

THE DISCIPLINE OF CONFESSION



“But if we know that the people of God are first a fellowship of sinners, we are freed to hear the unconditional call of God’s love and to confess our needs only before our brothers and sisters. We know we are not alone in our sin... we know we are sinners together. *In acts of mutual confession we release the power that heals.*”

-Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*.

The Gift of Confession

Like all of the other spiritual disciplines we have at our disposal, **confession** is a gift of grace meant for our benefit. Confession releases us from the heavy burden of guilt and shame, it softens our hardened hearts, and it brings us again and again into the loving presence of our Heavenly Father who has promised that the blood of his son Jesus purifies us from all our sin (**1 John 1:7**).

At least, that’s the way we *ought* to view confession. In reality, many Christians actively avoid the discipline of confession because of how painful and uncomfortable it can be. That is especially true when it comes to confessing our sins to *one another*. After all, what person in their right mind would seek out an opportunity to discuss in great detail all of the ways they have embarrassed themselves, let God down, and fallen short of what Jesus teaches us?

All too often confession feels like social suicide, so we don’t practice it nearly as often as we should. Let’s take a closer look at why that is and how we can develop a healthier attitude about confession.

Why Confession is so Difficult

Everyone makes mistakes, but not everyone is willing to own up to them. Why is that? One reason, according to Psychologist Guy Winch (Ph.D.), is that our egos are getting in the way.

“Some people have such a fragile ego, such brittle self-esteem, such a weak ‘psychological constitution,’ that admitting they made a mistake or that they were wrong is fundamentally too threatening for their egos to tolerate. Accepting they were wrong, absorbing that reality, would be so psychologically shattering, their defense mechanisms do something remarkable to avoid doing so—they literally distort their perception of reality to make it (reality) less threatening. Their defense mechanisms protect their fragile ego by changing the very facts in their mind, so they are no longer wrong or culpable.” -Psychology Today

In other words, owning up to our mistakes can be so threatening to our self-worth that we subconsciously construct an alternate reality where we’re completely innocent. We would rather live in a delusion than confront our own sin.

Confession and the False Self

While secular psychologists (like Dr. Winch) connect our fear of confession to our fragile egos, theologians like Henri Nouwen and Thomas Merton connect it to something called the “false self.” We’ll talk more about what that means in just a moment.

But first, in order to understand what they mean by “true self” or “false self,” we need to understand a thing or two about the deep questions that most people wrestle with over the course of their lives. Researchers at Fuller Theological Seminary concluded that the questions of **identity, belonging, and purpose** were at “at the core of what it means to be human.” (*Growing Young*, p. 95). In other words, we’re constantly trying to find meaningful answers to these deep questions:

1. Who Am I? (Identity)
2. Where Do I Fit? (Belonging)
3. What Difference Do I Make? (Purpose)

Returning to Nouwen and Merton, the “true self” and “false self” represent the different ways we seek to answer these fundamental questions.

The false self deals with the world of the exterior, of appearances, of worldly success and accomplishment. The **false self** says things like:

- “I am what others think of me.”
- “I am only as valuable as my latest achievement.”
- “I am defined by my accolades and success.”
- “I find joy and content in the approval of others.”

On the contrary, the **true self** goes deeper than superficial appearances. It strives to understand our identity, belonging and purpose from God’s perspective. Consequently, the **true self** says things like:

- “I am who God made me to be.”
- “I am a beloved child of God.”
- “My value comes from God’s love, not people’s approval.”
- “I find joy and contentment in living out God’s purpose.”

Confession feels a threat to our false self, because the false self requires looking good in the eyes of others. When we allow our false self to answer life’s deepest questions of identity, belonging and purpose, we will reject confession as an existential threat.

But if we are willing to allow the true self to answer those deep questions, we’ll discover how confession enables us to break free from the heavy burden of always needing other people’s approval and the even *heavier* burden of guilt and shame.

When we allow God to shape our inner monologue about identity, belonging, and purpose, we’ll discover that confession really is a gift.

What the Bible Says About Confession and Forgiveness

There’s several passages in the Bible that shape our understanding of confession.

- **1 John 1:8-9**, “8 If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”
- **James 5:13-16**, “13 Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. 14 Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. 16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.”
- **Psalm 32:3-5**, “When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. 4 For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. 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.”
- **Psalm 51** — A prayer of repentance and confession after David committed adultery and murder.
- In addition, there are several instances of Israel practicing group / national confession (e.g. **1 Sam. 7:6; Ezra 10:1; Nehemiah 9:1; Daniel 9**).

What We Learn about Confession from these Passages

- Confessing our sins leads to forgiveness (1 John 1:9).
- Living in denial about our sin is a form of self-deception (1 John 1:8).
- Confessing our sins to other people can lead to physical and spiritual healing (James 5:13-16).
- The weight of unconfessed sin is physically and emotionally draining (Psalm 32:3-4).
- Confessing our sins to God releases us from the heavy burden of guilt and shame (Psalm 32:5).
- Through confession, God renews and restores our heart (Psalm 51:10), releases us from guilt (Psalm 51:14), cleanses us and washes us (Psalm 51:7) and ushers us into the love, mercy and compassion of our Father (Psalm 51:1).
- Confession flows from a broken spirit and a contrite heart (Psalm 51:17).

Three Aspects of a Confession

“For a good confession three things are necessary: an examination of conscience, sorrow, and a determination to avoid sin.”

-St. Alphonsus Liguori

1. An Examination of Conscience

Before we confess, we need to sit in God’s loving presence and allow him to guide our hearts and minds towards the aspects of our lives that need to be brought into the light. Richard Foster writes, *“We are inviting God to move upon the heart and show us areas that need his forgiving and healing touch.”*

Perhaps it is a bitter attitude, or a selfish action, or an ongoing habit that needs to be brought to light. We know that our false self of pride and ego is working hard to deny the severity of our sin or the reality of the situation. Case in point: King David, who lived in stark denial of his egregious sin until Nathan confronted him with a poignant parable. Sometimes we are far too oblivious to the seriousness of our own sin. Just like David, we need some intentional time to allow God to bring our sin into the open.

2. Godly Sorrow

The second aspect of a good confession is sorrow. From a Christian perspective, sorrow is *“an abhorrence at having committed the sin, a deep*

regret at having offended the heart of the Father,” (Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 152).

Sometimes people confess their sins and issue apologies only because they got caught, and they want to limit the fallout. It’s fair to wonder how sincere the apologies are under those circumstances. Quite often the person isn’t exactly sorry for what they did; they’re just sorry they got caught.

In **2 Corinthians 7:8-13**, Paul talks about the difference between “Godly sorrow” that leads to life and “worldly sorrow” that leads to death. He’s describing how genuine sorrow over what we’ve done wrong leads us to lasting change, but worldly sorrow over the consequences of our sin just leads us into deeper and deeper sin.

Along these lines, Richard Foster argues that we are far too cavalier about the seriousness of sin in our lives:

“Today we take our offenses to the love of God far too lightly. If we had only a tinge of the sense of revulsion that God feels toward sin, we would be moved to holier living.”

3. A Determination to Avoid Sin

After looking inward and cultivating a disdain for sin and its effect on our lives, we move toward a firm determination to change our course for the better. In confession we ask God to change our attitude about sin, to help us hate it and the effect it has on our lives.

Sometimes the best thing we can do to avoid sin is learn to view it from God’s perspective. Let’s use alcohol abuse as a quick example:

- If your attitude about alcohol is that it’s something fun, relaxing and enjoyable that you have to deprive yourself from in order to please God, your entire mindset is fixated on deprivation. *“I don’t get to do the one thing that’s going to make me happy.”* You end up living your life feeling bitter towards God for withholding something enjoyable from you.
- But perhaps we can shift our thinking. If we learn to view alcohol abuse from God’s perspective, we’ll recognize that alcoholism has grave, ongoing consequences for people who are mastered by it. **Don’t think of resisting this temptation as depriving yourself of something that brings you pleasure; recognize you are escaping something that is extremely dangerous to your life and your walk with God!**

Sin makes grand promises about what it has to offer, but in the end it takes far more than it gives. Do you believe that? Do you believe that resisting sin is escaping something that will harm us? Or do you believe that God is denying you something that you need in order to find happiness?

In **Genesis 4:7** God warned Cain that sin was “*crouching at his door*” and “*desired to have him.*” Cain needed to master sin before it mastered him. Unfortunately, he did not take God’s advice, and his desire consumed him.

In the New Testament, Paul talks about sin as something that enslaves us. It takes us captive and becomes our master, so that we are not free to obey God (Romans 6).

Confessing our sin to God involves making a firm commitment to avoid that sin in the future. When we learn to view these sins from God’s perspective—that they intend to take us captive and do us harm—we’ll experience a genuine shift in our attitude about temptation.

Practical Guidance on Confessing to God and Others

1. **Rest in God’s unfailing love.** God is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness. We do not need to be perfect in order to dwell in the love and mercy of God. God desires a humble heart that acknowledges our need for a perfect savior. He does not expect us to be perfect in order to receive his love.
2. **Be specific.** We need to be honest and truthful about the sin we are confessing.
3. **Be genuine.** God knows the difference between heartfelt confession and simply going through the motions.
4. **Choose the right person.** When you confess to others, seek out kind, empathetic Christians who can practice confidentiality, offer grace, and honor the holiness of the moment.
5. **Move from sorrow to joy.** Confessing brings us face-to-face with pain and regret, but the act of confession releases us from that bondage and brings us into the love and mercy of God. Don’t let your times of confession turn into a bottomless pit of sorrow and regret. Move from the cross to the empty tomb and celebrate the new life we have with Jesus.

Practical Guidance on Receiving a Confession

1. **Listen well.** Show your love by listening well. Be fully present and eliminate distractions.
2. **Be a non-anxious presence.** Most people fear that revealing their inner secrets will lead to shock, disgust, and rejection. Maintain a calm demeanor throughout the conversation.
3. **Don’t preach any sermons.** You are there to be a tangible expression of God’s love and grace. Let your words be few so that they have the chance to rest in God’s love. Let God’s voice be the one to call them to a new way of living. You will have plenty of other opportunities to speak words of wisdom into their lives.
4. **Practice confidentiality.** Do not share anything they say with anyone else, except in the event there is a clear danger to them or someone else.
5. **Pray with them.** In this conversation, you represent the love and grace of God. Pray for your brother or sister and positively affirm that they are forgiven in God’s eyes.