

## The Discipline of Confession

1. As soon as we say the word “confession” we release a bit of fear into the room. Some might be afraid that we are talking about the Roman Catholic version, where one is required to enter a booth and tell their sins to a priest in the next booth. No, that isn’t our topic this morning.
2. Others will be uncomfortable because, well, confession is uncomfortable. It is painful. It reveals what we worked so hard to cover up and hide. It undoes the careful, long term work we have put in to make ourselves seem other than what we truly are.
3. It goes so deep that we even find ways to get God on our side. In the King James Version, **James 5:16** reads like this. Now look at it in the New International Version. In fact, even if you go to the super accurate American Standard Version, it reads “sins” and not “faults.” Why is this important? Because you can still find books written by our people and by other religious tribes that argue, “See? It says faults, not sins, so you don’t have to be specific.”
4. It seems we will do what we can and must to avoid confession. Much of that is because we live in a shame based world and we fill it with shame based religions. Comedians who are Catholic or Jewish will make jokes about how shame shaped their lives and still shapes their interactions with others. Shame is used by social media, politicians, religions, school friendship groups, and communities to keep others in line (HOAs use it first before going nuclear).
5. When it comes to religion, I think we can trace a lot of it back to the teaching that goes, according to Richard Foster, like this: “People were so bad and so mean and God was so angry with them that he could not forgive them unless somebody big enough took the rap for the whole lot of them.” This is the official teaching of many churches and it leads to a shame based faith that drives home that it is NOT safe to share, to ask for help, or to admit a brokenness in the depths of your heart.
6. But the cross was not about retribution; it was about love and grace and the character of God. Jesus, who is the express image of God,

took the worst that mankind could do to a person and, in the midst of it, forgave those who did it. Don't run past that part. [Luke 23:34]

7. By taking it all and dying on the cross, Jesus took all the sins we had ever committed and tossed them to the side. No penance. No probation. No reluctance. And now, whenever the devil wants to accuse us, Jesus steps up and says "They're with me." [Romans 8:31-39] If Paul had had a mic, he would have dropped it.
8. What has this to do with the discipline of confession? Everything. Now we are free to admit our sins and ask for help, for accountability, and for grace. We believe that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" [Romans 3:23] and that means that we confess our sins to others who are, themselves, admitted sinners. We are all forgiven, all saved by grace, and all working out our salvation.
9. Salvation is an event and a process. We are saved, but we are not content with where we are; we want to bring the cleansing of God's grace into every corner of our lives. That requires a serious and honest self-examination (not self flagellation) and a safe place to confess. We are a fellowship of saints and a fellowship of sinners. We are not isolated in our sins. We have no need to hide.
10. That is why, on Senior Sunday, I spoke to the seniors about the fact that I, personally, still struggle with sin. We cannot let them feel that they are alone. We are a community of faith and part of that faith is the absolute belief that Jesus' love and grace are greater than all our sins – as evidenced by the cross and his resurrection.
11. We are also given the gift of forgiveness – and, of course, we mean that we are forgiven by Jesus but there is MUCH more to this. We are also given the power to forgive each other. [John 20:23; 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 2:9] We are priests, encouraged to lift each other up and to lift up those who are in our path along the way.
12. Charles Hodge, a CoC minister from Duncanville, TX, once told a group of men I was with that our problem with confession is that we think "your dirt's dirty, mine isn't." He went on to explain that we think that our sins are not as bad as the sins that do not tempt us. The one who lies does not understand the addict. The addict does not

understand the one who lusts. The one who lusts does not understand the one who is lackadaisical in their worship and attendance. And so on.

13. CS Lewis referenced this in his classic, "Mere Christianity." He said that we all know that there are laws of human behavior built into us. When others break those laws, we rise up and demand justice and punishment. When we break them, we excuse ourselves and provide a "reason" why we are okay. Confession takes that away ("I said I was in a hurry and I needed to get home. But the fact is, I was a jerk")
14. So is confession just a time to gather, share our sins, and shrug? No – for when a sin is revealed and shared with a tight knit community that loves us, it is also harder to keep committing that sin, knowing that you will be asked about how you are doing. You don't want to lose the honesty of the gathering so you are faced with a choice: get control over the sin or lose the intimacy of the gathering.
15. [Foster's story of writing down his sins and handing it to a trusted friend who, without a word, tore it into pieces and tossed it into a wastebasket: forgiveness]
16. The ancient church said that confession had three parts: an examination of the conscience, sorrow, and a determination to avoid sin." Examining the conscience is necessary for, unlike the message the world gives you, letting your conscience be your guide is a terrible idea. Our conscience is culturally conditioned and weakened by our sins. We need to examine it.
17. Then, sorrow. Confessing that we are sinners and believing that God loves and forgives us is not like just shrugging and saying "what are you going to do?" (using Ireland as an excuse...) There is to be sorrow and then a re-setting of resolution to get better. Sometimes that requires a plan – community, lifestyle change, etc.
18. I love the phrase Richard Foster uses when he says that 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. Honest leads to confession, and confession leads to change.”

Let us remember the words of Christ when he taught us to pray and the warning his brother, James, gave us.

James 2:12-13; Matthew 5:7; Luke 11:4

“Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”