

New Life International Fellowship
Sermon by Rev. Timothy C. Geoffrion, Ph.D.
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“Father, forgive us our sins...”

Introduction

Welcome to New Life International Fellowship. It is a great blessing for us to gather together as a church, to praise God, to fellowship with our brothers and sisters in Christ, to read Scripture, and to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit in our worship. Today, we’re going to talk about an important subject in our spiritual life, but one that may be a bit uncomfortable. Confession.

When you hear the word, “confession,” what do you think of? How does it make you feel? For some, confession refers to acknowledging your faith, and some churches do this every week by reciting the Apostle’s creed, for example. Most often, I think, when we hear the word “confession,” we think about admitting that we’ve done something wrong. To the police, criminals confess their crimes. To teachers, students may have to confess that they didn’t do their homework or maybe even cheated on an exam. To God, we confess our sins. Today, we’re going to focus on confessing our sins to God, and then asking for forgiveness. This is not a comfortable subject for many of us. But it is very important for our relationship to God and spiritual life.

Prayer

Sermon

ACTS model of prayer (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication). As I said earlier, today we’re going to focus on confession, which is one of the four major types of prayer modeled and taught in Scripture. Everyone knows you’re supposed to confess your sins to God and ask God for forgiveness. But from a spiritual point of view, why is confession so important? How can we overcome our resistance to doing it? And, how could we go deeper in our prayer life to include confession in more powerful and life-changing ways on an ongoing basis?

I. Why is confession so important?

First, why is confession so important? Consider these four verses from Scripture.

Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,”
and you forgave the guilt of my sin (Psalm 32:5, NRSV)

I confess my iniquity; I am sorry for my sin. (Psalm 38:18)

Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. (James 5:16)

If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death. (Romans 8:2)

When you look at these verses, what do you see? Why is confession so important?

To these biblical writers, confession is linked to forgiveness, healing, and power in prayer. In confession we can show our remorse and our desire for cleansing and righting our relationship with God. From a spiritual point of view, confession helps us to get back in sync with the Holy Spirit's leading in our lives.

Confession is how we humble ourselves before the Lord and submit ourselves to his will. When we admit our sins, we are agreeing with God that we have done wrong and that we are sorry. We are letting go of our rebellion against God (if that's the case) or simply admitting our human weakness and inability to do all that God wants us to do. The Holy Spirit has reached out to us by convicting us of our sin and calling us to confess and seek God's mercy. When we say yes to God, we are cooperating with his prompting and entering into the flow of his Spirit.

II. Overcoming our resistance to confession (and to repentance)

However, sometimes we don't want to confess. Sometimes, we don't want to face our sins. We may know very well that we've sinned, but we don't want to touch the subject. For me personally, I hate confessing sin. I don't like admitting that I did something wrong. It hurts my pride. It's embarrassing. But even more significantly, sometimes the real reason I don't want to confess is that I don't want to change. I know if I admit that I've thought something, said something, or done something wrong, I must be willing to make things right or do things differently. And frankly, sometimes, I don't want to make things right. Sometimes, I just don't want to change... And I'm sure I'm not alone in this.

So, how can we overcome our resistance to confession and repentance?

There are many things we can do, such as reading Scripture, listening to the voice of others who are trying to speak into our lives, and reflecting on how our attitudes and behavior are hurting others and probably ourselves, too.

A helpful prayer One of the methods that has been most helpful to me is simply prayer, asking God to help me to repent of my sin. I pray:

"Lord, help me to see whatever I need to see. Give me courage to face the truth. Then give me wisdom and strength to act on whatever you reveal."

A personal illustration—Seeing the light

This prayer came out of a very intense experience I had many years ago when I was participating in a *lectio divina* group, where we read the same passage of Scripture three times, then sit in silence for meditation and personal prayer. That day we were reading the story of the Last Supper, where Jesus told his disciples that one of them would betray him. One by one, each one said, "Not I, Lord," including Judas. (Matthew 26)

As I was meditating on the reading, I imagined I was one of the disciples who heard Jesus say, "One of you will betray me." I responded with the others, "Surely, not I, Lord?" Yet, my heart was fear-stricken, wondering. Could I betray Jesus?

Judas said that he wouldn't. Was he lying or was he so out of touch with his heart that he didn't know that he would betray Jesus? I asked myself the same question, and suddenly I realized, what I did not want to admit. I, too, could betray Jesus.

I did not have the power within myself to assure myself or Jesus that I would not betray him by sinning. I asked for help. He opened the door to my mind a crack. His brilliant light poured into the dark places. I started to cry. I could not stand the intensity of the truth. I cried some more, and tried to close the door.

I cried out in my mind, "I can't stand it. It's too much!" Yet, I knew I needed to see the truth. The truth was my only hope of softening a hardened heart.

Afterwards, this is what I prayed: "Lord Jesus, thank you again for the gift of your presence and light in my life yesterday. I am stunned, but so very grateful. I don't want to turn back. Please stay close to me. Thank you for helping me want to stay close to you. I don't know what to do ..., but I know I want you most of all. I want to do God's will most of all. I want to love you faithfully. I never want to betray you. I want to become more of a ... man of God and man after God's own heart. Be merciful to me a sinner, and lead me in the paths of righteousness, for your name's sake. Amen."

A powerful biblical example

In 2 Samuel, we find a well-known story about someone who needed God to open his eyes to his sin. After King David had committed adultery with Bathsheba and had orchestrated the killing of her husband, Uriah, Nathan the prophet confronted him with his sin. We read in 2 Samuel 12...

The LORD sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, "There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.

"Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him."

David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, "As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this must die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity."

Then Nathan said to David, "You are the man!" (2 Samuel 12:1-7a)

If you don't know where or how you're missing the mark of God's will, ask for help. Pray, "Lord, help me to see the truth, face the truth, accept the truth, and live by the truth." Perhaps the Lord will send you a modern day "prophet" to help you to see what you've been in denial about—maybe it will be your spouse, your children, the pastor, or someone else who knows you well. Or he might just reveal the truth through Scripture, a sermon, or in some conversation. But you need to be open and you need to be willing for God to break your heart over the darkness and sin in your life. You need to be willing to ask for help to repent, if you're resisting, or to go further in your repentance, if you're only half-hearted about making needed changes in your life.

Admonition from Hebrews

No matter what, do not harden your heart. In the letter to the Hebrews, we read:

Therefore, since it still remains for some to enter that rest, and since those who formerly had the good news proclaimed to them did not go in because of their disobedience, God again set a certain day, calling it "Today." This he did when a long time later he spoke through David...:

"Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts." (Hebrews 4:6-7)

III. Responding seriously to our sin

Scripture is clear that confession of sin is very important to our relationship with God and spiritual health. We must be on our guard against hardening our hearts, and we must be willing to admit when we've failed in some way. We must be willing to confess our sins and to repent, which means, to turn away from the sin with a serious intention to do so.

David's response to his sin

When David was confronted by Nathan, he humbled himself and confessed. We read:

Then David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." (2 Samuel 12:13a)
This may seem like a very minimal confession, but it is actually quite profound. Why? Because when David was confronted with his sin, he immediately acknowledged it. He didn't try to minimize it, justify it, explain it away. He simply responded, "Yes, it's true. What I did was wrong."

A model generic prayer of confession

Later, at some unknown point in the future, David wrote a more generic confession to God based on this experience. The header to Psalm 51 in the ancient Hebrew text reads: *A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.*

Psalm 51:1-4, 7-12

- 1 Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.
- 2 Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.
- 3 For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.
- 4 Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight;
so you are right in your verdict
and justified when you judge...
- 7 Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.
- 8 Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.
- 9 Hide your face from my sins
and blot out all my iniquity.
- 10 Create in me a pure heart, O God,

- and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
- 11 Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.
- 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

David was far from perfect, but he does provide a model for us of what to do when we know we have sinned: we must humble ourselves, admit that we have failed, confess our sins to God, and repent. His prayer recorded in Psalm 51 is another kind of model for us. By example, he's showing us the value of taking time to write out a generic prayer confession to God that we could use on an ongoing basis. He was thoughtful and creative in writing his prayer. He took confession and repentance seriously, because he cared about his relationship with God. He wanted to set things right and get back in sync with the flow of the Holy Spirit.

Practical Application

How is the Holy Spirit calling you to repent and confess your sin today?

In addition to confessing specific sins that already know about, you can also make a habit of praying a general prayer of confession on a regular basis. The goal is to have something to pray day after day to keep your heart soft before God and to put yourself in a position where the Holy Spirit can bring to your attention something you need to confess and repent of.

Illustration

Here's what I pray every day:

"Loving God, forgive me for the times I take my eyes off you and stop listening to your Spirit. Help me to better acknowledge and respect your anger and grief over my sinfulness. Help me to see my sin and to face the truth about what I'm doing that I shouldn't be doing and about what I'm not doing that I should be doing. Please help me to better see the harm I'm doing and the pain I am causing others. Give me the grace I need to truly repent, so that I may genuinely want to turn away—far away—from [this kind of behavior]."

Turn to me and have mercy on me,
as you always do to those who love your name.

(Psa. 119:132)