

WALKING IN THE LIGHT • CONFESSION



Photograph by Greg Schneider/Worldwide Challenge

WHAT'S THIS ABOUT?

Confession is the key concept you need to teach in this study. It is the means by which we experience God's forgiveness, are purified from sin, and can enjoy fellowship with God. It also enables us to enjoy real fellowship with one another.

We want to hear from you! Please send your feedback on this study to cru.comm@uscm.org.

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW?

I JOHN 1:5-9

In this passage, John teaches that the key to experiencing intimacy with God is "walking in the light." This is a fundamental concept, but is often misunderstood. Let's try to unlock the metaphors and learn how we can experience God's love and forgiveness continually.

God is Light (Verse 5)

John uses a metaphor, namely "light," to help us understand a particular thing that is true about God. Apparently, this truth about God has a special relevance to what John wants to teach us. So let's see if we can figure out what it means.

In everyday life, light enables us to see. It exposes things and reveals what's really there. In Scripture, light often represents holiness or righteousness.

I Timothy 6:15,16 says: "God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever. Amen."

Matthew 5:14-16 states: "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."

John has both these ideas in mind and is drawing our attention to a perfect, holy God who sees and knows everything. He does so to make us aware of our sinfulness before this awesome God.

Walk in the Light (Verses 6 and 7)

Keeping in mind the metaphor of light, John then makes a logical argument; namely, that it is impossible to have intimacy with God and simultaneously walk in darkness.

Why can't we? If God is light, and we claim to be next to Him in the dark, something is wrong. It is like claiming that we spent the weekend lounging in the shade of the Sahara desert! John is preparing to make the case that the only place to have intimacy with God and enjoy the other benefits He enumerates is to "walk in the light."

What does it mean to walk in the light? The most common answer you should expect to this question is something along the lines of “being good,” or “following Jesus,” or “doing the right thing.” That’s the answer you are looking for, but tell them it is not the right answer. By asking the question and graciously pointing out that the answer is not what they likely thought it was, you create a teachable moment. The correct answer isn’t “being good.” Instead, it is “living exposed to God’s holy knowledge,” or “leave the shadows and bring your sin into the light.” The Bible uses the word “confession” to describe this state.

Understanding the Parallelism (verses 6-7, 8-9)

One way to understand the concepts in verses 6-7 more clearly is to also read verses 8-9 and compare the two passages. Together, they form a parallelism. A parallelism is a literary structure in which one idea is expressed in two different ways. It’s a device used for emphasis or clarity. The book of Proverbs is full of parallelisms. Proverbs 16, in particular, uses that structure extensively. For example, in verse 18 “pride” and a “haughty spirit” are synonymous, as are “destruction” and “fall.” The two clauses are meant to communicate precisely the same thing.

Proverbs 16:18: “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.”

A quick survey of Proverbs 16 will provide many other examples. If the people in your study understand parallelisms, it will help them unlock I John 1. The ideas and clauses in verses 6-7 match up, or parallel, those in verses 8-9.

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

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

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.

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

Although it’s more complicated than the Proverbs examples, and not all clauses have a direct parallel, the overall correspondence should be apparent, and may help your students to see that “walking in the light” is a figure John uses to mean “confession.”

Confess Your Sins (verses 8-9)

The Greek word for “confession” literally means “to say the same thing along with someone” or “to agree with someone.” This sheds some interesting light on what is involved in confession:

We are agreeing with God that we have sinned. This stands in contrast to justifying, or denying, that what we did was wrong.

We are agreeing that what Christ has done paid for our sins. This stands in contrast to “beating ourselves up” for what we did wrong.

We are agreeing to turn from our sinful course and turn back to God. This is repentance.

John also emphasizes that God is “faithful and just.” These two concepts are important. In confession, there is a component of faith. We are trusting that God is faithful to us as our Father and will forgive us. We are also trusting that God is just, that sin needs to be dealt with, and that Jesus dealt with it for us.

WHAT IF THERE'S A PROBLEM?

While this topic is fairly easy to understand, there is the possibility for a critical misunderstanding. The misunderstanding is on the difference between relationship and fellowship. If one has placed his or her faith in Christ, he or she now has a relationship with God. Nothing can change that. That person is, and will always be, in the family of God and have eternal life. When we sin, this relationship is not changed. It is our intimate fellowship with God that suffers. Like a marriage, our relationship is based on a one-time decision, but our fellowship can be diminished by sin and restored by confession and forgiveness.

WHAT'S YOUR POINT?

There are two very practical things you can do for application. First, you can ask people to keep a short accounting of sins they committed this week. When they become aware of sin, encourage them to go through the three steps of confession:

1. Agree you've sinned.
2. Agree with God that the sin is forgiven.
3. Agree that, with God, you will turn your attitudes and action toward Him, and away from sin.

A second application with which you can end the study is to have everyone take a piece of paper and make a list of sins that God brings to mind. Then have them write out I John 1:9 across the list and rip up the list.

The Summary (verses 5-9)

The fundamental idea that you must convey through this study, is that God has provided a way for us to experience intimacy with Him, even after we have sinned. God's means are not difficult. He simply asks us to come to Him to confess our sins, and experience His forgiveness all over again. He who is holy and all-knowing loves us, and has seen all that we've done anyway. His commitment to us, and our security in Him are never at risk, but our ability to experience that fellowship with Him can be ruined by unconfessed sin. We can enjoy His presence unhindered in our lives by: continuing to walk in the light, agreeing with Him that our sin is wrong, knowing He has forgiven it, and turning from it with His help.

This study is accompanied by an article. Take the time to read it over before the study. Hand it out to the group at the end of the study and have them read it this week.

MEMORY VERSE

I John 1:9 "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

WHAT ARE THE ANSWERS?

1. Light enables us to see. It reveals and exposes things.
2. Light represents God's holiness or righteousness.
3. He is a holy, all-seeing God.
4. Because there is no darkness anywhere near Him, He is all light. It's impossible to be in an intimate relationship with an omniscient God, and have unrevealed secrets.
5. Walking in the darkness is hiding our sins. Walking in the light is bringing our secrets out in the open, where God can deal with them.
6. They are a parallelism (see above).
7. The parallel to "walking in the light" is to "confess your sins."
8. Unconfessed sin can cause disruption in our Christian fellowship, if for no other reason than we may be experiencing conviction or guilt.
9. We are agreeing with God that we have sinned, that it is forgiven, and that we must turn away from it.
10. To remind us that God will be faithful to his promise to forgive us. Nothing we say, can, or will, be used against us.
11. We should confess our sin as often as we are aware of sin in our lives.
12. All of our sin is forgiven because of Christ's death on the cross. Confession is for maintaining fellowship, and experiencing forgiveness. Even sin of which we are unaware is forgiven by Christ's death. It does not hinder our fellowship, because we are unaware of it.