



Practicing Confession Pursuing Holiness Together, Part 3

Psalm 32:1-5; James 5:16

David Sunday

January 24, 2016

O holy God, in You is light and there is no darkness at all. We pray now that by Your Spirit You would lead us out of the shadows of our sin and shame into the brilliant light of Your holiness, and that through beholding You in Your Word we would be transformed more into Your likeness for the glory of Your Son Jesus, the worthy Lamb Who takes away every spot of our sin. We thank You for the cross, Lord, and we would listen and live under the shadow of that cross now. Amen.

You have heard it said, “Confession is good for the soul.” But it is not pleasant, and it is not easy. We try hard to avoid it. There’s a reason why the Episcopal Church, U.S.A, removed from the 1979 Book of Common Prayer the phrase “miserable offenders” from the general confession. It’s not like us to think of ourselves as miserable offenders. We find that kind of terminology repellant. We want to feel better about ourselves than that.

But just as a person who has swallowed poison needs an emetic to be purged, so a person who has swallowed sin needs confession. The Puritan Thomas Watson described it in an unforgettably graphic way: “Confession is an act of mortification. It is the vomit of the soul.” Think about that. Sin is sweet in commission, but bitter in remembrance. God’s children find that their hatred is never more keen and exasperated against sin than in confessing.

Now, some of us do all we can to avoid vomiting, and we will endure a great deal of writhing agony if only we can avoid that experience. Likewise, we sometimes do a whole lot to avoid confessing our sin before a holy God. But the avoidance of confession only produces more misery.

So my aim today is to cultivate by the Spirit in us a consistent, regular—even daily—practice of confessing our sin before a holy God. I also hope that by God’s Spirit He will breed in us a little bit less fear about confessing our sins to one another when it’s appropriate. Although it may not be pleasant to confess, it will have the sweet result of breeding in us a greater hatred toward sin and a greater delight in the beauty of God’s holiness. We will pursue three lines of inquiry together:

1. What is it like to live with unconfessed sin?
2. Why are we reluctant to practice the confession of our sins?
3. How should we confess our sins?

1. What is it like to live with unconfessed sin?

There is probably no better description of unconfessed sin in the Bible than David's prayer in Psalm 32, as he reflected on all those months after his sin with Bathsheba, his sin against Uriah and against God. Before he confessed his sin, his misery was great, but after confession he looks back and writes this profound prayer:

¹ *Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.*

² *Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.*

³ *For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.*

⁴ *For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.*

⁵ *I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not cover my iniquity;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,"
and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.*

Notice David's resolve in verse five: "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord." That's what I'm aiming for—that we as a people likewise will regularly and consistently say, "will confess my transgressions to the Lord." I'm sure that some of you today are holding in your heart some secret sin—and it brings shame. No one knows. Not even your spouse. Not even your closest friend. I had a friend who for years held on to a dark secret. Finally he confessed. It was incredibly painful, but through that vomiting of the soul there is gradually coming a new season of joy and peace.

Others of you are not aware of any particular sin in your life that you are refusing to confess, but you're still groaning. There still is a general unhappiness, a spiritual sluggishness. Your strength is dried up. You're unmotivated spiritually. You're always looking for ways to minimize commitment to the Lord because your joy is gone, and it could very well be due to the fact that there is a pronounced lack of confession in your life. You're rarely acknowledging your sins to the Lord. It's not like there's something big that's looming over your conscience with the

specter of shame, but the truth is you're hardly aware of any sins you need to confess, so you rarely do.

So whether you're covering something up or simply calloused and complacent toward your sin, a lack of confession in your life will result in the experience of spiritual dryness and desolation that David describes in verses three and four. This will be your spiritual experience: when you keep silent, your bones will waste away through groaning all day long. Day and night the sense of God will be heavy, not joyous, free, light and life-giving. Your spiritual strength will be dried up like in summer's heat if there's not a regular practice of confession in your life— unless you believe there's not a regular practice of sin in your life, that somehow you're beyond that.

What David describes as an individual experience can also be experienced by churches and whole communities of people. If we're not continually humbling ourselves under God's mighty hand with this scathing, personal, penetrating confession of our sin together, and if we're not continually being washed afresh by the renewing grace of His forgiveness in our lives we become a people who are groaning a lot, moaning a lot, complaining a lot and not living in loving grace-filled fellowship together because we have lost sight of the joy of our salvation.

The Puritan Richard Sibbes said, “Til sin be bitter, Christ will not be sweet.” But once we've tasted the bitterness of our sin and experienced the cleansing of His forgiveness, what joy is ours. I love how the New Living Translation translates verses one and two. *“Oh, what joy for those whose disobedience is forgiven, whose sin is put out of sight! Yes, what joy for those whose record the LORD has cleared of guilt!”* And this phrase I love: *“Whose lives are lived in complete honesty!”*

What joy—and I call you to that joy today. I call you to that freedom today. If you don't know that joy today, don't ask yourself merely, “Are there any great sins that I'm covering up?” Go deeper than that and ask yourself, “How frequently, how honestly, how specifically am I confessing my sins to the Lord and experiencing the joy of His forgiveness?” You know, there's a lot of inadequate ways we talk about sin.

There was an on-line article last month by Derek Rishmawy of Trinity Seminary that described five wrong ways we talk about sin. I'm going to highlight them for you right now.

1. The Youth Group Way. (No offense to the youth in our church.) This is when we sit around in a circle and start describing our faults and foibles. Before you know it, someone else is describing his and then suddenly we're kind of giggling, laughing and commiserating together, almost treating our sins like we would treat biting our nails—not with seriousness, not as a plague of the soul, a disease that kills, an offense against the majestic and holy God.

2. The Millennial Way. Have you noticed how in our day and age authenticity trumps everything? “Just be real!” Sometimes we think, “Hey, if I air my brokenness and let it all hang out, that’s all I need to do. I’m being real—but don’t you dare criticize me. Don’t you dare tell me I need to repent. Don’t you dare look at me in my self-justifying authenticity and say, ‘That’s wrong. That’s evil. God wants to change that in you.’”

3. The Sectarian Way. You know what it’s like to speak of sin in church with utter seriousness and the most earnest of tones. But after you listen for a while, you realize it’s all about the sins of the people “out there,” and very little is being said about the sins “in here.” The only way you speak about sin is by condemning the sins of others. If you really think sin is mainly just a problem of your past—not an ongoing present reality in your life today—then you’re probably taking the Sectarian approach. You’re seeing yourself as holier than thou and not really confessing your sin and acknowledging your transgressions to the Lord.

4. The Mainline Way. This view sees human sin pretty much as being within relationships. It’s all horizontal and not vertical. It lacks a sense of offending the majesty of a holy God. We talk a lot about things like sexism, racism, oppression and greed—all of which are heinous sins in the eyes of a holy God—but we never look at the Godward dimension of those sins. As theologian Richard Niebuhr put it, “A God without wrath brings people without sin into a kingdom without judgment through a Christ without a cross.”

5. The Evangelical Way. This runs to the opposite extreme and believes, “*Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight*” (Psalm 51:4). This falls short in that we think, “If I confess my sin to God, that’s enough.” We forget that God wants us to move from the freedom of His forgiveness into the difficult work of restitution and restoration and reconciliation with our fellow man.

There are lots of ways, you see, that we distort or minimize or insulate ourselves from deep, profound, painful, transformative confession of our sin, and whenever we do this we forfeit the joy that could be ours. I love how Ray Ortlund puts it: “When we get real, we find that God gets real.” When we get honest about our sin and really confess—that’s when God gets real to us.

2. Why are we reluctant to practice the confession of our sins?

With so much at stake, why are we reluctant to practice confession? In 1 John 1:5-10, we see that fellowship with God and fellowship with one another both hinge on an open, honest, ongoing, grace-giving culture of confession in the church. If God doesn’t seem real to us—if He seems vague, distant, remote and theoretical—one possible reason is that we are staying in the

shadows of our sin. Listen to these verses which describe our reluctance to confess—and what we’re missing when we don’t confess:

⁵ This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice 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 cleanses us from all sin.

That’s what will help you overcome your fear and reluctance—the confidence that the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin. But we’re still reluctant.

⁸ If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

Imagine a scenario where God is seen as remote and distant, vague and unreal to a believer. Where can you find Him afresh? You find Him where He has made Himself findable—in the light. “*God is light, and in him is no darkness at all*” (1 John 1:5). But if we stay in the shadows, if we brush our sins under the rug, if we are evasive with God and in denial about our sin, then we are hiding from the light. It’s not that the light isn’t real. It’s that we’re staying in the realm of unreality.

That’s why God is remote and distant, and that’s why fellowship can become so dry and barren. Fellowship with God and fellowship with one another depends on walking in the light where God is. It hinges on a culture of confession. Otherwise we’re just playing games, deceiving ourselves and staying in the darkness.

John highlights three lies that keep us from being vulnerable and exposing our shame, that keep us in hiding, and that Satan wants us to believe. They each begin with the phrase, “If we say...”

1. Sin is no big deal—verse six: “*If we say we have fellowship with him...*” Isn’t that what being a Christian is—having fellowship with the living God? Being a Christian is not just going to church. It’s not just believing the creed. It’s not just following rules. It’s certainly not being better than those immoral people out there. That’s not what being a Christian is. Being a Christian is walking with God, knowing God, having real fellowship with the living God. That’s true Christianity. “*If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.*”

You see, in the 1st century—just like in the 21st century—there were false teachers who taught that how you live as a Christian is really no big deal. You can believe in Jesus and not have it change your life, not have Jesus by His Spirit transforming you. You can just trust in Him and there be no difference in the way you live, no real marked change, no repentance, no growth in sanctification. You can walk in darkness, treating God in His holiness like it's no big deal. You can think little of God—that He's just this benign, forgiving Father Who will just let you into heaven when you die.

John says, "That's a lie! If you have fellowship with Him Who is light, will not His light be transforming you? Will not it be changing the way you live?" Of course, this doesn't mean we're perfect. John freely and right away acknowledges that in verse seven. But it means you keep coming to Jesus again and again, brokenhearted by your sin, bringing it all into the light.

Look at what verse seven says will happen. When you walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, we encourage one another in this great fight against sin and in the pursuit of holiness together, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us—ongoing—from all sin. Isn't that beautiful? I love how Mark Dever of Capital Hill Baptist Church in D.C. puts it:

The difference between Christians and non-Christians is not that non-Christians sin whereas Christians don't. The difference is found in what side we take in the battle. Christians take God's side against sin, whereas non-Christians take sin's side against God. A Christian will sin, but turn to God again and His Word, and He will say, "Help me fight my sin." A non-Christian—even if he recognizes his sin—effectively responds, "I want my sin more than God."

There it is. A Christian takes sin seriously. We are not sinless—we need to confess all the time. But we're taking God's side in the fight against our sin. That brings us to the second lie.

2. I'm not a sinner—verse eight: "*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.*" This is a denial of our sinful nature, of our original sin. Sin is at the very origin of our being. Something that struck me for the first time this week in looking at this is that John the Apostle includes himself here. You know, John might be in his 90s when he's writing this letter. He is a godly man. He's walked with Jesus for a long time. But he doesn't say, "If you say..." He says, "*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.*"

John sees himself still as a sinful man, a great sinner in need of a great Savior. Some people will argue, "I'm a new creation in Christ. I've received a new nature. I've been delivered from that old nature." We forget—or we deny—that we're still in the flesh. That sinful nature is not going to be eradicated until we stand with Christ in glory; all our days we have to engage in a

good fight of faith against indwelling sin. It's a joyful battle because we know the Spirit wages war against the flesh, and the Spirit will be victorious. But it's a battle nonetheless.

In the 1st century there was a heresy called Gnosticism, whose false teachers argued that if you become a Christian, you've been completely delivered from your sinful nature—and then there is no sin in you. So if you do something that's wrong, it's not really you who have sinned. John says, "Nonsense. This is utter self-deception." We sin because we're sinful, and that sinful nature remains even while we're a new creation, until finally we stand with Jesus and our sinful nature is vanquished forever. I'm looking forward to that. But until then I need to confess my sin.

I like how Charles Spurgeon hits the nail on the head:

The idea of having no sin is a delusion. You are altogether deceived if you say so. The truth is not in you, and you have not seen things in the true light. You must have shut your eyes to the high requirements of God's law. You must be a stranger to your own heart. You must be blind to your own conduct. You must have forgotten to search your thoughts and to weigh your motives, or you would have detected the presence of sin.

He who cannot find water in the sea is no more foolish than the man who cannot perceive sin in his members. As the salt flavors every drop of the Atlantic, so does sin affect every atom of our nature. It is so sadly there, so abundantly there, that if you cannot detect it, you are deceived.

That's what John is saying.

3. We have not sinned—verse ten: *"If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar."*

The lie in verse eight is a denial of the sinful nature; the lie in verse ten is a denial of sinful actions. Did you hear that? Now it's not just that we are lying. Now it's blasphemy and we make God a liar. Paul tells us, *"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"* (Romans 3:23). God sent His Son into the world and nailed Him to the cross to redeem us from our sins. We're blaspheming God if we deny that we have sinful actions in our lives flowing from a sinful nature.

But we do that. We say, "Hey, I'm not really such a bad person. I didn't mean to do wrong. Yeah, I make mistakes, but I'm really good." Recently a political candidate said these words: "I am Protestant. I am Presbyterian. I go to church and I love God and I love my church." Then he was asked if he ever asks God for forgiveness for his actions. His answer was this: "I am not sure I have. I just go on and try to do a better job from there." Later they asked

him to clarify, and he said, “Why do I have to repent or ask for forgiveness if I’m not making mistakes? I work hard. I’m an honorable person.”

You look at someone else and say, “Are you crazy? Really?” We can see it in another person, but we hide it, deny it and miss it in ourselves. Because of a lie that we believe we’re reluctant to confess our sins. Which brings us to the last line of inquiry.

3. How should we confess our sins?

The first way we should confess our sins is to God. Verse nine tells us so reassuringly, “*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just...*” He is faithful and just. He’s faithful because He has promised He will not cast away any sinner who comes to Him and because He has dealt with the penalty of our sins, having paid them in full on the cross of Jesus Christ. So we don’t need to do penance to someone else. We don’t need a human priest to make absolution of our sins. We can go directly to God through Jesus Christ, and we can be completely open to Him. We can tell Him the darkest secrets. We can tell Him the things that bring us the most shame. We can say it specifically to our holy God Who already knows everything about us.

He is faithful and He is just “*to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*”—even the stuff in our hearts we don’t know about yet. That’s God. It doesn’t matter how many times you’ve asked for forgiveness for the same sin. It doesn’t matter how hypocritical you’ve been. There is a Savior Who is able to cleanse you. God is willing. But don’t pretend.

I love what we do in church on Sundays. It prompts me to confess what I need to confess. But there is a slight danger in thinking, “Hey, if I just say those words, I’ve confessed.” Your heart can be far from that. Don’t make up things you don’t believe to be true about yourself. Don’t say things just because you think it’s the right thing to say. If you’re not aware of your sin, the first thing to go to God with is your hardheartedness. Tell Him, “Lord, I’m calloused. I’m insensitive. I do not see what You see. I need You to make my heart tender and soft. I need You to convict me of my sin.” And He will.

You don’t need to go to God—if you’re in Christ—like you’re bringing the guilty record before a Judge. Jesus paid for that. It is finished. But you go to Him as a child goes to her father because you want to experience His love. You want to know fellowship with Him. You want there to be warmth and joy and closeness. You want to be walking with Him Who is in the light and you ask Him to cleanse you so that you can know Him more and more.

The first way we confess our sin is to God, but secondly and lastly we also need to confess our sins to one another. This might be where it gets real for you. Sometimes it’s too easy simply

to go to God. It's a way of avoiding the real-life ramifications of our sin. Whenever our sin affects someone else, we need to acknowledge and confess that sin to the person who's been affected.

James 5:16 says, *"Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed."* This is in the context of sickness and community. Let me put it bluntly:

- If you've committed adultery, you cannot just take it to God. You have to confess to your spouse.
- If you're married and you're viewing pornography, it's very unlikely that you're ever going to find victory keeping it just between you and God. It's not just a sin against God. That's a sin against your spouse. There are right ways to do this and wrong ways to do this, and I would really recommend you get some good pastoral counsel before going to your spouse. But you need to confess that sin to him or to her.
- If you're not married and you're involved in pornography, it's unlikely I think that you will be ready to be married until you confess that sin to a godly brother—or sister, if you're a woman—who will not coddle you, but who will care for you with the deep, deep love of Jesus, who will point you to a holy God.
- If you're stealing, you can't just tell God about it. You've got to tell the IRS too, or your employer, or whoever it is that you're stealing from. That's what confession is.
- If you're cheating in school, you can't just lay your head down at night and say, "Sorry, God." You've got to go to your teacher tomorrow morning and tell her, "I cheated on that assignment." That's confession.
- If you've lied to another person, you've got to go back and tell the truth.
- If you've been cruel in your anger toward your children, you can't just wake up tomorrow and try to do better. You've got to go to your son, your daughter. You've got to confess your sin and seek his or her forgiveness.
- If you've gossiped and spread a bad report—if you've taken that proverbial pillow and emptied all the feathers and they've flown all over the place and you can't collect them all or fix it—you can still own it. You can go back, wherever you see feathers, and you can say, "My evil, unruly tongue has caused a lot of damage, and I am sorry. I repent." I want to say I have found there's great freedom in this.

There are times when embarrassingly I have had to go to my wife and confess a particular sin to her. I've seen her reaction both of pain and of pointing me to Jesus in forgiveness, which have gone a long way to break the power of that sin, making me never want to do it again. Or I have told a dear friend who isn't just going to respond, "Oh, David, I'm like that too," but who is pursuing holiness and loves Christ, who is able to look at me and say, "That is sin—but there is a Savior Who forgives you."

Confession is like you're abandoning the last bastion of self-justification. You're saying, "I don't want to be hiding anything anymore. I want to walk in the light as He is in the light." And oh, the freedom that can come! Who are you confessing your sins to?

Is there anyone in your life who hears what you have done and knows who you are deeply? There are right ways and wrong ways to do that, but I want to leave you with the vision of what can happen in a community that's practicing confession. Listen to this eye-witness account of the great Korean revival of 1907. Let it kindle in our hearts a desire for a similar purging and cleansing in our lives. A man who was there describes a meeting:

Then began a meeting, the like of which I have never seen before, nor wish to see again unless in God's sight it is absolutely necessary. Every sin a human being can commit was publicly confessed that night. Pale and trembling with emotion, in agony of mind and body, guilty souls standing in the white light of their judgment saw themselves as God saw them.

Their sins rose up in all their vileness, 'til shame and grief and self-loathing took complete possession. Pride was driven out, the face of man forgotten. Looking up to heaven—to Jesus Whom they had betrayed—they smote themselves and cried out with bitter wailing, “Lord, Lord, cast us not away forever!” Everything else was forgotten. Nothing else mattered. The scorn of men, the penalty of the law, even death itself seemed of small consequence if only God forgave.

We may have other theories of the desirability or undesirability of public confession of sin. I have had mine. But I know now that when the Spirit of God falls upon guilty souls, there will be confession—and no power on earth can stop it. If only God forgave—and He does. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Let's pray before Him.

Holy God, in Whom is light and not a shade or shadow of darkness, Who knows us intimately—every thought, word, deed. Before a word is on our mouth, You know it completely. As David prayed in Psalm 139, “Search us, O God, and know our hearts. Try us, and know our anxious thoughts. See if there any offensive way in us, and lead us in the way everlasting” we pray, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

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