



Thought for the Week 24th January 2021

READING 1 John 1:8-2:2

⁸ If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

¹ My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. ² He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

SERMON

Imagine sitting in a dark, solemn, and almost cupboard-like room. On two sides there are deep wooden walls, to the front, a door. There is a little seat and your left side a screen of some sort. There is someone on the other side though you cannot see them clearly nor can they see you or pick out who you might be.

It's not a scenario with which most of us in our Presbyterian tradition would be familiar, but of course in the Roman Catholic tradition, the practice of the confessional is very common, indeed for many routine. However, it seems that, in our evangelical protestant world, a unique thing happened at conversion when we recognized the seriousness of our sin and our lostness before God and we confessed our sin and found free and full forgiveness in Christ. And that was it – confession over – no need of sitting a dark little box confessing our sins to a priest. But, perhaps as a reaction against the idea of the confessional, I wonder if we've thrown the baby out with the bathwater." In the Anglican tradition everyone joins in saying the General Prayer of confession:

ALMIGHTY and most merciful Father; We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done; And there is no health in us. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders. Spare thou those, O God, who confess their faults. Restore thou those who are penitent; According to thy promises declared unto mankind In Christ Jesus our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake; That we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, To the glory of thy holy Name. Amen.

One of the benefits of doing these pre-recorded services is that I get a chance to join in worship online with different other churches on a Sunday Morning (well I don't really want to listen to myself!). I have noticed that in quite a few Presbyterian services that there is no general confession as people are led in the prayer. I think we are missing out if we do not have a time of corporate confession.

Four preachers met for a friendly gathering. During the conversation one preacher said, "Our people come to us and pour out their hearts, confess sins and needs. Let's do the same. After all "Confession is good for the soul"." They all agreed. One confessed he liked to go to the movies and would sneak off when away from his church. The second confessed to liking to smoke cigars and the third one confessed to liking to playing cards. When it came to the fourth one, he wouldn't confess. The others pressed him

saying, "Come now, we confessed ours. What is your secret vice?" Finally he answered, "I'm a terrible gossip and I can hardly wait to get out of here."

Maybe that's why we are hesitant to actively participate in the spiritual discipline of confession? As someone said, "Usually we are more concerned with concealing, than confessing." Nothing new in that, of course. It happened immediately following the first recorded act of sin in the Bible. When Adam and Eve sinned in the garden the first thing they tried to do was hide their sin from God.

And when we come to the New Testament church there were some people spreading lies about the nature of sin and how a believer should deal with sin. Some said that they were above sin and no longer sinned; still others said it didn't matter whether or not you sinned; and a third group said that they didn't have a sin nature anymore. And in the midst of this confusion and disagreement, John finds himself having to deal with these attitudes through the writing of I John.

"If" is a very little word but it can have big consequences. In chapter 1 verses 8-10 John give us three "ifs" each followed by a consequence. Inserting a "then" into the middle of the sentence make this clear.

⁸ If we say we have no sin, [THEN] we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

⁹ If we confess our sins, [THEN] he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

¹⁰ If we say we have not sinned, [Then] we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

Is it possible? Could it be that in a world of beaten down people, beings who are bruised and battered emotionally, that in these short verses an answer to all their guilt and pain can be found? Could it be that in the reclamation of a centuries old spiritual discipline called "confession" that great freedom awaits? There is no doubt that a huge hang up for many people in our world today is guilt. The psychiatrist Dr Karl Menninger said he believed that the number one reason that most people ended up in psychiatric hospitals was guilt. If they could just confess their guilt and know they were forgiven, 75% of them could leave the hospital that day. I don't know the mathematical accuracy of his statement, but I know we live in a world where people are riddled by guilt and longing to experience true forgiveness.

Writer Ernest Hemingway wrote a story about a father and his teenage son. In the story, the relationship had become somewhat strained, and the teenage son ran away from home. His father began a journey in search of his rebellious son.

Finally, in Madrid, Spain, in a last desperate attempt to find the boy, the father put an ad in the local newspaper. The ad read: "Dear Paco, Meet me in front of the newspaper office at noon. All is forgiven. I love you. Your father." The next day, in front of the newspaper office, hundreds of boys all named Paco showed up. They were all seeking forgiveness. They were all seeking the love of their father.

Most people today are seeking forgiveness and the love of a father. We each have a deep desire to be forgiven and accepted by our heavenly father. And if we chose to believe God's Word. If we chose to accept what is in this book as truth, then we have an "If. . .Then" statement which suggests that the love and forgiveness we so desire is within our grasp. However, it also clearly suggests that there can be no forgiveness unless there is an admittance that we have something in our lives that needs forgiving. That is where confession comes in. It is that open, verbal admittance to God that we have sinned. It is not something you have to do through anyone else, confession is made directly to God, wherever you are. And, *"If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."*

Before I go any further. What about you? Are you in a right place with God or are you still racked with guilt about all the things that are wrong in your life – all those things which you know you should not have said or done and which have cut you off from God? Then verse 8 tells you what you need to do

about it. I'm sure you've heard it before, but maybe you've just never got around to doing it – simply A – admit your sin – Believe in Jesus – and Confess your faith in him. There's no time like the present.

However, John is not writing his letter to unbelievers, he's writing to Christians. So let me share with you three things about Confession. They all start with the letter "P" to help you remember them. Let's start with.

THE PRACTICE OF CONFESSION

What does John mean by the term confession?

"If": This suggests that confession is an act of free will and not forced upon us by God or man. He doesn't say "You must", nor does he say "God will force you to." It says, "If". "If" you make the choice to do this act. "If we. . ." "We": All of us. Including the author John himself, as an active believer. Not just those who haven't received Christ. He doesn't say "If you. . ." or "If they. . ." but "If we." Confession is for everyone. Saved and unsaved. Ministers and laypeople. Church goers and pre-Christians. God's Word tells us that all have sinned. "If we confess our sins."

It is not a once and done deal. It is a daily discipline. What did Jesus say when He provided His followers with a model of how to pray? Along with daily bread we are to ask God to "Forgive us our trespasses". We acknowledge our sins, our shortcoming, and our failures. We take personal responsibility through our own free will for the things in our life that are not pleasing to God. That is the practice of confession. But what is. . .

THE PURPOSE OF CONFESSION

Why confess? What good is it? After all, God already knows my sins, why can't He just forgive them? Well. . . I think there are a number of reasons. First. . .

Confession humbles us: Reminds us who we are and who God is.

Confession allows God to change us: It is God's tool for changing us, not our tool for changing ourselves. Until we confess to God our need for Him, we are working on fixing ourselves. And we don't have the tools to do that. Have you ever tried to hammer in a nail with a pair of pliers? Good luck. That's not the tool for the job. We do not have in our personal tool- box the tool needed to fix ourselves. Redemption is God's tool. And our confession of our need for Him allows His tool to go to work in our lives. Third. . .

Confession allows God's grace to be activated in our lives: We are never closer to God than when we are on our knees confessing our weakness and His strength. Richard Foster writes, "*At the heart of God is the desire to give and to forgive.*" John 1:12 says, "*To all who received Him He gave the right to become children of God. All they had to do was to trust Him to save them.*" It is God's nature, it is the unfolding of His redemptive plan, and it is the purpose for sending His Son down from heaven to die on the cross so that His grace can be activated in our lives. And confession allows that to happen. Fourth. . .

Confession allows us to be free: The purpose of guilt is to drive us to Christ, once we are there, we are free from its power over us. The story is told of a shoplifter who wrote to a department store and said, "I've just become a Christian, and I can't sleep at night because I feel guilty. So here's £100 that I owe you." In a little postscript at the bottom he added, "If I still can't sleep, I'll send you the rest of it."

The solution to guilt is to confess our sins to God fully and openly. Come clean. Tell God everything even if He already knows. Confession reassures you that you're forgiven by God. There is something relieving about saying it out loud. Psalm 32:1 says, "*What happiness there is for those whose guilt has been forgiven! What relief for those who have confessed their sins and God has cleared their record.*"

Confession allows us to be free. And that leads us directly to. . .

THE POWER OF CONFESSION

There is great power in confession. Let's look at it again, word by word. *"If we confess our sins. . .He. . ."* - the power of confession is not in us but in Him. *"He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins"*. There is no "maybe" here. God's Word tells us that *"If we will confess our sins. . .He will forgive us our sins."* AND *"Cleanse us from all unrighteousness."* The power of confession that John is trying to give assurance to is the power of the forgiveness of our sins and a complete cleansing from all unrighteousness. There is power in knowing that your slate has been wiped clean. There is power in knowing that you no longer have to live under guilt, condemnation, and the chains that Satan desires with which to bind you. Chains to your past. Chains to your mistakes. Chains to your choices that you made, and regret daily. The power of confession can break those chains, and open the floodgates to God's forgiving grace and cleansing blood.

One more story. This one is about a man who robbed a bank and drove off. He thought he was in the clear until he opened the bag and it exploded with permanent ink. He was florescent blue from head to toe. Day after day he scrubbed himself trying to get free from the ink but it was futile. He lived with all this money yet could not leave his home for fear the paint would be seen and he would be arrested. The ink served as a constant reminder of who he was and what he had done, a constant reminder that he was a guilty man and the shame drove him mad. He was completely isolated from the world because of the ink and was driven almost insane. Finally the day came when he could no longer take the paint and he decided to turn himself into the authorities for at least in prison he could be free from the guilt of what he had done.

Some of you may feel like this man. You may not have robbed a bank, and for sure you do not have blue paint all over your body but it's my guess that many of us have sin that weighs us down in the same way. Sin that has to date gone unconfessed. Like the man maybe our sin has led us to a place of isolation from others and threatens to drive us crazy. So today I want to encourage you that there is a cleansing waiting for you. A cleansing that will remove the florescent blue stains of sin in your life.

Could it be that we need to unleash the power of confession in our churches? Right where you are, wherever you are - just between us and God, let's reflect for a moment on your life. Are there things in our lives that we need to confess to the Lord today? Maybe they are physical actions or activities. Maybe they are attitudes or judgments. Maybe they are emotions and deep-seated places of hostility. What are those things within your soul, in your personal life and world that no one else even knows about that you need to confess to God today?

Let's also reflect on our circles of influence. Maybe a spouse, our children, our neighbours, people at work. Again, are there physical actions, activities, attitudes, judgments, or emotions that you need to confess to God today are sinful towards those people?

And let's reflect on our church. Are there things that we need to confess to God today, and ask His forgiveness for? Towards other denominations. . .towards the lost in our community towards political leaders. As a church, have there been moments, expressions, communications that were not in the light?

Simply in your mind and your spirit share those things with our Heavenly Father as you pray.