

## How We Grow: Implementing the Spiritual Disciplines

### Week 5 - Confession

April 14, 2024

#### I. Sharing Time

- A. How was your experience practicing the discipline of meditation this week? As you practiced throughout the week, did you notice or experience anything surprising, challenging, comforting, confusing, helpful, or encouraging? Invite your class to share with the people beside them, and then open it up for sharing with the class at large.

#### II. Teaching Time (*Teaching Video provided*)

- A. Teaching Narrative: This week's spiritual discipline, confession, may be good for the soul, but it's really tough to do. Forgiveness is perhaps the most central tenet to the Gospel—that no matter where we stray, our God always welcomes us home. This is why one-third of Jesus' parables are about forgiveness. But sometimes it's difficult for us to actually receive that forgiveness. Because at its core, sin creates a barrier that prevents us from living as we were created to live. It builds a wall between us and God. It keeps us from loving God and loving one another. And *receiving* God's love. I really appreciate the way Bonhoeffer describes the isolation of sin. He says, "Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him...Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light. In the darkness of the unexpressed it poisons the whole being of a person."<sup>1</sup> But we know and can have confidence that nothing can ever separate us from the love we receive from God through Jesus. And the spiritual discipline of confession actually helps us receive that forgiveness. Frederick Büchner writes, "To confess your sins to God is not to tell him anything he doesn't already know. Until you confess them, however, they are the abyss between you. But when you confess them, they become a bridge." In Proverbs 28:13, Solomon writes something similar, "he who conceals his sin will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes it finds mercy." Through confession, we find the mercy we receive through Jesus.

But confession doesn't merely build a bridge between us and God; it builds a bridge between each other, too! There is both a vertical and horizontal aspect of confession. James tells us, "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed." Confession to each other actually leads us to freedom and healing, but it's so vulnerable! Vulnerability is tough because sometimes we're not sure

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<sup>1</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 112.

how our vulnerability will be received. We are afraid to be perceived as weak, but vulnerability takes so much courage. Brené Brown writes, "Vulnerability is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity. It is the source of hope, accountability, and authenticity." Vulnerability breeds more vulnerability. Your courage to be vulnerable encourages me to be vulnerable. Confession is such a beautiful and powerful discipline because it reminds us that we are not alone. It builds solidarity and openness between us. I would love for our church family to create a culture through the power and gift of the Holy Spirit that makes vulnerability safe. What might it look like for us to have a confessing culture that builds bridges over walls and values accountability over isolation?

- B. Here's an initial question to discuss as a class: How can we help to build on a culture of vulnerability here at Mayfair? What role might confession play in that?

### III. Discussion Time (*Questions Provided by Jason*)

- A. What immediately comes to mind when you hear the word "confession?" Generally speaking, does confession have a positive or a negative connotation?
- B. How can confession help increase one's spiritual self awareness?
- C. In the sermon, Jason defined confession as "the spiritual discipline of acknowledging the presence of specific sin in your life." In your opinion, how important is it to be specific when confessing sin? What do we lose whenever we generalize our sin without naming it specifically?
- D. Read 1 John 1:5-10. What stands out to you about this passage? What does this passage teach us about confession?
- E. Jason pointed out that confession is the antidote to the sin of secrecy. How does Satan use secrecy to wound us spiritually?
- F. Read James 5:16. What is the connection between confession and healing?
- G. Jason pointed out that confession begins with God. In your opinion, when is it appropriate to confess your sin to someone else?
- H. Jason pointed out three elements of godly confession: Honesty (Acknowledge Sin); Humility (Ask Forgiveness); and Help (Accountability). What qualities should you look for in an accountability partner?
- I. If someone confesses a sin that they committed against you, are you obligated to forgive them immediately? Spend some time discussing wise approaches to this type of situation.
- J. Exercise: Martin Luther suggested a simple practice of using the Ten Commandments as a guide for confession, reading each commandment and asking God's forgiveness for any ways we have violated His command. Have everyone in your group open to Exodus

20:1-17. Have someone read the passage slowly, followed by a moment of silent reflection. Go around the circle and have group members make confession for the group according to the order of the Ten Commandments. For example, the first person would say, "Lord, forgive us for having any other gods before you." The second person would say, "Father, forgive us for bowing down to any other gods, for we know you are a jealous God." Use this time of corporate confession to lead into more personalized confession as you pray for one another.

IV. Invitation for the Week: Below you'll find two practices that can help lead to confession. Walk through the discipline of Examen daily this week. You might choose to journal your prayers or create a note in your phone. The power of this discipline is in its habitual nature. Second, we'd like to encourage you to meet with an accountability partner who can help you navigate the struggles you are walking through during this season.

A. Prayer of Examen (***Invitation Video provided***)

1. Practice by Ignatius of Loyola, a 16<sup>th</sup> Century Theologian.
2. Examen is all about noticing. It's the daily practice of noticing the work and presence of God in your life and noticing the spaces in your life that desperately need the presence of the Lord. It has been most helpful for me, as I have practiced it habitually.
  - a) Ignatius taught that there were these two forces at work in our lives all the time: the true Spirit and the false spirit. He invites us to become attentive to those two competing forces so that we can "discern what is best and that we may be filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus."
  - b) Ignatius writes that when we are living in the false spirit, the spirit of the enemy, we experience desolation. Mark Thibodeaux summarizes the characteristics of desolation:
    - (1) "I am in desolation when I am empty of faith, hope, and love and the sense of God's closeness and full of some combination of disquietude and agitation, boredom and tepidity, fear and worry, and secrecy."<sup>2</sup>
  - c) Furthermore, Ignatius writes that when we are living in the true Spirit, the Spirit of God, we experience consolation. Thibodeaux summarizes the characteristics of consolation:

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<sup>2</sup>Mark E. Thibodeaux, SJ, *God's Voice Within: The Ignatian Way to Discover God's Will* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2010), 57.

- (1) "I am in consolation when I have faith, hope, and love, the sense of God's closeness, peace and tranquility, great desires, and transparency."<sup>5</sup>
3. The practice of Examen has given me space to discern what is from God and what is not. It is a practice of attentiveness, allowing me to slow down and discern the movement and presence of the Spirit at work within me and around me.
  4. Here's the prayer practice:
    - a) Through the practice of Examen, at either the beginning or end of the day, we take time to notice the moments where we experienced desolation. When did we feel far from God? When were we agitated or bored, fearful or anxious? We simply notice each of those moments. We name them (not writing a novel about them), and invite God into those moments.
    - b) Then we move on to Consolation. When did we experience faith, hope, and love? When did we feel close to God? When did we experience peace or tranquility? We notice each of those moments. We name them, and thank God for them.
    - c) Finally, look toward tomorrow. What are you excited about? Anxious for? Fearful of? Do you have a test or a conversation or a ballgame or a meeting that you're worried about? Is God inviting you to love a friend or neighbor or family member? List those items, asking God to join you in them.

B. Accountability Partner<sup>4</sup> (***Invitation Video provided***)

1. If you would like to have an accountability partner, begin by asking God to bring someone to mind. An accountability partner does not have to be older and wiser than you but simply should be someone you love and trust deeply. He or she simply needs to share the desire to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in the transformation process.
2. When a name comes to mind, approach the person with your desire. Decide how often you will meet together. Have an intentional chat about how you want your relationship to become a place where you can 'bare your souls' to one another. The central ingredients for this time of relationship and ongoing conversation are accountability, wisdom and encouragement.

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<sup>5</sup>Thibodeaux, *God's Voice Within*, 57.

<sup>4</sup>Adapted from Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 144 and a guide from [https://downloads.24-7prayer.com/prayer\\_course/2019/resources/pdfs/25 How to Confess Sin.pdf](https://downloads.24-7prayer.com/prayer_course/2019/resources/pdfs/25%20How%20to%20Confess%20Sin.pdf).

3. This type of practice takes an obvious healthy dose of vulnerability for it to work. As you have now established the boundaries for your relationship, then become comfortable opening up your heart to your trusted friend. Step out of your shell of invulnerability, connect with the common human brokenness of your brother or sister, share with them and pray together. You can begin by sharing your stories, temptations and desired area of growth. Pray for each other.
4. While vulnerability and openness are wonderful and endearing gifts, it is important to be wise with the practice of confession. Sometimes with the best of intentions and earnest desire to be 'pure of heart' we can naïvely share things that it might have been better not to.
  - a) Firstly, we need to be sure we are confessing to the right person. Will they maintain confidentiality? Are they mature enough to be able to hear what I need to tell them? It is also vitally important, as a general rule of thumb, that men are confessing with men and women with women. We don't want to kid ourselves into thinking we won't get drawn into emotional ties or worse, particularly when we are connecting over issues of the heart.
  - b) Secondly, we need to ask ourselves if our confession is going to cause more distress or embarrassment to the person? If we are in doubt about this, we should talk to someone who we know is wise and get their advice.
  - c) Thirdly, we may need to grow to realize that there are some things we can just take to God in confession. Sometimes those of us who have a tender conscience feel the need to spill our heart out every day to others even if we are not sure whether it is sin we are confessing or not. Don't allow this kind of therapy to become a substitute for receiving forgiveness from Jesus, the source of all forgiveness and cleansing.