

## Building a Christian Community

### Confess to One Another

#### James 5:16

### Introduction

Over the past few weeks, we have been looking at what it takes to build a solid Christian community. We've learned how to serve one another and how to encourage one another, and last week we studied what it means to admonish one another.

In this series, we are exploring what the New Testament calls "one-another ministry," why it's essential and what it looks like. We are using John 13:34 as our base text, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35 NKJV)

Jesus says the most compelling evidence that He is the Truth, is a community of people who know how to succeed in love relationships. As we have seen, the apostles took this to heart. In their letters, they detailed what it means to "love one another as I have loved you." They did this through some specific "one another" imperatives. This week, we will explore "confess to one another."

Let me begin by asking, "What is biblical confession?" It's a good question to start with! The word dredges up a lot of different images to people, but its meaning is pretty straightforward. The Greek word for "confession" is a compound verb that means "to say the same thing" or "to agree with someone about something."

On the surface, it doesn't seem like it should be that hard, right? All you have to do is find someone who thinks like you do and get together with them! But the problem begins when disagreements and wrongs surface. That's when you need to come to a meeting of the minds. But that's an altogether different form of confession than James is talking about in Chapter 5.

Confession in the New Testament encompasses a vast range:

- Agreeing with God that he is great (something we call "praise"),
- Agreeing before others that Jesus is Lord (Matt. 10:32),
- Agreeing with testimony in a court case (Acts 24:14),
- Agreeing with God and/or others about our sins (1 Jn. 1:9).

It is this last sense that we want to explore today. 1 John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9)

To confess our sins mean that we agree with and "say the same thing" God says about sin instead of calling sin something else like indiscretion; or, out of character, or slip out of gear. It isn't something we just admit to God; we are talking about verbalizing this to other Christians as well.

## I. Reasons for Confession

But why would we do this? Well, biblical confession in this sense acknowledges wrong behaviors or attitudes to another Christian who can help us be reconciled and find healing and wholeness in our relationships with others. It presumes that sin is real and is destructive to us as individuals and to our relationship with others.

There are several common misconceptions about confession we need to address. The first misconception is that confession to others is necessary to gain or keep God's acceptance. This misconception is rooted in Roman Catholic theology. However, it's a teaching that directly contradicts the message of the New Testament.

The good news is that God grants you complete and permanent forgiveness when you confess your sin and guilt before him and accept Christ's total payment for it. The Apostle Peter wrote, "But YOU are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."

(1 Peter 2:9)

Paul writes in Romans 5:1, "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God."

(Romans 5:1-2 NKJV)

This is the basis for all biblical confession. When we receive Christ and know that God accepts us apart from our works, it becomes easier to be honest with God and with other people. To experience the benefits of confession, you first must experience the blessing of God's complete forgiveness.

The second most common misconception is that "since God alone ultimately forgives sin, there is no need for confession to others." Unfortunately, this is often the Protestant overreaction to the Roman Catholic doctrine of confession. Of course, confession should always begin with God because all sin is first and foremost cosmic treason and an act of rebellion against God. David writes in Psalm 51:4, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment."

(Psalms 51:4)

But the Bible also teaches that there are times when we need to confess our sins to other people. James writes in Chapter 5 verse 16, "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working." (James 5:16)

The Discovery Bible has an excellent Word Study on this verse. The Word Study begins with the desired result of confessing our sins to one another, namely healing, "particularly by *supernatural* means to bring *attention to the Lord Himself as the Great Physician*."

Then it cross-references Isaiah 53:4-5 with says, "Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he *was* wounded for our transgressions, *he was* bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace *was* upon him; and with his stripes we are healed." (Isaiah 53:4-5)

To use God's forgiveness as an excuse for not being honest with others conveys a serious misunderstanding of God's grace. These scripture passages also correct another misconception that *"Only professional Christians should handle confessions."* Some people think that pastors or priests are the only ones qualified to hear the confession of your sins. Thank God for Christian counselors and therapists who have helped many people to deal with life situations and even sins they've committed. The truth is, you may need some skilled advice and counsel from a professional Christian worker who can help you sort through those tough issues. But all of us need to experience the liberating comfort and power of confessing our sinful behavior to God and to other trusted Christian friends.

Jas. 5:16 does say confess your faults "to one another." Healing and wholeness for you and your relationship with others is the goal of every Priest, Pastor, Christian Therapist, or close friend and confidant. In fact, close Christian friends ought to be involved in reciprocal confession whenever it is needed. It is this behavior and attitude that promotes honesty and integrity among us. If you do not practice confession and honesty, the reciprocal effect will lead to a defeated Christian life.

It is also one of the most practical ways to gauge whether your involvement in the Christian community is on a biblical level. So the question is, "Are you involved enough with other Christians that you can share your sins and defeats with them and ask them for help and prayers without feeling they will sit in judgment of you?" Are you trustworthy and loyal enough that others feel comfortable doing the same with you? If you don't have someone like that in your life, you should pray about it and then find someone who can inspire your spiritual growth.

## **II. Benefits of Confession**

### **There are benefits of being open and transparent and confessing your faults to others!**

Some people think that what we do is for God's benefit and that He derives some weird pleasure or meets some strange need from hearing our confession. God already knows all about your sins, and when you receive Christ, he completely forgives them. When he calls on us to confess our sins to one another, it is altogether for our benefit. When you can acknowledge your sins to another Christian, it can be a wonderful source of spiritual help.

Confession opens the door for us to experience God's forgiveness. It relieves you of the terrible burden of having to be perfect and the fear that others might find out you're not. God wants you to experience what the author of Hebrews calls a "cleansed conscience."

We all need the personal assurance of God's forgiveness of our sins so that we can move forward without the pangs of unresolved guilt. When you can dialogue and discuss your personal failures and sins with another trusted person, there's a healing and cleansing that washes over your entire being.

The truth is it's possible to be forgiven without experiencing this deep and profound healing and cleansing, but it will definitely limit your forward progress. Prov. 28:13 teaches this principle, " He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh *them* shall have mercy." ([Proverbs 28:13](#))

You may be here today, and you are trapped in a boatload of guilt and regret for some decisions and choices you've made, and you need to be liberated from those sins and mistakes. And that is precisely what Christ wants to do for you today. God wants to cut you loose from the trap of sin you've fallen into and set your heart free to continue your faith journey in Christ!

Now, closely associated with this benefit is a second one, "Confession unleashes God's empowering for you to change." When you confess your sins and embrace God's forgiveness, your life is about to get a whole lot better!

Sin thrives in darkness. And when we keep sin hidden, its power over us grows, even though we may be struggling to free ourselves from it. But when we bring it out into the light, it breaks its power. It's why in verse 16, James connects confession and prayer with healing. John teaches the same principle in 1 Jn. 1:7, "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us." ([1 John 1:7-10](#))

Walking in the light means being open and honest about our lives. Let me give you an example of how it works. Internet porn is epidemic in our society. I have talked to dozens of people who have struggled with it. They know they're forgiven and try to break free, but they keep getting drawn back into this destructive habit. And for many, the first step toward real freedom in this area has been to bring it out into the light with another true Christian friend. That step, coupled with ongoing accountability, prayer, encouragement, and practical steps of resisting and replacing, unleashes God's strength and power for true moral change! This kind of openness and honesty works for all types of sinful habits; over-eating, lying, cheating; gossiping, manipulating situations, rudeness, anger, and on and on.

The parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15 is a beautiful story of God's willingness to forgive repentant sinners. But it is also a picture of the power of confession to restore broken human relationships. Suppose you have violated a relationship through betrayal, bitterness, neglect, or whatever. In that case, God may call upon you to go back to them once you accept God's forgiveness and ask their

forgiveness, so you can move forward even if they choose not to. It is scary--but it's worth it!

You've probably heard of the 12 Step program or AA – Alcoholics Anonymous. The 12 steps, however, were borrowed from the Oxford Group, a spiritual Christian movement that began in England in the early 1920s. Bill Wilson, the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, wrote, "I should acknowledge our great debt to the Oxford Group of people. It was fortunate that they laid particular emphasis on spiritual principles that we needed."

A lot of people think the 12 step program is just for addicts. But in reality, they are based upon biblical principles that every Christian ought to practice every day. The program relies heavily upon this biblical principle of confession. I don't know if you've ever read the 12 steps, but let me share them with you as they came from the Oxford Group:

- Step 1 – We admitted we were powerless over our addiction – that our lives had become unmanageable.
- Step 2 – Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
- Step 3 – Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God.
- Step 4 – Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
- Step 5 - Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
- Step 6 – Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
- Step 7 – Humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings.
- Step 8 – Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.
- Step 9 – Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
- Step 10 – Continued to take personal inventory, and when we wrong, promptly admit it.
- Step 11 – Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood God, praying only for knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry that out.
- Step 12 – Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to other addicts, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

As you read each of these steps, you realize they are based upon powerful life-changing principles. You also realize that healing and wholeness in your relationships involve not only forgiveness but a move towards reconciliation. Of course, it concerns significant past issues, but it also involves more minor offenses that inevitably arise in our close relationships.

It's so much better to humble yourself, admit it if you're wrong, apologize, and be forgiven—so your closeness can be restored. Which brings us to a final question, "When should I confess to someone, and when should I keep it to myself?" Let me conclude with some rules for confession.

### III. Rules for Confession

Unfortunately, there is no magic formula answer to this question. With personal relationships, there are many variables. If you are honest with God and willing to do what he wants, He will show you. Sometimes, He will say, "The issue is settled, so move on." Sometimes, however, He says, "You need to open up and share this to experience the healing you need." As you ask God for wisdom, consider this:

- If you still need peace about a situation, get it out in the light with another Christian who can pray with you and agree with you for God's healing and forgiveness?
- If you can't get free from a besetting sin, there may be a connection between the help you need and disclosing it to a mature Christian friend.
- If there is a sense of alienation in your relationship, you should seriously consider humility, transparency, and confession.
- If you need advice on whether, when, or how to do this, ask another mature Christian friend about it?

One word of caution; some people over-confess, turning confession into neurosis. However, that's not really the problem with most of us. Most of us are much more likely to confess too little. We're usually more concerned with saving our own pride, not risking rejection, or trying to avoid the consequences. If we're going to have a "default," shouldn't our default be that we will confess to someone rather than that we won't?

### Conclusion

We've covered a lot of ground here, but just remember, openness is a crucial ingredient for a healthy community. Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:25, "Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour: for we are members one of another." ([Ephesians 4:25](#))

This all adds up to no more lies, no more pretense, and tell the truth. Because in Christ's body, we're all connected to each other, and when you lie to others, you end up lying to yourself." Don't try to fake it! Be honest with yourself and so we can be open with one another. It ought to be encouraging to know you're not the only one who struggles! It makes it easier, to be honest about your defeats and opens doors for help and healing! The assurance of God's forgiveness and healing power is so often worked out in our relationships with one another! Seeing how this works is so refreshing and attractive to people who don't yet know Christ! Recently, a person told me the thing he appreciated most about the Chapel is that "people here are real." I hope we never lose this!