

Scripture: 1 John 1:5-2:5 NIV (Pro 28:13; Mat 18:15-17; Ps 32:5; Ac 19:18; Ez 10:9-11; Neh 9:1-3))

Big Idea: Close fellowship and communion with God and fellow believers is only possible when we exercise the discipline of confession.

Introduction

Where's Waldo Bank Robber Arrested after Facebook Confession

Ryan Holmsley may just go down as the dumbest bank robber who ever held up a teller.

He got away with a heist at a bank in Tualatin, near Portland, Oregon by telling cashiers he had a bomb.

The police of course had it all on tape and the fact that Ryan looked like the cartoon character Waldo earned him the nickname the "Where's Waldo Bandit" in the local press.

Apparently Holmsley liked that moniker, ..hours later ... he began posting stories about the heist on his Facebook page... To cap it all off, Holmsley then changed his status to "I'm now a bank robber".

On his Facebook page he also offered up a reason for his bank robbing antics. "I'm doing this to pay for my medical expenses. ... live for today!" he posted. Investigators have since learned that Holmsley is a diabetic with inadequate health insurance who needed money to pay for expensive medical supplies... in fact it was while he was being treated at a local hospital that FBI agents caught up with him and arrested him for the heist.¹

The good news for Mr. Holmsley is that where he is going, he will have all of his medical needs looked after! There is an old Scottish proverb that goes "Open confession is good for the soul," but somehow I don't think his confession did his soul any good!

Here we are in week five of our series on the Spiritual Disciplines, and this morning we are going to look at the spiritual discipline of *confession*. Dallas Willard lists the discipline of confession as a "discipline of engagement;" in other words, confession is something we do with other people. Foster likewise indicates that confession is a 'corporate' discipline, one that takes place in and amongst the Body of Christ. But, you object, don't we only need to confess our sin to God through Christ? Well, yes... and no! Willard:

Confession is a discipline that functions within fellowship. In it we let trusted others know our deepest weaknesses and failures. This will nourish our faith in God's provision for our needs through his people, our sense of being loved, and our humility before our brothers and sisters. Thus we let some friends in Christ know who we really are, not holding back anything important, but, ideally, allowing complete transparency. We lay down the burden of hiding and pretending, which normally takes up such a dreadful amount of human energy. We engage and are engaged by others in the most profound depths of the soul.²

The NT clearly indicates that we are called by Jesus into fellowship not only with Him, but also with other believers (1Co 1:9; 1Jn 1:3), so *confession* is necessary not only for our personal spiritual health, but also for the health of the Body! Yes, sin is rebellion against God, but as James also says we must "confess [our] sins to each other and pray for each other" (Jam 5:16). Foster explains:

... if we know that the people of God are first a fellowship of sinners we are freed to hear the unconditional call of God's love and to confess our need openly before our brothers and sisters. We know we are not alone in our sin. The fear and pride which cling to us like barnacles cling to others

1 <http://apexnewsnetwork.com/27454/where%E2%80%99s-waldo-bank-robber-arrested-after-facebook-confession/>

2 Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (HarperSanFrancisco 1988) pp. 187-188.

also. We are sinners together. In acts of mutual confession we release the power that heals. Our humanity is no longer denied but transformed.³

We need to exercise the discipline of confession so that we might enjoy the grace of forgiveness, and experience under Christ and with each other the healing and peace and fellowship that He desires for us, for His Body! **Close fellowship and communion with God and fellow believers is only possible when we exercise the discipline of confession.**

I. Reasons for confession

A. Confession brings help and healing

When there is unconfessed sin in our lives, there will be consequences. The truth is when we attempt to live a lie and cover up sin in our lives, it will affect us; the result may be emotional, mental, certainly spiritual, and even physical. When there is sin in our lives that we attempt to bury and not deal with, we *will* pay the price. David talks of this in Psalm 32:

When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. *Selah* Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD”— and you forgave the guilt of my sin. *Selah* Therefore let everyone who is godly pray to you while you may be found... (Psalm 32:3–6 NIV)

Perhaps the best known passage dealing with the need to confess sin in order to bring healing is found in the book of James:

Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. (James 5:13–16 NIV)

Let me say that not all illness is caused by sin, nor is all illness the sign of God’s disfavour or punishment! We live in a sinful, fallen world and have sin-wracked, imperfect bodies that are obsolete and designed to be replaced by version 2.0 when the Final Resurrection happens (Php 3:20-21). But these verses in James clearly show that there are times that our anguish and physical suffering *may* be caused by sin that must be confessed in order to find relief.

The phrase the NIV translates as “Is any one of you in trouble” in verse 13 communicates the thought of suffering that is not of a physical nature:

According to Thayer it means, “to suffer (endure) evils (hardships, troubles); to be afflicted.” According to Liddell and Scott, “to suffer ill; to be distressed.” And Rotherham translates, “In distress is any among you?” Moreover, the means to be used for the relief of such distress is quite in keeping with the nature of the case; “Let him pray.”⁴

We love to sing about the relief and help that comes through prayer, do we not?

3 Richard Foster. *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. p. 127 (San Francisco, Ca. Harper & Row, 1978)

4 Carl Armerding, “*Is Any Among You Afflicted?*” *A Study of James 5:13-20*. *Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 95*. 1938 (No. 374, Pg. 196). Dallas, TX: Dallas Theological Seminary.

“In seasons of distress and grief,
My soul has often found relief,
And oft escaped the tempter’s snare,
By thy return, sweet hour of prayer!” —William W. Walford

In verse 14, then, James continues by encouraging those who are physically sick to ask the elders (spiritual leaders) in the church (not just the pastor!) to come and pray for healing, and to *rub them down with oil!* This was a time-honoured custom in the Ancient East, and we need to acknowledge that the word used in this verse is not the word used of “anointing” with oil, but in fact another word entirely:

The [word] which James uses means that the sick person’s body is to be rubbed with oil just as the nurse now rubs a patient’s body with alcohol. The ancients used olive oil in this way. There are plenty of illustrations that demonstrate this fact. Isa. 1:6 has the expression “mollified with oil”; the Good Samaritan applied oil and wine to wounds and bruises, wine to cleanse, oil to mollify them.⁵

Today in our society we no longer ‘rub-down’ folks to ease their physical suffering, but what is still meaningful and significant is the prayers of the Church offered up in the Name of the Lord! Lenski writes:

...the prayer comforts and strengthens the mind and the soul by placing the patient into the Lord’s hand with faith and confidence in his gracious will. It is the Lord who raises up the patient to renewed health and strength. The prayer directed to him moves him even as he himself has promised. ... The thought is that the Lord will not withhold his answer to the prayers that are made in true faith, will not withhold recovery because of such sinning in the past. He will forgive and graciously heal.⁶

James continues in verse 16; literally “*Make a practice of confessing your sins one to another, and make a practice of praying one for another*”⁷ He has in mind here confession to other believers, not just the Elders / leaders, and not just the Pastor (or priest)). And James means more than just confessing sins and wrongs that we have perpetrated against those praying for us; he has in mind simply unburdening ourselves that we might receive God’s blessing and God’s healing. As one author puts it:

Confession is certainly good for the soul. Here, however, confession is mentioned in connection with a person that is sick and wants prayer to the Lord for his recovery. Sins that burden the conscience would interfere with such a prayer, would prevent trustful reliance on God’s gracious promises. Conscience would point accusingly to such sins as constituting a barrier between us and the grace of God. All that can be done to have such a barrier removed ought surely to be done.⁸

So, confession allows help and healing to come to us.

B. Confession helps us avoid sin

He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy. (Proverbs 28:13 NIV)

5 Lenski, R. C. H. (1938). *The interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and of the Epistle of James* (p. 661). Columbus, O.: Lutheran book concern.

6 Lenski, R. C. H. *Ibid.* (p. 665).

7 Lenski, R. C. H. *Ibid.* (p. 666).

8 Lenski, R. C. H. *Ibid.* (pp. 666-667).

A significant aid in renouncing our sin (and not secretly hiding it) is to confess our sin. Willard makes the point that the only way we can persist in sinning within a close community of believers is to in fact hide our sin; therefore confession removes the power of that sin to trap us.

It is said confession is good for the soul but bad for the reputation, and a bad reputation makes life more difficult in relation to those close to us, we all know. But closeness and confession force out evil-doing. Nothing is more supportive of right behaviour than open truth.⁹

C. As NT priests we make Christ's forgiveness 'real'

Peter reminds us that we are "a chosen people, a royal priesthood" (1Pe 2:9 NIV) and one of the key ministries of the OT priesthood was to bring the forgiveness of sins through the offering of the prescribed sacrifices. As the NT makes clear, Jesus was the once-for-all perfect sacrifice that has paid for our sin (Heb 9:28; 1Pe 3:18; Rev 5:9), but he has given us His priesthood, that we might make "that sacrifice real in the hearts and lives of other human beings."¹⁰

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

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.¹¹

Why practice the Discipline of Confession? To receive help and healing, to help us avoid sin (and draw its power to grip us), and to make Christ's forgiveness 'real' in the lives of those who need it. **Close fellowship and communion with God and fellow believers is only possible when we exercise the discipline of confession.**

II. Guidelines for giving a confession

A. Do not fear; expect mercy and grace

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us... We love because he first loved us. (1 John 3:16; 4:19 NIV)

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

The Story of the Prodigal Son (Luk 15:11-31) is in reality the Story of the Loving Father; God isn't waiting for us to mess up so he can bash us over the head! He's waiting at the end of the driveway for the moment we come into view, so He can run to us and place his arms around us and forgive us!

B. Ask God to search your hearts

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. (Psalm 139:23-24 NIV)

9 Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (HarperSanFrancisco 1988) p. 188.

10 Richard Foster. *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. p. 128 (San Francisco, Ca. Harper & Row, 1978)

11 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, 1952), p. 116.

You might as well be open and honest; God knows you better than you know yourself! Ask God to search you, and in your confession be *specific* about the sin in your life that needs to be dealt with; call a 'spade' a shovel! Too often we hide behind generalities; if you need to confess gossip, call it gossip; whether it be an *attitude* or an *action*, name it for what it is, as God searches your heart and shows you what you *specifically* need to deal with.

C. Be sorry for your sin (sorrow)

Foster writes:

Sorrow as it relates to confession is not primarily an emotion, though emotion may be involved. It is an abhorrence at having committed the sin, a deep regret at having offended the heart of the Father. Sorrow is an issue of the will before it is an issue of the emotions.¹²

The Apostle Paul had to confront a situation in Corinth involving public sin, and in his second letter to the Corinthians he wrote:

Even if my letter made you sad, I am not sorry I wrote it. At first I was sorry, because it made you sad, but you were sad only for a short time. Now I am happy, not because you were made sad, but because your sorrow made you change your lives. You became sad in the way God wanted you to... The kind of sorrow God wants makes people change their hearts and lives. This leads to salvation, and you cannot be sorry for that. But the kind of sorrow the world has brings death. (2Co 7:8–10 NCV)

D. Determine to sin no more

We must be determined no longer to live for *us*, but for the sake of Christ:

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. (Romans 6:1–4 NIV)

E. Choose your confessor wisely

Every believer is a priest, but not every believer has the spiritual or emotional maturity to hear every confession, and to deal with it graciously as Christ would will. Choose someone who is of godly reputation, who has 'lived life,' and who can keep a confidence. It does *not* always need to be the pastor, but that may be a good place to start.

Conclusion

Foster writes:

... confession and forgiveness are realities that transform us. Without the cross the Discipline of confession would be only psychologically therapeutic. But it is so much more. It involves an objective change in our relationship with God and a subjective change in us. It is a means of healing and transforming the inner spirit.¹³

Close fellowship and communion with God and fellow believers is only possible when we exercise the discipline of confession.

¹² Richard Foster. *Celebration of Discipline*. p. 133

¹³ Richard Foster. *Celebration of Discipline*. p. 126