

I want to begin by taking you back to 1991, my freshman year in college, and an incident that, to this day, remains somewhat unresolved. I was in the lounge of my dorm with some friends and teammates. And, as teenage boys are prone to do, we were messing with each other. And, as teenage boys are prone to do, that messing included physical contact. And, as teenage boys are prone to do, it included me shoving my roommate into a floor-to-ceiling window. He didn't go through it, but the window definitely broke. And we did what any good Catholic schoolboys would do...we ran!

As you might imagine, it didn't take long for my conscience to get a hold of me. I sat in my dorm room that night, debating if I should confess the incident to my dorm director. I was reluctant, though. You see, I knew confessing would come at a great cost. First of all, I'd have to deal with the shame of being the perpetrator. Second, it would have ultimately gotten to my football coach, and my penance would have been a whole lot of laps. And finally, I'd have to make restitution. It was going to be a debt I could not pay, and I'd have to ask my father to pay for my mistake for me. Trust me. You don't want to call Hans Pressler, tell him you shoved your roommate into a window, and you need \$200 to fix it. So, I swore everyone to secrecy and kept it to myself. That was almost 30 years ago...and it feels really good to get off my chest!

Confessing our wrongdoing is a tricky thing. Some of you grew up with a parent that expected nothing less than perfection and let you know their disappointment if you fell short. You've worked for an unrelenting boss who lost it if you made a mistake. And many of you grew up being told you had to make up for your wrongdoing by reciting a bunch of prayers over and over again, and the worse you did, the more you had to recite, or you grew up believing in a God who was always on the verge of getting mad at you, and the slightest mess up was going to set him off and put your salvation at risk. And you find yourself here this morning, studying the book of Nehemiah and considering the divine disciplines necessary for living out our divine discontent, and the idea of living a life of confession is about the farthest thing from your mind.

But what if confession had nothing to do with those things you grew up with? What if the discipline of confession is one of the most misunderstood and misapplied spiritual practices we can do? And how would your relationship with God change if you started to see confession as one of the most powerful and intimate interactions we can have with him? What if confession didn't waste time or lead to condemnation, but instead was **a practice that produced forgiveness, fellowship, freedom, and flourishing?** Might you reconsider its importance then?

I want to start by getting a handle on what the word "confession" means. You see, it's more than just telling on yourself to God. In fact, it goes far beyond the things we have done wrong. Confession is a declaration of what's true, and it's something even Jesus does.

[Matthew 10:32, NASB] "Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven."

Confession is the telling of the truth; the truth about God, the truth about us, the truth about our relationship with him and, yes, the truth about how we have fallen short of God's glorious standards for our lives.

And for the nation of Israel, there's a lot of truth to be told. The wall around Jerusalem has been built, and the returned exiles have begun a process of spiritual restoration (chapter 8). They opened God's Word and were confronted by his holiness and his grace. And while that ended with a feast and celebration, the truth of who God is and who they were before him led to a moment of confession for the people.

[Nehemiah 9:1-3] Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, and with earth on their heads. ² And the Israelites separated themselves from all foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. ³ And they stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day; for another quarter of it they made confession and worshiped the LORD their God.

As we saw last week, the Jews celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles. After a one-day break, the people reassembled and the divine discipline around the centrality of God's Word led to the divine discipline of confession. Fasting, sackcloth, and dust on their heads are all an indication of mourning. These people were captivated by the truth found in God's Word and, led by Levites, prayed a prayer of confession, the longest prayer in Bible. It is a prayer I believe clarifies the practice and purpose of confession, and my prayer this morning is that it helps eliminate confusion and inspires you to incorporate it into your own spiritual lives.

Apart from the greatness of God, confession has no purpose. If God is not great, he is not worthy of a confession. But if he is great, and we start by declaring the truth of his greatness, it will not only inform our confession, it will compel it. That's because when we understand the greatness of our God, we recognize the gravity of our sin.

[Nehemiah 9:6-9, 14] ⁶“You are the LORD, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you. ⁷ You are the LORD, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham. ⁸ You found his heart faithful before you, and made with him the covenant to give to his offspring the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Girgashite. And you have kept your promise, for you are righteous. ⁹“And you saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea...¹⁴ and you made known to them your holy Sabbath and commanded them commandments and statutes and a law by Moses your servant.”

Before the Jews ever get to what they'd done to offend a great and holy God, they spent time confessing that he is great and holy. It is out of this truth that our confession of sin comes. Israel begins with praise for who God is and then recounts his power, provision, plan, protection, and purpose. They are telling the story of God by telling their own story.

All of our prayer lives should begin with the confession of who God is. Who God is determines who we are and how we should live. It informs all other prayers, it keeps us focused on him, and it declares his greatness. It is also a time to tell the story God is telling through us. If you have not gone through Repurposed, you might think it's a fun and fancy way to land on two words.

But Repurposed begins with a confession of who God is and who we are in him as seen in the story he has so far told in our lives. It is a time to declare his power, provision, protection, plan, and purpose for our lives, and it's also a time to recognize where we have fallen short of his call and to go to him with that confession. That's exactly what the Jews do next.

[Nehemiah 9:16-17a] ¹⁶“But they and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey your commandments. ¹⁷They refused to obey and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them, but they stiffened their neck and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt.”

When we ignore the greatness of God, we risk taking his commands lightly. Historically, Israel went in circles with God, hearing from him, obeying for a while, then disobeying, then being judged, then returning to him and being restored. Those seasons of disobedience usually began with ignoring the greatness of God, oftentimes by turning towards other gods. And when they did that, they took his commands lightly and violated God's Law.

We may look at the Jews and shake our head because of their cycle of disobedience but, if we are honest, they are a picture of our own disobedience. And, like them, a life that lacks confession lacks obedience. **Ultimately, if we spend more of our time confessing the greatness of God, we'll likely have to spend less of our time confessing our sin.** His greatness may compel our confession of sin, but it also could prevent it. Confession inspires our love and fear of the Lord, and through that creates a desire to live a life pleasing to him.

So confession has the purpose of declaring God's greatness and is a motivation for our obedience. But is it also a pathway to judgment and shame? That depends on the character of God. Confession is only as good and effective as God will allow it to be.

Apart from the grace of God, confession has no potential. While confession declares the greatness of God and the gravity of our sin, confession also declares our desire for forgiveness and reconciliation. But if God is not a God of mercy and grace, confession is meaningless at best and wrath-inducing at worst. Thankfully the God Israel encountered time and again is the same one we will encounter too.

[Nehemiah 9:17b] But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them.

Our God is not one who has to be talked into forgiving. He is full of grace and mercy, loves us, and desires to have a relationship with us. Here the Jews are both telling of the history of God's faithfulness to forgive each time the nation turned back to him, as well as acknowledging they need his forgiveness once again. Their history has taught them something about God, and their prayer declares it.

Confession is a means to forgiveness and reconciliation, not judgment and punishment. It says, "I've done this and there is nothing I can do about it, God. But you can and I'm asking that you do." We don't confess with the wishful thinking that God may forgive us. We confess in the confidence he already has and will again. Like Israel, when we return to God in confession, he is eagerly waiting to forgive us.

So if confession seems to have a place in every believer's life, why do I know so few Christians who have a regular practice of it? If this is true, then why don't we practice confession more often? What are the consequences of leaving sin unconfessed in our lives?

Pauses progress: Unconfessed sin is like an untreated disease that grows and debilitates our spiritual health and prevents God from working through us. A sick body cannot flourish, and neither can a sick sinner. Proverbs 28:13 says "**Whoever conceals his sin shall not prosper.**" Sin is a roadblock that must be cleared through the divine discipline of confession, and it is a necessary step if we are intent on fulfilling our divine discontent.

I talked to a man recently who was lamenting where he was in his life, and after speaking for a few minutes, he paused and said, "I just feel stuck." That "stuckness" included his relationship with God and his relationship with his wife. After a few questions, I asked him if he had any unconfessed sin in his life, and rather quickly he said that he did, both to his God and his wife. He courageously took that step of confession the following week. And while it wasn't a magic formula that immediately got him unstuck, he has begun to make progress.

I only gave you the first half of Proverbs 28:13. It starts with "**Whoever conceals his sin shall not prosper**", but it ends with "**but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.**" Confession asks God for favor we do not deserve to clear the roadblocks that sin has created and to continue to work through us so that our lives flourish for him.

Prevents reconciliation: Unconfessed sin leaves distance between us and God. You may ask how that is since sin has already been forgiven? If you are a follower of Jesus, sin cannot cause you to lose your salvation, lose your place as a son or daughter of our Heavenly Father. However, sin obstructs fellowship with God, and if left unresolved, it leaves us far from him and battling our sin on our own.

There have been moments of willful sin in my life where I immediately felt guilt and shame and unworthiness, and not only did I feel distant from God, my guilt and shame made me put more distance between us, to stay as far away from him as possible. When we do that, we put ourselves right back in the Garden with Adam and Eve, trying to manage our guilt by wearing fig leaves and hiding from God instead of going to the foot of the Cross and allowing Jesus to take care of it for us. If you stay far from God, it means you are trying to handle your sin on your own. Let me tell you, from experience, it doesn't work. James 4 says "**Come near to God and he will come near to you.**" When you sin, your impulse should be the same impulse I had when I pushed a guy into a window: run! But the difference is to not away from God but right to him!

Perpetuates disobedience: If unconfessed sin keeps us distant from God, it leaves us more vulnerable to the temptation of sin and at risk of being in bondage to it. Vv 36-37 of this passage are quite telling. In the midst of their confession to God, they acknowledge that, even though they have returned to the land, they are still the slaves of another nation. Their sin has placed them in bondage, as will ours if we don't take it to the Cross. **Confession is the path to**

freedom. It breaks the power and pattern of sin in our lives and liberates us to live our lives with and for God.

At the end of my freshman year, I found out that my dorm director knew all along it was me who broke the window, and instead of me paying for it, every tenant of the dorm had to pay equal shares. Hiding our sin doesn't hide our guilt or the cost associated with it. The choice we have to make is what we are going to do with it when it happens. I don't know if a heartfelt confession to my dad would have moved him to forgive me and lovingly pay my debt (I doubt it!) But I do know that we all have a Heavenly Father who is eager to get that phone call saying "I messed up and I need your help. You're my only hope."

[1 John 1:9] ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

In light of God's greatness and grace, I want to take a few minutes to do that very thing right now as the faith family of Fellowship Dallas. For many of you, the most courageous next step you can take in living out your faith is going to the cross to confess your sins.

Bow your heads, take notes on your phone, or write in your worship guide. I pray you participate in this moment because God wants to hear from you.

1. God is great. Confess something about him that you admire.
2. God is full of grace and mercy and ready to forgive. Confess that you believe that marvelous truth. And, if you struggle to believe it, would you tell him that instead?
3. All of us have fallen short of God's perfect, glorious standards. He knows it, but he wants to hear you say it. Would you confess your sin to him right now, and if there is something specific you have been holding back, let today be the day you bring it to the Cross? He is there and he has no condemnation for you. Only forgiveness.
4. And now, would you worship him for his grace, his mercy, his forgiveness.