

1 John 1:5-10; James 5:13-16 **Confession: The Doorway to Forgiveness and to Healing** April 23, 2006, Pastor Brad Smith

The Sermon in a Sentence: Repentance and confession of sins to God and to one another produces forgiveness and healing.

Why I Am Preaching It: To encourage the congregation to practice the discipline of confession.

We are now beginning on the tenth of Foster's thirteen spiritual disciplines: the discipline of confession. Confession simply means to speak the truth about something. For example, we might confess that Jesus is Lord. But Foster really means confessing our sins, and that is mainly what we will look at this morning. To confess our sins means to declare our sins specifically, without justifying ourselves or sugar-coating what we have said, thought or done.

We might confess our sins to God and to the people we have sinned against. Or we might confess our sins to a trusted friend. The two are different. That is why I have developed the sermon around two biblical passages.

In the first part of the sermon we will see how confession to God and to whomever we have sinned against yields the fruit of forgiveness of our sins. That is what John writes about in his letter. In the second part of the sermon, we will see how confession to trusted brothers and sisters yields the fruit of healing from our sins. That is what James writes about.

We will start with the confession that leads to forgiveness, as taught by John. He starts with the nature of God: God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. The characteristics of light point us to God; the characteristics of darkness point us to sin. Light reveals things as they are; darkness keeps things hidden. Light promotes health; darkness promotes bacteria, mold, and other agents of disease. A well lighted place is a safe place; walking in darkness puts us in harm's way.

It is physically impossible to have light and darkness in the same place at the same time. Spiritually it is impossible to have fellowship with God or with his children and to continue in a dark, or sinful, lifestyle.

I don't suppose many people would disagree with John here. But he presents us with a problem. We may want fellowship with God, but we have to admit

that we have darkness or sin in our lives. Who can claim to have no thoughts or actions that we keep hidden from others? We might keep them hidden from ourselves, and if it were possible, we would not reveal them even to God. We have all done harm to others, and to ourselves as well. What can we do to restore fellowship with God? Confess our sins, says John, and God will forgive and cleanse us.

Confession must be specific. If we have trouble identifying our particular sins, God kindly offers to reveal our sins to us. He does it not to humiliate us, but so that we can be freed of them. We can pray the last two verses of Psalm 139: “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.” I prayed it once; that very night I had a nightmare, and shortly afterwards I had a conversation that helped me to put my finger on two areas of sin in my life.

Another way to identify our sins is to use the Ten Commandments, remembering how Jesus deepened them in the Sermon on the Mount. To take just one example, think of, “Thou shalt not kill.” Have I attempted to destroy anybody’s reputation this week? Have I harbored anger and desired harm for someone?

Once I have identified my sins, I need to confess them to God and to repent of them. John does not use the word repentance, but it is what he means when he says that we must walk in the light, not in the darkness. After confessing or acknowledging our sins before God, we take the next steps in repentance: we commit to turn away from those sins. We take advantage of whatever means are available to be freed from them. Once we have confessed and repented, we experience God’s forgiveness.

So what is this forgiveness that God offers to everyone who confesses and repents? There are some wonderful pictures of it in the Bible. Listen to them:

Psalms 51:9 “Hide your face from my sins, and blot out my iniquity.”

Psalm 103:10-12 “[God] does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.”

Micah 7:19c “You will...hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.”

Acts 22:16b “Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.”

Different analogies will speak more deeply to different people. Some will identify with their sins being thrown far away where they cannot be seen; others will rejoice that their sins are down at the bottom of the ocean where they can never be recovered, or that they are completely washed away.

When he forgives, God lets go of the offence. He will never throw it in the sinner’s face. God will not allow the sin to negatively color his relationship with the sinner. God offers forgiveness in the moment that we repent of our sins. Forgiveness is never earned; it is always a gift from God to the sinner.

Christians are imitators of God, so confession, repentance, and forgiveness also need to occur in the Christian community. As a Christian, if I have done wrong I need to confess what I have done to the people that I have wronged. I need to make a commitment to turn away from my sinful patterns of thought, speech, and behavior, and I need to take advantage of whatever means are available to help me change.

If I have been wronged and the person who hurt me has confessed and repented, then I must forgive. I let go of the offence. I will never throw it in the sinner’s face. I will not allow the sin to negatively color my relationship with the sinner. Forgiveness is never earned; it is always a gift from the person who was sinned against to the person who sinned. I think, though, that there is a difference between God’s forgiveness and human forgiveness. God offers forgiveness in the moment that we repent of our sins; for people who have been deeply hurt, it may take time before they are able to forgive. And they may rightly conclude that the person who hurt them cannot yet be trusted in certain areas. But forgiveness and, if possible, restored trust are always the goal.

Do you see the wonderful chain of blessing that begins with confession? We are all sinners, and we deceive ourselves if we deny it. We all have hidden, hurtful things in our past and in our present. But there is hope. As soon as we confess and repent of our sins before God, our sin is wiped out.

Confession, repentance, and forgiveness also open the door to maintaining healthy relationships, or restoring broken ones, within the Christian community. When someone has hurt us, we are free to forgive and to leave

the bitterness, anger, and resentment behind us. When we ourselves have sinned, we are free to be released from the burden of guilt that can drag us down. Confession, repentance, and the forgiveness that results is indeed tremendously good news.

However, not everybody is able to accept the gift of forgiveness even when it is offered. When I sent out my sermon draft one person wrote back and asked me, “What would you say to a Christian who says he knows that God has forgiven him, but he cannot forgive himself?” Often Christians continue to feel guilty and condemned even though God has forgiven them, and even though the people they have hurt have forgiven them.

When we cannot believe that we are forgiven, or we cannot forgive ourselves, we can fall into a vicious cycle. The more guilty and isolated we feel because of our sin, the less we can believe we are forgiven. And the less we can believe we are forgiven, the more guilty and trapped we feel.

When we are trapped in such a situation we do not need to be forgiven for our sins. We have already been forgiven. In this case we need to be healed from our sins and guilt. That need for healing brings us to the second part of the sermon, the part on confessing our sins to trusted friends. It is the topic that James talks about.

Let me read the passage again so that it will be fresh in our minds. [Read it.] Like John, James puts the focus on God. God is the one who helps us in trouble, and the one to whom we offer praise in times of happiness.

In the case of illness, the sick one is to call for the elders. Elders here might be formal leaders of the church, or simply mature and trustworthy believers. They are to pray for the sick one, and anoint his or her head with oil. Oil in the Bible often symbolizes the Holy Spirit. There is a promise of healing, and of forgiveness if the illness was caused by sin. However, James reminds us that it is not the oil, but rather confessing our sins to each other and praying for each other that brings healing.

James is not talking here about confessing our sins to God, or even to the person we have hurt. He is saying that a Christian community which provides healing is a community where there is no need to struggle along trying to keep our sins hidden. Everybody in the community has one or a few people who know them inside and out, people who are willing to hear

whatever is going on in their lives—the good, the bad, and the ugly, to pray for them, and to remind them of God’s forgiveness.

What exactly is this healing that James talks about? Spiritual healing is something that occurs in the sinner. It is different from forgiveness, which occurs primarily in the one who was sinned against. Looking at physical healing can help us to understand what spiritual healing looks like as well. I checked this description out with a doctor, and he said that it was accurate.

How do we become healed? Let’s think about how physical healing occurs. Some minor problems clear up on their own, just as some sins pass without our having to talk them over with anyone. But if symptoms don’t go away, or if they get worse, it’s a big mistake not to seek help. The choice not to seek help delays or in certain cases prevents healing.

But let’s consider those people who seek help. When patients see a doctor for the first time, they need to give a complete and accurate description of their symptoms. The doctor may ask questions that will help patients to recall certain symptoms that they might have forgotten or not considered to be important. The purpose is to come up with a proper diagnosis, so as to provide the appropriate treatment.

Sometimes the diagnosis turns out to be incorrect because the patient was too embarrassed about certain symptoms to reveal them. Healing will be hindered if patients hold anything back from their doctors. Remember that at the root of it, confession simply means to speak the truth about something. We might say that for physical healing to take place, the patient must start by confessing his or her symptoms to the doctor. Spiritual healing starts with confessing, or speaking the truth, about our sins.

Often the simple act of confession and prayer with one or more other people is enough to bring healing, to break the hold that a sin had over us. There is something powerful about allowing someone else to know us deeply, and to hear them affirm that God has forgiven us. I don’t know why it works that way, but I know from experience that it does.

Once we have completed the process of healing, what will the results be? Again, we can look at physical healing as a model. When we are physically healed, the disease no longer has the ability to do any damage to us. We are no longer contagious, so we are not a threat to others. Depending upon the

disease, however, scars may remain. Also, we may be more susceptible to the same illness in the future. In the same way, once we are healed from a sinful act or pattern, that past sin no longer has the power to drag us down, and we are no longer a danger to others. However, some of the pain or sadness of memories associated with the sin may remain. We also may need to take extra precautions against falling into that sinful pattern again.

We might think that we need to confess only when we have committed some terrible sin. But confession can be an ordinary part of our lives, not just a reaction to some crisis. Richard Foster writes of a time that he decided to confess his sins to a friend. He wasn't feeling burdened with guilt. He just thought that confession to a friend might be a way of deepening his relationship with God. When he was done he did not have any dramatic feelings. But his relationship with God did begin to deepen from that time.

I think that Foster's experience of spiritual healing or health reminds us again of physical health. Doctors appreciate seeing patients before they are sick. They recommend annual physical examinations or visits to HMSA's HealthPass program. Often doctors can give us a clean bill of health, or can suggest a minor change in lifestyle that prevents a health crisis from happening later on. The same can happen spiritually in an ongoing relationship of friendship and confession.

So there it is. I think most believers already understand that the joy of forgiveness comes from confessing their sins to God. A growing number of Christians are also learning the joy of healing that comes from opening their lives to one another, from confessing the good and the bad to a few friends or to a small group.

Let us pray.