



Core Seminar How to Grow Class 6: Confession of Sin

I. Introduction¹

Let's begin with a few introductory facts to frame the rest of our discussion.

A. Confession Has Two Meanings

The Bible uses the word "confess" two ways. One meaning is ***to declare faith in, or adherence to, God.***

Hebrews 3:1

Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, **the apostle and high priest of our confession.**²

The *second*, and more common meaning of "confess," and the ***primary focus of this lesson***, is ***to acknowledge guilt before God.***

This "confessing" means admitting to having sinned: to have transgressed, broken, or disobeyed one or more of God's commands, or laws. The Bible's first use of the word "confess" with this meaning is found in

Leviticus 5:5

When he realizes his guilt in any of these and **confesses** the sin he has committed

B. Confession Results in Forgiveness

1 John 1:9

*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*³

When we confess our sins, God forgives us—we are purified from our unrighteousness. As we'll see later in the lesson, confession can accomplish reconciliation to another person or a church as well.

C. Christ Is the Basis for God's Forgiveness

From 1 John 1:9: Why does God forgive us? Forgiveness is offered to us by God on the sole ground of *the death of His Son*. To answer this let's look at a few other texts:

¹ Most of this lesson is taken from the following books:

- *The Holy Bible*
- Stott, John. *Confess Your Sins: The Way of Reconciliation*. Hodder, 1964.
- Mahaney, C. J. and John Loftness. *Disciplines for Life*. People of Destiny International, 1994.
- Foster, Richard J. *Celebration of Discipline, The Path to Spiritual Growth*. Harper San Francisco, 1988.

² My emphasis. Also, other examples of "confess" being used this way can be found in 1 Kings 8:33-35; 2 Chronicles 6:24-26; John 12:42; Romans 10:9-10; Philippians 2:11; and Hebrews 3:15.

³ My emphasis.

Matthew 26:28

for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many *for the forgiveness of sins*.⁴

Romans 10:9

Because *if you **confess** with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved*.⁵

So we see the two meanings of confession are linked in this way: *The **confession of sin** is necessary to receive the forgiveness of God, and that forgiveness is only possible if we **also confess Christ***.

D. Confession Must Be Accompanied by Repentance

Ezra makes the link that confession is accompanied by repentance.

Ezra 10:11

Now then *make confession* to the LORD, the God of your fathers *and do his will*.⁶

A determination to obey God—to do His will—is a necessary complement to confession.

Acts 3:19 makes it clear that God demands repentance to receive His forgiveness.

Acts 3:19

Repent, therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come for the presence of the Lord,⁷

Confession isn't genuine if it's not accompanied by determination to live your life differently. That completes our introductory framework. Let's go on to consider the second point in the handout "To whom, and what, should we confess?"

II. To Whom, and What, Should We Confess?

A. Confess to God All of Your Sins

Since it is His laws we break when we sin, we must confess to the lawgiver, God. Even when we sin against others, **Psalms 51:4** reminds us that ***every sin is ultimately against God***. Although David had clearly sinned against Bathsheba, Uriah, and the entire nation of Israel, he prayed to God acknowledging that his sin was ultimately against Him.

Psalms 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*.⁸

This flows from a biblical understanding of sin. When the Bible speaks of sin, it does not mean wrongdoing in abstract terms. No, sin is always against a perfectly holy God. Sin is not merely doing

⁴ My emphasis.

⁵ My emphasis.

⁶ My emphasis.

⁷ My emphasis.

⁸ My emphasis.

something wrong, it is rebellion against God, in whose image we were created. He made us as His image bearers in order to glorify Him. That is why Paul describes sin in Romans 3:23 as falling short of God's glory. Sin is self-worship. It is treachery and rebellion against a sovereign Creator God.

But we have a problem being honest with God about our sins. We get so good at concealing our sins from others that we sometimes lapse into thinking we can conceal them from God.

When we read, in Genesis 3, the account of Adam and Eve's encounter with God after they sinned, we smile at their naiveté. They thought they could hide from the Lord God "*among the trees of the garden.*" But don't we also make pathetic attempts to conceal our sins from God? By refusing to confess sins, hiding behind the fantasy image of ourselves that we have created, we hide from God.

Nothing about us is hidden from God right now, and one day everything about us will be made known to all. Although we may attempt to cover our sins in this life, any hypocrisy by us will be exposed.

Romans 14:12

So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

Hebrews 4:11-13

11 Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. **12** For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. **13** And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

1 Samuel 16:7

For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, *but the Lord looks on the heart.*⁹

B. Confess to Another Person Your Sins Against Them

The Bible places great importance on maintaining right relationships with our fellow men. It teaches that a right relationship with God is impossible without them.

Numbers 5:5-7

5 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, **6** "Speak to the people of Israel, When a man or woman commits any of the sins that people commit by breaking faith with the LORD, and that person realizes his guilt, **7** he shall confess his sin that he has committed. And he shall make full restitution for his wrong, adding a fifth to it and giving it to him to whom he did the wrong.

Matthew 5:23-24

23 So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, **24** leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.¹⁰

⁹ My emphasis.

¹⁰ My emphasis.

So, confessing our sins against others is required by Scripture. This includes our Christian brothers and sisters particularly, but it is not limited just to them. We have the same obligation to others.

C. Confess Your Sins to Your Church

1. *Participate in congregational prayers of confession.*

In our corporate worship, we *collectively confess, to God and one another, our sins of commission and omission*. We confess things we did that we shouldn't have done; these are sins of commission. We confess things we should have done and failed to do; these are sins of omission. We confess sins against God, against our brothers and sisters, and against our neighbors as well. By doing so as a congregation we're reminded that we're all sinners dependent on the mercy of God in Jesus Christ. Seeing the struggles of our brothers and sisters also encourages us to follow God's command in Ephesians 6:17 to "always keep on praying for all the saints."

We should pray along with the one who leads the congregation in confession of sin. This means thinking about each offense he names, silently affirming those we recognize as true of us, and mentally associating ourselves with the speaker's confession and plea for forgiveness.

This confession is a collective confession so it lacks any public announcement about the specifics of what any one individual has done. Those details are known to God.

2. *Confess to the church when you're baptized.*

We first see confession associated with baptism in Scripture's description of the work of John the Baptist.

Mark 1:4-5

4 John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. **5** And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and *were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.*¹¹

In a Christian baptism, the person being baptized makes a public confession of their sins, professes faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior, and pledges to attempt to follow Him as Lord. This is what we practice here at CHBC.

3. *Confess your offense to the church if you're disciplined.*

So far, we've been speaking about the confession of secret sins against God or private sins against people which is done publicly for specific reasons. There is a **third type** of public confession to your church.

I'm speaking of having to ***personally confess to the church for willfully persisting in serious sin in conjunction with church discipline***. Acknowledgement of a public offense against the church is necessary in order to move toward forgiveness of the offender. It is also needed for restoration to the church. This could be needed because the sin is of a scandalous nature, as in 1 Corinthians 5. It could also be needed because the offender has not yet repented of a private offense after entreaties by the offended party and one or two others, as stipulated in Matthew 18. Undergoing church discipline may be painful at the moment, but it is for the offender's good. The goal is to restore them to a right relationship with God and the church.

¹¹ My emphasis.

2 Corinthians 2:5-8

5 Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you. **6** For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, **7** so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. **8** So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.

While such confession to the church may be painful, it does bring blessing to the church and to the repentant individual. Ultimately, it brings glory to a gracious and compassionate God.

D. Confess Your Sins to Another Christian to Whom You Wish to be Accountable.

James 5:16

Therefore, *confess* your sins to one another and pray for one.¹²

In view here is confession to one or more fellow Christians whom we have not sinned against. The Bible doesn't give us specific rules regarding this.

This type of confession is a powerful tool for overcoming repeated, stubborn sins. ***If your fear of God fails to keep you away from habitual sin, add the fear of your friends!*** "If, in your desire to please God, you think confessing to someone else would be helpful, do so."¹³

Such confession is not easy. We do not want to be humbled by someone else seeing us as we really are. But remember, the church is not a place for those who have cleaned themselves up. No, the church is a hospital for recovering sinners who have all been cleansed by the precious blood of Christ.

Any Christian with a healthy understanding of sin will not reject you or seek to humiliate you when you confess your sin. They will instead seek to encourage you to overcome your sin, by practical advice, prayer, and regular accountability. They can also help us to see sin in our lives that we are not aware of, and vice-versa. They will rejoice in our victories too! Good accountability partners will also ask you to pray for them in their own struggles with sin, recognizing the power of God's command in Galatians 6:1-2.

Galatians 6:1-2

1 Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. **2** Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

A few words of advice regarding confession to others:

- Most of our daily, non-habitual sins can be adequately handled in our private confession to God.
- Beware of confessing something that releases you but hurts someone else in the process.
- Be careful picking an accountability partner. We'll discuss that more below.

¹² My emphasis.

¹³ Quote from John Calvin

III. The Wisdom of Confessing Sin

A. Confession Yields Forgiveness and Reconciliation

As we read in 1 John 1:9 and discussed earlier, we need to uncover our sins so that our God can forgive them. **Micah 7:18-19** *speaks powerfully of God's wonderfully merciful nature.*

Micah 7:18-19

18 Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity
and passing over transgression
for the remnant of his inheritance?
He does not retain his anger forever,
because he delights in steadfast love.
19 *He will again have compassion on us;
he will tread our iniquities underfoot.
You will cast all our sins
into the depths of the sea.*

B. Confession Enables Us to Prosper

Proverbs 28:13

*Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper,
but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.*¹⁴

How many of us experience adverse consequences because we refuse to confess our sins? Psalm 32:3-5 speaks to this as well.

Psalm 32:3-5

3 *For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.*
4 *For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah*
5 *I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not cover my iniquity;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,"
and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.*¹⁵

C. Confession Can Overcome Relational Barriers

Confessing our sins against another should serve to restore a right relationship between us. Proverbs 15:1 tells us that *"A gentle answer turns away wrath."* How much further does an apology go towards overcoming anger and resentment?

Confessing sins to an accountability partner can result in reciprocal confession and a deeper friendship as you together labor to follow Christ.

¹⁴ My emphasis.

¹⁵ My emphasis.

D. Confession Can Commend the Gospel

Because it is unusual, confessing your sins against another is also a powerful testimony of the transforming power of Christ in your life. It gives credibility to the gospel.

E. Confessing Sin to Others Can Overcome the Fear of Rejection

Do you think that if people knew about your sins, they'd kick you out of the church? Not so! Shame for your sin and humility in confession demonstrate your desire to grow in obedience to Christ. The entire church is made up of people who struggle with sin in one form or another.

F. Confessing Sin to Others Can Help Us Overcome Sin

If we refuse to confess our sins to others, their ability to pray for us is limited. They will be unaware of the spiritual battle that we are currently under. In our church covenant, we promise to "*exercise an affectionate care and watchfulness over each other.*" Hiding our sins prevents other Christians from caring for us. Conversely, confession enables other Christians to intercede on our behalf.

IV. Signs of True Confession

A. True Confession Is Accompanied by Repentance

We covered this point in the introduction. Confession isn't genuine if it's not accompanied by determination to live your life differently. The person confessing should be able to describe specific things that they have done, or will do, to prevent a recurrence.

B. True Confession Is Specific

Leviticus 5:5 requires that a sinner "*must confess in what way he has sinned.*" The offender need not give every detail, but the confession must be specific enough to clarify the nature of the sin.

C. True Confession Includes Motives

Sinful actions are often just the symptom of something deeper, more fundamental. In Matthew 15:18-20, Jesus says, "What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person." So we want to ask a couple questions of ourselves when we confess sin.

- What motivated that lie? Was it pride?
- Why did you denigrate something someone said? Was it jealousy?

Confession should go to the heart of the issue. If you desire to change, the "why" of your sin must be included in your confession.

D. True Confession Is Accompanied by Godly Sorrow

There's a huge difference between admitting you were wrong and feeling remorse about it. And the remorse must be over having sinned, not over getting caught! Paul writes:

2 Corinthians 7:10

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.¹⁶

¹⁶ My emphasis.

The sorrow God seeks is abhorrence at having committed the sin against a holy God, and a deep regret at having offended our heavenly Father. As we were reminded in Psalm 51, every sin is ultimately against God.

E. True Confession Is Made in Light of the Cross

An attitude of true confession includes acknowledgment that the sinner, by this sin, participated in nailing Jesus to the cross. Likewise, the sinner's plea for forgiveness recognizes that forgiveness is only possible because of Christ's atoning death on the cross. Humble confession of the one leads to thankful confession of the other.

F. True Confession Is Followed by Intercessory Prayer

A prayer of supplication, asking for forgiveness and help to not repeat the sin, is the proper follow-on to a prayer of confession. It moves from the negative (our past failure) to the positive (requesting God's help in our struggle not to fail again).

G. True Confession Results in an Experience of Forgiveness

A heartfelt confession, made in light of God's promises in Scripture, should lead us into the joy of forgiveness. It should increase our delight and contentment in Christ and His gospel.

V. When is Confession Required?

A. Confession Should Be Ongoing

Of course an initial confession of sin, and repentance from it, are necessary components of any Christian's conversion.

But as Paul attests in Romans 7, Christians continue to struggle with sin and often fail.

Romans 7:18-19

18 For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. **19** *For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.*¹⁷

So, as sin continues through this life, so too confession is to be the routine practice of every child of God. The Christian life is characterized by continual confession, repentance, and faith in Christ.

Some of us have a hard time recognizing we have sinned. We tend to shift the blame for our sinful behavior to others. But the apostle John makes it clear that if we think we are without sin we are sorely mistaken.

1 John 1:8

*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.*¹⁸

B. Confession Should Be Immediate

We should confess as soon as we are conscious of our sin. Don't postpone confession and repentance.

¹⁷ My emphasis.

¹⁸ My emphasis.

In Acts 24:16, Paul told Felix, “I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man.” We should do the same.

C. Confession Should Precede Communion

A time of careful examination and confession should occur before taking the Lord’s Supper.

1 Corinthians 11:28-29

28 Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. **29** For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.¹⁹

Recognizing the body of the Lord includes remembering that He died for our sins and confessing any sins we have not confessed previously. This requires confession to God or to our fellow man.

VI. Choosing an Accountability Partner

It pays to be careful and wise in choosing an accountability partner. **Look for someone who:**

- *Is clearly growing in godliness and correctly handles the Word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15)*
- *Is of the same sex, unless it is your spouse*
- *Is compassionate and has a biblical view of sin. This person will neither be shocked by your sin nor smother you in mercy when you need a rebuke.*
- *Listens carefully and withholds counsel until he or she fully understands the situation*
- *Will respect your confidence and treat it with great discretion*

Not only seek, but seek to be, such a person; for accountability usually works best when it is reciprocal.

One note about that last point on discretion: Absolute confidentiality should not be expected or promised. Simply put, keeping a secret isn’t always the most loving thing that a person can do. The sinner may be involved in something criminal or something that requires the help of others better qualified to deal with the particular situation and care for the person. The accountability partner should be free to contact others when that is warranted, while having the wisdom and discretion to only do so under such exceptional circumstances.

VII. Moving Toward Godliness

Each of us has some decisions to make:

- *Will you commit to fully confessing your sins to God?*
- *Will you confess your sins against others?*
- *Will you turn from your sinful pride and commit to finding an accountability partner to help you defeat any stubborn sins?*
- *Will you remember the truth of Hebrews 12:11? “For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”*
- *Will you place your hope in the One who died on the cross so that you can be forgiven?*
- *Will you trust God’s promise that “If we confess our sins, he ... will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”?*

¹⁹ My emphasis.