

SIN

5

**BACKGROUND
SCRIPTURE**

Genesis 3:1–24;
6:5–8; Mark
7:14–23; Romans
1:18–32; 3:10–18;
1 John 1:5–2:6

**A VERSE TO
REMEMBER**

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:8–9)

Daily Bible Readings			
M	Dec. 29	Gen. 3:1–13	The Man and the Woman Sin
T	Dec. 30	Gen. 3:14–24	God Pronounces Judgment
W	Dec. 31	Rom. 1:18–25	God's Wrath Is Revealed
Th	Jan. 1	Mark 7:14–23	Jesus Warns against Defilement
F	Jan. 2	Ps. 51:1–12	A Prayer for God's Mercy
Sa	Jan. 3	Mic. 6:1–8	God Demands Right Living

STEPPING INTO THE WORD

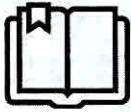
A wise professor gave my seminary worship class some excellent advice: Learn some worship words and phrases by heart—words to say at the font, at the table, before and after prayer, and as benedictions and blessings. No doubt your worship leaders have favorite phrases they rely upon that may come straight from Scripture like today's Verse to Remember. These words give us a call to confession worth committing to memory. Whether we repeat them to ourselves alone, or out loud in a communal worship setting, we affirm one of the central theological truths of our faith: Each of us sin and need God's forgiveness.

Worship traditions that include a weekly prayer of confession hold this truth like a mirror in front of us. We gather as those who inevitably fall short of our Creator's intentions for us, and we pray together, bearing witness to our full humanity. Our prayers of confession may list some of the ways we sin—the things we have done and not done that separate us from our neighbor and from God. As we grow in faith, we learn that these are our prayers together as human beings, even if we don't see our individual selves in each line. In need of mercy, we approach God in humility and remorse for our sin, for each and for all of us.

Our worship traditions and the biblical witness don't leave us there, though. Neither does the grace of God. Prayers of

confession don't hang unanswered. God who is faithful and just responds with forgiveness; the call for us is to live in response. We hold confession and pardon together in worship because of God's great love, and we can never really separate them. As we keep both in mind, we will focus in this lesson on sin, and in the next on repentance and grace.

God of grace, you know us inside and out, and you see us as we are. Hear our confession of sin, and forgive us, we pray. (Include a time of silent confession.) Amen.



SCRIPTURE

1 John 1:5–2:6

1:5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. ⁶If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; ⁷but 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. ⁸If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

2:1 My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, ²and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

³Now by this we know that we have come to know him, if we obey his commandments. ⁴Whoever says, "I have come to know him," but does not obey his commandments is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist; ⁵but whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection. By this we know that we are in him: ⁶whoever says, "I abide in him," ought to walk in the same way as he walked.

Note: Find Scripture Notes for this reading on the final page of the lesson.

SAYING THE SAME THING

In a series of contrasts, our passage illustrates the way sin separates us from God: light and dark, truth and lies, righteousness

and unrighteousness, obedience and disobedience. Only God is wholly on the first side of these contrasts, with human beings inevitably on the other, unable to free ourselves from our tendency to sin. The link between the contrasts is the atoning sacrifice of Jesus, who takes on and takes away our sin, reconciling us to God and to one another. Even in professing faith in him, we err and need good teaching to show us the way forward.

The letters of 1, 2, and 3 John, with their strong connection to the gospel of John, were written to steer a community of believers away from a misunderstanding of Jesus that rejected his full humanity. Misguided teachers claimed that Jesus only *seemed* to have a body that suffered and died; because how could Jesus—all good and spiritual—have a body like us? The “blood of Jesus” in 1 John 1:7 is both a link with Old Testament cultic sacrifice rituals, and a reminder that Jesus—with a human body like ours—bled and died. Saying something different about Jesus makes them, and us, liars, just like saying we have no sin does. (See 1 John 2:18–27 and 1 John 4:1–3.)

Believing the right thing about Jesus, or about ourselves and our sin, is not the goal, however. It is to “walk in the light as he himself is in the light” (1:7). It’s like Jesus turns on a lamp in a far corner of a dark room. Suddenly we are less likely to stumble as we walk. At the same time, the light shows us how dusty the room is, every inch in need of a good cleaning. The light illumines both our sin and our path forward. We can see neither on our own.

Two Greek words help us further understand our predicament and our saving grace. The word for “sin” is *hamartia* (ἁμαρτία) meaning to “miss the mark,” like an archer shooting off-target. Even our best efforts and arrows fall short (Rom. 3:23). But God does not leave us here. First John 1:9 states, “If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” The Greek word for “confess” is *homologeō* (ὁμολογέω) meaning to “speak the same.” In our confessions of sin, we say the same thing that God says about our sin. In our confessions of faith, we say the same thing that God says about Jesus—the one who saves us and shows us the way.



Where have you “missed the mark” recently?

SIN, BROKENNESS, AND HOPE

At its core, sin is about broken relationships. First and foremost, our relationship with God is broken. We see this in the initial story about sin in Genesis 3. Created in God's image, Adam and Eve are living in harmony with God, one another, and their surroundings. When the serpent enters the picture, it easily entices them to want to be like God and ignore God's good commands. They choose a lie over the truth. The resulting fracture sets in motion a cascade of human brokenness. The whole rest of the biblical witness is about God's desire to restore us to right relationship, culminating in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Defining a doctrine of sin is both simple and complex. It's simple because it is so clearly evident: we see the consequences of sin everywhere we look—war, poverty, injustice, environmental crises, and every kind of -ism we can name. At the same time, it's complex because in our sin, we downplay its connection with us while being quick to point fingers at others, contributing to broken relationships among us and our own self-injury.

"A Brief Statement of Faith" for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) describes human beings as created in God's image to live as one community; then this:

But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator.
Ignoring God's commandments,
we violate the image of God in others and ourselves,
accept lies as truth,
exploit neighbor and nature,
and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care.
We deserve God's condemnation.¹

While we worry about an individual's tendency to sin (particularly pointing to that neighbor over there), we must also concern ourselves with how sin plays out in the ways we live together in community. Perhaps those who wrote our Apostle's Creed placed the affirmation of "the communion of saints" next to "the forgiveness of sins" for a reason. The *koinonia* fellowship that our passage holds up as a goal (1 John 1:6–7) is a restored relationship both with God and with one another. As all sin, so all have the same hope: The atoning sacrifice of Jesus is "for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world." (2:2)

The author of 1 John gets it right when he points out both his hope and our reality in verse 2:1, "My little children, I am writing

1. "A Brief Statement of Faith," in *Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2016), lines 33–39.

these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” Sin may be an inevitable part of our human condition, but it does not have the last word.

 Where do you see broken relationships as examples of sin with God or among people?

STEPPING INTO THE WORLD

Our life together in Christian community gives us a laboratory in which to practice living as forgiven sinners—repentant, grateful, and committed to the good of our fellowship with God, one another, and the world. Just as the early church wrestled with implications of the embodiment of Jesus, we wrestle with the embodiment of our sin and how our deliverance from it calls us to care for the embodied neighbors near us and around the globe. Those who follow Jesus—who, in his full humanity bled, suffered, and died—are called to care for those whose lives also include suffering. It may be that we must first recognize and repent of our own complicity in the systems that lead to their suffering.

Some of the recurring worship words and rituals we might use help us to pray alongside the fellowship of sinners and saints through the ages, and those in the pew next to us. Corporately, we confess that we have sinned against God “in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you [God] with our whole heart and mind and strength. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.”² We pray aloud together, and silently as individuals, then we pause to receive the declaration of pardon as one body. We stir the water at the font and remember how we are each cleansed from sin by the grace of God, and are welcomed, still dripping wet, into the fellowship of the community of faith. We gather at the Lord’s table and recall his body and blood, shed for each of us and for the world, as we pass the loaves to one another, spilling crumbs as we go. We receive a benediction—a good word—and then are sent out to carry the grace we have received into a still-broken and hurting world. Our words and acts of worship remind us that sin is both real and present in our human selves and institutions, and yet is ultimately no match for the grace of God.

2. Office of Theology and Worship, *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 20.

As we step into the world this week, let's try to do it as 1 John suggests: walk in the light of Christ, the one who frees us from the grip of sin. Let's walk in truth, honest about our own failings. Let's be concerned not about the sin of others, but about their well-being, as part of the same fellowship of sinners that Jesus came to redeem.



What parts of worship help you remember both sin and grace? How can you carry the call to walk in the light of Christ into your week?

SCRIPTURE NOTES

The following notes from the Uniform Series provide additional information about today's Scripture.

1. First John addresses a Christian community divided over whether Jesus really became human (and suffered), or only appeared so. The writer responds by asserting the embodiment of the Christian faith, both in the individual and in the community. The language and theology of the letter correspond to the language and theology of the Gospel of John.
2. First John 1:6–2:2 unpacks the communal implications of verse 5 (“This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all”). Walking in the light is made evident in our fellowship with and our love for one another (cf. 3:18). Walking in sin is also manifested in the community.
3. Believers ought not to deviate from righteousness (2:1), but should we sin, Jesus will intercede and advocate on our behalf with the Father. The roots of the word in Greek describe one who comes alongside, calling, and entreating. In John 14:16, Jesus promises another advocate, the Holy Spirit, suggesting that he already has been an advocate for us with God.
4. Our advocate Jesus is also the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. As atonement, Jesus's actions bring together what was fragmented and establishes “at-one-ment” between God and humanity. Jesus, through the cross, brings us into union with God—as he does for all who will believe (1 John 2:2).