has in mind Jesus’ answer to the question about the greatest commandment ([Matthew 22:36–39](#); [Mark 12:28–31](#); see [John 13:34](#); [15:12](#)). Love is the hallmark by which Jesus indicated the world would recognize his followers. Additionally, the apostle Paul regarded love as the law’s fulfillment (see [Romans 13:10](#); [Galatians 5:14](#)).

Regardless of the specific interpretation of “commands” in this context, John implies that following the commands is not the way of salvation; it serves as evidence of that relationship. This aligns with teachings found throughout Scripture ([Galatians 2:16, 21](#); [3:11](#); [Hebrews 7:19](#)). Moreover, John’s emphasis on the certainty believers in Christ possess contrasts starkly with the uncertainty propagated by false teachers (compare [John 14:15](#); [15:10](#)).

What Do You Think?

What role does action play in our life of faith?

Digging Deeper

In what ways are we dependent upon Jesus Christ, our advocate?

4. Whoever says, “I know him,” but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person.

John now elaborates on his earlier remark ([1 John 1:6](#), above), drawing it to a logical conclusion. This might be summed up by the old axiom that actions speak louder than words. Anyone who professes to know God yet whose life contradicts God’s commandments is making a false claim.

Some commentators suggest that John is addressing the heresy of Gnosticism here. The followers of this heresy claim exclusive enlightenment, secret knowledge. However, their conduct fails to align with the elevated knowledge they claim to possess.

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

John continues to distinguish between those who adhere to *his word* and those who do not. The central element in the statements in this verse is the *love for God*. Three main interpretations of what

this love entails have been proposed: the love of God could signify (1) his love for individuals, (2) an individual's love for God, or (3) a divine type of love that individuals have for one another. Evidence exists for each of the three alternatives. But given John's portrayal of this love as a distinctive sign, it is likely that he is referring to the divine love found in believers (see [John 13:35](#)). This form of love is poured into a person's heart by the Spirit when one comes to faith in Christ (see [Romans 5:5](#)).

We also acknowledge differing opinions regarding what it means that love for God is *made complete* this verse and in [1 John 4:12, 17](#). This word is used in [John 4:34](#); [5:36](#); and [17:4](#) to refer to something that is finished (in terms of having reached a goal). Given the nature of the fallen world in which we live, our growth in love for one another will be perfected in an ultimate and final sense only after Jesus returns. Until then, we continue to grow and mature in our expressions of that love.

The Christian's Uniform

When my children were in elementary school, administrators there decided to require uniforms for all students. As a parent, I appreciated the school system's attempt to standardize the students' appearance in order to prevent comparisons and judgments regarding clothing choices. I understood that the administration hoped to eliminate the bullying that could occur between students who could afford expensive, designer clothes and those who could not.

However, parents and administrators quickly realized that students still personalized their looks by the style of shoes they chose, the hairstyles they sported, and the socks they wore. Even things such as hair ties became status symbols. Students followed the human desire to identify themselves as part of certain groups by the way they accessorized their uniforms.

Such desires can result in both positive and negative outcomes. Positively, believers validate their identity as Christians by the way they express love for one another. That expression is our "uniform," identifying us as believers. However, a problem can present itself in the way we "accessorize" that uniform, particularly if the accessories end up overshadowing the uniform itself. What dangers do you need to be aware of in that regard?

—L. M. W.

B. Proof of Abiding (v. 6)

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

To *live as Jesus did* is to follow Christ's example ([John 13:15](#); [1 Peter 2:21](#)). The author fronts this conclusion by using a Greek word often translated as "remain" or "stay"; he uses this word 23 times in this letter, and this is the first. In doing so, he speaks of a close, ongoing connection. Those who abide in Jesus will live consistently in ways that reflect his love and teaching.

What Do You Think?

What outward fruit should we expect to see in Christ-followers?

Digging Deeper

How does [Galatians 5:13–26](#) align with these passages from 1 John?

Conclusion

A. Talk = Walk

My experience as an airline supervisor required me to interact with passengers. Some attempted to board the plane with household pets by falsely claiming they were service animals. With no official registry for service animals, our team had to assess each case based on the animal's behavior. Disruptions like barking led to denied boarding.

This situation is akin to what John addresses in his letter: distinguishing the true claims from the false. John uses a firm, fatherly tone to stress that claiming to live in the light while walking in darkness is deceitful. The message is straightforward: one's walk must match one's talk. Jesus highlighted that, on Judgment Day, many will profess to know him by citing a list of their deeds. However, their lack of a genuine relationship with Christ will result in their condemnation ([Matthew 7:21–23](#)).

This is a powerful reminder! In our spiritual walk, Jesus is our standard. When we compare our lives to Christ's example, we must ask ourselves whether we see a reflection of him or a contradiction. This self-assessment and willingness to correct our course when necessary is crucial to authentic faith.

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, we are grateful for Jesus' light. Thank you for the reminder that when we abide in you, we walk in the light. May the world know that we are Christians by our "walk" being aligned with our "talk." In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Praise God for the light of the gospel!

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with [NIV Bible Student](#) (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the [NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition](#)).

Into the Lesson

Ask participants to discuss the significance of light in the physical world, providing examples such as its role in plant growth, its ability to reveal hidden objects, and its part in vitamin D production and energy levels. Contrast how darkness affects the world. Next, invite the participants to consider light metaphorically and share their thoughts. Examples might include guidance, purity, revelation, hope, unity, and comfort. Conclude your discussion by contrasting the metaphorical ideas of "light" with

the metaphorical ideas of “darkness.”

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Light and Darkness” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Have learners work in pairs to complete as indicated. Discuss if time allows.

Lead into Bible study by saying, “John often employs the metaphors of light and darkness in his writings to create a clearer mental image for his readers. In today’s lesson, we’ll explore a passage where John uses light to represent God and the daily life of Christians while portraying sin and unrighteousness as darkness.”

Into the Word

Divide the class into two groups, designating one the **Truth Trackers** and the other the **Assurance Alliance**. To each participant, distribute a copy of the lesson text you prepared, a highlighter, and a pen. Assign the following activities for group discussion.

Truth Trackers. Read **1 John 1:5–10**. Highlight all the statements that about truth with one color (light). Use a different color to highlight statements about falsehood (darkness).

Assurance Alliance. Read **1 John 2:1–6**. Highlight in one color everything the text instructs believers to do. Use a different color for assurances or promises mentioned in the passage.

After five minutes, ask each group to summarize their findings on a separate sheet of paper.

Reconvene for whole-class discussion. Have volunteers from each group read their Scripture passage aloud and share the group summary.

Option. Engage the two groups in a role-playing exercise to explore what it means to walk in the light in real-life scenarios. Have groups discuss how they would respond to the following situations based on the text from 1 John.

1. A family member wants to do something that contradicts your beliefs. How would you navigate this while maintaining love and respect for them?
2. A friend is seeking guidance during a crisis, feeling hopeless and guilty about a mistake. How can you use assurances from 1 John to encourage and help them find a path forward?

Present these questions for further whole-class discussion: 1—What does “walk in the light” mean, as mentioned in **1 John 1:7**? 2—Based on John’s text, why is confession important? 3—How does knowing that Jesus is our advocate influence how we respond to our failures and others’ sins?

Into Life

Say, “One way to walk in the light is to maintain fellowship with other believers.” Give participants time to brainstorm concrete ways to walk in the light and stay in fellowship. Distribute index cards to learners. After allowing time to reflect on the brainstormed ideas, ask, “What is one thing you can do this week to walk in the light and seek fellowship with another believer?” Invite learners to write their ideas on the card. Challenge them to follow through with the plan throughout the week.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Walking in the Light” activity from the activity page. Have learners work with a partner to complete as indicated. After calling time, invite pairs to share their

poem with the whole class.

Conclude class with a prayer, thanking God for the light he provides for us to walk in and for the forgiveness of sins we have in Christ.

To print the reproducible activity page, simply click the highlighted text below to create a pdf file on your hard drive. Then open the pdf file in Acrobat Reader and print.

[Activity Page \(January 4—Sin and Forgiveness\)](#)
