

Do Believers Need to Confess Their Sins for Forgiveness?

According to the Bible, when someone believes in Jesus Christ as Savior, that person's sins are forgiven. If that is so, should Christians continue to confess their post-salvation sins after believing in Christ? Some say that confession is unnecessary since all the believer's sins are forgiven already. What is the scriptural perspective?

The Believer's Positional Forgiveness

To the Christian, forgiveness means to be released or freed from the guilt of sins as a personal offense in a relationship. One of the results of faith in Jesus Christ as Savior is that God forgives the believer's sins that were an offense against Him. In this sense, forgiveness is granted once for all eternity. It is a positional truth like justification and redemption, which is why forgiveness is sometimes linked in the Scriptures with eternal salvation.

In the Gospels, the positional aspect of forgiveness is seen by its contrast with eternal condemnation (Mark 3:28-29). Jesus and His death (blood) secures this remission of (release from) sin (Matt. 26:28). In this way He is *"the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"* (John 1:29). He paid the ransom for all people (Matt. 20:28). Ransom implies release or freedom from the guilt of sin for all who receive it. Forgiveness is used in other salvation contexts in Acts (Acts 5:31; 13:38-39; 26:17-18).

The Apostle Paul makes some definitive statements about the positional forgiveness that occurs at the time of justification. In Romans 4:5-7 he links forgiveness with justification through faith. Also, in Ephesians 1:7 Paul describes one of the benefits of being in Christ: *"In Him [Christ] we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins."* Similarly, in Colossians 2:13 he says, *"And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses."* In the surrounding context, it is clear that Paul is speaking of a benefit of the believer's new position and identity with Christ (Col. 2:11-12, 14). "Trespasses" is virtually synonymous with *sins*. The verb "having forgiven" is in the Greek aorist tense signifying a completed action. The action that is completed is the forgiveness of "all" sins, which includes even future sins because all the believer's sins were future when Jesus died on the cross. In two similarly worded passages, Paul argues that Christians should forgive one another *because Christ has forgiven them* (Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13). The author of Hebrews also asserts positional forgiveness in Hebrews 10:17-18 by citing the result of the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31:34 in terms of *"Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more."*

Clearly, all these passages show that those who have believed in Jesus Christ as Savior have had all their sins forgiven on the basis of Jesus' full and final payment on the cross. So why must Christians confess their sins?

The Believer's Fellowship Forgiveness

Christians must confess their sins so that they can *experience* the forgiveness that is theirs positionally. In other words, because of Jesus' death on the cross and one's faith in Him, sin's power to condemn is annulled forever, *but* it still has power to sever a believer's experience of fellowship with the Heavenly Father. The first is a judicial forgiveness, the latter a family forgiveness. Because of judicial forgiveness, the Christian has the privilege of enjoying fellowship or communion with God in the Christian walk, but this privilege can be abused or interrupted by sin.

The believer's fellowship with God is the theme of First John (1 John 1:3-4; See GraceNotes no. 37, "Interpreting 1 John"). This fellowship depends on walking truthfully in the light of God's Word and God's will (1 John 1:5-8). As a believer walks in the light, sins become visible or apparent. When God brings these sins to mind and convicts the conscience, the believer can deny the truth about his or her sin or confess them to God. According to 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.” To confess literally means “to say the same thing,” thus “to acknowledge, to agree.” Upon that honest confession, God forgives because He is “faithful” to His own character and His commitment to His children. He is also “just” because He has accepted His Son’s payment for that sin. Because God is faithful and just, the believer’s confession restores fellowship with God. Given the theme of fellowship, 1 John 1:9 is obviously intended for those who are saved, not the unsaved (note that John uses “we”!).

John understood this principle well. His Gospel includes the story of Jesus washing the disciples’ feet. In that account, when Peter tries to refuse washing, Jesus says, “*He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean*” (John 13:10). The reference to bathing and complete cleansing is a reference to positional forgiveness, but the washing of feet pictures the ongoing necessity of forgiveness and cleansing from sins committed as a Christian.

King David also understood the principle of confessing sin to restore fellowship. After his sin with Bathsheeba and Uriah, he confesses his sin to restore fellowship with God (Ps. 32:5). Similarly, in Psalm 51, David confesses his sin to receive cleansing and to restore the joy of his fellowship with God. David’s salvation was not the issue; his fellowship was.

Jesus taught the principle of confession to restore fellowship with God and others in the familiar Lord’s Prayer (better called the Disciples’ Prayer). He taught that believers should pray “*And forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us*” (Luke 11:4). Thus He taught the necessity of forgiveness to restore the believer’s relationship vertically to God and horizontally to other people. There are many other passages where confession of sin is the basis for restoring fellowship in the divine or human relationships (Matt. 6:14-15; 18:21, 35; Luke 17:3-4; 2 Cor. 2:7, 10; Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13). Simply put, confession restores fellowship in a relationship, whether divine or human.

Conclusion

There is no question that believers have the secure position of having all their sins forgiven on the basis of Jesus Christ’s full payment on the cross. However, a believer’s experience often contradicts his or her position. Sins committed after justification do not jeopardize the believer’s positional forgiveness, but adversely affect the believer’s enjoyment of that position and his or her fellowship with God. To restore the joy of fellowship, the believer is taught to confess sins to God who will forgive and cleanse from the guilt of those sins. An illustration may help. If a son offends his father, the father may agree to absorb the pain of the offense and forgive the son. In the father’s eyes, the son is forgiven. However, to fully experience the father’s forgiveness and enjoy fellowship in the relationship, the son must acknowledge (confess) his offense to his father. God is a Heavenly Father, a God of love and grace, who will always restore fellowship with those who seek forgiveness for their sins.