

How We Grow: Implementing the Spiritual Disciplines

Week 5 - Confession

April 14, 2024

Additional Teaching Notes

“The confession of evil works is the first beginning of good works.” – Augustine of Hippo.

“If we say 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)

Confession is the desire to surrender my weaknesses and faults to the forgiving love of Christ and intentionally desire and embrace practices that lead to transformation.

What does confession involve?

- Admitting to God the natural propensity to rationalize, deny, blame, and self-obsess.
- Examining the ‘sin network’ in your life as evidenced in presumptuous sins, besetting weaknesses, self-centered habits, and broken relationships.
- Replacing sinful habits with healthy ones.
- Seeking God’s grace to change.

The Value of Confession

It brings about objective change. Confession is more than psychologically therapeutic. It is a means of healing and transforming the inner spirit.

“Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.

Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit." (Psalm 32:1-2) Keeping company with Jesus as he helps you with how much or how little you change.

It is part of the ongoing work of sanctification in our lives. Philippians 2:12 "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." Confession helps the believer to grow "until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." (Ephesians 4:13) Proverbs 28:13 "No one who conceals transgressions will prosper, but one who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy."

It challenges our pride.

Thinking of yourself with sober judgment, it gives you awareness of your blind spots.

Helps you gain insight into your temptations and God's work in your life.

Helps you have compassion toward others in their faults.

Helps you to see yourself as God's loved and forgiven children no matter what you have done.

Helps you live in thankfulness for God's work in your life.

Helps you to savor the gift of salvation.

It brings Freedom from bondage. There is no stronger sin than sin that remains hidden. Secret sins are the most destructive force in the spiritual life. They chain us into a life of duplicity and spiritual mediocrity, if not spiritual bankruptcy. However, when we practice confession, our sin is no

longer hidden. Such transparency brings an incredible freedom. What were once iron chains of bondage fall off as if they were made of paper.

Is Confession Private or Corporate?

It is a private act. "There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" 1 Timothy 2:5. The prayer of "examen" – asking God to stir up an awareness of our sin. We ask God to test us, search us, and know our hearts (Psalm 139:1). Other ways of opening our spiritual need to God: journaling, reading of Scripture, meditating on the Lord's prayer, private retreats.

It is a corporate act. "Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another..." James 5:16. The Bible teaches public and shared confession. The model prayer: "Our Father in heaven... Give us this day our daily bread..."(Matthew 6:9-13)

In large assemblies, where Christians may not have meaningful relationships and where they may not even know one another, "Public confession" is deeply problematic. Such venues are not necessarily spiritually or psychologically safe. The chances of abuse, embarrassment, and misunderstanding are considerable.

Suggestion: use confessional prayers such as Psalm 51 or the Lord's prayer, or even a prayer like this 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 Challenge of Confession

We can see others as being better Christians than we are. Confession is difficult for us because we all too often view the believing community as a fellowship of saints before we see it as a fellowship of sinners. We often hide ourselves from one another and live in veiled lies and hypocrisy.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "A man who confesses his sins in the presence of a brother knows that he is no longer alone with himself; he experiences the presence of God in the reality of the other person. As long as I am by myself in the confession of my sins everything remains in the dark, but in the presence of a brother the sin has to be brought into the light."

What if Christians came to the assembly expecting to lay down their burdens, their griefs, and their grievances before each other? What if they refused to go forward with their worship and their countless religious activities until they had made amends with their brothers and sisters in the faith? Could it be that our congregations are unnecessarily burdened by pain because we have failed to confess our faults to one another?

There are countless social forces that tempt us to soften the truth, to spin the facts, or merely to stay superficial. For one thing, we live in a harsh and competitive world. The cost of truth-telling can be extraordinarily high, especially in communities of faith, where everyone is expected to look better than they are.

The truth is found in two facts: Everyone who lives is deeply hurt by others. Everyone who lives has deeply hurt others. We have all wounded and offended God. Acts 2:37 "When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?""

The Christian who is not confessional is in peril: A danger to himself. A danger to the community. A necessary premise of Good News is that something very bad is going on in our lives for which the Good News is the welcome remedy. If we cannot see the bad news in our lives and confess it, we block the one pathway to hope.

Three Qualities of Confession.

An Examination of Conscience. A time when we are pierced in our soul in the presence of God, helps us to become conscious of the things that must be forgiven and put right before we can continue to love One whose care has been so constant. We bring our sins in specific...both outward sins and the sins of the heart.

Sorrow. It is necessary to a good confession. Sorrow as it relates to confession is an abhorrence at having committed the sin, a deep regret at having offended the heart of the Father. Sorrow is a way of taking the confession seriously.

A determination to avoid sin. This is the will to be delivered from sin that we seek from God as we prepare to make confession. We must desire and be conquered and ruled by God.

To Whom Should we Confess?

Not a gossip. It is an unfortunate fact of life that some people seem to be unable to keep a confidence.

Key Qualities: spiritual maturity, wisdom, compassion, good common sense, the ability to keep a confidence, and a wholesome sense of humor.

There is danger in confessing to improper people at improper times. Jesus taught us to take care not to cast what is most precious before those who will treat it unworthily or with contempt (Matthew 7:6).

How Should I Receive Confession?

Humility. We learn to live under the cross. We can escape being horrified by the sin of others and feeling superior to others – to know the grace and mercy of God's acceptance. Once we know the awfulness of sin we know that regardless of what others have done, we ourselves are the chief of sinners. By living under the cross we are delivered from the danger of spiritual domination. We feel no need to control or straighten them out.

Indwelling. We need to pray for the light of Christ within us so that our presence will speak of the love and forgiving grace of God.

Wisdom. We need to pray for an increase in the gift of discernment.

Quiet. When others are opening their grief to us we discipline ourselves to be quiet. We should not relieve tension with off-handed comments, nor prying out more details than are necessary.

Prayer. Inwardly and imperceptibly you are sending prayers of love and forgiveness for the person who is confessing.

Prayer for the healing of the inner wounds that the sin has caused. Prayer in this manner is best accompanied by "laying on of hands" – a means

through which God communicates his life giving power (Hebrews 6:1-2 “Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.”).

Forgiveness is to be Received.

Absolution is the pronouncement of the glorious truth that we have been released from our burden. All Christians ought to hear that God is a good and gracious God, ready to forgive, ready to welcome them home. It is true that only God forgives, it is also true that we can benefit from hearing divine forgiveness explicitly pronounced.

1 John 1:9 “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness”

1 John 2:12 “I write to you, dear children, because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name.”

Christ called us to speak words of truth to one another. We can emphatically affirm that Christ receives and forgives penitent people.

The discipline of Confession brings an end to pretense. God is calling into being a Church that can openly confess its frail humanity and know the forgiving and empowering graces of Christ. Honesty leads to confession and confession leads to change. Tippens: Confession is a joint process involving a sincere speaker and an attentive, responsive listener. The confessor speaks his or her weakness; but the speaker must be heard, held, and loved by someone – first and foremost by God, but also by a brother or sister who embodies the patience of Christ.

EXERCISES (from the book *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* by Adele Calhoun)

1. Imagine you are in a safe place, surrounded by the love of God. Ask God to help you see yourself as He sees you. Remember he sees you absolutely and with love. Using the Ten Commandments as a guide, journal your sins. When you have finished, go through each commandment one at a time, asking God to forgive you and help you to change. Then burn your list in a symbolic act of what it means to have God remove your sins from you.

2. Set aside some time for confession and self-examination. In the presence of God ask for light to pierce your defenses. Then ask yourself, Who have I injured recently through thoughtlessness, neglect, anger, and so on? As the Holy Spirit brings people to mind, confess your feelings about these people to God. Ask God to forgive you and if need be to give you grace to forgive them. Write an apology, make a phone call or confess out loud in an attempt to put the relationship back on track.

3. Enter into a covenant group or an accountability relationship where you cannot hide. Tell the truth about who you are and ask your partners to pray for you and help you change.