



Spiritual Disciplines: Confession

iFOLLOW

Walking with Jesus

The iFollow Discipleship Series

About the iFollow Discipleship Series Pastor's Edition

Categories

The iFollow Discipleship Series is designed to be used in congregations to assist people in their pursuit of God. This assumes that individuals are in unique places in their journey and there is no perfect set of lessons that everyone must complete to become a disciple—in fact discipleship is an eternal journey. Therefore the iFollow curriculum is a menu of milestones that an individual, small group, or even an entire church can choose from. The lessons can be placed in three general categories: **Meeting with Jesus** (does not assume a commitment to Jesus Christ); **Walking with Jesus** (assumes an acceptance of Jesus Christ); and **Working with Jesus** (assumes a desire to serve Jesus Christ).

Components

Each lesson has a presenter's manuscript which can be read word for word, but will be stronger if the presenter puts it in his/her own words and uses personal illustrations. The graphic slides can be played directly from the Pastor's DVD or customized and played from a computer. There are also several group activities and discussion questions to choose from as well as printable student handouts.

Usage

The lessons are designed to be used in small groups, pastor's Bible classes, prayer meetings, seminars, retreats, training sessions, discussion groups, and some lessons may be appropriate sermon outlines.

Credits

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The Spiritual Discipline of Confession

This presentation is designed for people who have decided to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

Learning Objectives

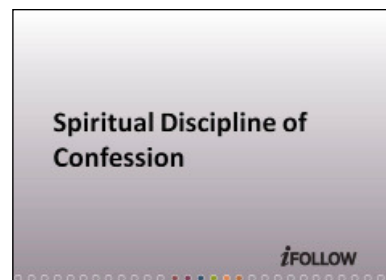
1. Define confession
2. Review Biblical admonitions and examples
3. Understand why confession is “good for the soul”
4. Discover when and to whom to confess
5. Learn to relate confession with forgiveness and reconciliation

Content Outline

1. What is confession? A theological investigation
2. Advantages and disadvantages of confession and penance
3. Two OT stories: Daniel and Nehemiah, confessing for the sins of all
4. Four NT passages concerning confession
5. The health benefits of confession
6. Rules for the person confessing and the confessor

Background Material for the Presenter

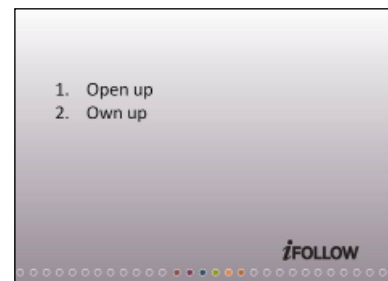
Everyone knows what it means to confess. That’s when you admit what you did wrong. And it usually includes being sorry. Right? Well, yes, but it turns out confession is a lot more than that, too. In the Hebrew, the word used is **yadah**, meaning “direction,” or, more literally, “to use or hold out the hand.” It also includes things like cast, shoot, praise and making confession or thanksgiving. In particular, this term is used in descriptions of the sacrificial offerings. The penitent is to lay hands on the head of the animal and **yadah** his sins. It seems as if confessing might mean casting away our sins, which seems very desirable, and may be our devout wish. But might it also include the idea of first



opening the hand rather than hiding the sins, then holding the sinful hand open, truly acknowledging or “owning” the sin? The root word is **yad**, which means “hand” and also “power.”

We do have an old-fashioned term in English, “owning up.” We even have a universal gesture, raising our hands in surrender. It would be much easier to hide the sin, or if that’s not possible, throw it as far as we can. Opening up about it is much harder, and **owning** it? Ouch! Yet it is only God who can actually get rid of our sins, and He can’t do that until we have confessed and repented, thus turning our “power and means” in a completely different “direction.”

When we turn to the New Testament, the Greek employs two words, both for confessing sin and for the passages which talk about confessing Christ, or faith. The first is **homologeo**, from **homou**, meaning same or together, and **logos**, meaning word, speech, thought, reasoning. The meanings of **homologeo** include “as-sent, covenant, acknowledge, confess, give thanks, promise.” In other words, to confess is to talk together about something. And the “talk, word, reason” part—**logos**—is one of Jesus’ most powerful titles. So you could see **homologeo** as “same or together with Jesus.”



The second word is closely related; **exomologeo**. That is the same word above, plus **ek**, which means “place, origin, out of.” To speak out, in other words, about the gospel. And sometimes, as we shall see, about our sin, too. How about the English itself? Several dictionaries agree that the etymology of **confess** comes to us through Old French and Old English nearly unchanged from the Latin **confessus**, which is the past participle of **confiteri**: to acknowledge or confess. **Com**, meaning together, plus **fateri**, meaning to acknowledge. So, confession means, literally, to **acknowledge together** about something. About what? Sin only or other things too? Together with whom? God? Others? Ourselves? Of course if it is just “me, myself and I,” there are no “to-gether” about it (no matter how many of me there may seem to be sometimes) and no “speaking out,” either. So there has to be some “other” involved before an action becomes a confession.

Ritual Confession

In many traditions there is a religious leader or priest who receives confessions and a prescribed procedure for performing it. The believers see this as valuable. First, the

sinner has “gotten it off his chest,” and usually feels much better for it. Secondly, usually the confessor then assigns a penalty or penance, some means of making things right again. This is becoming much less common in Western countries than it once was, and there is a very good reason for that. People have come to realize that there is often something formal and arbitrary about the proceedings. It feels made-up. Even if it does “good,” it does not feel entirely authentic. Nothing has really been changed or made right.

First, it leads to a mindset of listing sins. There’s a certain list of rules and regulations which one must “keep.” A person keeps a mental tally of how many of these they “break” and goes on a regular basis to the confessor to list these breakings. There may even be a division of sins into less-bad and more-bad categories. A person is led to think, “It’s not so bad—I only did two minor sins this week.”

Secondly, this system usually makes no real connection between the sin and the penalty. For your two venial (not-so-bad) sins, you have to say a certain prayer or set of prayers a certain number of times. Then all is squared again with the universe. That wasn’t so bad. Now you can go blithely out and continue the same behaviors as before, knowing you can “pay up” again next week.

An American visitor in Myanmar (Burma) was watching the local people pass out rice to the Buddhist monks. Some gave as little as one grain of rice to each of many monks. When the visitor asked someone why this was so, it was explained to him that each feeding of a monk counted as one good deed, and offset one bad deed. If you gave out one grain of rice at a time, you could parlay one small bowl into many good deeds, thus, presumably, forgiving many bad deeds. Whether this is a true teaching of Buddhism is beside the point. No doubt many Catholic priests don’t want their flock to get the idea that they can sin all they want and just say enough Hail Mary’s to cover for them, either.

Which brings us to the worst feature of ritualistic confession: one pays for one’s own sins by some sort of punishment. And the truth is most Western (ostensibly Christian) societies have the same idea. The thief, arsonist, or rapist, having either been caught and confessed, must “pay the penalty” for his sin by spending a number of years in prison, a number to be determined by how bad a particular judge thinks the sin was. In prison, rather than learning anything about himself or his temptations or how to deal with them, he will likely learn new and better ways to sin. But he’ll be “suitably punished.” That’s assuming conditions in the prison are bad enough. Any attempt to make life bearable or even educational will be seen as “being soft on crime.” No, this reprobate must be made as miserable as possible so that “justice will be served.”

Once he finishes his sentence he will be set loose. Those who wanted him to be mis-

erable have no illusions of his becoming a new, productive member of society. Those who would like to think he has, and want to give him a second chance are likely to talk of his having “paid his debt to society.” He’s paid up. Leave him alone to get on with his life.

Where did this begin? With the five-year-old who is taught to **confess**, that is, **admit** wrongdoing and face up to whatever punishment is meted out, in the hopes of not repeating it. Maybe. If the punishment is bad enough that the child doesn’t want to face it again. Is this what God means by confession?

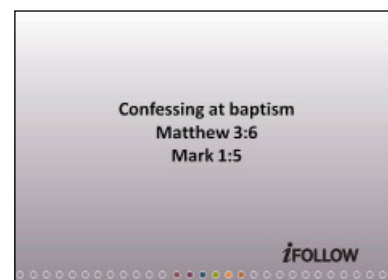
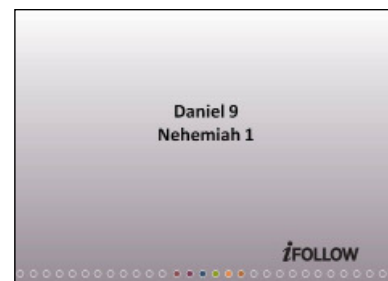
The various systems of confessing to someone trustworthy, such as the shepherd of the flock, were set up for the best of reasons; to follow Biblical teaching and to give a penitent and probably confused and anxious person a listening ear, preferably that of someone who knows and cares personally for the individual. There really is some value in this. The trouble is that every time God says “Do this ...” some well-intentioned human turns it into a blueprint for success, with graduated steps and flow charts and if-then clauses and rules.

Confessing for All

There are two very interesting stories of confession in the Old Testament. Nehemiah and Daniel are both disheartened about the slow rebuilding of Jerusalem, after the Babylonian captivity. Daniel is watching Jeremiah’s prophetic seventy years wind down and seeing no end of captivity in sight. Nehemiah knows many Jews have already gone back home and are supposed to be rebuilding, but little progress is being made. They both decide to fast and pray, and both do some serious confessing. But it is not what we are used to today.

Daniel, in particular, has reason to worry. God has sent him a vision of many days. Now Babylon has fallen to the Medes and Persians. He gets that part. They are now in the silver, two-armed section of the statue in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. But he still can’t understand the vision of the evenings and mornings. “There was none,” he says unhappily, “to explain it.” (Dan. 8:27) Surely they aren’t going to have to delay the return and rebuilding of the temple for 2,300 years!

Not that they don’t deserve it. Daniel 9 is one of the most beautiful and poignant



prayers in Scripture. In it, Daniel, one of the few people in the Bible for whom no sin is recorded, “speaks and prays and confesses his sin and the sin of his people Israel, presenting his supplication before the Lord his God in behalf of the holy mountain of his God.” (Daniel 9:20) “We,” he says, “have sinned, committed iniquity, acted wickedly and rebelled, even turning aside from Your commandments and ordinances. Moreover, we have not listened to Your servants the prophets, who spoke in Your name.” (Verses 5-6)

“We,” who? Of course Daniel was a sinner. We all are. And no doubt his sin was before him as he spoke this prayer. But this was the man who had stood for God for decades, through the reigns of several kings in two different nations, and at the risk of life and limb. Yet he confessed. His hands were, whether figuratively or literally, raised in both surrender and praise.

Note what kind of **speaking together** was going on here. Most obviously, Daniel was speaking together with God. This is always the first One to go to in any situation, good or bad. (“Against Thee, and Thee only, have I sinned,” said David, despite the fact that his sin had materially affected Bathsheba, Uriah, the baby born of the sin, Nathan, the servants, and the whole nation.) But more than that, Daniel was lumping himself together, **speaking together**, you might say, with his whole nation. He was even taking on the weight of sins he had by no means committed. He was, on the behalf of others, though he knew he himself would never see the Promised Land again, begging God’s forgiveness and restoration; not because they deserved it, but “for Your own sake, O my God.” (Verse 19)

This was no list of transgressions. There were large categories mentioned, but Daniel knew it would be impossible to tell all they had done. In fact, it is clear that he understood their condition to be far worse than simply having racked up a particularly long list of rule-breakings. “We have sinned, committed iniquity, acted wickedly and rebelled.” That ought to cover it. These are all the varieties of sin from mistakes and missteps to deliberate, knowing rebellion. And yet Daniel seeks, and apparently expects—despite the fact that “open shame” belongs to them—full forgiveness. Why? Because “to the Lord our God belong compassion and forgiveness.” (Verse 9) Daniel knows his Lord. He has been **speaking with** Him for a long, long time. And he is not disappointed. God’s response is (as always) even more beautiful than the prayer. “O Daniel,” says Gabriel gently, “I have now come forth to give you insight with understanding. At the beginning of your supplications the command was issued, and I have come to tell you, for you are highly esteemed.” (Verses 22-23) Daniel never got to go back home to Jerusalem. But he will be truly at home in the New Jerusalem. He learned to speak together with God and with the human community.



One hundred and fifty years later, Nehemiah prayed a similar prayer. In his case, a friend from Judah had come to visit, and he had asked for news from home. The Judean told him that the people who had survived the captivity were in great distress and the walls of Jerusalem were still down, the gates burned with fire. (Neh. 1:3) Nehemiah “sat down and wept and mourned for days; and ... was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.” (Verse 4) He did the same thing Daniel had done. He raised his hands and begged the “great and awesome God” to listen as he prayed on behalf of Israel, “Confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against You; I and my father’s house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against You and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances.” (Verses 6-7) Then Nehemiah claims specific promises. Remember, God, You promised through Moses that if we sinned and were scattered, and we turned to You and confessed and kept Your commandments (he’s referring to the promises found in Deut. 30:1-5), You would take us back to “the place where [You] have chosen to cause [Your] name to dwell.” (Neh. 1:9) In the case of Nehemiah the cupbearer, God chooses to work through the king he serves to send him and another contingent of his countrymen home to rebuild the walls and the temples of Jerusalem.

From these two stories it is clear that confession of sin can be something far different from what we usually envision. It seeks more than a punishment befitting the crime, a sort of never-ending wash, rinse, repeat. True confession seeks a genuine righting of things, which only God can accomplish. There were no penances set in either of these stories. In fact, the consequences of the sin involved had already been faced, and they were natural ones. Despite the fact that the Bible gives the responsibility for the captivity to God—He is seen as using Nebuchadnezzar to His own ends in bringing a guilty people to a realization of their condition—these consequences were entirely predictable results of their repeated seeking after the gods and kings and actions and values of the nations around them. And, most tellingly of all, these negative situations don’t appear to have brought the people in general to repentance! It was these spiritual leaders, the ones who **were** trying to obey, the innocent bystanders (there must have been thousands) who had to go into captivity even though they had **not** “bowed the knee to Baal,” it was these men who saw the true situation and went to their knees to make confession, to confess on behalf of their people, “We have sinned.” They had the courage to **speak with** God on behalf of the sheep-without-shepherds nation they loved. And it was the reforms of Nehemiah himself, along with Ezra the scribe that finally taught the Israelites to stop, once and for all, hankering after the idols of the next-door neighbors.

What they did next was to make an idol of their own religion. But that’s another story, except for one point, a propos here. Confession, like everything else, became a ritual part of a rote, feeling-divorced religious system with rules upon rules about rules.

The main job of the high priest was to go before God **for** his people, to confess over the head of the Atonement Day scapegoat “all the iniquities of the sons of Israel and all their transgressions in regard to all their sins.” (Lev. 16:21) That’s not exactly what Caiaphas was doing several centuries later, but the verse continues, “and he shall lay them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who stand in readiness.” Caiaphas did do that, after all. And he never even knew it.

One to Another

It is surprising to realize that the majority of texts in the New Testament concerning confession are referring to confessing Christ and His truth, the gospel, or another word for witnessing, proclaiming. Only four passages talk directly about confessing sin. We will take a look at each.

1. Confessing to John the Baptist: In the story of John the Baptist found in both Matthew 3:6 and Mark 1:5, it says that “all the country” were going to be baptized by John in the Jordan River, “as they confessed their sins.” It does not say so, but there is the implication is that people were telling John, possibly in the hearing of the crowd, what they regretted and wanted to change about their lives. Certainly the body of John’s preaching was about repenting—making a U-turn—making a straight path for the Messiah who was on the horizon, right behind John. Those who took what he said to heart knew he spoke nothing less than the truth. The “path to God” inside their hearts was very crooked indeed. So they repented, confessed, and were baptized. It seems unlikely that these repentant ones were going into detail, though we can’t know for sure. It would have taken a very long time to baptize many people if John first had to listen to the sins of each. Most likely, they were general confessions such as those we’ve seen in Nehemiah’s and Daniel’s prayers. “We haven’t been listening and following you, God. We have been blind and selfish, and now we see the glimmerings of the Light, promised by the prophets, now heralded by this man.”



Each individual, in their own heart, was likely more specific. Some probably confessed specific sins out loud. For instance, a tax collector might admit to having over-charged, or a soldier may have confessed to taking money by force, as is hinted at in Luke 3:10-14. These were public sins, and confessing them publicly not only made the guilty one feel freer, it began the long process of reassuring those sinned against that maybe this soldier or tax collector would become someone they could trust.

2. Confessing to the Apostles: Acts 19 tells a series of stories that happened in Ephesus. First, Paul found some disciples who had been baptized because of John's preaching. He taught them of the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts. Then he taught generally, first in the synagogue, and when that venue became too divisive and unruly, in a school belonging to Tyrannus. Verse 10 says this went on for two years, and that both Jews and Greeks were becoming more and more interested.

Next, there is a story of true and false miracles and exorcisms, in which the seven sons of a Jewish exorcist named Sceva thought maybe the name of Jesus was a particularly powerful charm, and tried it, with painful results. Following this story is a report of magicians and occultists giving up their practices and burning their magic books. It is in between these two accounts that an intriguing sentence appears. "Many also of those who had believed kept coming, confessing and disclosing their practices." (Verse 18)

Is it that they "had believed" in magic and now didn't anymore? There was some of that, clearly. But usually when Acts talks of "believing," it means believing the gospel of Jesus Christ. This passage looks as though those who have confessed before "kept coming" and confessing again. Each of us can certainly testify that one confession is never enough. It is that clause "and disclosing their practices" that catches the eye. No doubt it means, in part, admitting to magical practices. However, it also adds another angle to true confession.

Admitting that you stole a candy bar is one thing. Disclosing that you have an ongoing problem with the practice of stealing is another, and probably a good deal more useful. Someone who steals a candy bar must first go to God. God always comes first. His forgiveness, freely given and never running out, will give the guilty person strength and wisdom to do what else needs to be done. In this case, the one who stole needs only to go to the person from whom she stole and tell the truth, ask forgiveness, and pay for the candy bar, perhaps adding a little as a peace offering. Case closed. Until it happens again and again. Our dishonest person is now facing a bigger problem. Of course, sin is always larger than it looks. Outward actions are only the tiniest tip of a most deadly iceberg.

Let us say that our sticky-fingered one is feeling terrible about it, and trying to stop. Let us allow that she prays about it—**speaking together** with God. Let us even assume she has the strength to continue to ask forgiveness of each person she cheats, though this grows less and less likely as time goes on. Nothing seems to help! What now?



There is only one thing to do. The guilty person must find a godly person she can trust, perhaps her pastor, a teacher, a parent, a friend. She must disclose, uncover, “own up to” her **practices**. By this time she may even be labeling herself a thief. God never does this, by the way. Neither does her carefully chosen confidant. These two people, working together with God, now have an exponentially greater power than any one person, even with God. We were created in community. These two, working together with God, will be able to uncover some of the roots of this brokenness and begin the difficult process of making new choices that really stand. What we know is that Acts 19 says Jesus and His name were more and more greatly magnified in first century Ephesus. And confession played a part.

3. Confess to One Another: James 5:16 is one of the more famous verses on confession. Here, we are specifically adjured to confess our sins “to one another,” and to pray for each other. Does it only mean to confess to the one you have wronged? It doesn’t look like it. It’s in the context of the prayer for the sick, in the previous verses. Of that sick one, healed by God because of the prayers of his faithful friends, it says that if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven. The clear implication is that these sins (again, not necessarily in detail) have been disclosed in the select company of the elders who have gathered to pray.

Must a sick one give his entire sorry autobiography of failures? No. He may, however, want to confess that he is aware his present illness is connected with some lifestyle choices he wishes he hadn’t made. And he is much less likely to do differently, once he’s well again, without the help and accountability of his trusted, praying friends.

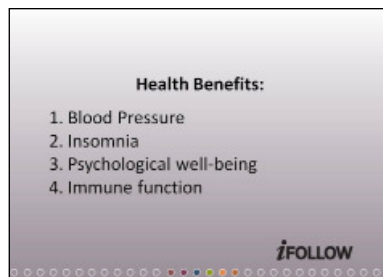
4. God’s Promise about Confession: And so we come to the most famous confession passage of all. Many of us know it by heart: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9) This is a picture of the infinite forgiveness of God. You may say He is the only one who can **really** forgive, out of His own righteousness or justice. When the rest of us think we are forgiving, all we are actually doing is recognizing we are just as sinful and might have done the same in similar circumstances, and sharing the forgiveness of the all-forgiving God. In fact, when we cannot yet bring ourselves to forgive, we can at least, and always, offer the forgiveness of God. We know He always forgives us, so we can know He’ll forgive the other, too. Even that unspeakable enemy who has hurt you so badly you can’t imagine forgiving him.

But, 1 John 1:9 has more to offer. God’s forgiveness includes cleansing. “He who began a good work in you will perfect it.” (Phil 1:6) And yes, He may choose to use other people to do it. He *will* choose to use other people. And He’ll use you in the perfecting work He’s doing in others.

Confession is Good for the Soul

Everybody says it. Everybody knows it. But why **is** confession so good for us? And are there other things we might want to make full disclosure about, besides our sins? Here's a quote from an online blog called *Lifesigns*:

Researcher James Pennebaker studied health benefits of confession. Some people's secrets literally make them sick. He discovered that criminals who confessed to lie detector technicians were often so grateful for the relief they felt after "getting it all out," that they sent birthday, holiday and thank you cards to the polygraph personnel who heard their stories. (*Goodier*)



Trying to hunt down more details of James Pennebaker's studies reveals that today there are many online sites that offer anonymous confessions, even charging for the privilege! And they're swamped. One site says it is nearing a million confessions, and it's moderated by one person. Obviously there are plenty of people who think it will do them good to "get it off their chest" and plenty more who find it titillating to read the juicy details. I'm pretty sure this is not how God defines community. Knowing God, I'm also pretty sure He's working, even in those sites and the people who use them. After all, God already knows the personal stories and details of each, every one of them.

It turns out Dr. Pennebaker has run studies for years that show the healing powers of what he calls "confessional" sharing, journaling, talking out loud even to oneself, and prayer. He found that it improves blood pressure, insomnia, psychological well-being, and immune function. Confession enhances both psychological and physical health. In other words, science once again agrees with what Seventh-day Adventists have believed for years—we are whole, not dualistic beings. Our personalities and living bodies *are* our souls, and what affects one affects the other.

It is important to note that Dr. Pennebaker includes in his definition of confession the act of telling stories of traumatic events, rather than sins. His point is that keeping powerful secrets of any kind can make us sick. This is not confession in the Biblical sense, but it is often about being sinned against. For Holocaust survivors or survivors of rape and abuse, being able to open up and tell the whole story is like confessing the sins of one who may never confess for himself or herself. Frequently, victims feel guilty and ashamed, as if they are the ones who have done wrong, or as if they deserve no better. Sometimes the very act of hearing themselves talk helps them realize this is not true, and this realization is the first step to healing.

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Spiritual
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Confession

Rules for Confessing

It is probably not that good an idea to rush out and get online to confess all our deep, dark secrets to an admiring public. So when, how, and to whom should we confess?

When: Obviously, choice number one is when we first realize the sin. The second those words leave your mouth, that you immediately wish unsaid, you may not be able to call them back, but you can humbly say, “I am sorry! Please forgive me.” And without excuses! “I’m sorry **but**, I’m tired, I’m busy, I wasn’t thinking, or worse yet, if **you** hadn’t ...” is not nearly so helpful.

The second best choice is before bed. Once upon a time, most religious traditions spoke and wrote a lot about “examining the soul” at the end of each day. It can lead to a morbid self-absorption if over-indulged, but a little soul searching is a good thing. “Don’t let the sun go down on your anger” is still good advice. (Eph. 4:29)

If it’s too late for either of these choices, then **now** would be a good time. If it’s a serious subject, make an appointment. Find a quiet time. Practice first with a friend, if it will help. Pray. Then tell the truth.

Is there ever a bad time? Yes, there is. If the person against whom we have sinned knows nothing about it, and it would hurt him or her worse to know, this is a good time to talk to the trusted pastor or friend. The sin must be confessed, not only to God, but to one other godly person. However, it may never be possible to tell the whole truth to the person most nearly affected. *If* we have talked it through with someone else, and this person agrees it should not be told, we can still find the relief of sharing, and the peace of God’s forgiveness and strength to do differently next time.

How: As simply as possible. If it’s immediate, a simple “I’m so sorry” will do. A little later, it might be, “I’m so sorry I lost my temper with you earlier, at the dinner table. Will you forgive me?” But what if it’s a big deal? Then there are steps.

1. Talk to God first. This may be a good place to write the whole sordid thing down. Some people find comfort in then burning the report. The sin goes up to God in the smoke, never to be seen again.



2. If you are afraid, it may be desirable to talk to someone else first. This must be someone absolutely trustworthy, both to keep your secret from others, and to tell you the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. This person will have a more objective eye, and will not let you get away with half-truths or excuses, but will love you anyway, and assure you, over and over if necessary, that God can and does forgive, and still loves you more than you can imagine. This person can also help you decide whether to tell, when to tell, and even how to tell. In serious situations, a pastor or counselor may agree to be with you when you tell the tale to the person you have harmed.

3. When you are ready to confess to the wronged one, you may wish to make an appointment. “I have something important to tell you. Can we talk this evening?” Be sure it’s a quiet time that won’t be interrupted by children, telephones, or business. And be sure it’s private, unless you have decided you need a third person.

4. Tell the truth. Tell the truth. Tell the truth. It isn’t confession if it’s a tissue of excuses, reasons, and extenuating circumstances designed to show that it’s all *really* not your fault. There are two things to talk about: what you did, and how you feel. Both are important.

5. Listen. The other person may forgive immediately, cry, get angry, or say he’ll never forgive you. The other person has only one thing to talk about: how he or she feels, or rather, how the feelings were when the event happened, and how they are now that you’ve confessed. The other has things to work through, too, and it may take time before you are forgiven. Accept that, and comfort yourself with the realization that God has already forgiven you, and not only that, already paid for your sin.

6. Accept the consequences, whatever they may be. Consequences are different from punishment, and don’t affect God’s forgiveness.

7. **Go and sin no more.** This is easy to say, of course. If there is a practice that needs revealed, a tendency or temptation, you will need help. This may be again, a friend, pastor, support group, or professional help. But you don’t want to go through this again and again!

Rules for the Confessor

What if you are the one hearing the confession? There are two possibilities: you are the one who has been wronged, or someone wants to talk to you before talking to the person or persons who has been harmed. In either case, talk to God first.



If you are the wronged party, the rules are quite simple. Listen, express your honest feelings lovingly, and forgive. If you cannot forgive yet, offer the forgiveness of God, and go see your own friend or counselor. The goal is forgiveness as pure and free as that you receive from God. “Forgive our sins **as we forgive** those who sin against us.” (Matthew 6:12, 14)

There is one exceedingly important point, however. **Forgiving is not excusing the evil done!** If you have made a slight mistake, bumped into someone in line, let’s say, you exclaim, “Oh, excuse me! I’m sorry!” “That’s OK,” the bumped person can respond. “It was nothing.” And it is nothing. Human error.

It is only when there is no excuse, the thing which was done is sin—glaring angrily at someone, for instance—that forgiveness is necessary. And there is only one source of forgiveness; God. Jesus paid dearly for the forgiveness which comes so freely to us. We can’t even imagine the price. Confession isn’t it. Punishment isn’t it. Restitution isn’t it. There is no “paying the debt,” even if there is actual repayment. If someone steals a Toyota and repays with a Cadillac, he still can’t make up for the original harm, the sense of violation. It can’t be excused. It must be forgiven. That takes God. And when we forgive, we haven’t said it’s OK. It’s not. And no, we won’t forget. We will love anyway, which is much harder.

If you are a listening ear, then the rules are nearly as simple. The person confessing has the hard job. You have simply to listen calmly without getting shocked, prayerfully try to divide truth from excuses and complaints, reflect back to the other person carefully, assure (and reassure) of the love and forgiveness of God, and offer the best counsel you can as to what to do next. If you feel unqualified, offer to go with the person to a pastor or counselor.

Reconciliation

The goal of confession is complete reconciliation between two or more sinners. It’s wonderful when it happens. When two faulty Christians admit their faults to each other, uncover and stop hiding their tendencies and practices, pray together, and “make up,” the angels dance in heaven. Each is now greater than before, and the two are far more than the sum of their parts. God is a little more visible to the whole community to which they belong.

But it doesn’t always happen. Even Paul said, “**If** possible, so far as it depends on **you**, be at peace.” (Romans 12:18) There will not always be reconciliation. Some people were never taught how to forgive, are too angry to even consider it, or have confused forgiveness with excusing or condoning sin. And some people have been hurt so badly that even if they do forgive, they may not ever want to have anything to do

with the one who hurt them. Like perfection, reconciliation is something to seek, as well as something we may have to live without. In that case, we can only cling to the forgiveness of God and go on, trying to let the Holy Spirit make real in us the new, abundant life God has promised.

Conclusion

Confession is tricky business. As we have learned, it is far more than simply listing infractions. “Today I cut in front of another car in traffic, stole paper from the office, yelled at my wife.” We couldn’t do it thoroughly, even if we tried! “I had a judgmental thought while watching the news.” Just how detailed do we want to get? We don’t even have a realistic view of what sin is. We may recognize that we have lost our temper and said hurtful things, but are we aware of **all** our sin? Can we trace back to the thought, and the temptation that led to the thought and the tiredness that made us pay attention to the temptation, and the childhood influences that made this a likely sore point for us? Do we know our whole brokenness? Only God knows. All we can do is open our hands and hearts and hold them up to Him. Well, there is one more thing. We can look left and right, take the broken hands of those nearby, and **all** hold them up together to Him. He is Faithful and Just. And He **will** forgive.



Handouts in this Package

1. Nehemiah's Prayer
2. Daniel's Prayer
3. Rules for Confessing
4. Rules for the Confessor

Additional Resources

Arnold, J. C. (1997). *Seventy Times Seven: The Power of Forgiveness*. Rifton, NY: The Plough Publishing House. (Note especially Chapter 12, “Forgiveness through Confession.”)

Augsburger, David (2006). *Dissident Discipleship: A Spirituality of Self-Surrender, Love of God and Love of Neighbor*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press.

Chittister, Joan O.S.B. (1990). *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Foster, Richard J. (1978). *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. New York, NY: HarperSanFrancisco.

Johnson, Jan, Keith Matthews and Dallas Willard (2001). *Study Guide to The Divine Conspiracy*. New York, NY: HarperOne.

Jones, Tony (2005). *The Sacred Way*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Hahn, Scott (2003). *Lord, Have Mercy: The Healing Power of Confession*. New York: Doubleday. (Note that this book is very Catholic. In fact the jacket calls it “an illuminating, reassuring explanation of the Catholic Church’s teachings on confession and forgiveness.” Nonetheless, it has some helpful ideas, including good Biblical material.)

Kuhlman, Delcy (1998). *Experiencing God through Spiritual Mentoring*. Lincoln, NE: Center for Creative Ministry.

McLaren, Brian D. (2008). *Finding Our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson.

Ortberg, John (1997). *The Life You’ve Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Pennebaker, James W. (1997). *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions*. New York: Guilford Press.

Smith, James Bryan (1993). *A Spiritual Formation Workbook: Small Group Resources for Nurturing Christian Growth*. New York, NY: HarperOne.

Stassen, Glen H., and David P. Gushee (2003). *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Whitney, Donald S. (1991). *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress Publishing Group.

Willard, Dallas (1990). *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*. New York, NY: HarperOne.

Willard, Dallas (1998). *The Divine Conspiracy: Discovering Our Hidden Life in God*. New York, NY: HarperSanFrancisco.

Willard, Dallas (2002). *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.

Wright, N.T. (1994). *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

Articles

Baumel, Syd (1994, 1998). "Private Confession." Published on the Internet at: www.mts.net/~baumel/confession.html

Goodier, Steve (2008). "Confession Is Good for the Body for Life?" *Lifesigns*, August 11. Available at: lifesign.blogspot.com/2008/08/confession-is-good-for-body-for-life.html

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss these terms: justice is served ... pay one's debt to society ... suitable punishment ... soft on crime ... and others the group may think of. What are the prevailing attitudes of the group toward these terms?
2. Is punishment a good way to get obedience? Why or why not?
3. What effect will the specter of punishment have on willing confession, whether of adults or children?
4. What does "restorative justice" mean?
5. Is it possible to have a family or a community whose system of justice is not based on punishment?
6. Did Jesus' ideas of justice seem to center on punishment?
7. Have you ever confessed? Has someone confessed to you? What were the results?
8. Is confession something that we should do regularly as followers of Christ?

Group Activities

Activity 1

Purpose: To compare and learn from Daniel's and Nehemiah's prayers of corporate confession.

Preparation: Make enough copies of Handouts 1 and 2 that each participant may have both. You will need space for two (or even numbers of) teams. Each team needs a white board or flipchart and markers and several Bibles.

Assignment: Let half the teams work with Daniel's prayer in Daniel 9 and the other half with Nehemiah's prayer in Nehemiah 1. The handouts contain the complete texts of the prayers, as well as the following questions: What details seem important in this prayer? How can we allow these details to shape our prayer lives: For ourselves? For others? Have you ever confessed on behalf of another or others? What was the result? What do you think would happen if you prayed such a prayer on behalf of your own church congregation?

Time: Allow each group 15 to 20 minutes to discuss and (if they wish) write answers in their handouts. Leave 10 to 15 minutes for the teams to compare the two charts. How similar and how different are the two prayers? Encourage the learners to pay particular attention to the details they feel are important in a personal prayer of confession, which we do on a much more regular basis than confessing for others.

Activity 2

It is suggested that this activity be done after the section on rules for confessions and confessors.

Purpose: To gain experience and practice in confessing in a safe situation.

Preparation: Make enough copies of Handouts 3 and 4 for each participant to have both. Put the following scenarios on 3x5 cards: 1. You regularly steal small items from your workplace and are feeling guilty about it. 2. You overheard a church member gossiping about you some time ago, and have felt hurt and angry ever since. 3. You gossiped about a church member, are sorry now, and don't know whether to talk or whom to talk to. 4. You told a lie that affected someone else's job. 5. You are secretly fantasizing about a co-worker. You are both married. 6. You haven't spoken to a sister or brother for years and want to renew the relationship, but are afraid to try.

Assignment: Divide group into pairs and give them a choice of two options. If they feel safe enough, they may choose to confess a real (not too intense) secret or sin to their partners. Those who do not feel safe enough for this may choose one of the scenario cards and practice acting as confessee and confessor, using the “rules” given in the handouts.

Debrief: Share the feelings, reactions, and emotions elicited by this exercise. Will you do more or less confessing in the future? What, if anything, will you do differently?

Time: Allow five minutes for each person to confess, a total of ten minutes for the pairs. Then allow 15 to 20 minutes for sharing.

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Handout 1

Nehemiah's Prayer

"When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven. I said, 'I beseech You, O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments, let Your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant which I am praying before You now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Your servants, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against You; I and my father's house have sinned.

'We have acted very corruptly against You and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses.

'Remember the word which You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, "If you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples; but if you return to Me and keep My commandments and do them, though those of you who have been scattered were in the most remote part of the heavens, I will gather them from there and will bring them to the place where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell."

'They are Your servants and our people whom You redeemed by Your great power and by Your strong hand.'" (Nehemiah 1:4-10)

Questions:

1. What details seem important in this prayer?
2. How can we allow these details to shape our prayer lives: For ourselves? For others?
3. Have you ever confessed on behalf of another or others? What was the result?
4. What do you think would happen if you prayed such a prayer on behalf of your own church congregation?

Handout 2

Daniel's Prayer

"So I gave my attention to the Lord God to seek Him by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth and ashes. I prayed to the Lord my God and confessed and said, 'Alas, O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant and loving-kindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments, we have sinned, committed iniquity, acted wickedly and rebelled, even turning aside from Your commandments and ordinances. Moreover, we have not listened to Your servants the prophets, who spoke in Your name to our kings, our princes, our fathers and all the people of the land.

'Righteousness belongs to You, O Lord, but to us open shame, as it is this day—to the men of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem and all Israel, those who are nearby and those who are far away in all the countries to which You have driven them, because of their unfaithful deeds which they have committed against You. Open shame belongs to us, O Lord, to our kings, our princes and our fathers, because we have sinned against You.

'To the Lord our God belong compassion and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against Him; nor have we obeyed the voice of the Lord our God, to walk in His teachings which He set before us through His servants the prophets. Indeed all Israel has transgressed Your law and turned aside, not obeying Your voice; so the curse has been poured out on us, along with the oath which is written in the law of Moses the servant of God, for we have sinned against Him.

'Thus He has confirmed His words which He had spoken against us and against our rulers who ruled us, to bring on us great calamity; for under the whole heaven there has not been done anything like what was done to Jerusalem. As it is written in the law of Moses, all this calamity has come on us; yet we have not sought the favor of the Lord our God by turning from our iniquity and giving attention to Your truth.

'Therefore the Lord has kept the calamity in store and brought it on us; for the Lord our God is righteous with respect to all His deeds which He has done, but we have not obeyed His voice. And now, O Lord our God, who have brought Your people out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand and have made a name for Yourself, as it is this day—we have sinned, we have been wicked.

'O Lord, in accordance with all Your righteous acts, let now Your anger and Your wrath turn away from Your city Jerusalem, Your holy mountain; for because of our sins and the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and Your people have become a

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reproach to all those around us. So now, our God, listen to the prayer of Your servant and to his supplications, and for Your sake, O Lord, let Your face shine on Your desolate sanctuary. O my God, incline Your ear and hear! Open Your eyes and see our desolations and the city which is called by Your name; for we are not presenting our supplications before You on account of any merits of our own, but on account of Your great compassion. O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen and take action! For Your own sake, O my God, do not delay, because Your city and Your people are called by Your name.” (Daniel 9:3-19)

Questions

1. What details seem important in this prayer?
2. How can we allow these details to shape our prayer lives: For ourselves? For others?
3. Have you ever confessed on behalf of another or others? What was the result?
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Handout 3

Rules For Confessing

When

1. When you first realize the sin.
2. The second best choice is before you end the day. "Don't let the sun go down on your anger" is still good advice. (Eph. 4:29)
3. If it is too late for either one or two, then do so as soon as you can.
4. Don't do it if the person against whom we have sinned knows nothing about it, and it would hurt him or her worse to know.

How

1. Talk to God first.
2. It may be desirable to talk to someone else first, someone absolutely trustworthy and entirely confidential.
3. Make an appointment. "I have something important to tell you. Can we talk this evening?" Be sure it's a quiet time that won't be interrupted by children, telephones, or business. And be sure it's private, unless you have decided you need a third person.
4. Tell the truth.
5. Listen.
6. Accept the consequences, whatever they may be.
7. Go and sin no more.

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Handout 4

Rules for the Confessor

What if you are the one hearing the confession? There are two possibilities: you are the one who has been wronged, or someone wants to talk to you before talking to the person or persons who has been harmed. In either case, talk to God first. If you are the wronged party, the rules are quite simple. Listen, express your honest feelings lovingly, and forgive. If you cannot forgive yet, offer the forgiveness of God, and go see your own friend or counselor. The goal is forgiveness as pure and free as that you receive from God. “Forgive our sins **as we forgive** those who sin against us.” (Matthew 6:12, 14)

There is one exceedingly important point, however. **Forgiving is not excusing the evil done!** If you have made a slight mistake, bumped into someone in line, let’s say, you exclaim, “Oh, excuse me! I’m sorry!” “That’s okay,” the bumped person can respond. “It was nothing.” And it is nothing. Human error.

It is only when there is no excuse, the thing which was done is sin—glaring angrily at someone, for instance—that forgiveness is necessary. And there is only one source of forgiveness; God. Jesus paid dearly for the forgiveness which comes so freely to us. We can’t even imagine the price. Confession isn’t it. Punishment isn’t it. Restitution isn’t it. There is no “paying the debt,” even if there is actual repayment. If someone steals a Toyota and repays with a Cadillac, he still can’t make up for the original harm, the sense of violation. It can’t be excused. It must be forgiven. That takes God. And when we forgive, we haven’t said it’s OK. It’s not. And no, we won’t forget. We will love anyway, which is much harder.

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