

The Heart of Worship

2/4 in Series

Act 2: Confession

1 John 1:5-2:2; Psalm 51 (Responsive Reading)

02 13 2011

Scripture Lesson: 1 John 1:5-2:2

Saints and Sinners

(Address the right side of the congregation). Good morning, **saints!**

(Address the left side of the congregation). Good morning, **sinners!**

I hope you chose your seat carefully this morning. In Matthew 26:31-46, Jesus described the final **Day of Judgment**. The King will divide the people into two groups like a shepherd separating sheep from goats. He will say to the sheep on his right hand, “*Come, you who are blessed by my Father.*” And He will say to the goats on his left hand, “*Depart from me, you who are cursed.*”

Saints *(to the right side)* . . . sinners *(to the left side)*. If you are visiting with us for the first time, don’t worry—there’s no way you could have known. However, next Sunday you’ll know where to sit!

But wait a minute . . . *(Turn around with back to congregation)*. Maybe I have it backwards. From this perspective, the sheep would be on THIS side and the goats on THAT side. *(Then turn with sideways to congregation and choir)*. But this way the sheep are in the congregation and the goats in the choir. I’m SO confused!

Saints and sinners—actually, we all fall somewhere between the two extremes. Every sinner is a potential saint; and even the most saint-like still struggles with sin. At our best, we are recovering sinners. Abigail Van Buren—better known as *Dear Abby*—once wrote: “*A church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints.*”

If you are a sinner, then you’ve come to the right place today. We are all recovering sinners seeking healing for our sin-sick souls.

The Heart of Worship

Today we are continuing our worship series entitled *The Heart of Worship*. We are exploring how to worship God in spirit and truth. The sermons are organized around the acronym **ACTS** which stands for: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. Each act is a critical part of faith in general and worship in particular.

Last week we explored the first act of worship: **Adoration**. Adoration means praising God for who God is. Today we explore the second act of worship: **Confession**.

Confession

Scripture repeatedly calls us to confess our sin before God. **Confession** is a dense word packed with weighty meaning. It is not an action to be taken lightly. At its root, confession means the acknowledgement and admission of sin.

Confession is NOT informing God about some secret sin. The Lord already knows! We’re not surprising the Almighty with some unexpected bombshell. We don’t

confess our sin and hear a heavenly voice reply, “REALLY? YOU did THAT? I’m SHOCKED, I tell you, SHOCKED!”

Instead, confession is agreeing with God about the sin in our lives. The Holy Spirit convicts and convinces us of our sin.

James 1:22-25 says that truly hearing God’s Word in our lives is like gazing intently into a mirror. We see ourselves through our heavenly Father’s eyes. The Spirit calls and challenges us to become more than what we are.

Have you ever stood **next to greatness**? Have you ever spent time with someone who excelled in some aspect of life? These extraordinary people simply by being who they are challenge us to become better.

I have certainly experienced this in my life. I must confess that there are times when I grow a bit smug about my abilities. For example, I start to think that maybe I have this preaching thing down pat. Then I hear some gifted person of God preach a sermon that strikes me to the heart of my being, and I realize how much more I need to grow.

I love to write; and occasionally I will craft an article that IMHO is inspired. Then I read something by Pat Conroy, Max Lucado, or Frederick Buechner; and I realize that I’m an amateur trying to play in the big leagues.

Worship ushers us into the very presence of God. We stand next to greatness. We are overwhelmed by God’s glory. The divine light reveals our human darkness; and the Lord’s holiness makes our sinfulness all too evident. If the first movement of worship is adoration, then the next movement is confession.

The prophet **Isaiah** experienced this in his own life. He had gone to the temple to worship. Suddenly, it was like a curtain had been drawn back, and Isaiah saw the Lord God Almighty seated upon his throne. The seraphim on either side of the throne adored God, calling: “*Holy, holy, holy!*” And this man who had only wanted to go to church found himself in the very presence of God.

Before God’s holiness, Isaiah was all too aware of his own sinfulness. He instinctively confessed his sin, crying, “*Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I come from a people of unclean lips, and I have seen the Lord.*”

Denial

Confessing our sin is an essential part of faith and worship; however, confession does not come easily for us. It requires us to do something we studiously avoid: **claim responsibility** for our sinfulness. And it is SO hard for us to admit that we were w—wr—wro—wron—wrong!

We must be born with the sinful desire to avoid taking responsibility for our actions. At the very least, we learn it at a very early age.

<p>During childhood, our daughter had an imaginary friend named Lucy. Lucy often visited to play in Katie’s vivid imagination. Then one day we discovered that someone had colored on the playroom walls. The identity of the culprit was clear. When we confronted Katie with the crime, however, she said without hesitation, “LUCY DID IT!”</p>
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Years later this same child was asked in Sunday School to write down some sin that she had committed. After long minutes of thought, she finally wrote, “Well, I THINK I may have sinned in second grade but I’m not sure!”

One way to define a word is to identify its opposite. The opposite of confession is **denial**. We stand before God like children accused of coloring on the wall; and with crayons in our hands, we solemnly declare, “LUCY DID IT!” It began in the Garden of Eden when Adam blamed Eve who blamed the snake; and it has continued ever since.

The Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin. And we deny. Alibi. Take the fifth. Plead extenuating circumstances. Justify our actions. And even when our guilt is proven beyond a shadow of a doubt, we still attempt to prevaricate, equivocate, evade, and avoid.

We are also quite skilled at making **qualified** confessions. If we finally admit our guilt, then we plead extenuating circumstances.

In school, we learned that the word “**but**” serves as a conjunction to join two parts of a sentence together. The word “but” is especially useful in apologies and confessions. Regardless of what we might confess, it’s what comes AFTER the word “but” that we really mean.

- Example: “I’m sorry, *but* I don’t think I was totally to blame.”
- Translation: “I’m not sorry because it wasn’t my fault.”
- Example: “I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings, *but* I think you were wrong, too.”
- Translation: “If you weren’t so touchy, then there wouldn’t be a problem.”
- Example: “Yes, I ran the traffic light, *but* it was only dark yellow.”
- Translation: “It turned red three seconds before I hit the gas!”

James Moore wrote a book entitled *Yes, Lord, I Have Sinned but I Have Several Excellent Excuses!* In reality, we stand before God with no excuses. Our Scripture lesson today reminds us: “*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.*” (1 John 1:8) True confession cuts through the human desire to deny responsibility and accountability. It drives us to stand with the prophet Isaiah in total humility and submission before God.

Healing and Forgiveness

Conviction leads to true and heartfelt confession. However, confession is a means to an end—not the end itself. If we stop with confession, then we miss the intent of the Holy Spirit’s conviction of our sin.

Confession is NOT designed to end in guilt and shame. However, we sometimes stop there. Humans can be guilty of wallowing in our regret like pigs in the mud. Through a twisted sense of humility, we bemoan that God could not possibly forgive OUR sin. The 19th century poet, James B.V. Thomson, wrote:

*Once in a saintly passion
I cried with desperate grief,
"O Lord, my heart is black with guile,
Of sinners I am chief."*

*Then stooped my guardian angel
And whispered from behind,
"Vanity, my little man,
You're nothing of the kind."*

Do you really think that your ability to sin is greater than God's ability to forgive? Hear again the words of 1 John: "*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*" (1 John 1:9)

Confession is the first movement of repentance that leads us to accepting God's **forgiveness** in our lives. Frederick Buechner put it this way:

To confess your sins to God is not to tell him anything he doesn't already know. Until you confess them, however, they are the abyss between you. When you confess them, they become the bridge. (Wishful Thinking, p. 15)

Listen to the rest of the 1 John passage. "*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*" (1 John 1:9). John's choice of the word "**purify**" gives us another insight into the act of confessing our sins. Confession is the first step towards experiencing God's **healing** in our lives.

Through the mid 1800s, doctors and surgeons did not know what caused some wounds to become infected. The medical theory of the day was that "*bad air*" called "*miasma*" caused infection. Then a Scottish surgeon named **Joseph Lister** read about Lewis Pasteur's work with microorganisms. Doctor Lister believed that these same bacteria caused wounds to become contaminated. So he developed the first antiseptic methods of medicine to prevent infection. In many ways, Lister's work marked the birth of modern medicine.

Confessing our sin is like **disinfecting a wound**. It cleanses our lives of sin and prevents it from growing toxic and deadly. It is the first step towards healing. Now I won't lie to you—it can be painful. Remember scraping your elbow or knee as a child? I always dreaded my parents bringing out the hydrogen peroxide, mercurochrome, or iodine. These disinfectants STING! But it's a good hurt that cleanses the wound; and they enabled the wound to heal cleanly.

In Greek, "*to heal*" and "*to save*" share the same root word: *sózó*. In Psalm 51, the Psalmist prayed: "*Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin . . . create in me a clean heart, O God.*"

Confession leads to the cleansing of our sin and the acceptance of God's grace. Our salvation leads to the healing of our souls. The Holy Spirit assures us that our sin is truly forgiven.

The Psalmist says that God takes our sin and casts it as far as east is from west. Another Psalm declares that God casts our sin into "*a pool of forgetfulness.*" God forgives us, and gives us the grace to forgive ourselves and others.

When we celebrate **Holy Communion** in the church, it is traditionally preceded by a *Prayer of Confession*. We confess our sins both individually and corporately. There is a powerful moment after the confession when the pastor stands before the people. Claiming a priest's role for the congregation, the pastor declares, "*In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.*" And the people echo back to the pastor, "*In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.*"

An old proverb declares: "*Confession is good for the soul.*" It leads us to accept our healing and salvation in Christ. When we confess our sins, God forgives us.

Conclusion

This morning I invite you into the heart of worship. In God's holy presence, our sin is all too evident. The second act of worship is **confession**. Certainly it is important to echo *The Lord's Prayer* petition to "*forgive us our trespasses.*" However, sometimes this prayer might be too general.

Today I challenge you to become more specific. Gaze intently into the mirror of God's Word. Open your life to the Spirit's convicting power. Agree with the Lord about the sin in your life. Name it. Claim it. Through confession, allow Christ to cleanse you of your sin and create within you a new heart. Then let the healing begin.

Let us pray.

Guided Prayer

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