

Why Confessing Sin Matters

Grace, Mercy, and Peace to you from God our Father, and the Lord, Christ Jesus. Amen.

The text for our message today is the epistle read earlier, emphasizing especially these words: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.” This is the text.

Dear friends in Christ,

If there’s anything you don’t want to do, it’s to rebury a cat. I must have been about 12 or so when my mother told me to grab a shovel and scoop up the cat by the side of the road and bury it. At the time I thought, “Why bury it where we always bury the animals –in the garden or the field? We work up that ground and I’d have to dig deeper. Why not bury it someplace else where we never dig or plant or have any grass?” So I decided on a spot we never used: part of the driveway out by the barn. No one ever dug that up. I didn’t know how hard that ground would be. I dug, and I chipped, and I chopped, and after an hour I finally got a hole carved out an inch or too deeper than the cat, and so considered my job done. But a week or so later my mother noticed that something was definitely wrong out there, asked what I had done, and told me to go and bury that cat properly and deep this time. And by that time the cat had changed. Folks, if there’s anything you don’t want to do, it’s to rebury a cat.

And you know what? Some people think about confessing sin that way. They think, “What’s the point of bringing that up again? Can’t we just leave it where it is and forget about it?” Well, the good news is ... Yes you can, if you’ve dealt with it properly the first time. Otherwise the stink is just going to get worse. The Bible says, “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. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.” Are you calling God a liar? If you are, then his word -- which alone brings eternal life-- has no place in you.

How do you make God a liar? By saying you have no sin, and I think you come close to it by making sin in your life into something of little or of no consequence. Once I was talking with a congregation member about allegations another person had made against him. And these were serious charges and character flaws. I would have been crushed to hear it, but the other person only laughed. I said, “You’re not taking this very seriously.” He said, “All it shows is that I’m not perfect, and I already knew that.” Yes, true, you’re not perfect, I’ll grant it, but there is too much of a tendency in our time to make too little of sin, I think, as if it didn’t really matter. Scripture says, “If we claim to have fellowship with him [the Lord] yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth.” God, you see, takes it very seriously, while we can tend to be very permissive about our own lives and the fault that rightfully belongs to us, and what we ought to take

responsibility for. I heard of a woman just yesterday who is suing the government because she hit a pothole with her bike and hurt herself. She said the pothole shouldn't have been there. Yes, in a perfect world. But this is Michigan in the spring, and there are going to be potholes, and if you are riding your bike on a road with potholes, whose responsibility is it, really, to ride carefully? I also heard of a woman who sued her microwave manufacturer because they didn't put a warning label on the machine to say not to dry your pet cat in it. Again with the cats. Sorry, all you cat lovers. But you do the same thing in a way, whenever you excuse yourself from the responsibility of your own stupidity or your own actions, and think to yourself, "Well, it's just an honest mistake. Anyone could have done that. It's an honest mistake. I'm not really as bad as all that."

When was the last time you confessed a specific sin before God? You may say, "Just a few minutes ago in the service," and you'd be right. And the forgiveness given there is complete and full and free. But I'll tell you something truthful: You can mumble through those words in the service and not even be thinking about them or really confessing. And this also is true: You can confess in the service in a kind of general way admitting that you aren't perfect, while at the same time be thinking to yourself that you really aren't all that bad compared to others. That's why I asked you when was the last time you said to God, "I'm sorry for this specific sin I did." If you cannot think of one, your conscience and spiritual life are probably pretty dull. You need to ask God to show you what *he* sees as needing work in your life; otherwise we can get so secure and comfortable with ourselves that God can't get his message through. God's idea is that when we lay our head on our pillow at night or have devotions in the morning, that we also practice confessing to God as a way to achieve what God wants to accomplish in our lives.

Our human judgment, you see, isn't always correct. It's a true story that Charlie Chaplin once entered a Charlie Chaplin look-alike contest and came in third. The way we humans see reality isn't always accurate. That's why God says, "Don't call me a liar." We confess our sins not only because we feel they are wrong—that's one very good reason, but our feelings can be off. We also confess because the Lord has said so. He is the standard, and when we confess what doesn't measure up to God's standards, according to God's Words and not just our feelings about things, this makes three very good things happen, each of which draw us closer to our Lord.

First, it allows us to walk in the light. That means we open ourselves to seeing our lives the way God sees us, and not just the way we want to see ourselves. God calls this having the "truth in us." If you pray, "Lord, show me my sin that I may confess it. Search me and know me. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting," then you allow God to let you look at your life the way you need to see it. Most of Jesus' condemnation of sin in Scripture was not against the obvious sins of the body, but against people who appeared good and respectable but whose lives were not really so good as they thought they were, and whose hearts were not geared to repentance but rather to appearance managing. They didn't think they needed a physician and they certainly didn't think they needed to make a practice of repenting or confessing. Yet our repentance is part of sanctification. Repentance is part of drawing close to God. Repentance is part of loving God and desiring what God desires for us. This text says it is part of walking in the light of the Lord.

Second, it brings the fullness of the Gospel into your life. If we belittle our sin we fail to measure it against the greatness of what God has done, because we have the wrong standard. If you're a carpenter, you can be off by a 1/16th of an inch and chances are nobody will ever know. If you're a mechanic, though, you can be off by a fraction of that and blow an engine apart. The standard is that much more exact. In our life, the standard is God. That measures what sin is, and our life is measured against the standard of a true follower of the living God. If you don't take your sin seriously, you cannot take Christ seriously, nor the greatness of what he has done for you. Sin deserves death –any sin, even the sin you are rather comfortable with today. That's why God had to take such drastic action against it. The greatness of what God has done at Easter is not that someone rose from the dead. God had done that before in several miracles already. The greatness of Easter is that the one who died bearing the sins of all the world was not destroyed by death. He answered every charge and paid the price... and then that powerful love which gave itself for you rose with full might to be present for you evermore today. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just..." He is both faithful to you always in deep devotion, and just in that he cut no corners in accomplishing your salvation, given freely to all who will accept this forgiveness. Confession makes sin real to us, which makes the Gospel of Christ's saving work all the more real.

During the communist reign in Russia, even though the Orthodox Church was allowed to operate, it was still suppressed and watched very closely by the KGB. Occasionally the Communists would organize a debate with someone from the Orthodox faith in a setting designed to discredit Christianity by bringing in some secular expert to prove the faith wrong. At one such debate, as the communist speaker set forth his logical points against the truths of Scripture, and especially the possibility of any resurrection, the Christian bishop waited patiently for his turn to speak. The Communist felt he was making great headway. When he finished speaking he was convinced that the crowd agreed, because they applauded him, much to his satisfaction. The bishop then walked up to the lectern and simply said two words, "Christos boskress!" "Christ is risen!" To which the whole crowd responded, "Boestenu boskress!" "He is risen indeed!" The truth of the resurrection was a live in the hearts of the people. And that resurrection victory purifies those who will accept it from all unrighteousness.

Now, what is the effect of this salvation? John writes, "My dear children, I write this to you so that **you will not sin.**" The ought to be a difference in our life. So John makes a big deal about confessing. Confession is part of what keeps our life on the right track, because it alerts us to where we are starting to go astray. The text continues, "But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense-- Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world."

The third result of a life of active confession is that it makes fellowship more real to us: Fellowship with God and fellowship with other Christians. John writes, "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ... If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin."

Fellowship is having something in common, in this case a shared salvation. It is having eternal life together. It is being forgiven together and by each other. I was talking

with a fellow in the church who as a young married man brought home a box of chocolates and six long-stem roses for his wife on Valentine's Day. She wasn't impressed. She said, "You just bought them because you like to eat them. And as for those flowers, they're just going to die anyway. I don't know why you waste your money buying them." In anger, he knocked the chocolates off the table, threw the flowers, and stormed out of the house to the bar until three in the morning. When he came home, still hot, she was waiting up for him. At that point, there were any number of things she could have said. She could have said she thought he had over-reacted to her words, or that his going to the bar was an act of immaturity, and she may have been right on both counts, but that's not what she should have said first, is it? You know what she needed to say. What she said was, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said those things. I was completely wrong." At that point there were three things he should have said: "I forgive you," first of all. That's the first thing he really ought to have said. "I'm sorry for knocking chocolates all over the room," for another. I don't know if he said those things, because I wasn't there. Not all my illustrations are about me. One thing he did say was, "You're right. Don't do it again." He allowed the confession to be real. He didn't say, "Don't worry about it," or "It was nothing, really." He accepted her confession and that was a beginning of restoring the bond between them. If they had just ignored the wrong and let it go, it would have caused a later problem for them.

As Christians we have fellowship, a bond of shared experience holding us together. It's called "forgiveness," or "the grace of God." St. John here calls us to practice confession because we need to know and feel that sin is real and that grace is real to live the Christian life. We need it for fellowship with God, and for fellowship with one another, confessing to one another as well when we have been wrong, and enjoying the fellowship of being one in grace together through Christ and his resurrection. So confess your sins for the health of your spirit. I can tell you that neither dead cats nor unresolved sin improve with age. I talked to a congregation member who for several months this winter had a dead goat, two dead sheep and a couple cats on a pile because he was waiting for the right time to bury them. He was waiting for the ground to thaw. Unlike him, for us the right time to confess is always right away, for our Lord has promised to remove those sins from us completely, and so to give us a rich experience of his grace and fellowship. Amen.