

Spiritual Disciplines: Confession

Psalm 32

ABC 6/8/15

From time to time we've been looking at various spiritual disciplines, the things the Bible tells us to do that grow us as Christians. This morning we're looking at the discipline of confession. As Christians we all know we're to confess our sins, but do we? This seems so basic, but it's something we need to be reminded of because it's so easy to ignore & rationalize our sins. I realize that the idea of confession strike some of you as basic, perhaps even boring. But before you tune out, I'd like to point out that most spiritual failure involves a violation of some basic spiritual principle. I've often mistakenly assumed that a person was applying the basics of Christian living. But quite often that isn't the case, even with people who've been Christians for years. We can all profit by studying this portion of God's Word which shows how David got right with God after he had done wrong. As you open to Ps 32, **(S)** imagine with me: You've never been so nervous. You've been held in custody without bail on a murder charge. The trial has taken months, draining & weighing you down with increasing anxiety. Finally, the big moment arrives. The jury files in after days of deliberations. The courtroom falls silent as the judge calls the court to order. He asks, *Mr. Foreman, do you have a verdict?* Your heart is pounding & your mouth is dry as you watch him rise. The rest of your life depends upon his words. *Your honor, the jury finds the defendant... not guilty.* An immense flood of relief sweeps over you & tears of joy trickle down your cheek. Not guilty! It's as if a heavy weight has dropped from your shoulders! You hear the judge declare, *You are free to go.* Freedom from condemnation! Life suddenly takes on new meaning. You're free from confinement, free from the constant pressure of the charges against you, free to begin a new life, because you've been released from those charges. Can you

imagine how that would feel? I hope to some degree we can. Why? Because every believer ought to know what this feels like. David knew how it felt! Whether Ps 32 stemmed from David's sin with Bathsheba or from some other sin, it shows that he knew how it felt to have God as his condemning Judge. But that's not all. He also knew the joy & relief of experiencing God's forgiveness. He instructs us so we can know the blessings of God's forgiveness. These blessings should impel us to confess our sins regularly. Because despite that we as Christians have been given **everything we need for life & godliness** (2 Pt 1:13), that we're **no longer slaves of sin** (Rom 6:6), that Jesus has made us **free indeed** from sin (Jn 8:36), that if we **resist the devil, he will flee** from us (Js 4:6), that we have impenetrable spiritual armor from God (Eph 6:11-17), & therefore never need to sin again, the fact of the matter is **we all stumble in many ways** (Js 3:2). As Rom 7 makes clear, we'll be struggling with sin until we leave this earth. But we should know how to respond to sin in our lives & do so quickly. Someone once said that sin is like mud, & we're to be spiritual cats, who, having fallen into the mud immediately spring up & begin cleansing ourselves, rather than spiritual pigs who wallow in it & spend the rest of the day covered in it. Mature Christians know that sin is not their home & though we may fall into it, we don't live there. **PS 32 PRAY**

This psalm flows out of the great anguish of David's heart as he groaned under the load of his guilt. David was a professional at trying to cover up his sin. He also understood the haunting loneliness & guilt that went with it. He understands what we go through so he writes this psalm for us. It teaches us that ... **(S)**

1. To know the blessings of forgiveness, we need to feel the burden of sin. Rather than feel guilty when we sin, we often rationalize our actions. In our humanity we

don't like to admit we're wrong. So we keep quiet, spin it differently, or try to cover it up.

We're like the 2 college roommates who, after a tough exam, headed to the local pizza joint to celebrate. When they parked the car, the rider pointed out a sign that prohibited parking in that area. Since he usually lent the money to pay off his roommate's large collection of parking fines, he was annoyed. *Don't worry*, the driver assured him. *I won't be getting any more tickets ever again.*

How do you figure that? the other replied sarcastically.

I looked at the problem scientifically, collected the variables, studied the data & came up with the solution that will eliminate any further encounters with the law. He then explained: *I took the windshield wipers off the car.*¹

That's a classic example of how we attempt to deal with our sin! Instead of admitting & confessing our sins, we work at inventing ways to get away with it. Since Adam & Eve, there has been the innate tendency in the human heart to hide our sin. We try to put our fig leaves in place to cover our sin. There are various types of fig leaves that we use in our attempts to hide our sin from God & from one another: **(S)**

A. Deception & lying. David tried this. He brought Bathsheba's husband Uriah home from the battle & so the child would appear to be his. Almost invariably, when there's sin, there's also deceit & lying. **(S)**

B. Being judgmental of others. The person who covers instead of confesses his sin is often judgmental of the same sins in others (2 Sam 12:5-6). When you excuse sin in your own life, you often become very critical & judgmental of others. A 3rd fig leaf is ... **(S)**

C. Attacking the one who confronts us. David didn't do this with the prophet Nathan, probably because Nathan was so clever in the way he got David to condemn himself

¹ *Reader's Digest*, "Campus Comedy," 1982

(2 Sam 12). But if Nathan had been more direct, who knows but that David would have said, *Who are you to condemn me?* (S)

D. Rationalizing our sin. We do this when we make up excuses to absolve us of responsibility for our sin. Ever notice everyone's a victim & no one is responsible for their own actions? A 5th fig leaf is ... (S)

E. Blaming others or God. Adam blamed Eve & the Lord who gave Eve to him. Eve blamed the serpent. & we've all been in the blame game ever since. David could have blamed Bathsheba for bathing in a visible location. But if you're blaming, you're not confessing. Whatever fig leaf we use, covering our sin isn't confessing it.

David doesn't say,

How blessed is he whose childhood issues are forgiven & whose denial & faulty coping techniques are covered. How blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute stepping over the line of acceptable behavior.

No, David knew he'd sinned & he felt deeply the guilt of his wrong actions. His guilt even made him feel physically ill (32:3-4; 38:2-8). Those who appreciate most the gift of God's forgiveness are those who've felt most deeply the guilt of their sins & the holiness of their God. Charles Spurgeon went through 5 years as a child of intense guilt before he was saved. He goes on for a whole chapter in his autobiography describing the agony of those years. Here's a short sample: (S)

When but young in years, I felt with much sorrow the evil of sin. My bones waxed old with my roaring all the day long. Day & night God's hand was heavy upon me. I hungered for deliverance, for my soul fainted within me. I feared lest the very skies should fall upon me, & crush my guilty soul. God's law had laid hold upon me, & was showing me my sins. If I slept at night, I dreamed of the bottomless pit, & when I awoke, I seemed to feel the misery I had dreamed. (S) Up to God's house I went; my song was but a sigh. To my chamber I retired, & there, with tears & groans, I offered up my prayer, without a hope & without a refuge, for God's law was flogging me with its ten-thonged whip, & then rubbing me with brine afterwards, so that I did shake & quiver with pain & anguish, & my soul chose strangling rather than life, for I was exceeding sorrowful.²

² 1:58

Today we'd probably take him to a counselor to find out what's wrong with him! But God was preparing him to preach the wonders of His grace. Until we feel the burden of guilt, we can't truly exclaim with David, **How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered** (1)! The burden of our guilt should drive us to seek the blessings of forgiveness. Maybe you're tormented by guilt this morning. Perhaps no one else knows about your sin, & although you're trying to put on a good front, deep down inside you're troubled. Don't shrug it off or explain it away. Let it drive you to the cross where you'll find God's wonderful mercy! **(S)**

2. The blessings of God's forgiveness are fantastic. Ps 32 begins just as Ps 1 does, with a plural which might be rendered: *Oh the happinesses...* The Living Bible puts it: **(S) What happiness for those whose guilt has been forgiven! What joys when sins are covered over! What relief for those who have confessed their sins & God has cleared their record.** & the NLT says, **(S) Oh, what joy for those whose disobedience is forgiven, whose sin is put out of sight!** There are many blessings, joys, & happinesses for the person who experiences God's forgiveness. Here are 4: **(S)**

A. The blessing of a clean conscience In vss 1-2 David uses 4 Hebrew words for sin & 3 words for forgiveness which helps us understand what it means to have a clean conscience before God. **(S)**

1) **Transgression** means rebellion, refusing to submit to authority. God has given certain limits for behavior for our good & the good of society. When we go against those, we transgress; we refuse to be subject to God's authority. **(S)**

2) **Sin** simply means to miss the mark. While transgression looks at the violation of a known law, sin looks at a coming short of what God commands. When God forgives, he removes our sins, he lifts them up, he takes them away, and he puts them so far

away from us that we could never find them if we searched for them for a thousand years. They are gone forever. **(S)**

3) **Iniquity** comes from a word meaning bent or twisted. It has the nuance of perverting what is right. Any time you've done something crooked you've committed iniquity. **(S)**

4) **Deceit** is a deliberate cover-up, falsehood, or hypocrisy. Trying to present a false front so you look good when you know you're not.

These words condemn us all as guilty before God. But David's words for forgiveness show us what it means to have a clear conscience before God. **(S)**

1) **Forgiven** means to carry off or take away a burden. Our sin is a burden which God bears or takes away. We're all familiar with the term *scapegoat* which takes the blame & everyone else goes free. Israel's high priest would select a goat, lay his hands on its head & confess the sins of the people, symbolically putting their sins on the goat. The animal was then sent into the wilderness as a picture of how God carried their sins away. The sacrificial system pointed ahead to Jesus because He is the perfect & final scapegoat for sins. He bore our sins away once for all, so that when we put our trust in what He did on the cross, our sins are gone. **(S)**

2) **Covered** means out of sight. God puts our sins out of His sight, which means He'll never bring up our sins to judge. If we're in Christ, our sins are covered by His blood! When God forgives, He removes our sins, He lifts them up, He takes them away, & He puts them so far away from us that we could never find them if we searched for them for a 1,000 years. They are gone forever. **(S)**

3) **Not impute** means it's not charged to our account. This is the word used of God's dealings with Abraham: **he believed in the Lord; & He reckoned (credited) it to him as righteousness** (Gen 15:6). As we've seen in Romans, this is the righteousness

which comes from faith & not from works (Rom 4:5-8). It's as if I ran up a million dollar debt at a store & didn't have \$10 to my name. There's no way I can pay the debt. But the store informs me that they'd accidentally charged the debt to someone else's account & he was willing to pay it on my behalf. That's what God has done for us in Christ. We owed an unpayable debt for our sin. But Jesus paid it on the cross. When we trust in what He did, God credits our account paid in full & even adds the righteousness of Christ to our account! As Martin Luther said, **(S)**

Sin has but 2 places where it may be; either it may be with you, so that it lies upon your neck, or upon Christ, the Lamb of God. If now it lies upon your neck, you are lost; if, however, it lies upon Christ, you are free & will be saved. Take now whichever you prefer.³

If your sin is upon Christ, you enjoy the blessing of a clean conscience. **(S)**

B. The blessing of having God as your refuge (6-7). The same man who in vs 4 complained that he was oppressed by God's hand now declares God to be his hiding place. Before he feared God as his Judge, now he takes refuge in Him as his Protector who surrounds him with songs of deliverance. The flood of great waters (6) refers to God's judgment. The man who's experienced God's forgiveness need not fear the flood of God's judgment. What a blessing that, instead of having to run from God, we can run to God & know we're safe! It's like setting a back burn so that when the main fire reaches the back burn, there's no more fuel for the fire. We're safe because we're standing where the fire has already been. Since Jesus has taken the fire of God's wrath & judgment, then we're safe as we take refuge in Him. **(S)**

C. The blessing of God's instruction In vss 8-9 we have the promise of God's instruction as one of the benefits of His forgiveness. These vss are saying that God will teach & guide those sensitive to Him. If we confess our sins & grow in sensitivity to His Word, He'll guide us in His ways. We're not to be stubborn or self-willed, like a

³ Quoted in R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John's Gospel*, p 130

horse or mule, so that God has to put a bit & bridle on us to direct us. We need to be sensitive to His Spirit & Word, having a tender conscience. God will use these to direct the forgiven sinner onto paths of righteousness. Is your conscience growing more tender toward the Lord? We're not pardoned to go our own way, but rather to go God's way. The person who understands forgiveness by God's grace won't continue in sin, but will grow more sensitive to the ways of the One who's freely pardoned him. **(S)**

D. The blessing of God's joy (10-11). David ends the psalm by contrasting the wicked, who have many sorrows, with the righteous, who are surrounded by the Lord's unfailing love. The righteous aren't those who never sin, but those **upright in heart** because they've confessed their sins. The thought of God's mercy to sinners who don't deserve it causes David to break forth with joy. **11**

The Judge of the Universe has pounded His gavel & proclaimed, *Not guilty!* You're free from the weight of your sins & free from condemnation because Jesus has paid the penalty! There's no greater joy than that of knowing your sins are totally forgiven. John Calvin sums it up: **(S)**

David here teaches us that the happiness of men consists only in the forgiveness of sins, for nothing can be more terrible than to have God for our enemy; nor can He be gracious to us in any other way than by pardoning our transgressions.⁴

Those are some of the blessings of experiencing God's forgiveness: we have a clear conscience before God, we have God as our refuge, we have His instruction, & we have great joy in Him. But how do we experience those blessings of His forgiveness? **(S)**

3. They're experienced as we confess our sins. The turning point in this psalm is vs 5, where David confesses his sin & vs 6 where he exhorts his readers to pray to God.

⁴ *Commentary on the Psalms, p 362*

It's also important to note that David confesses his sins directly to the Lord (5), not to a priest; not even to the ones he had wronged at this point. Sin is 1st & foremost against the Lord, & so we must confess it to Him. What does it mean to confess sin?

(S)

A. It means to acknowledge our sin to God. Often we don't like to admit we're wrong. We've bought into the lie that covering up our wrongs is the way to go. We look at confession as a burden when it's actually a grace. The Hebrew word & the Greek word used to translate it in the LXX both have the idea of telling forth or acknowledging openly one's sins. Confession involves uncovering sin before God, making known to God what He already knows. If we uncover our sins before God, He covers them from His judgment. Acknowledging our sin means: (S)

1) We call sin *sin*. We don't explain it away as faulty coping techniques due to a dysfunctional family. We don't excuse it as weakness or human nature. We say, *Lord, I sinned*. The sooner we confess, the sooner we experience God's blessing. (S)

2) We see sin as serious. The closer you get to God, & see sin from His perspective, the more serious you'll see it. My sin put my Savior on the cross. & sin always causes damage to the name of Christ, to others in His body, & to me. Sin always erects barriers between us & God & between those around us. We must take sin seriously. Our sin is **against the Lord**. God sees sin as serious enough to separate us from His presence. That's why He took the drastic solution of sending His Son to die for our sin. We must see how our sin wrongs God above all others. (S)

3) We see confessed sin as forgiven. *You forgave the guilt of my sin* (5b). Only God can forgive sin & only on the basis of the shed blood of Jesus (Heb 9:22). Living under the Old Covenant, David's forgiveness was based on what the sacrificial system pointed forward to. Living under the New Covenant, our forgiveness is based

on the finished work of Jesus on the cross, where He paid the penalty for all our sins. All our sin is forgiven the moment we put our trust in Christ as Savior. God has once & for all reconciled us to Himself through the cross. But when we sin after salvation, in order to experience God's forgiveness & to enjoy fellowship with Him, we must apply the blood of Christ by confessing our sins. It's best to keep short accounts with God. The instant you're aware of sin, whether in thought, word, or deed, turn from it & confess it to Him & you'll enjoy cleansing & communion with our holy & gracious Father. & remember, no sin is too big to be forgiven & no sin is too small to confess. If you've truly confessed your sin & still feel guilty, it isn't the Lord, but the accuser of the brethren who's troubling you (Rev 12:10-11). The blood of the Lamb fully satisfied the demands of God's righteousness. We must rest in God's promise, that He is faithful & just to forgive all our sins as we confess them. & Jesus, even now, is at God's right hand interceding for us that the price has been paid. **(S)**

B. To confess means to accept responsibility for our sin. David didn't say, *We all mess up once in a while*, or *What do you expect, I'm only human?* David admitted his own responsibility & called it what it was--sin. As long as we shrug off sin or see ourselves as a victim of circumstances, we aren't accepting responsibility for our sin. Accepting responsibility means being willing to forsake our sin in His strength. **He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses & forsakes them will find compassion** (Prov 28:13). It's a sham to confess sin if you have no intention or willingness to forsake it. You may not feel like forsaking it & you may need to confess that as well. You haven't truly confessed if you aren't seeking to put the sin away from your life. Accepting responsibility for sin also means confessing to others you've wronged. David doesn't deal with this here, but it's part

of the biblical teaching which can't be ignored. If you've sinned against someone else, confess it to God & go to the person & confess your sin & seek forgiveness.

Ever wondered, *Since I'm a Christian & God has already forgiven me, why do I have to confess?* When we ask that we're looking at confession in the wrong way.

Confession isn't a transactional exchange, it's about the relationship we have with God. As John Ortberg has said, **(S)**

*Confession is not primarily something God has us do because He needs it. God is not clutching tightly to His mercy, as if we have to pry it from His fingers like a child's last cookie. We need to confess in order to heal & be changed.*⁵

What happens if we refuse to confess our sins? **3-4**

Not confessing sins has consequences, doesn't it? Is it hard to admit you've been wrong? Absolutely. Sometimes we stubbornly refuse to do so. We pretend as though if enough time goes by, God will forget about it. We pretend that it wasn't that big of a sin. We excuse, rationalize, & justify our behavior. But there are predictable consequences for refusing to confess your sins. You'll lose your strength & peace & joy. You'll find no relief & be thwarted & frustrated. Here are some of the counterfeit confessions⁶ we sometimes try to get away with: **(S)**

1. The Martyr's confession—*OK, I sinned, so shoot me. God, I don't really believe that what I did was that bad, but if you're going to be so unreasonable & make me confess, well, just go ahead & strike me dead right now!* **(S)**

2. The Politician's confession, part 1—*Errors were made.* Done like this it negates the need for accepting any responsibility. No one is responsible. But that isn't confession! **(S)**

⁵ *The Life You've Always Wanted*, p 122

⁶ John Underhill, <https://bible.org/print/325>

3. The Politician's confession, part 2—*I'm sorry you took offense.* This pseudo-confession throws the blame on the offended party. *God, I can't believe You were offended by that. But if it bothered You, I'm sorry for the offense.* If you say that you're not sorry you sinned, because you don't think you did! **(S)**

4. The Burglar's confession—*I'm sorry I got caught.* Sometimes what sounds like a confession of wrongdoing is really just regret for getting caught. **(S)**

5. The POW confession—*I'll mouth the words, but I won't mean them.* This is like a prisoner of war's confession that's coerced. They might have been speaking the words, but their hearts weren't in it. **(S)**

6. The Negotiator's confession—*I'll say I was wrong if you'll cut me a deal.* *God, I'll give up my speeding & admit it was wrong if you'll let me skip church twice a month. Deal?* That's not confession. That's plea bargaining with the Almighty!

Confessing sins is humbly admitting & agreeing with God you were wrong. When done from the heart it's like a course correction along life's path. We recognize & acknowledge that we've drifted off course. We experience remorse & repentance & ask for forgiveness. We want to get back on track & ask for His help. Therefore, after we've sinned, confessed, & been forgiven, we should study what happened, how we reacted, what temptations deceived us, & what actions led to the sin. Then we must be vigilant knowing that a pattern of sin can be established quickly. If we confess an outburst of anger or pride, we need to pray against it & be careful of that area of weakness. Without this kind of vigilance toward sin, we've learned nothing from the experience & may soon be repeating it.

You may have come here this morning with unnecessary guilt, but you don't have to leave the same way. The choice is yours. Are you willing to confess your sins? Here are 7 A's of confession. **(S)**

1. **Address everyone involved.** That may just be God or it may involve others as well. You need to confess your wrong to everyone affected by your sin. **(S)**
2. **Avoid ifs, buts, & maybes.** As Tony Evans says, *If it contains an excuse, it isn't a confession.* **(S)**
3. **Admit specifically what you did wrong.** It's easy to hide behind vague generalities. Don't do it. Identify your sinful attitudes & sinful actions. **(S)**
4. **Acknowledge the hurt you've caused.** Let God know you realize your sinful behavior has caused Him & others pain. **(S)**
5. **Accept the consequences.** Tell God you're willing to bear the consequences of your sin. God may graciously let you off the hook. That's His call, not yours. **(S)**
6. **Alter your behavior.** Make a commitment that with God's help, you'll avoid walking down this path again. **(S)**
7. **Accept God's forgiveness.** If after confessing your sin, you find your conscience still plagued with guilt, that's not from God. He says that if you confess, He will forgive. Receive it, believe it, accept it!

A legend says that during a serious illness, the devil came into Martin Luther's room, looked at him with a triumphant smile, & unrolled a big scroll, which unwound by itself. Luther read from the scroll the long, fearful record of his own sins, one by one. At first, he reeled in despair.

But then, suddenly, Luther cried out, **(S)** *One thing you have forgotten. The rest is all true, but one thing you left out: 'The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.'* As Luther said this, Satan and his long scroll disappeared.⁷

You may feel condemned this morning because of your sins. Don't stay there. Confess & be forgiven &, like David, you can be strengthened in the Lord your God & His forgiveness of your sins! **(X)**

⁷ Paul Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7,700 Illustrations*, #480