

## CHAPTER SIX

# CONFESSION: DOORWAY TO LIFE

JOHN LOFTNESS

“This is embarrassing, but I believe I should tell you...”

“I thought you should know...”

“I’m ashamed to admit it but...”

Confession of sin is a painful discipline. It’s also a doorway to life. If we fail to use this door, we’ll find ourselves stumbling around in the deceitfulness of our own souls.

Scripture tells us to confess our sins to God and other people. Though this chapter will focus almost exclusively on person-to-person confession, we must begin by noting that transparency before God is essential. Without confessing our sins to God, we have no access to his saving and sanctifying grace. And while an initial confession of sin must accompany our conversion, it is also to be the ongoing practice of every child of God. “If we confess our sins,” the apostle John noted, “he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives” (1Jn 1:9-10).

In general, practicing the spiritual disciplines covered in this book is more difficult in private than in public. Fasting, praying, or studying the Bible as part of a group is far easier than doing those things alone. Confession is a different matter. I have always found it easier to confess my sins to God than to another person. Why? Perhaps because I know God is omniscient and that his love for me is perfect. Consequently, he already knows what I’ve done before I admit it to him, and I know he’ll respond in love, even in his correction. (People, on the other hand, are not as dependable.) I also know God will correct me whether I confess or not, so the sooner I get it out the better.

If I were fully aware of God’s holiness, my attitude

### **For Further Study:**

Read Proverbs 1:7 and Hebrews 10:19-22.

What is the balance between fearing God and being confident of his grace?

toward confession might be different. I am the first to admit I have an inadequate fear of the Lord. I long to

grow to the place where the sting of shame affects me more when I confess my sins to God than when I confess those same sins to my friends. But I'm not there yet, and in the meantime I've found that confessing to my brothers and sisters increases my fear of God and helps me grow in obedience.

Before we move on to the practice of this discipline, note that there is one occasion when confession to others is mandatory: when we've offended them. "If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift" (Mt 5:23-24). When we've lied or gossiped or expressed anger to someone, we have an obligation to God and

to that person to go quickly, admit our wrong, and make appropriate restitution.

**1** What would make you most nervous about confessing a sin to a Christian friend?

- Fear that confessing my sin would give it additional power over me
- Fear that my friend would not understand
- Fear that I would be asked to leave the church
- Fear that I would be embarrassed
- Fear that my friend would publish the details of my confession in the church newsletter
- Other \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Six Arguments for Accountability

Confession may be initially painful, but it's also a gift to us. Not only does it glorify God, but it helps us in numerous ways. The following are things that should motivate us to confess our sins to others.

**We overcome relational barriers.** Sin ruins relationships. When we sin against someone, feelings of resentment or guilt often create a sense of alienation that can only be removed through confession. But confession isn't limited to those we've offended or hurt. By acknowledging our failings to certain people who are

close friends in our journey through life, we gain the benefits of accountability *and* a deeper friendship.

I won't say it's easy. It's not unusual for me to fear anger, rejection, or disrespect when I confess certain sins

“Confession alone makes *deep* fellowship possible, and the lack of it explains much of the superficial quality so commonly found in our church associations.<sup>1</sup>”

— Dallas Willard

to my friends. Yet invariably I hear things like, “I respect you for telling me”...“Now *I’m* convicted of the same thing”...“How can I help you to avoid that in the future?” Transparency builds trust and a depth of understanding. Close relationships are impossible without it.

**We overcome fear of rejection.** “I always thought that if people knew about my struggles, they’d kick me out of the church.” As a pastor, I’ve heard this refrain more times than I’d like to remember. Often I’ve responded by saying, “Shame for your sin and the humility of your confession demonstrate that you desire to grow. That’s all God requires and that’s all we require. This entire church is made up of people who struggle with sin in one form or another. The only people whom God allows us (actually commands us) to reject are those who, after repeated entreaty, *refuse* to admit to or turn from clearly defined sin.”

Shame makes us want to reject ourselves, feel as if God has rejected us, and fear the rejection of other godly people. Confession to God frees us from shame, and confession to other believers confirms to us that his forgiveness and acceptance are real. Jesus founded his Church as the place where such transparency and resulting growth can effectively take place. We need encouragement, encouragement, encouragement to overcome sin, and that encouragement comes through confession.

**We overcome condemnation.** Condemnation results

from thoughts or feelings of God’s rejection. Whether they are aware of it or not, those apart from Christ live in a perpetual state of condemnation. But an instantaneous change occurs at the point of salvation. According to Paul, condemnation and union with Christ are mutually exclusive (Ro 8:1). It’s impossible for one who truly believes to experience God’s condemnation.

Yet at times, for different reasons, we still feel condemned. Some of us, in our pride or ignorance, develop an unbiblical notion that our behavior determines our status before our loving God. Others are susceptible to the accusations of our ancient enemy, Satan, who roams the earth looking for people to condemn. Still others have an overly sensitive conscience. While not feeling God’s *rejection*, they constantly expect his displeasure over any and every perceived misstep. Their

**Meditate on 1 John 4:17-18.** What frees us from the fear of God’s punishment?

**2** As you’re reading the newspaper one day, you learn about an upcoming television exposé called “The Secret Sins of the Saints”...featuring your private life! What one scene would you most want to edit?

(Rather than writing your answer, simply confess it to God, then meditate on his complete acceptance and forgiveness.)

**For Further Study:** The more we understand God's infinite mercy, the less Satan's accusations affect us. Read the extraordinary promise in Micah 7:18-19. Also read Jeremiah 31, realizing that the first 30 chapters speak almost exclusively of Israel's sin and coming judgment.

problem often stems from a misunderstanding of the nature of sin (which is too broad a topic for this chapter). They can get help by confessing their sins to someone with a healthy conscience and a strong grasp of what the Scriptures say about sin.

One of the ironies of Martin Luther's life can be seen in his relationship with a young follower and brilliant theologian, Philip Melancthon. Before coming to an understanding of justification by faith, Luther would spend up to six hours at a time confessing—in excruciating detail—every thought and feeling that he considered sin. His confessor, Johanan von Staupitz, saw such confession as the inner workings of a potentially insane man and suggested that Luther go out and “commit a real sin” so he could then have something genuine to confess.

Years later, with Luther now the leader of the reform movement in Germany, Melancthon would come to him with his own lengthy list of supposed sins. Luther appar-

ently had less patience with Melancthon than his mentor von Staupitz had with him, but he gave facetious counsel similar to that of von Staupitz: “Sin for all you are worth,” he told the conscience-pained scholar. “God can forgive only a lusty sinner.”<sup>2</sup> Luther was not encouraging a breach of the

Ten Commandments, but chiding the young reformer to reform his own conscience. Some of us need to hear the same.

As a pastor I hear many confessions of sin. Often the person's burden remains even after genuinely repenting. One of the most fulfilling things I do is to affirm the reality of God's absolute forgiveness. People seem to get great assurance from just hearing, “You've confessed your sin to God. You've asked him to forgive you. He does forgive you. Now stop

walking in condemnation and accept what Jesus did for you on the cross.”

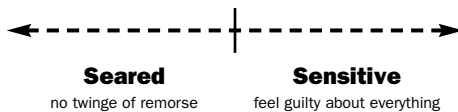
Through confession we open the door so that others can jolt us out of condemnation with a clear, biblical perspective.

**We overcome pride.** Not everybody struggles with a hypersensitive conscience. In fact, some of us have a

“ The discipline of confession brings an end to pretense. God is calling into being a Church that can openly confess its frail humanity and know the forgiving and empowering graces of Christ. Honesty leads to confession, and confession leads to change.<sup>3</sup>

— Richard Foster

**3** How sensitive is your conscience? Make an “X” at the appropriate point on the scale below.



**Meditate on Proverbs**

**28:13.** Have you ever tried to hide your sin, either from God or your friends? What did it feel like?

**For Further Study:**

To appreciate the way the early Christians relied on each other's prayers, see Romans 15:30-32; 2 Corinthians 1:10-11; Colossians 4:12.

hard time recognizing that we really have sinned. The Spirit's conviction shouts at us from loudspeakers and we think he's paging someone else.

Blame-shifting is one of the most subtle forms of pride. It can derail us from moving forward in our relationship with God and leave us in a train wreck if we let it invade other areas of our lives. Husbands excuse their indulgence in lust by blaming their unloving wives. Wives blame their bitterness on their preoccupied, insensitive husbands. In confessing our sins and struggles, we can get help from someone with a clear view of sin who's willing to shatter our pride and boldly call sin for what it is.

Long ago my friend Gary and I agreed to be transparent with each other. When I know that my sin is more than a small, temporary stumble or that I'm experiencing repeated temptation in the same area, we talk. I feel embarrassed when I admit my sins and weaknesses, but in humbling myself there comes an openness to experiencing God's grace for the battle.

**We overcome sickness.** The book of James makes this intriguing appeal: "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed" (Jas 5:16). Although most commentators are quick to qualify this verse, narrowing it to a wholeness of the soul, the relationship between confession and physical healing is hard to dismiss. Confession may not always lead to healing, and healing may not always be denied apart from confession. When we sin, though, our conscience is stained. In this sense, I think it's fair to say that sin makes our souls sick. As we confess our sins to one another, we can pray that our bad conscience and any weakness or defect it has brought into our minds, hearts, or bodies will be healed and made whole. Flushing out the soul through confession is an excellent first step toward physical healing.

**We overcome the enemy through effective prayer.**

If we refuse to confess our sins to others, their ability to pray for us is quite limited. They may not even be aware of the spiritual battle raging inside us. As James suggests, confession doesn't merely result in a little encouragement and a slap on the back. It empowers the prayers of the saints on our behalf. Like a trumpet blown in battle, confession rallies others to our side in a united assault against the enemy. But if we're too proud to cry out for help, we'll find ourselves fighting alone.

**Meditate on  
Colossians 2:8.**

Unless they reinforce and are supported by biblical truth, religious traditions have no value. Is there any area where such a tradition is holding you “captive”?

## Who Should Know?

As Philip Melancthon learned from Martin Luther, not all sins are worth sharing with others. Most of our daily, non-habitual sins can be adequately handled in our confession to God. Don't feel you have to call your pastor each time you lose your temper or envy someone's new car.

In fact, the Bible doesn't give us any rules regarding confession. That didn't stop the early Church from developing rules of her own, but we're not bound to these man-made traditions. No one has any biblical authority to impose on you a certain pattern of confession.

An absence of specific guidelines leaves some people feeling perplexed: “Do I need to confess this or not? What if I don't? What if I do?” John Calvin concluded that the spiritual discipline of confession should be a voluntary practice: “Confession of this nature ought to be free, so as not to be exacted of all, but only recommended to those who feel they have need of it. And even those who use it

““ The confession of evil works is the first beginning of good works.<sup>4</sup> ””

— Augustine of Hippo

according to their necessity must neither be compelled by any precept nor artfully induced to enumerate all their sins, only insofar that they should deem it for their interest that they may

obtain the full benefit of consolation.” Here's a modern-day paraphrase: If in your desire to please God you think confessing to someone else would be helpful, go ahead.

Confession is always called for when our sins negatively affect others. Our biblical responsibility, as we read earlier, is to go to those we've offended and ask forgiveness. Even if they don't respond, we must obey God. Confession is also a powerful tool for overcoming repeated sins. If your fear of God fails to keep you away from habitual sin, add the fear of your friends! The inevitability of an embarrassing confession may be just the incentive you need to walk purely before God and man.

Finally, confession is essential in cases of serious sin. Because of the ramifications of something like child abuse, fornication, or stealing, you would be foolish to confess only to God. In this last case someone with pastoral gifts and authority would be best suited to help you walk through the consequences of your actions.

If confessing our sins to a brother or sister is normal for us, we'll rarely or never have to go to a pastor. The circle of confession needn't exceed the circle of the sin's

**Meditate on Psalm  
32.** Does this make you eager to practice the spiritual discipline of confession?

**4** In which of the following areas would you benefit most from being accountable to a trusted friend?

- Work habits
- Spiritual disciplines
- Finances
- Sexual purity
- Self-control (diet, anger, exercise, TV)
- Taming the tongue
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

impact except for the purposes of accountability and care. However, we are obligated to confess to anyone who has been affected by our sin.

Confession will make you very vulnerable, so it pays to be selective. Find someone who listens carefully and withholds counsel until he fully understands the situation. Find someone compassionate who will keep your confession in confidence. Find someone who will not abuse your trust by making unbiblical demands. Also, though you'll want to confess to someone with a big heart, make sure that individual has a healthy

view of sin. Avoid anyone who will react in horror to your confession or, at the other end of the spectrum, will smother you in mercy when you need rebuke. We'll get the most benefit when we confess to someone who accepts us without being shocked by our sin, yet helps us confront the serious-

ness of what we've done to God and others.

“ A man who confesses his sins in the presence of a brother knows that he is no longer alone with himself; he experiences the presence of God in the reality of the other person. As long as I am by myself in the confession of my sins everything remains in the dark, but in the presence of a brother the sin has to be brought into the light.<sup>5</sup>

— Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Wisdom dictates that we take two final precautions with confession. If your sin is of a sexual nature, don't confess to a member of the opposite sex. That's inappropriate and unwise. It has the potential of getting you in deeper trouble and of tempting the other person. And beware of confessing something that releases you but hurts some-

one else in the process. Telling a friend you've struggled to accept her personality is likely to only be unhelpful. Telling your spouse you find someone else more attractive will only cause hurt. When these kinds of situations arise, confide in someone who won't be rocked by your confession.

## The Signs of True Confession

Whether you're confessing to someone or hearing a confession, it's important to know the genuine from the counterfeit. Authentic confession will be characterized by the following:

**It is specific.** The offender need not give every gory, morbid detail, but enough to clarify the nature of the sin. It's not going to accomplish God's purpose merely to say, "Pray for me—I'm struggling with anger."

**It includes motive.** Sinful actions often represent just the smoke spewing out of the volcano; what's more important is what's going on with the magma beneath the mountain. Perhaps you lied about your level of education the first time you introduced yourself to a friend. What motivated you to do that? Pride? A fear of rejection? A sinful love of approval? Confession should go to the heart of the issue. If you desire to change, the "why" must factor as prominently in your confession as the "what."

**It is sorrowful.** There's a huge difference between admitting you were wrong and feeling remorse about your wrong. I have confronted people who blithely said, "Oh, yeah, I'm sorry." That's not the stuff of which effective confessions are made. Rather, while making sure we don't slip into condemnation, we should grieve over the pain our sin has caused others, especially God.

In yielding to his lust for Bathsheba, David committed both murder and adultery. He killed Uriah and widowed Bathsheba. His actions led to the death of his illegitimate son. Surprisingly, though, his confession in Psalm 51 focuses exclusively on God: "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight." While David's example doesn't absolve us from responsibility to get things right with others, his perspective fosters a healthy fear of God and a deeper sorrow over sin.

**For Further Study:**

Read 2 Corinthians 7:5-11. What's the difference between godly sorrow and worldly sorrow?

**5** Read David's confession in Psalm 51:4 again. Do you think he was denying the harm he had done to others, or did he just have a different view of sin's consequences? Briefly explain your answer.

**It is accompanied by repentance.**

Confession is not genuine apart from a determination to live one's life differently. The person confessing sin should be able to describe specific, measurable changes that have been or will be implemented.

**It is made in light of the Cross.**

The wording could be completely different, but here's the idea: "God, I confess this sin before you. I ask, Father, that you would count this under Jesus' payment on the cross, and I realize

this sin participated in nailing him to the cross."

**It is followed by intercessory prayer.** As we've seen in James, prayer is the perfect follow-up to confession. It moves us out of the negative (confessing our past failure) and into the positive (requesting God's success in the future).



### THE SEVEN A's OF CONFESSION

In his book *The Peacemaker*, Ken Sande teaches how to pursue reconciliation with those with whom we have conflict. His “Seven A’s of Confession” address confessing sin to a person you’ve sinned against, but the principles are helpful for any confession, including our sins against God:

1. Address everyone involved.
2. Avoid “If...” “But...” “Maybe...”
3. Admit specifically.
4. Apologize—express sorrow or regret.
5. Accept the consequences.
6. Alter your behavior.
7. Ask for forgiveness.<sup>6</sup>

**It results in an experience of forgiveness.** As Calvin said, the goal of confession is consolation, not condemnation. The spiritual discipline of confession releases us into the joy of forgiveness. It cleans our conscience. It makes us whole and gives us fresh power to live like Jesus.

“No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful,” wrote the author of Hebrews. “Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it” (Heb 12:11). Yes, confession is a

painful discipline, but it is a discipline that leads to life. ■

### GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Do you find it hard to accept God’s forgiveness? Why?
2. Have you had (or heard of) any bad experiences with accountability?
3. What’s the value of confessing something to others that we have already confessed to God?
4. Read 1 John 1:5-10. How does confession to God and others help us “walk in the light”?
5. What are the most effective ways you have found to battle condemnation?
6. Is spoken confession any better than silent confession?
7. Would anything prevent you from singling out a stubborn sin and confessing it to a trusted friend?

**RECOMMENDED** *The Peacemaker* by Ken Sande (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker  
**READING** Book House, 1991)

#### NOTES

1. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins Publishers, 1988), p.188.
2. Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1950), p.225.
3. Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1988), p.157.
4. Quoted in *Celebration of Discipline* by Richard Foster, p.143.
5. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1954), p.116.
6. Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker* (Grand Rapids, MI; Baker Book House, 1991), pp.94-102.