
Confession

DAVE BAST

Recently, I went to the doctor for my annual checkup, which they now call a wellness exam. I got the same basic advice I get every year: Eat less, exercise more, get enough sleep, avoid bad habits. Well, there is also a sort of checklist of things that will promote spiritual wellness. They are called the spiritual disciplines; and today on *Groundwork*, we will look at the discipline of confession. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. So, Scott, we are in the middle, really, of a lengthy, seven-part series on the spiritual disciplines, and this is actually a follow-up to an earlier series we did looking at kind of the common disciplines like fasting and Bible reading and prayer; and in this one, many of the disciplines we are considering might strike listeners as new or unusual perhaps.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; we have thought about sabbath. We think of sabbath as a day of the week, not a discipline, but as we saw in the earlier program in this series, it is a discipline...

DAVE BAST

Keeping the Sabbath; yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

To keep sabbath...and it shapes you. Worship...the previous program was on worship; well, we think of that as an activity, but it is really also a discipline meant to shape you, form you, putting into place certain habits of mind and thought; and confession is that way, too. We will think briefly about confession in terms of confessing our faith...

Dave Bast; Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Mostly on this program, we are going to think about, you know, confession of sin as an admission of guilt; like, you know, I have a confession to make. I ate the last cookie, sorry.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; that is kind of the everyday understanding of confession, but as you pointed out, Scott, in the Bible, in the New Testament, confession is used of speaking together what we believe, our faith, using a creed even perhaps; and there are early creeds in the New Testament; but Paul uses the word in this sense. The word is *homologian*—confession—literally means the same word or saying the same thing together. He uses it in 1 Timothy 6, where he writes to Timothy:

¹²Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses. ¹³In the sight of God, who gives life to everything, and of Christ Jesus, who while testifying before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you, etcetera, etcetera...

Even Jesus made confession in this sense, but while we do use that and we often have a confession of faith, we call it in worship, primarily, thinking of the spiritual discipline, we want to think about what it means to confess our sins.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; we can start with a question: Why should we confess our sins at all? I mean, we are told and assured over and over that we have been saved by grace alone, not by our own works; and therefore, not even by our own confession. If we were saved by our confession, that would be being saved by works, and we know we are saved one hundred percent by Jesus. So, isn't sin like, over and done with? We are baptized; our sinful self was drowned in the waters of baptism. So, you know, what about Romans 8? ^{verse 1} There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus; and then later in that chapter: ^{verse 33} Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. ³⁴Who is the one, then, who condemns? No one.

So, why confess sin if it has been put away by Jesus?

DAVE BAST

Yes; or I think of this great passage from Micah Chapter 7, where Micah says: ¹⁸Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever, but delight to show mercy. ¹⁹You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.

So, if God does that, don't they disappear? Aren't they taken away? Aren't they gone forever? Why do we have to keep revisiting this over and over and over? And I think we need to make a couple of important points here, Scott. One is, we don't earn forgiveness by confessing. Luther was tormented by this before he kind of rediscovered the gospel of grace. He felt like unless he confessed every sin...brought it to mind and spoke it...it couldn't be forgiven; but that is an impossible task. We have sins we are not even aware of, so how can we confess those?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; Luther was a little neurotic and he really needed the assurance of the gospel that even the sins we have forgotten about God still forgives; but, we recognize the fact that although we have been forgiven, we are still sort of in between the times, right? We are in the already and the not yet, and we still make mistakes...we still sin; we sin against other people. You know, it would sort of be like in a marriage. Well, we committed ourselves to each other, we know we love each other, we know we will forgive each other when we mess up in our marriage, so I guess we never need to say we are sorry or ever need to apologize. Well it doesn't work that way, even in a really strong marriage where, when you apologize, you do always get forgiven. Those words of apology are still needed, and that is just on the human level...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It certainly is true over against God.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so, I think we need to make an important distinction between the guilt of sin and the consequences of sin. So, the guilt is done with. We are not guilty in God's eyes. Even if we sin again, we are still not guilty. There is no condemnation, as the Apostle says, because Jesus' righteousness covers that. His sacrifice on the cross has dealt with the guilt of sin...with that consequence. It is done. As you said, we are buried with Christ in baptism. We died with him, we have been raised to newness of life with him, but sin still has effects...it still has some consequences, and we don't avoid those; and frankly, the consequences affect both us and God. For us, the consequence can be a guilty conscience; even if we are not objectively guilty, we feel that way. It can make us miserable. Unconfessed sin can torment us. It also can put a barrier in our relationship with God. It can make us feel estranged or distant from him. It can even...the Bible says repeatedly that God doesn't

hear our prayers, speaking of his people Israel, because of their sin.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and, confessing our sin...Neal Plantinga has said that confessing sin is like taking out the garbage; once is never enough. You have to take the garbage out every week unless you want a really smelly house. It is a little bit like that; but...and we are going to think about this in the next segment, Dave...so, you just said that unconfessed sin...not owning up to it...could become an obstacle. We get guilty and we don't dare look God in the eye, as it were; but it can also go the other way. We can start fooling ourselves that we aren't sinful, and then we get proud, right? And we start to believe a lie about ourselves, and we are going to see a passage from John in just a few moments in the next segment on that very thing. So, it could poison our relationship with God in two ways: One: it will make us not fellowship with God anymore because we feel so guilty, or; two: it could break our fellowship with God because we feel so proud: I never sin!

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I don't ever have a...I cannot think of a sin I need to confess. That is a deeply untrue thing for anybody to say, other than Jesus. So, it can be a barrier in two ways.

DAVE BAST

So, there are some wonderful, rich passages of scripture that deal with the why and the how of confession, and we are going to look at those in just a moment.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and Scott, today we are talking about confession of sin as a spiritual discipline...as a practice or a habit that is good for us; and we have just seen that though the guilt of our sin has been dealt with once and for all, we are not really guilty in God's eyes, there is no condemnation; nevertheless, when we sin, and we do that repeatedly, we can feel that sense of guilt and it can make us really miserable if our consciences are sensitive.

SCOTT HOEZEE

David was God's chosen anointed servant. He is the first in the line that ultimately leads to Jesus as the ultimate Son of David, but David messed up pretty regular in his life; and in Psalm 32, which is attributed to David, but whether it was written by David or not, it was written by somebody who knows what unconfessed sin can do to you. So, here are some fairly familiar words from Psalm 32:

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. ²Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity and in whose spirit there is no deceit. (And now, this is an important line from verse 3) ³ While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. ⁴For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. ⁵But then I acknowledged my sin to you and I did not hide my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord," and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

So, there is the reflection, Dave, of an experience a lot of people have. In fact, in literature there are some famous characters—you think of Raskolnikov from *Crime and Punishment*—who never confess their sins and are pursued by guilt all their days...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They have no peace.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, this psalmist is writing three thousand years ago. He doesn't have any knowledge or conception of modern psychology, but boy, is he ever right on. What unconfessed sin that you lug around inside you, like as you said, taking the garbage out, if you don't do that, if you carry that garbage within you, it can just eat away at you. I remember reading some years ago a statement of an eminent psychiatrist who said: I could discharge half the patients in my hospital if I could help them with the problem of guilt. So, that is the first thing confession can do for us, it can, as we like to say, get it off your chest, you know? Tell it to God. Go to him again; ask him for his mercy, because he is merciful.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Because it will eat away at you; and Dave, you and I have been pastors, and I have had the experience, and you probably have too, and a lot of pastors do. Somebody...a good, wonderful member of your church is nearing the end of his or her life and practically on their deathbed they say to you: I did something years ago. I cheated on my wife forty years ago. She never found out. I think I need to tell her before I die. Should I tell her?

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is a very hard thing to do because it can be so painful, but the point is, that never went away. It has been hanging on his heart for forty years! So, like you say, Dave, there is a reason we say get it off your chest because it can lead to a tightness in your very heart.

DAVE BAST

Well, Scott, thanks a lot, because in the words of Pharaoh's butler: Now I remember my sins. Not that I cheated on my wife, mind you; but things that I have done years ago that when they come to mind again and again...the accuser will bring them up, too.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

But they are dealt with; the guilt is gone, and you need to believe that good news and live in peace, as we say, after the confession of sin; but here is another thing...another classic passage, this one from the New Testament about what confession can do. It is from 1 John Chapter 1, where John writes:

⁶If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true. ⁷But if we walk in the light, as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin. ⁸If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar and his Word is not in us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that verse lands with a profound thud because, boy oh boy, the last thing I ever want to do is make God out to be a liar...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

God sent his only Son to die on the cross as a way to say: Oh, no; you've got a problem; you've got sin. We said in the previous part of this program, Dave, that not confessing sin can block our relationship with God two ways: One, we feel so guilty that we stop going to God, we are too embarrassed; or we don't have a problem with sin at all; and then we get proud...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But we are also...John says then you are living a lie...you are living a lie if you say you never ever screw up, you never ever sin, you never ever have anything to confess when that time rolls around on Sunday mornings in church. You never come to church and say: Well, let's see; this last seven days, nope...nothing...I got nothing...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

If you say that, John says, then you are not living in the truth.

DAVE BAST

John famously will write later in his letter, God is love, which is a wonderful statement. A lot of people latch onto that, and well they should. He also says here, earlier in Chapter 1, God is light. So, both things are true about God, and we do well to bear them both in mind. So, if we, as a matter of habit, just walk in the darkness, apart from God, who is light, then, as you say, Scott, we live a lie and we are making him out to be a liar; but the good news is, if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins; and Jesus' blood shed on the cross, which is the ultimate and only payment truly for sin, will cleanse us from all unrighteousness. So that is the good news, live in the truth and acknowledge before God who and what we are and what we have done.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In the next program in this series on prayer we are going to consider a verse from Hebrews about approaching God's throne of grace with confidence when we pray. We can go to God with confidence, even when we are confessing our sins, because we know the mercy is there. So, we don't have to be afraid...we don't have to hold back out of fear that, oh, maybe this is the one bridge too far. God cannot forgive this one. There is not enough grace in heaven for...no; that will never, ever happen. You never have to worry that there isn't enough grace to cover you again and again and again; and that is the good news that is the gospel. You know, Dave, when we think about confession as a discipline...as a habit...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Which is what we have been saying...

DAVE BAST

Both public worship and personal devotions.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; and there a very simple little prayer. It is called the Jesus prayer. Most of us know it. It comes out of the Orthodox tradition, I think, and it is a prayer I know a lot of people, and I do it, too. It is so short that you can say it anytime, while you are driving in the car, while you are taking a walk, while you are getting the groceries, it is just this simple: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God; have mercy on me, a sinner.

DAVE BAST

Yes, there it is; and to me, so much of faith consists in acknowledging the truth about who God is and who we are, and that prayer does it all in just a few simple words. Jesus is Lord; he is merciful; I am a sinner, and to recognize and acknowledge that on a daily basis can lead to proper humility, but also proper gratitude; and out of that, a life of closeness with God will come. But, there is one more great classic passage in the Bible on confessing sin. It is the most famous prayer of confession of all, and we want to look at that, or at least listen to it, in the time that we have left, and we will do that next.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and this final part of a program that is sort of right in the middle of a seven-part series on spiritual disciplines...today, the discipline of confessing our sins...confessing our sins to God; and Dave, you referred to it just a moment ago. There are a lot of psalms of confession. We looked at Psalm 32 earlier, but no psalm is quite as famous as Psalm 51.

DAVE BAST

Right; it is again ascribed to David, and it certainly seems to fit his life circumstances. Often there will be a little heading in our Bibles that say: This is David's response to his sin with Bathsheba, a famous story from the Old Testament; maybe you are familiar with it, how David, the king, was in Jerusalem and he was at the height of his power, and he saw a beautiful woman bathing herself in her courtyard, and he sent for her and lay with her, impregnated her; and then her husband, who was off at the war...David tries to get him to come home and think he is the father...Uriah was his name...and when that doesn't work, he sends Uriah back and has him killed. So, this horrible story of this great king and righteous man who is guilty of both adultery and murder, and then he is confronted by one of the prophets.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The prophet Nathan comes and, as you recall, tells David a homely little story about a man who only had one little lamb, and there was a rich man who had whole flocks of sheep, but when a visitor came, the rich man stole the poor man's only lamb and served it up with mint jelly to his guests; and David is infuriated. How dare somebody who has it all do something like that! Then Nathan, in that great, great dramatic moment, looks at David and says: You are the man.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is what you did with Bathsheba...that is what you did to Uriah; and David is cut to the heart. We don't know with one hundred percent certainly that Psalm 51 resulted from that, but everybody who looked at it said it sure could have.

DAVE BAST

It sure sounds like it, yes; and David, even in the story, which is told in 2 Samuel...David's first response when Nathan says you are the man, David says: I have sinned. And you think, okay, pretty brave of Nathan to say that to the face of the great king. Pretty humble and appropriate for David to immediately acknowledge the truth. When you think of what he could have done, he could have just said off with his head, and that would have been the end of Nathan; and so, more fully, that statement, I have sinned, is expressed in this beautiful psalm, which begins:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. ²Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. ³For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. ⁴Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge.

Martin Luther said that repentance begins by agreeing with God, and that is exactly what the psalmist is doing here. He is agreeing with God: God, you are right when you declare me to be sinful.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And you know, the line you just read, Dave, is a line that some people these days...and maybe all through history, I don't know, but certainly, these days...might take issue with. When the psalmist says...and again, let's just sort of assume that this came out of David's adultery with Bathsheba. Some actually suggest David may have raped Bathsheba. He was the powerful king, she was nothing. He had Uriah killed. So, he says...the psalmist says: Against *you*, God...only you have I sinned. Well, a lot of people today would say: Hold on there; I think you sinned against Uriah. You sinned against Bathsheba. You sinned against their family. You sinned against your own wife, or wives. What do you mean, you sinned only against God? Well, but that is sort of the ultimate perspective. Yes, there are people we hurt and we sin against, and we need to confess our sins to each other as well. We are not going to have time to go into that, but ultimately, the psalmist here, David, let's say, is right. All sin is an offense finally against the God who created a world where that kind of stuff was not supposed to happen. All sin is offensive to God, first and foremost.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and all sin is ultimately directed against him. It is disobedience of his law. It is breaking his commandments. It is thwarting his purposes for shalom, for peace in the world. So, as you point out, Scott, we need to confess to one another. If we have sinned against them, we need to apologize and say we are sorry. In fact, in one of the future programs in this series, a program on reconciliation, we are going to talk about the need to confess our sins to each other and apologize and seek to heal the broken relationships and the damage that sin can do to one another; but fundamentally, it is sin against God; and so David goes on in the psalm to plead with God for mercy and for cleansing:

⁷Cleanse me with hyssop and I will be clean; wash me and I will be whiter than snow. ⁸Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice.

That beautiful image taken again from the law, where to deal with sin you killed a bird and you sprinkled...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, there is a cost, right?

DAVE BAST

But David couldn't know what the ultimate cost of sin would be.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; by the way, Dave, that thing you were mentioning earlier about how all sin is an offense against God. This is sort of also what got Jesus in trouble with the Pharisees, right? So, they lowered that man through the hole in the roof, remember? The first thing that Jesus says is: Your sins are forgiven. Everybody says: Wait a minute. This guy didn't do anything to you, Jesus. Who do you think you are, God? Because all sin is an offense...well, he was God.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly. He could forgive, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is right; but in Psalm 51, you not only have those incredibly heartfelt calls to confess sin, to recognize that, but also the next step, that God will then, in verse 10, create in me...this is a great song, too...create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. That is the trajectory of confession that goes straight to the gospel...straight to good news. That is why we need confession as a spiritual discipline in our

lives, because it lets us feel anew all the joy that is the gospel.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and lead on to a new life, again in the power of the Spirit and the power of God. So, let's give thanks for the mercy of God and for the confession of sin that enables us again to experience the cleansing of Jesus' blood and a new relationship once more—or renewed relationship with God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast, and we hope you will join us again next time as we study the scriptures to better understand the spiritual discipline of prayer.

Connect with us at our website, groundworkonline.com, to share what *Groundwork* means to you, or tell us what you would like to hear discussed next on *Groundwork*.

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Printed on June 3, 2026