

IF WE CONFESS OUR SINS

I John 1:8-9

Rev. Joyce Anderson-Reed

May 20, 2007/Crossroads Christian Fellowship/La Paz, Mexico

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. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives. (I John 1:8-9 NIV)

Prussian King Frederick the Great was once touring a Berlin prison. The prisoners fell on their knees before him to proclaim their innocence, except for one man who remained silent. Frederick called to him, “Why are you here?” “Armed robbery, Your Majesty,” was the reply. “And are you guilty?” “Yes indeed, Your Majesty, I deserve my punishment.” Frederick then summoned the jailer and ordered him: “Release this guilty wretch at once. I will not have him kept in this prison where he will corrupt all the fine innocent people who occupy it.” (*Today in the Word*, December 4, 1992)

Confession is the theme of my sermon this morning! And let me put you at ease right now, this sermon is not about making you feel guilty. Confession is about healing. It’s an action that takes us to the cross of Jesus, and then to the throne of God’s grace.

You might be wondering why I’m even tackling this subject this morning. I have two reasons. One, is because God has been addressing confession in my own prayer life for the last month. And as a pastor, I find that when I have the courage to share with you some of my struggles, it often gives you the courage to tackle your own struggles as well.

Second, at least 95% of you have told Pastor David and me that the reason you were drawn to Crossroads and stayed here is because of the incredible love you found. That this community of faith expresses a love that many of you have rarely experienced in other churches. And why is it hard to find in other churches? I believe it is because many believers have lost the power of confession in their individual and corporate lives. They’ve become too proud to admit their wrong doings. To ask for forgiveness. To say I’m sorry. To restore brokenness. They’ve rationalized away their sin. And thus the love we experience in those churches no longer feels authentic. I don’t want that to happen here. I don’t want us to get puffed up in pride, too afraid to say I’m sorry, sweeping hurts and regrets under the rug and pasting on false smiles. I want us as it says in I Peter “to love

one another deeply from the heart”, to love our neighbors as ourselves, to forgive each other as Christ forgave us. And to do that, we need to understand confession.

For those of you who grew up in a Baptist Church, an Assembly of God church, or an independent church, the word “confession” was one you usually only heard when there was an altar call at the end of the service. Confess your sins, ask God for forgiveness, invite Jesus into your heart as your Lord and Savior, and you will be saved. And certainly this is a critical step in restoring our relationship with God. Acknowledging that we have sinned and asking God for his forgiveness and merciful grace.

However, if you grew up Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian or Methodist, the word “confession” was more readily spoken. You might recall that every Sunday worship service included a Prayer of confession. This is one from the Book of Common Prayer:

Most merciful God
We confess that we have sinned against You
In thought, word, and deed
By what we have done
And by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart
We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ
Have mercy on us and forgive us
That we may delight in your will
And walk in your ways
To the glory of your Name. Amen.

The Bible offers both views of confession. The Bible speaks of salvation as both an event and a process. So we can read in Romans 10:9 *“If you confess with your mouth “Jesus is Lord” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”* But in Philippians 2:12b we also read *“Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.”* So confession is not only an event to receive salvation, but also a continual process to bring us into righteous living.

The word “confession” literally means “with acknowledgement.” To acknowledge means to bring into the open, to put into words, and to make visible that which is hidden.

Most of us would prefer to keep our passivity, our wrongdoings, and our evil, vengeful thoughts invisible. But like harmful bacteria lying dormant in our bodies, sin tucked away in our souls can make us sick. The first step in treating any illness is an accurate diagnosis. Once we name our sinfulness out loud, healing can begin. Without confession, our power is lost and we become powerless to make genuine changes in our lives. Confession enables us to stop blaming others and to take complete responsibility for our own experience and the choices we make regarding how we live mentally, physically, and emotionally in the world. Taking responsibility for our own thoughts, feelings and actions allows us to regain our own power to change. (page 39, *Reinventing Worship* by Brad Berglund, Judson Press, 2006)

So what constitutes a confession? Some of us hear the word and immediately think of the stereotype of a person going to a booth or closet of confession where the person enters behind a closed curtain on one side, separated by a wall with the priest on the other, and a small window is slid open between you so that the priest may hear your penitent words and then absolve you in God's name, without you ever disclosing your identity. Others of us think of kneeling on the floor pouring out our heart in anguish before God, begging for his forgiveness. Still others of us might reflect on Peter and Jesus standing on the shore of the Sea of Galilee as Peter seeks forgiveness for denying Jesus three times, and Jesus responds three times, "Peter, if you love me, feed my sheep."

Again, the Bible teaches that confession is a private, and yet also a corporate event. We are told in I Timothy 2:5 that "*there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.*" But in James 5:16 we are also told to "*confess your sins to one another, to pray for one another.*" Neither exclude each other.

As the people of God we are first a fellowship of sinners. And the redemptive process is a great mystery hidden in the heart of God. But I know that it is true. Through my own life and through the lives of many other people, I have seen how confession and forgiveness are realities that transform us. Without the cross, confession would be only psychologically therapeutic. But with the cross, it is so much more. It involves an objective change in our relationship with God and a subjective change in us. It is a means of healing and transforming the inner spirit. (page 144, *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard J. Foster, Harper and Row, 1978)

So confession is both private and corporate, but always centered at the cross, where Jesus took on the collective sin of the human race (past, present and future) and redeemed us through his blood.

Richard Foster, in his book *Celebration of Discipline*, shares three things that are necessary for a “good” confession: an examination of conscience, sorrow, and a determination to avoid sin. (Foster, page 151)

Let’s look at each one separately.

An Examination of Conscience

This is when we invite God to move upon our hearts to show us areas that need his forgiving and healing touch. We open ourselves up to the gaze of God. It is a willingness to be prepared to deal with definite sins. “A generalized confession may save us from humiliation and shame, but it will not ignite inner healing.” (Foster, page 151)

Pastor and Author Bill Hybels shares:

“I used to be an “oops” confessor. I would say an unkind word to someone, then say, “Oops, Lord, I’ll have to confess that to you later.” Then I would exaggerate a story, and say, “Oops, Lord, I’ll catch that one later too.” All day I would add to the tally, fully intending to clear the bill later.

But later seldom came. When it did, I would make a blanket confession of “my many sins.” I thought I was being wonderfully honest and humble to claim my sins like that. In reality, it was a colossal cop-out.

You see, blanket confessions are virtually painless. But they do nothing to transform our hearts. It seems confession has to hurt a bit, even embarrass us, before we’ll take it seriously. That is why writing out our confessions and seeing those words on paper can be such a powerful experience. (page 61, *Leader’s Guide of Authenticity Bible Study* by Bill Hybels, Zondervan, 1996)

Have you ever kept a journal of your confessions? It’s a powerful tool. Bill Hybels asks, “Do you know what it’s like to see your sins in print? Try writing something like this: “Last night I told Todd I would play ball with him, but I didn’t keep my word. I lied to my son.” It’s so easy to justify our behavior by saying, “I intended to play ball. It just didn’t work out.” Instead we need to see our sins for what they are. (Hybels, page 15)

As we’ve stated before, there doesn’t seem to be much true confession in Christian circles. And that’s a shame because exciting things happen when God’s children get honest about their sin. Hybels says, “Five days of having to call oneself a liar,

a greedy person, or a cheat is enough to drive any spiritually sensitive person to forsake that sin.”

We all have to realize that sin is serious business and that we need to enlist the Holy Spirit’s help in forsaking it. Only then can we make progress in rooting specific sins out of our lives and know what Scripture means when it says in II Corinthians 5:17 “the old has gone, the new has come. (Hybels, page 62)

After we let God gaze upon our hearts, there should also be sorrow or deep regret.

Sorrow

Confession is not primarily an emotion, though emotion may be involved. But it should be an abhorrence at having committed the sin, a deep regret at having offended the heart of God. Sorrow is a way of taking the confession seriously. In Isaiah 66:2b God says, *“This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.”*

Humility is critical to confession. We’ve certainly all experienced an insincere apology. When someone says to us “I’m sorry” but the tone of his/her voice indicates that this person is not sorry one bit!

In a sermon a pastor emphasized the fact that we’re all sinners who need a Savior. After the service, a salesman informed the pastor that he didn’t consider himself a sinner. So the pastor asked him if he’d been absolutely faithful to his wife. “Well, I travel a lot, you know . . .” Then the pastor asked about his expense account. “Oh, everybody stretches the truth a bit . . .” Finally, the pastor questioned his sales techniques. Did he ever exaggerate or overstate a claim? “That’s standard in the industry . . . “

“Well,” the pastor said, “you’ve just told me you’re an adulterer, a cheater, and a liar.”

“How dare you call me those awful things!” the man huffed, appalled at the pastor’s brash insensitivity.

And the pastor replied, “As hard as it was for you to hear those words, I believe I did you a favor. God doesn’t want us to hide from our sin. We need to humbly confess it and ask for forgiveness.” (Hybels, page 61)

Contrast that story with one told by the late Dr. F. E. Marsh. After preaching a sermon on confession of sin, and restitution for wrong done to others, Dr. Marsh was approached by a young man at the end of a worship service. The young man's face was troubled.

“Pastor you have put me in a sad fix. I have wronged another and I am ashamed to confess it, or to try to put it right. You see, I am a boat builder and the man I work for is not a Christian. I have talked to him often about his need for Christ, I have urged him to come to church, but he scoffs and ridicules it all. Now I have been guilty of something that, if I should acknowledge it to him, will ruin my testimony forever.”

He then went on to say that some time ago he started to build a boat for himself. In this work, copper nails are used because they do not rust in the water. These nails are quite expensive and the young man didn't have the money to buy them. So every day after work, he would carry home several pocketfuls from the boatyard of his employer.

He knew that this was stealing, but he tried to salve his conscience by saying that his employer had so many he would never miss them. And besides, he wasn't being paid all that he thought he deserved. But Dr. Marsh's sermon had caused him to face the fact that he was just a common thief, for whose dishonest actions there was no excuse.

“But,” he said, “I can't go to my boss and tell him what I've done or offer to pay for what I've used and return the rest. If I do, he'll think I'm a hypocrite. And yet, those copper nails won't leave me in peace. I know I need to make this matter right.” Dr. Marsh prayed with him, and invited him to seek God's guidance. For weeks, the struggle went on. Then one night the young man came to Dr. Marsh and exclaimed, “Pastor, I've settled the copper nails and my conscience is relieved at last.”

“What happened when you confessed to your employer what you had done?” asked the pastor.

“He looked at me strangely, then said, ‘George, I always did think you were just a hypocrite, but now I begin to feel that there's something in this Christianity after all. Any religion that would make a dishonest workman come back and confess that he had been stealing copper nails and offer to settle for them, must be worth having.’”

Reformation and restitution do not save us. But when one is truly repentant and has come to God in sincere confession, he or she will want to the best of his or her ability to put things right. (H.A. Ironside, *Illustrations of Bible Truth*. 1945. Moody Press. Pages 104-106)

Examination, sorrow, and the third aspect of a confession is a determination to avoid sin.

Determination to Avoid Sin

Part of confession is asking God to then give us a yearning for holy living, and a hatred for unholy living. John Wesley once said, “Give me 100 preachers who fear nothing but sin and desire nothing but good . . . such alone will shake the gates of hell and set up the kingdom of heaven on earth.” (Foster, page 152)

I John 1:8-9 says: *If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, we can rely on him in his righteousness to forgive us our sins and to make us clean from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar and his word is not in us.*

John says a very surprising thing here: we can depend on God *in his righteousness* to forgive us if we confess our sins. Don't we usually expect God to condemn us, rather than forgive us? The Bible promises that if we come with humble hearts before God, we will receive mercy, we will receive grace, not condemnation. (page 33, *Commentary on I John* by John Barclay, Westminster Press, 1996)

That's what I meant when at the very beginning of this sermon I emphasized that confession is not about making you feel guilty. It's about healing. It transforms us so that we will shake the very gates of hell.

There was a woman in the north of England who said that every time she got down before God to pray, five bottles of wine came up before her mind. When she had worked as a housekeeper, she had wrongfully taken them. And she had not been able to pray since. She went to her pastor for advice.

“Perhaps you need to make restitution,” he told her.

“But the person is dead,” she said.

“Are not some of the heirs living?”

“Yes, a son.”

“Then go to that son and pay him back.”

“Well,” she said, “I want to see the face of God, but I’m not doing that! My reputation is at stake.”

So she went away and thought some more. The next day she came back and asked, “Couldn’t I just put that money in the offering plate on Sunday?”

“No,” she was told. “God doesn’t want any stolen money. You need to make restitution and ask for forgiveness.”

The woman reflected on this for several more days, and then felt convicted that God had indeed spoken through her pastor, and that she should locate the son of her former employer. She went into the country, found the son, made a full confession and offered him a five-pound note.

The son said he didn’t want the money, but she persuaded him to take it, and she came back with a joy and peace that made her face radiant. She became a magnificent worker for souls, and led many into God’s light.

Dwight Moody says, “Many of our prayer meetings are killed by people trying to pray who cannot pray because their lives are not right. Sin builds up a great wall between us and God. You may stand high in the community and may be a member of some church “in good standing” but the question is, “How do you stand in the sight of God?” (pages 49-50, *Moody’s Anecdotes*, from Sermon Illustrations.org)

After her confession, the woman in this last story experienced great peace and joy. And that is another aspect of sincere confession. Confession may begin in self-examination, sorrow, and a desire to be more holy, but it should always ends in joy.

God doesn’t want us to stay in a place where we continually beat ourselves up, in a place of self-condemnation. He doesn’t want us to stay at the foot of the cross, or worse yet, to take Jesus down and put ourselves in his place on the cross! If we confess our sins, God’s forgiveness is free. He is faithful and just to forgive us. That is the mystery of grace. It is something that we don’t deserve. And the unexpectedness of God’s grace will bring us joy!

When we confess our sins honestly we experience the freedom and joy of forgiveness. Un-confessed sin tangles around us and drags us down. Bill Hybels says, “I didn’t know how much my sins were hindering me until I quit playing games and got honest with God.” And then, when I realized that God was not waiting to condemn me, but to love me, to forgive me, to embrace me with wide open arms, I was even more motivated to forsake the sin in my life. “Why would I want to hurt someone who loved me that much? Why would I want to disobey someone who extended to me that kind of grace?” (Hybels, page 62)

Confession brings an end to pretense. Honesty leads to confession and confession leads to change. And change allows for a community of faith that models the forgiveness and empowering grace of God. (Foster, page 157)

Let us close by reading together a Prayer of Confession (by Terry Falla):

Leader:

O God of life, we thank you that in our work and our worship
Your son, Jesus, has been in our midst; that your Holy Spirit has moved among us,
Shaken our complacency, questioned our orthodoxy, and challenged our conformity.

People:

We confess there are many ways in which we have failed to change, ways in which selfishness still wins, and divisions remain.

Leader:

There are ways in which our need for security and longings for recognition make us measure our lives by the standard of the crowd.

People:

We measure our achievements by the size of our salary, the location of our street, the impressiveness of our house, or the make of our car.

Leader:

Nevertheless, you have called us to adapt ourselves no longer to the pattern of this world,
But to rise above the narrow confines of race and culture, creed and color.

People:

You have brought us together to be a new creation, a community marked by love, and we thank you for the ways in which this is true.

Leader:

Let us never forget your words to us, “I have chosen you to be with me”
And that being with You does not mean belonging to a closed or exclusive circle,
But rather following You into the world to be your disciples, regardless of the consequences.

People:

Keep us aware, O God, that we can be the servant church only as long as we allow you to transform our lives.

Leader:

Let our worship be an encounter with You, and lead us to more awareness of each other,
Our studies to new ways of expressing our faith
Our participation in Your church and world to relationships that last and allow others to know
You as their Lord

People:

And let our care for each other increase until in reality it becomes the task and concern of the whole church.

Leader:

So that in hardship there is sharing, in sickness there is support, in grief there is comfort, and in loneliness there is friendship.

All:

O God, whose enduring love is our hope, we praise you that it is by your grace we are called, and by your mercy we are sustained, so that we can follow you into the world, and can be the church by sharing in your death and resurrection. Amen. (page 41-42, *Reinventing Worship* by Brad Berglund, Judson Press, 2006)