

Confess Your Sin • James 5:16

The old story makes a powerful point. Every member of the group agreed to confess their sins to each other. There was a mutual pledge of confidentiality. The confessions ranged from stupid to stunning—sins of greed, violence, lust and hatred. All but one candidly confessed. When pressured to speak he was equally honest, confessing that his two great sins were gossip and the inability to keep secrets.

Such stories add to our discomfort over the instructions of James 5:16 to “*confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.*” Why would anyone want to do that? Sins are embarrassing enough when we are caught, but no one wants to volunteer to tell what we’ve done wrong. What good could come out of confessing a sin to someone else? How might those who hear our faults damage and control us with otherwise private information?

Some recall unpleasant childhood experiences in tiny confessionals revealing secrets we would rather forget. Others imagine the worst of cults that play mind games and manipulate with guilt and shame. But God and the Bible do not intend for any of the worst scenarios to occur. Confession to one another is presented as good, healthy and wholesome.

Confession is good for relationships because it removes barriers. Relationships are very important to most of us. A Harris Poll revealed that 56% of Americans listed relationships as “the most important thing in life.” That is higher than religious faith (21%), making the world a better place (12%), a fulfilling career (5%) or monetary success (last place).

Unfortunately, relationships can turn sour. Barriers grow up between people who are important to each other. Often those barriers are the result of offenses and injuries one person inflicts on another. If the barriers aren’t removed they grow and cause severe damage. When the barrier is caused by one person’s sin against the

other person, confession is the first step to remove the barrier. If no one says, “I sinned against you; I was wrong—please forgive me”, then the barrier remains. But when one person goes to another and admits wrong the barriers often melt and the relationship can be stored.

Confession can heal hurts that have been sore and painful for years. Sometimes the source of the wound is unknown—one person has sinned against another but the second person doesn’t even know about it. The barrier is invisible.

A physician once told me that it is especially important to remove glass from a wound. Unlike other foreign substances that the body naturally rejects glass must be found and extracted. If it is left in the body its sharp edges will continue to cut and cause bleeding and tissue damage. In the same way confession removes the sharp glass of sin-caused injury. This does not mean that wounded relationships will instantly heal just because of confession, but it is an important step to stop further hurt and damage.

I have known Christians who unnecessarily suffered alienated relationships for years. There is no doubt that one person sinned against the other. But then there was retaliation, hatred, animosity, resentment, gossip—all the ugly things that can turn a relationship bad. This happens between husbands and wives, parents and children, friends, church leaders, business partners, co-workers and every other relationship of life.

In some cases the original offense has been long forgotten. No one is exactly sure who started it. Everyone involved becomes stubborn. No one

will break the deadlock. There may even be sickness involved from the heartbreak, the stress and the sin. Now imagine the good that can come if one person has the courage to “confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.” It’s a good thing to do.

But understand that confession of sin should

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always be appropriate to the offense. The Bible is not asking us to stand up in church and publicly reveal everything we have done wrong. If the sin was against a group—perhaps at work—talk to the entire group together. If the sin was against the whole church it may need to be confessed to the whole church. If the sin was against the nation, the appropriate confession might be on network television. But most sins require limited confession, especially if they are confessed early. The longer we wait the more people may become involved.

Appropriateness may actually restrict or eliminate confession. It may not be appropriate to confess resentment toward your boss. It is inappropriate to confess lust to the person for whom you have lusted. It is inappropriate to confess a sin that may cause more damage in the confession than in silence. It is inappropriate to cause confession to manipulate and control another person or to actually commit a new sin against that person.

Most of the time most confession is good not bad and should be done sooner rather than later. If in doubt ask God for wisdom, check out the Bible for guidance. If necessary, seek the council of other Christians who may have traveled the same path and faced the same issues. “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.”

Confession is not only good for relationships; confession is also good for the soul of the person who confesses. Sin is a disease of the soul. It is the spiritual equivalent of the infamous flesh-eating bacteria. Unless it is forgiven it can devastate your spiritual life. If you have carried the burden of un-confessed sin you know what a horror it can be.

A popular television series told the story of an operating room nurse who dropped a human heart just before it was to be transplanted into a 76-year-old rabbi whose own heart had already been removed. The surgeon told everyone not to tell what happened, but the nurse could not stand living with the guilt. She blurted out to the rabbi’s widow what she had done.

Few of us will ever face such bizarre circumstances. All of us know how difficult it is to carry secret un-forgiven sin. As hard as confession may be, it is worth it because of the goodness of forgiveness.

I John 1:9 is talking about confession of sin to God, not to some other person against whom we have sinned, when it says, “*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify (cleanse) us from all unrighteousness.*” This refers to a supernatural miracle. If a Christian goes to God and confesses sins, God promises to forgive sins and to totally purify us from any stain of those sins on our souls.

However, the same God tells us to go to the person against whom we have sinned and also confess to that person. While those teachings are not connected in the Bible they are both from God. The assumption is that we do both. When we confess our sins to God and to the person against whom we have sinned, God cleans that sin out of our system as if it had never happened.

Yes, confession is good for relationships, good for the soul and it brings forgiveness and cleansing—all of which could

be viewed selfishly. It is true that the benefits of confession are many, but it is the right thing to do no matter what. And Christians are those who want to do what is right.

It’s possible that the person you have offended will be more offended by your confession. You could go to her and say, “I was wrong. I sinned against you. Please forgive me.” And she could say, “I wouldn’t forgive you in a million years.” But it is still the right thing to do!

The Christian life is about doing what is right. Christians are people who admit we are sinners, but God has forgiven us. We promise to live God’s way. God tells us to “confess your sins to each other.”

Millions of American Christians pray daily for God to bring a great spiritual awakening to this country. We pray for our churches and our regions and our nation. Throughout history God has answered prayers for spiritual awakening and it has always been connected to Christians

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Imagine if we Christians really did what the Bible says—admitted that we have done wrong, confessed our sins to those we have hurt and asked them to forgive us. Imagine if that was the beginning of a great spiritual renewal that spread through our churches, our communities and across this nation. It would not only be the right thing to do, it would be wonderful!

The words of James 5:16 must be more than an interesting academic study if we take the Bible seriously. So let me ask you a question: Whom have you sinned against? If there is one person to whom you should go and admit you were wrong, who is that person? If there is one person with whom you have a stressed or broken relationship that should be made right, who is that person? If there is someone God particularly brings to your mind, who is she? Who is he?

Here's what I encourage you to do. Pray to God right now and ask him what you should do. Promise him that you will listen to his answer and do what he says. Unless God tells you not to, go and tell that person you were wrong and that you are sorry and ask for forgiveness.

Lord, thank you for loving us and hating our sin. Thank you for sending your Son to die on the cross, taking our sins on him. Thank you for confession so that we can get

our sins off of our souls.

God, touch our hearts. Hear our confession of sins to you and please forgive us as you have promised to do. Show us the sins against others that need to be made right. And give us the courage to go to whomever we need to go to, confess our sins and ask for forgiveness.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

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