

“What Do We Mean When . . . We Confess our Sins to God?”

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For the 1st Sunday of Lent

Psalms 32

February 14, 2016

Blessed are those whose wrongdoing is forgiven,
whose sin is covered over.
Blessed are those against whom the Lord assigns no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

When I kept silence, my bones wasted away.
I was groaning all day long.
Day and night, Your hand was heavy upon me.
My strength was dried up as if in a summer drought.
Then I admitted my sin to You, and I did not cover up my iniquity.
I said, “I will confess my wrongdoing to the Lord,”
and You forgave the guilt of my sin.

So let all who are faithful offer prayer to You.
When it is a time of distress, the rushing flood waters shall not reach them.
You are a hiding place for me.
You preserve me from trouble, and surround me with shouts of deliverance.

I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go.
I will counsel you and keep my eye upon you.
Do not be like a senseless horse or a mule,
which must be controlled with a bit and bridle or it will not stay near you.

The torments of the wicked are many,
but faithful love surrounds those who trust in the Lord.
Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, you who are righteous.
Shout for joy, all you whose hearts are right.

James 4.1-10

Adapted from the New International Version

December 1991. Exams were over. A movie was on. At just the right moment, I stood. Bent on one knee. Offered her a ring, the best we could afford. We'd bought it at Consumer's Distributing; she paid for it because she had a job. Knowing what her answer would be, I was still nervous as I asked, “*Will you marry me?*” . . . She said, “Yes.” . . . (And yes, she was Barb!)

Why the bended knee?

I could just say “*I respect you, I honour you. I surrender myself to you. I put myself in your hands.*”

I could have said that. Bending on one knee said it better. The action said things that words could not.

In a bit, we’re going to confess our sins. I wrote the prayer in your bulletin with Psalm 51 in mind. It’s one of the great confessional prayers of the Bible. Psalm 32, which we just heard, is another. We’ll pray aloud, then silently, finish with singing, and then hear God’s forgiveness.

Why? What does regularly confessing in worship do to us? It might be the most important thing that happens here. Why?

II

I need this regular confession. Otherwise I’ll persist in the notion that I’m okay.

I’m okay. I’d love to believe that. It’s happy. There are nice things about me. When I dare to dig deep, though, I find in my soul stuff that stinks. But we live in an “I’m okay, you’re okay” kind of world. It does not encourage me to be honest, to come clean about myself.

It’s not just that I do or think the occasional unkind thing. It’s that I am good at it. I have lots of practice. Often I like it. I don’t love well. I don’t love rightly. I love the wrong things too much, and the right things not enough. I nurse resentments. I feel self-righteous. I’m a hypocrite. I’ve murdered in my mind. I’ve cheated with my eyes. I flip into prejudices.

Sometimes these things happen by accident. Sometimes, it’s my carelessness. Sometimes I want to. I’m marching along, a soldier in the army of one and all, and together we’re wrecking havoc.

It’s bad news. Who likes that? So I’m glad to join our conspiracy to avoid, deny, and ignore it.¹ I can keep messing things up, conjuring excuses, trampling people down. I can keep up the image — for everyone else and for myself — that I’m quite a good guy. And nothing changes.

By grace, God won’t let me off the hook. That psalm we heard, Psalm 32, speaks of God’s hand pressing down on me heavy. Thank God! Confession releases me from the curse of pretending to be who I am not. It’s the gift of coming clean. A regular practice of confession makes me face myself, honestly. I need it. I need to see myself in the presence of the Holy One, who sees me first and fully.

¹ Francis Spufford puts it this way: *[This] is bad news, and like all bad news is not very welcome. . . . We would, on the whole, very much like this not to be true, and our culture conspires to help us avoid and defer and ignore the sting as much as possible.* Unapologetic (Londer: Faber & Faber, 2012), 29f.

III

It does not end there. On the one hand, our world distracts us from being honest about the messes we make. At the same time, it shames us in other ways, into believing we'll never be right.²

Here's what I learned about myself in just one hour, Friday night.

- I am failing at making enough money.
 - I am failing at having a good enough house.
 - My shave isn't smooth enough, and my beard isn't bushy like those cool young-guy beards.
 - I've got too much grey.
 - Tight abs . . . fail. Why would anyone want me?
 - No back-up camera, no heated seats, less-than-stellar fuel economy, and far from Ram-tough . . . car fail.
- and so on.

An hour of television or a trip to the mall are designed to tell me how not-okay I am. Any one of these messages I can laugh at, but they keep piling on, crushing me exhausted under the ways I am not good enough. But also teasing with the promise that if I buy that, if I do that, then all will be well. Our consumer economy makes me anxious about who I am. Then it offers a vision of who I should be. It's not just that I can buy a Lincoln. It's that I can be Matthew McConaughey, living the Lincoln-driver life.³

But I won't. I'll never have the winning hand. That's the secret. If a product actually solved your problems, you'd stop buying. So let's find something else wrong with you.

And this is just one part, one slice of this culture of shame we're part of. There is never anything like forgiveness or mercy. No absolution or freedom. Just new anxieties to create, new deficiencies to discover. Now available to me in texts and Tweets. There is no escape.

But when I confess to God, there is always the assurance of forgiveness. The One who creates you and knows you, also and always treasures you, flowing out forgiveness free and mercy unending. I need that. No one else will do it. No one else can.

Think of that image in the Psalm, of God's hand pressing down heavy. With confession and absolution, that same hand, that same gesture, I now realize is the Holy One covering me, protecting me, freeing me from guilt and shame, and surrounding me with God's faithful love.

IV

This repeated, ritual act of confession changes us. Even if we say and hear the same

² Much on the analysis in this section comes from a lecture by James K. A. Smith, "Restor(y)ing the World: Worship as Culture Formation" given Tyndale Seminary, Toronto on November 4, 2014.

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fakTNw56mw8>

words each week . . . Maybe it's better if we do. Repetition burrows it into us, so it's there when we need it.

Alex worships most Sundays. Many times he doesn't want to be there, and sometimes he skips. But usually he goes. Even when he is mumbling along, something tells him he needs it. It's not just about what he is doing, you see. It's also about what God is doing in him.

Every week, he confesses with his pew-neighbours. He knows the prayers by heart. Sometimes he skims through and hardly notices. Other times, the words bring him to a moment of self-understanding. Occasionally, they break him. Especially those times, the words of forgiveness the minister speaks are most precious. Not because of the minister; Alex knows what he's like. It's because the minister is speaking for Someone else.

One cold February night, they got the call. Their teenage son was in trouble. "Come to the police station," trouble. So they went down. It was so unfamiliar, too unreal. Alex was angry, and disappointed, and scared, and broken by his boy.

When his son was brought out and saw Alex, he stopped. He looked trapped. Then, he fell against his dad, and sobbed, "I'm so sorry, Dad. Please forgive me."

Remember, week after week Alex falls against the Holy One, who again and again announces, without hesitation or qualification, forgiveness. Absolute forgiveness.

Alex knew in his bones what to do. "Of course, I forgive you."⁴

V

I wonder if we've lost something by not kneeling for confession.

It's like bending on one knee to propose marriage. Words can do it. Still, there is something the body says and knows that words can't.

Confessing on my knees, I feel humility, surrender, dependence, the offering of my vulnerable self to God. It's hard to act elegant when my knees are cracking. It's awkward to get down there, especially when our pews were not laid out for it. In a moment when we pray, I'm not going to ask you to kneel. But if you want to try, please do.

After we sing, though, I am going to ask you all to stand. Stand and hear, not from me but through me, God's declaration, "Of course, I forgive you!" Stand for this Good News! No matter what anyone says, you are forgiven by the One who matters most. So you are free.

That's why we confess our sins. Praise God! Amen.

⁴ Adapted from a story told in James K. A. Smith, Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 184f.