

“Confession: Good for the Soul”

(selected Scriptures)

Introduction

- This summer, for our “summer sermon series”, we have decided to preach on “Spiritual Disciplines.” As the term implies, a “spiritual discipline” is a means of training or chastening oneself to grow spiritually. It is important to remember that the pursuit of spiritual growth (spiritual discipline) is a command from God, and therefore not an option or elective for the Christian. Just as every Christian needs to grow and persevere in Christ, so too every Christian needs to practice spiritual disciplines.

Spiritual discipline: a biblical practice that helps Christians to persevere and mature in their walk with Jesus Christ.

“... train yourself for godliness” (1 Timothy 4:7).

- So far in this series, we have studied “spiritual disciplines” in general, and the specific disciplines of “worship” and “fasting.” This morning, we are going to biblically examine the spiritual discipline of “confession.” While confession is a common religious term, we need to understand that all religious confessions are not the same – some extra-biblical, and some are even heretical. Biblically, in the New Testament, the spiritual discipline of confession can rightly be specified as “Christian confession.” To help us more fully understand this discipline, I want to identify four aspects of Christian confession.

A. The meaning of confession

- First, it is helpful to understand what the word the biblical “confession” actually means. For it is often misrepresented and misconstrued, and therefore misapplied. The New Testament word translated “confess” (*homologeō*), used twenty-six times, literally means “to say again” or “to say the same.” It can be translated “confess”, “profess”, “admit” or “agree.”

This means when we confess our sins to God, we are saying the same thing about us that God is saying (or knows) about us – we are seeing ourselves as God sees us. When we confess our sins to God, we are not giving God any new knowledge. Since God is omniscient (having perfect and exhaustive knowledge of all things), He already knows everything about us – everything we have ever done, every word we have ever spoken, every thought or feeling we have ever had, everything we have ever seen or heard. God does not blush at our confession, nor is ever surprised.

1 Cor 4:5 ~ “Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.”

1 Cor 4:5 ~ “So then, do not judge anything before the time. Wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the motives of hearts. Then each will receive recognition from God.” (NET)

1 Cor 4:5 ~ “Therefore don't judge anything prematurely, before the Lord comes, who will both bring to light what is hidden in darkness and reveal the intentions of the hearts. And then praise will come to each one from God.” (HCSB)

Heb 4:13 ~ “And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”

Job 34:21 [Elihu] ~ “For [God's] eyes are on the ways of a man, and he sees all his steps.”

Prov 15:3 ~ “The eyes of the Lord are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good.” (see Prov.5:21; Jer.16:17; 17:10)

- Confession, then, is us acknowledging our sin before God, and seeking to restore our relationship with Him. Confession is not a meritorious work, and God’s forgiveness cannot be earned (a person is saved by God’s grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone). Rather, through confession the believer draws closer to God becoming more and more conformed to the image of Christ. True confession promotes purity, humility, obedience, and reference toward God.

B. The need for confession

- Simply put, we have great need for confession because we have a great need of forgiveness. In God’s Word we find every human being is utterly sinful before God, in desperate need of God’s saving grace and dependent upon God’s sanctifying grace. Confession is quite literally saying to God, “I see me as You see me; a sinner in need of Your grace and mercy.” Refusing to confess our sin is equivalent, according to Scripture, calling God a liar – saying to Him, in effect, “You are wrong about me!” or, worse yet, “You are lying about me!”
 - ✓ Illust: “The holiest man on earth has cause to confess that he has sinned. Confession is the duty of the best Christians. While the ship leaks – the pump must not stand still. Confession is a soul-humbling duty, and the best have need of that, for they are in most danger of being lifted up in pride. To preserve us from self-exaltations, the Lord sometimes sends the messenger of Satan to buffet us by temptations, and commands us to buffet ourselves by confessions” (Joseph Caryl, “Confession of Sin”; 1645).

Rom 3:10-12, 23 ~ “as it is written: ‘None is righteous, no, not one; 11 no one understands; no one seeks for God. ¹²All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.’ ... ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”

James 3:2 ~ “For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body.”

1 John 1:8, 10 ~ “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ... ¹⁰If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.”

- Unfortunately, all too many Christians believe – practically, if not theologically – that confession is only useful for unbelievers or as a means of securing one’s salvation (and possibly for “really bad sins”). Scripture teaches us that while confession is an essential part of one’s conversion to Christ, it is never a means of earning or securing God’s saving grace. It is, however, a means of a Christian’s sanctification – walking and growing in holiness.

Isa 59:1-2 ~ “Behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear; ²but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.”

Ps 32:1-7 [of David] ~ “Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. ²Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. ³For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. ⁴For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. ⁵I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,’ and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. ⁶Therefore let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found; surely in the rush of great waters, they shall not reach him. ⁷You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance.”

Ps 38:1-10 [of David] ~ “O Lord, rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline me in your wrath! ²For your arrows have sunk into me, and your hand has come down on me. ³There is no soundness in my

flesh because of your indignation; there is no health in my bones because of my sin. ⁴For my iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me. ⁵My wounds stink and fester because of my foolishness, ⁶I am utterly bowed down and prostrate; all the day I go about mourning. ⁷For my sides are filled with burning, and there is no soundness in my flesh. ⁸I am feeble and crushed; I groan because of the tumult of my heart. ⁹O Lord, all my longing is before you; my sighing is not hidden from you. ¹⁰My heart throbs; my strength fails me, and the light of my eyes – it also has gone from me.”

Prov 28:13 ~ “Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.”

➤ We have great need for confession because we have a great need to be forgiven. This is certainly true for the unbeliever, but is also true for the believer. The unbeliever needs to confess sin as part of their saving faith in Christ. The believer needs to confess sin as part of their continual sanctification in Christ.

✓ Illust: Perhaps we all can relate to the hymn “Come Thou Fount” (written by Robert Robinson in 1758), especially the third verse:

O to grace how great a debtor / Daily I'm constrained to be
Let Thy grace Lord like a fetter / Bind my wand'ring heart to Thee
Prone to wander Lord I feel it / Prone to leave the God I love
Here's my heart Lord take and seal it / Seal it for Thy courts above

C. The work of confession

➤ As with so many of these spiritual disciplines (undoubtedly why they are called ‘disciplines’), true confession is hard and humbling work. While the mature Christian is often quick to confess, it is when we are struggling with sin or doubt that confession can be arduous and undesirable. But the work of confession is much needed for the Christian’s spiritual birth and spiritual growth.

➤ The work of confession is two-fold:

I. Confessing Christ

➤ An often-neglected aspect of the work of confession is confessing Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Most of the time, confession is relegated to the confession of sin (which, as we will see, is vitally important). We must forget or forsake the much-needed, and great benefits, of confessing Christ.

Once again, a proper definition of confession is important. Simply put, confession is agreeing with God. This is certainly the case when it comes to any confession of Jesus Christ.

Matt 10:32-33 ~ “So everyone who acknowledges [*homologeō*] me before men, I also will acknowledge [*homologeō*] before my Father who is in heaven, ³³but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.”

Rom 10:9-10 ~ “... if you confess [*homologeō*] with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses [*homologeō*] and is saved.”

1 John 2:23 ~ “No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses [*homologeō*] the Son has the Father also.”

1 John 4:14-15 ~ “And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. ¹⁵Whoever confesses [*homologeō*] that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.”

➤ As is evident in these verses, and the many more in Scripture, confessing Christ is much more than merely acknowledging that Jesus existed (i.e., the “historical Jesus”) or even wanting to add Jesus to a pantheon of other gods/idols. Failing to truly confess Christ is tantamount to denying Christ, and calling God a liar.

John 12:42-43 ~ “Nevertheless, many even of the authorities believed in him, but for fear of the Pharisees they did not confess [*homologeō*] it, so that they would not be put out of the synagogue; ⁴³for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.”

Matt 10:32-33 ~ “So everyone who acknowledges [*homologeō*] me before men, I also will acknowledge [*homologeō*] before my Father who is in heaven, ³³but whoever **denies** [*arneomai*] me before men, I also will **deny** [*arneomai*] before my Father who is in heaven.”

➤ Confessing Jesus is acknowledging that He is the one and only Son of God and the one and only Savior from God. It is professing His absolute, universal, and eternal lordship. This is not mere verbal declaration, nor is it merely a mental assent to the person of Jesus. Truly confessing Christ is certainly verbal and mental, but it is much more than that. It is acknowledging that Jesus is indeed the Christ (the Son of God), receiving Him as the Savior, and pledging your undying allegiance to Him as Lord.

➤ Listen to these examples of great confessions of Christ found in Scripture (sermon notes available online):

Peter:

Matt 16:15-17 ~ “[Jesus] said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ ¹⁶Simon Peter replied, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ ¹⁷And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.’”

John 6:68-69 ~ “Simon Peter answered [Jesus], ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, ⁶⁹and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.’”

Nathanael:

John 1:49 ~ “Nathanael answered [Jesus], “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

Martha:

John 11:27 ~ “[Martha] said to [Jesus], ‘Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.’”

The disciples:

Matt 14:33 ~ “And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’”

Demons:

Mark 1:24 ~ “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God.” (see Jms.2:19)

➤ Again, by definition, refusing to confess Jesus Christ – acknowledging and agreeing with God – is the same as rejecting Christ and, therefore, calling God a liar.

2. Confessing sin

➤ True confession of sin involves not only the acknowledgement of sin, but also the repentance of sin. To repent means to turn from sin and to turn to God. We are called to not merely say we have sinned, but actually (sincerely) desire to not sin.

Again, confessing sin is not a means of earning God's saving grace; nor is it a means of escaping God's judgment (or the consequences of sin). It is the genuine recognition of sin, and the heartfelt desire to be free from the power of that sin. It is not only hating sin, but hating that you have sinned. Confession involves contrition, humbly coming before God over guilt and shame of your sin.

2 Sam 12:13 ~ "David said to Nathan, 'I have sinned against the Lord.' ..."

Luke 15:17-24 ~ "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.' ²⁰And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ²¹And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²²But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. ²³And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. ²⁴For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate."

Luke 18:13 ~ "But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'"

Luke 5:8 ~ "But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.'"

Isa 6:5 ~ "And I said: 'Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!'"

➤ Our confession of sin can be directed in two ways:

a. To God

First, it needs to be noted that we are to confess our sins to God. For every sin – whether by commission or omission – is first and foremost a sin against God. There is no sin that is not an affront to God's holiness and glory. All "sin is cosmic treason" against God.

Ps 51:4 ~ "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment."

Technically speaking, sin is anything that is contrary to the will or Word of God.

Ps 19:12-13 ~ "Who can discern his errors [an unintentional mistake]? Declare me innocent from hidden faults [sins forgotten or committed in ignorance, or private sins]. ¹³Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins [intentional, conscious, willful, rebellious sins]; let them not have dominion over me!"

Thankfully, as Christians, we have the Son of God (Jesus Christ) as the only- and all-sufficient mediator between us and God (1Tim.2:5; 1Jn.2:1).

b. To others

While we ought not confess our sins to a priest as the mediator and advocate of our sins against God, we are commanded to confess our sins to other when we have sinned against them (see Matt.5:23-24; 18:15-20; Heb.3:1; 4:14-16; 6:19-20).

James 5:16 ~ "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working."

Other people cannot not forgive (absolve) our sin against God, but they can forgive us our sins against them. Christians are to be forgiving people, forgiving others as they have been forgiven by God Christ (see Matt.18:21-22; Eph.4:32; Col.3:13).

D. The results of confession

- It is important to remember that the primary goal of confession is to be reconciled to (right with) God – not an attempt earn God’s saving grace, or to avoid consequences for sin, or elicit special blessings from God, or to feel super-spiritual. The main goal of confession is to be right with God, and therefore be able to truly glorify God in life.
- With that said, there are some amazing results that come with true confession. Here are just a few:

1. Sins forgiven

- To have our sins forgiven – all of them (past, present, future) – is truly amazing. Again, confession does not merit God’s forgiveness, but God demands that we confess our sins so that we can humbly recognize our desperate need of God’s forgiveness. Forgiveness of sin is not the ultimate goal of confession; it is a means to the ultimate goal, which is reconciliation with God.
1 John 1:7, 9 ~ “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. ... ⁹If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”
- This verse is not stating a condition of God’s forgiveness, but His promise to be forgiving. This is not based on the merit of our confession, but on the character of God: “*he is faithful and just*” (vs.9). The fact that God is “*faithful*” (*pistos*) means God is absolutely trustworthy and perfectly honest. God not only does not lie, but Scripture records that God cannot lie – for lying would go against His nature and character as God (see Num.23:19; Heb.6:18; Tit.1:2). We can be assured of God’s forgiveness, because we know that God is faithful.
- In addition, God is also “*just*” (*dikaios*). Because God is just, He cannot simply ignore or dismiss our sin. There must be justice “*for the wages of sin is death*” (Rom.6:23). Thankfully, Jesus’ substitutionary death on the cross paid the full penalty of our sin – justifying believers according to the justice of God. Through the substitutionary and sacrificial blood of Jesus, God’s one and only Son, God has promised – by His unfailing faithfulness and flawless justice – “*to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*” (vs.9).

1 John 1:7 ~ “... the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.”

1 John 2:1-2 ~ “My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. ²He is the propitiation for our sins ...”

2. Relationships restored

- Where there is sin, and no confession of sin, there is broken relationships. Sin drives a wedge into relationships, causing a loss of intimacy, fellowship, harmony, and trust – which is one of the reasons why God commands that we quickly and sincerely confess our sin. True confession restores relationship with God, and with others.

a. With God

Once again it is important to note that our sin is, first and foremost, against God.

Isa 59:2 ~ “but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.”

The one who truly confesses their sin before God, is the one who truly recognizes that their sin has caused a separation between them and God. The sinner's humble confession will always be received by God, and God (by His grace and mercy and love) will restore the sinner into a right relationship with Him.

Isa 1:18 ~ "Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool." (see Is.55:1-2; Rom.5:20)

Isa 44:22 ~ "I have blotted out your transgressions like a cloud and your sins like mist; return to me, for I have redeemed you." (Rev.3:19-21)

b. With others

Secondarily, but also very seriously, sin wreaks havoc on our earthly relationships (one does not need to look too long or too hard to see the evidence of this truth!). We are commanded to seek and to grant forgiveness. We are to seek the forgiveness of others when we have sinned against them (Matt.5:24-25), and we are to grant forgiveness to those who have sinned against us (Matt.18:15-20, 35; Lk.17:3-4; Gal.6:1).

To be sure, reconciliation takes two (or more). A relationship cannot truly be restored unless both parties are willing to forgive and grant forgiveness. It is important to keep in mind that God does not that we make others forgive us (that would be impossible). But we are commanded to do everything in our power to see that the relationship is reconciled; that any broken relationship is not because we (ourselves) have failed to seek reconciliation.

Rom 12:18 ~ "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."

3. Consequences mitigated

➤ The highest and purest goal of confession is not avoiding the consequences of our sin but being reconciled to God. To be sure, confession and repentance mitigates the consequences of sin and impending consequences of sin. In some cases, God mercifully and graciously removes all the consequences of sin the very moment we truly confess and repent of sin (we must recognize God's grace and mercy in that He does not make us experience all the consequences of our sin the moment we first sin). We know that, for the true Christian, God has removed all the penalty of all our sin.

Ps 103:12 ~ "as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us."

Rom 8:1 ~ "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

➤ But we need to understand that true confession does not always remove all the consequences of sin. Some sins carry consequences even after there has been genuine confession and repentance (see 2 Sam.12:13-14). Even after true confession, we may still have to deal with the consequences (restitution) of our sin (e.g., being fired, broken relationships, addiction, disease, going to jail/prison, paying fines/settling lawsuits, etc.). Sometimes God uses the consequences of our sin, even after He has graciously forgiven us of our sin, as a means of discipling us in love in order to grow and purify in Christ (see Heb.12:5-11).

4. Joy unfettered

➤ Happiness can be defined as the temporary and emotional (psychological) feelings of pleasure based on external circumstances. Joy, on the other hand, is the eternal and spiritual (supernatural) pleasure based not on external circumstances but the inward reality of knowing Christ. The Bible teaches that (worldly) happiness is fleeting because it often depends on things outside of ourselves, but true joy is

eternal because it is based on our relationship with Jesus Christ, which is itself an everlasting source of joy.

John 16:22 ~ “So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.”

➤ While no one can steal our joy, we need to understand that unconfessed sin can keep us from experiencing the full blessings of joy. When we are not reconciled to God, we are awash with feelings of guilt and shame. This hinders and clouds our joy until we truly confess and repent of our sin (see Ps.32:3-4).

Ps 51:12 ~ “Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.”

Conclusion

➤ May we be heartfelt and quick to confess our sins to God and to one another. May we also be heartfelt and quick to confess Jesus as both Savior and Lord. May we not allow Satan a foothold in our lives due to unconfessed sin, or fickle profession of Christ.

Confession indeed is ‘good for the soul’ because it draws us into a right and closer relationship with God. By God’s mercy and love and grace, true confession enables us to be reconciled to God and live in a way that is pleasing and glorifying to Him. Confession is a spiritual discipline that truly helps us to grow and persevere in our walk with Jesus Christ.

✓ Illust: “Sorrow is such a vehement passion that it will have vent. It vents itself at the eyes by weeping and at the tongue by confession ... Confession is self-accusing: ‘*Lo, I have sinned*’ (2 Sam. 24.17). ... When we come before God, however, we must accuse ourselves ... And the truth is that by this self-accusing we prevent Satan's accusing. In our confessions we tax ourselves with pride, infidelity, passion, so that when Satan, who is called 'the accuser of the brethren', shall lay these things to our charge, God will say, ‘They have accused themselves already; therefore, Satan, thou art non-suited; thy accusations come too late.’ The humble sinner does more than accuse himself; he, as it were, sits in judgment and passes sentence upon himself. He confesses that he has deserved to be bound over to the wrath of God. And hear what the apostle Paul says: ‘*if we would judge ourselves we should not be judged*’ (1Cor.11.31).

But have not wicked men, like Judas and Saul, confessed sin? Yes, but theirs was not a true confession. That confession of sin may be right and genuine, these eight qualifications are requisite:

1. Confession must be voluntary
2. Confession must be with compunction
3. Confession must be sincere
4. In true confession a man particularizes sin
5. A true penitent confesses sin in the fountain
6. Sin is to be confessed with all its circumstances and aggravations
7. In confession we must so charge ourselves as to clear God
8. We must confess our sins with a resolution not to act them over again

(“The Doctrine of Repentance: ‘The Nature of True Repentance’”; by Thomas Watson [first pub.1668]).