

COPPER NAIL CONFESSIONS

Psalm 32:1-5

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Rev. Douglas F. Fortner who is a priest at a Catholic School shared the following story: Because the younger children at our parochial school often forgot their sins when they entered my confessional, I suggested that teachers have the students make lists. The next week when one child came to confession, I could hear him unfolding paper. The youngster began, "I lied to my parents. I disobeyed my mom. I fought with my brothers and..." There was a long pause. Then a small angry voice said, "Hey, this isn't my list!"

Confessions.

According to the dictionary, one definition of confession is an acknowledgment or disclosure of sin or sinfulness.

Confessing our mistakes, our failures, our character flaws, or our moral defeats is not usually at the top of our list for the Top Ten Things I Need to Do Today. As human beings we try to hide our sins from each other. We often try to see how much we can get away with, without getting caught.

Kevin Miller, executive vice-president of Christianity Today International, shares this story: (from PreachingToday.com)

In April of 2008, I had to drive to Fort Wayne, Indiana, for work, so I went to Enterprise to rent a car. They gave me a big, brand-new, comfy Chrysler 300 to drive—and I loved it! In fact, I enjoyed feeling large and in charge so much that I blew right past the first tollbooth. You see, I'm not used to stopping for tollbooths, because I have an I-PASS in my own car—a little device that signals I've already prepaid my tolls.

After passing the first tollbooth, I thought about it: *Oh! This car doesn't have an I-PASS!* But just as I started to worry about it, I thought, *This car belongs to the rental-car company—not me. So they're probably responsible for any tolls. That must be what your rental money goes toward covering.*

When I got on 294, I drove past another toll, thinking, *Even if I am responsible for the tolls, there's only a few tolls between here and Indiana—maybe \$4 round trip. I'm sure there's some threshold where they don't even bother sending you a bill for the tolls. I mean, it wouldn't be worth their time to send me a bill for only \$4. Nothing's going to happen!*

After I returned home from my business trip, a month or two went by. Nothing happened—and I knew nothing ever would. But then, in October, I received a piece of mail that read: "Notice of Toll Violation."

I was right, to a degree. The Tollway Authority wouldn't bother sending me a bill for my measly \$3.90 in tolls. But when you add in a \$20 fine for every one of the 5 tollbooths I drove past, they *did* bother sending me a bill for \$103.90!

I about had a heart attack. They had me dead to rights. They had a photo of my rental-car's license plate. They even knew the exact lane number I was in. The fact that months had gone by and nothing had happened didn't mean that nothing was ever going to happen.

Like Kevin Miller, most of us learn from experience that our sins usually catch up with us. We *are* held accountable for them in some tangible way. The truth either eventually comes out, or there is a physical toll on our minds, bodies, and spirits from hiding the truth deep inside.

In the book of Psalms, chapter 32, there is the story of a man who tried to hide his sins—not only from himself, but also from God. However, as he kept silent about his sin, it began to weigh upon his heart. He says, “My bones wasted away.”

Let's look at Psalm 32:1-5 . . .

1 Blessed is he

whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.

2 Blessed is the man

whose sin the LORD does not count against him
and in whose spirit is no deceit.

3 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 sapped
as in the heat of summer.

5 Then I acknowledged my sin to you
and did not cover up my iniquity.

I said, "I will confess
my transgressions to the LORD"—
and you forgave
the guilt of my sin.

Now listen to those same words from a more modern translation, *The Message*:

1 Count yourself lucky, how happy you must be— you get a fresh start,
your slate's wiped clean.

2 Count yourself lucky—
GOD holds nothing against you
and you're holding nothing back from him.

3 When I kept it all inside,
my bones turned to powder,
my words became daylong groans.

4 The pressure never let up;
all the juices of my life dried up.

5 Then I let it all out;
I said, "I'll make a clean breast of my failures to GOD."

Suddenly the pressure was gone—
my guilt dissolved,
my sin disappeared.

Have you ever carried a sin in your heart until you felt like the juices of your life dried up? That your words were day-long groans? Your bones like powder?

The poet of Psalm 32 was writing his heart's blood. He is sharing with us an agonizing battle which he fought on the soil of his soul. And as he struggles, he comes to the realization that the only way to relieve himself of this burden is to confess it to God. Only God can deliver him from the torment of self-recrimination. The forgiveness he needs for his sin comes through God's grace. He doesn't deserve forgiveness, but amazingly, God takes away the burden of his guilt when he acknowledged what he had done, and didn't try to cover it up anymore.

Verse 2 is particularly interesting because the poet says, "*Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit.*"

He realizes that he can't be sinless. As a human being he will sin over and over again. However, what he can be is absolutely truthful with God and with himself.

That's a challenge for you and me today: to have a spirit with no deceit. First, do we acknowledge that we sin? That we aren't perfect? That every day, whether we intend to or not, we commit an offense against ourselves, or against our neighbor, or against God.

Second, if we recognize that there is sin in our lives, do we choose to grapple with it, or do we choose to tuck it away in a deep corner of our hearts? What do we do with the sin in our lives?

And third, what about confession? Do we allow ourselves to take a stand for absolute truth? Do we confess our wrongs to God, to each other, to ourselves?

Or are we, like the Psalmist, living under constant pressure, all the juices of our lives drying up?

Psalm 32 was the favorite psalm of Saint Augustine. Born in 354 A.D., Augustine grew up in a Latin-speaking, middle class family in Northern Africa. His father didn't believe in God. His mother was a devout Christian. At age 16 he was sent to Carthage to continue his education. He became a scholar of rhetoric, a common pursuit in those days.

Once in the big city of Carthage, he fell in with the wrong crowd and spent much of his time drinking and partying. He struck up a relationship with a beautiful woman and lived with her for the next 14 years.

At age 29 he moved to Rome and then later Milan when offered an official professorship of Rhetoric. It was during this time that he became disillusioned with his lifestyle, and began a search for truth. Two friends and his beloved mother began to urge him to take a closer look at Christianity. He had written off Christianity in his youth, and had followed instead the Manichaeian religion, Neo-Platonism, and even astrology. But while in Milan, he began to study with a theologian named Ambrose. And he began to seriously pursue a relationship with God.

In 387 he was baptized into the Christian faith, and moved back to Northern Africa where he became a Bishop in 395. He served in this capacity until his death at age 76.

At the beginning of his career as a Bishop, when he was 43 years old, Augustine wrote *Confessions*. *Confessions* is his autobiography that outlines his sinful youth and his conversion to Christianity. In *Confessions* he confesses his sins of theft, lust, promiscuity, hanging out with the wrong crowd, and his study and belief in false religions. He bares his soul through the written word--something that no one of his esteemed position had ever done before. And it changed his life. It gave him a freedom in his life and ministry that he had not previously felt. He could relate to the Psalmist when he said:

Then I let it all out;

I said, "I'll make a clean breast of my failures to GOD."

Suddenly the pressure was gone—

my guilt dissolved,
my sin disappeared.

The late Dr. Frederick Marsh (1858-1931) was preaching a sermon on the confession of sin and urging his hearers, wherever possible, to make restitution for any wrong done to others.

At the close of his message, a young man, a member of the church, came up to him with a troubled countenance. "Pastor," he explained, "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'm a boat builder and the man I work for is not a Christian. I have talked to him often about his need of Christ and urged him to come and hear you preach, 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 sometime ago he started to build a boat for himself in his own yard. In this work copper nails are used because they do not rust in the water. These nails are quite

expensive and the young man had been carrying home quantities of them from work to use on his own boat project. He knew it was stealing, but he had tried to salve his conscience by telling himself that the master had so many he would never miss them, and besides he was not being paid all that he thought he deserved. But this sermon had brought 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 those nails I've used and return the rest. Because if I do, he'll think I'm just a hypocrite. And yet, those copper nails are digging into my conscience and I know I shall never have peace until I put this matter right."

For weeks the struggle went on. Then one night he came to Dr. Marsh and exclaimed, "Pastor, I've settled for the copper nails and my conscience is relieved at last."

"What happened when you confessed to your employer what you'd done?" asked the pastor.

"Oh," he answered, "he gave me a strange look, then exclaimed, 'George, I always did think you were just a hypocrite, but now I begin to feel 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.'"

Dr. Marsh asked the young man if he might use the story, and was granted permission.

Sometime afterwards, Pastor Marsh told it in another city. The next day a lady came up and said, "Pastor, I have had 'copper nails' on my conscience too. I'm a book-lover and I have stolen a number of books from a friend of mine who gets far more than I could ever afford. I decided last night I must get rid of the 'copper nails,' so I took them all back to her today and confessed my sin. I can't tell you how relieved I am. She forgave me, and God has forgiven me. I am so thankful the 'copper mails' are not digging into my conscience any more."

Pastor Marsh told this story many times and almost invariably people came to him afterwards telling of "copper nails" in one form or another that they had to get rid of.

When you are truly repentant and have come to God in sincere confession, then you will want to the best of your ability to put things right with others. (H.A. Ironside, Illustrations of Bible Truth, 1945, Moody Press, pp. 104-106.)

Copper Nail Confessions illustrate what can happen when we are willing to admit a sin against another person, and then make it right. I'm sure each of you could share a story about a troubled conscience over something you took that didn't belong to you. Maybe you actually stole something as the young boat builder stole his copper nails. Maybe you borrowed something—a book, a pan, a tool—then never returned it. You'd always meant too, but never had. Maybe you swiped a couple extra pens or pads of paper from the office you work in. They have so many. Who will notice?

We're good at justifying our actions. Of writing a sin off, saying it doesn't really matter in the grand scope of life. But sin, no matter how big or small, has a way of creeping in to haunt you. The Holy Spirit speaks to us and, if we listen, convicts of the sin in our life. Of the wrong choices. The poor choices. And urges us to confess in order to make our hearts right with God, and with our neighbors.

In the book of James 5:17 we read this:

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

Confessing our sins to each other is a bold step to take. It goes beyond just making things right with God. It challenges you to make things right with the people you're in relationship with. It challenges you to take responsibility for your actions at a corporate level. As Pastor David pointed out to us in his sermon last week: we are all interconnected. When you do your best in Christ, it challenges me to do my best in Christ.

So what would happen if we all acted radically, and decided to excel at authentic confession and forgiveness with one another?

Donald Miller in his book *Blue Like Jazz* shares a fascinating story about this type of radical confession & forgiveness. For awhile he was a student at Reed College in Portland, OR. Every year Reed has a festival where the campus is shut down so the students can party. Security keeps the authorities away and everybody gets very drunk and high. Miller says:

Some of the Christian students in our little group decided this was a good opportunity to let everybody know there were a few Christians on campus. We were sitting around trying to decide how to explain who we were to a group of students who often expressed hostility toward Christians. I said we should make a confession booth in the middle of campus and paint a sign on it that said, "Confess your sins." I said this because I knew a lot of people would be sinning, and Christian spirituality begins by confessing our sins and repenting. I also said it as a joke. But one of my friends thought it was brilliant. I tried to explain to him that we were not going to do this. I was joking. But a smile came across his face. "Oh, we are, Don. We certainly are."

The next day we all got together to discuss my "brilliant" idea. No one else was too thrilled with it either. But then Tony, the one who liked the idea, said, "Okay you guys, here's the catch. We're not actually going to accept confessions." We all looked at him in confusion. "We are going to confess to them. We are going to confess that, as followers of Jesus, we have not been very loving; we have been bitter, and for that we are sorry. We will apologize for the Crusades, we will apologize for televangelists, we will apologize for neglecting the poor and the lonely, we will ask them to forgive us, and we will tell them that in our selfishness, we have misrepresented Jesus on this campus. We will tell people who come into the booth that Jesus loves them."

So, on Saturday, while people were sleeping off their drunken stupors from Friday night, we began to build the confession booth. As the campus gained energy, people walked by and would ask what we were doing. "What are we supposed to do?" they would ask. "Confess your sins,"

we told them. “To who?” they would say. “To God,” we would tell them. “There is no God,” they would explain. But some told us this was the boldest thing they had ever seen. And all of them were kind, which surprised us.

As it got dark, we lit torches around the booth. My friends decided that I should go first. I sat on a bucket on my side of the booth and thought, “Nobody is going to confess anything. Who wants to stop drinking and dancing to confess their sins?” But then somebody came in. A guy named Jake.

“So, what is this? I’m supposed to tell you all the juicy gossip I did this weekend, right?” Jake said.

“No.”

“Okay, then what? What’s the game?”

“Not really a game. More of a confession thing.”

“You want me to confess my sins, right?”

“No, that’s not what we’re doing, really.”

“So what are you doing?”

“Well, we’re a group of Christians here on campus, you know.”

“I see. Strange place for Christians, but I’m listening.”

“Thanks,” I told him. “Anyway, there is this group of us, just a few of us who were thinking about the way Christians have sort of wronged people over time. You know, the Crusades, all that stuff . . .”

“Well, I doubt you personally were involved in any of that.”

“No, I wasn’t,” I told him. “But the thing is, we are followers of Jesus. We believe that He is God and all, and He represented certain ideas that we have sort of not done a good job at representing. He has asked us to represent Him well, but it can be very hard. So there is a group of us on campus who wanted to confess to you.”

“You are confessing to me!” Jake said with a laugh.

“Yeah, we’re confessing to you. I mean, I’m confessing to you.”

“You’re serious. What are you confessing?”

“There’s a lot. I will keep it short. Jesus said to feed the poor and to heal the sick. I have never done very much about that. Jesus said to love those who persecute me. I tend to lash out, especially if I feel threatened, you know, if my ego gets threatened. Jesus did not mix His spirituality with politics. I grew up doing that. It got in the way of the central message of Christ. I know that was wrong, and I know that a lot of people will not listen to the words of Christ because of people like me, who know Him, carry our own agendas into the conversation rather than just relaying the message Christ wanted to get across. There’s a lot more, you know.”

“It’s all right, man,” Jake said. His eyes were starting to water.

“I’m sorry for all of that,” I said, clearing my throat.

“I forgive you,” Jake said. And he meant it. “It’s really cool what you guys are doing. A lot of people need to hear this. You really believe in Jesus, don’t you?” he asked me.

“Yes, I think I do. Most often I do. I have doubts at times, but mostly I believe in Him. It’s like there is something in me that causes me to believe, and I can’t explain it.”

“You said earlier that there was a central message of Christ. I don’t really want to become a Christian, you know, but what is that message?”

“The message is that man sinned against God and God gave the world over to man, and that if somebody wanted to be rescued out of that, if somebody for instance finds it all very empty, that Christ will rescue them if they want; that if they ask forgiveness for being a part of that rebellion then God will forgive them.”

“What is the deal with the cross?” Jake asked.

“God says the wages of sin is death,” I told him. “And Jesus died so that none of us would have to. If we have faith in that then we are Christians. What do you believe about God?” I asked him.

“I don’t know. I guess I didn’t believe for a long time, you know. The science of it is so sketchy. I guess I believe in God though. I believe someone is responsible for all of this, this world we live in. It is all very confusing.”

“Jake, if you want to know God, you can. I am just saying if you ever want to call on Jesus, He will be there.”

“Thanks. I believe you mean that. This is cool what you guys are doing. I’m going to tell my friends about this.”

“I don’t know whether to thank you for that or not,” I laughed. “I have to sit here and confess all my crap.”

He looked at me very seriously. “It’s worth it.” He shook my hand and left the booth.

Another person was waiting to come in. I think I talked to 30 people that night. All the people who visited the booth were grateful and gracious. I was being changed through the process. I went in with doubts and came out believing so strongly in Jesus I was ready to die and be with Him. I felt very connected to God because I had confessed so much to so many people and had gotten so much off my chest, and I had been forgiven by the people I had wronged with my indifference and judgmentalism. Many years before I had made amends to God, but tonight I had made amends to the world. (Blue Like Jazz by Donald Miller, excerpts from pages 116-127, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003)

Two weeks ago in his sermon, Milton reminded us that there are many people who won't come near Christianity because of how they've been treated by another Christian. Copper Nail Confessions is not just about our own personal sins, it's also about how we sin as a corporate body. What each of us does when we walk outside these walls reflects back on all of us. How I act as a Christian affects Paula. How Paula acts as a Christian affects Ruben. How Ruben acts as a Christian affects Alonzo. How Alonzo acts as a Christian affects Ana. How Ana acts as a Christian affects Elaine. And so on.

Recently a Christian Business man in our congregation told me how he had messed up on some important paperwork. Several of his colleagues told him to forget it, no one will notice. But in his heart, he couldn't forget it. And he took the extra time and effort to correct his mistake. This man confessed, and took a stand for integrity and honor. I have no doubt that it will have a dramatic impact on his witness in the business community, in his faith community, and even in his marriage and family. This is a man who wants to be known for doing what's right.

Maybe you've never thought about confession that way. That it's not all about you. It's also about us. That as you strive to be holy, yet humble, it reflects back on every Christian you know. How we walk our faith speaks much louder than our words of faith.

What would happen if we constructed a Confession Booth and set it up at the Kiosk in the middle of the Malecon? What would you confess to those people who stepped inside and sat down across from you? How have you misrepresented Christ to your family, to your neighbors, to your co-workers, to your friends, to the world at large? Where are the juices of your life drying up because of how you have wronged those around you?

The power of the Copper Nail story, the power of the Confession Booth at Reed College story, is that in each a young man listened to God's voice, and courageously confessed his sins. Each said, "This is where I messed up. This is where I wronged God and I wronged you. And I'm sorry. Will you forgive me?" And to their surprise, they each did receive forgiveness. And their hearts were lightened.

I realize that the person or persons you've offended might not always grant you forgiveness. But it's important that you still ask, that you still try to make things right. Because it changes you. Shedding yourself of sin makes you a different person. And, what you can always hold on to is this: God *will* forgive you. When you confess your sins to God with a sincere and humble heart, God will cleanse you and wipe the slate clean.

Let me close by inviting you to read with me two prayers of confession:

Most holy and merciful God,
We confess to you and to one another,
that we have sinned against you by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart and mind and strength.
We have not fully loved our neighbors as ourselves.
We have not always had in us the mind of Christ.
You alone know how often we have grieved you by wasting your gifts,
by wandering from your ways.
Forgive us, most merciful God;
And free us from our sin.
Renew in us the grace and strength of your Holy Spirit,
for the sake of Jesus Christ your Son, our Savior.
Amen.

Psalter Hymnal,
Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1987

Gracious God, our sins are too heavy to carry, too real to hide, and too deep to undo. Forgive what our lips tremble to name, what our hearts can no longer bear, and what has become for us a consuming fire of judgment. Set us free from a past that we cannot change; open to us a future in which we can be changed; and grant us grace to grow more and more in your likeness and image, through Jesus Christ, the light of the world. Amen.

From the PCUSA Book of Common Worship
Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993; p. 88

Sources:

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