



CONFESSING SIN

“Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. *Selah*. I 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. *Selah*.”

Psalms 32:1-5 (ESV)

WHAT IS CONFESSION?

Confession is an incredibly important part of the Christian life, but it is often deeply misunderstood. In the Scriptures, confession simply means to declare or acknowledge some truth. The Bible talks about confession in two main senses. The first is the confession of faith—declaring belief in God or truths about Him (Dan. 9:4; Rom. 10:9-10; Phil. 2:11; Heb. 10:23). The second is the confession of sin—declaring the reality of one’s own sin against God and neighbor. In the Old Testament, confession is often tied to the sacrificial system as a link “between awareness that a sin has been committed and the offering of an atoning sacrifice.”¹

Following Jesus’s establishment of the New Covenant as the once-for-all atoning sacrifice for sin, confession plays an often-misunderstood role. Unlike the Old Testament people of God, we no longer practice temple sacrifices and thus are no longer required to confess to the temple priests. Contrary to the Roman Catholic view, we do not believe in a sacrament of penance requiring us to confess our sins to a vocational Priest to be fully absolved by God. Nevertheless, we believe confession plays an important role in our relationship with Christ. The book of Acts tells us that when the crowd heard the gospel on the day of Pentecost, they were moved to the core and asked what to do. Peter said to them, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Acknowledgment of sin is tied up with this initial repentance and faith, but confession is also supposed to be an ongoing habit of every believer.

CONFESSING TO GOD

Our first and primary act of confession is to God. Though all sin is heartbreaking and discouraging, confession to God isn’t meant to discourage. What David described in Psalm 32 is the beautiful grace that meets the believer when he or she acknowledges sin before God. Sin, bottled up inside, causes us to “waste away,” to “groan,” to “dry up” (Ps. 32:3-4). But confession brings the *experience* of forgiveness and the lightening of every load of guilt (Ps. 32:5). In the New Testament, John echoed this idea when he wrote: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn. 1:8-9). By virtue of what Jesus has done on the cross, every believer knows they’re forgiven, but ongoing confession to God brings the believer the *relational experience* of God’s forgiving love. We should also note that experiencing God’s grace isn’t meant to make us complacent (Rom. 6:1-2), but instead fuels our discipleship and our forgiveness of others (Eph. 4:32).

CONFESSING TO ANOTHER

But confession, even under the cross of Christ, isn’t meant to be exclusively between us and God. There has always been something incredibly powerful found in an individual confessing sin to another person. When a person (be it a priest in the Old Testament or a fellow believer under the New Covenant) hears your sin and then declares the truth of God’s forgiveness to you... it is a powerful, freeing experience. This is why James wrote, “Therefore, confess

¹ See Leviticus 5:3-6. The quote comes from Douglas Moo’s article titled “Confession of Sins” in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*.

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” (Jas. 5:16). Confession seems embarrassing, but that’s why it’s so necessary. It drives the truths of the gospel into our hearts experientially. Christians should find trusted, appropriate² people that we can boldly, humbly, truthfully confess our sins to. There’s incredible blessing to be found there.

RECEIVING THE CONFESSION OF ANOTHER

The New Testament declares that every believer is indwelt with the Holy Spirit of God (1 Cor. 6:19) and that the entire church is a “royal priesthood” (1 Pet. 2:9). For these reasons, every Christian is capable of receiving the confessions of their brothers and sisters in Christ. In these holy moments, we get to represent the love, mercy, and grace that Jesus (the true and better High Priest, the once-for-all mediator) has poured out on our believing friends by speaking it back to them. When we receive the confessions of others, we can take a moment to mourn the sin with them, but then move into the privilege and joy of telling them that God has completely, absolutely, unequivocally forgiven them through Jesus. The Psalmist had it right when he declared, “As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us” (Ps. 103:12).

A PARTING QUOTE

In his book *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer beautifully summarized the importance of Christian confession:

“The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous is his isolation. Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light... In confession the light of the gospel breaks into the darkness and seclusion of the heart. The sin must be brought into the light. The unexpressed must be openly spoken and acknowledged. All that is secret and hidden is made manifest. It is a hard struggle until the sin is openly admitted. But God breaks gates of brass and bars of iron.”

May we be a people who trust Jesus and believe his good news enough to humbly confess our sin to one another, speaking his grace and mercy to one another in loving response.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Mutual Confession: A Holy Experiment article by Dane Deatherage – A great article about the power and beauty found in mutual confession. [<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/mutual-confession-a-holy-experiment/>]

Confession and Communion chapter by Dietrich Bonhoeffer – A powerful chapter on confession in an incredible book on Christian community. [https://drive.google.com/open?id=1BE51CyVGp9PVVhIhyLj_vD3ztlyVcjU5]

The Prodigal God book by Tim Keller – Not a book about confession, but an amazing book about the gracious heart of God and the power of the gospel.

² “Appropriate” is a key word, as not every sin should be shared in every context. Some sins are best shared in closer relationships, in same-gender contexts, etc.