

Confess to God

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[0 : 00] Let us pray one more time before we look at these passages. Heavenly Father, you are light, and therefore you are the source of all illumination.

And so, Father, we pray that you will shine into our minds so that we might have understanding. You will shine into our hearts so that we might have conviction. And you will help us to see the light of the world, the Lord Jesus, who transfers us from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen. Confession is a gift from God. Now that might come as a surprise. After all, you usually wouldn't put the word confession and the word gift together, would you?

When I was in primary school, my parents discovered that I had lied to them about when my Chinese exams were taking place. And my dad in particular got very angry as he cornered me and eventually got me to confess before beating me.

And so confession for me was associated with something negative. I certainly wouldn't call it a gift. On the contrary, it felt more like a curse.

[1 : 19] And to say confession is a gift might also come as a surprise because, wait a minute, isn't confession something only Roman Catholics do?

And isn't B-E-M-K-E-C a Protestant evangelical church? So clearly we don't practice sitting in some cramped booth as some stern elderly priest listens in.

We don't believe in confession, right? So what's the relevance? But today, I want to convince all of us that confession, rightly conceived, is actually a gift from God.

And God has given it to us because it is central to living the Christian life joyfully. It is one of what I will call habits of grace, something that God encourages us to do.

Not simply because we have to, but because doing so will help us know and enjoy Jesus more and more. But how exactly is this habit a gift?

[2 : 32] And how can we cultivate this habit of grace? That's what we're going to explore this morning. And the way I'm going to do so is under these four headings. The necessity of confession, the alternative to confession, the joy in confession, and the practice of confession.

So firstly, the necessity of confession. Why exactly might we need to confess our sin? Well, let me begin answering this question by introducing you to the idea of spiritual clutter.

I got this image, by the way, from a pastor called Doug Wilson, who has certain theological positions that I don't completely agree with, but on this point, I found him immensely helpful.

Now, I'm sure many of you have clutter in your homes, don't you? Open your drawers, and you'll realize that it is a mishmash of AA batteries and old birthday cards and cheap jewelry that you haven't thought about in years.

Or maybe open your closets and find all sorts of clothes and socks you have forgotten that you've had. Or perhaps go to the storeroom, and suddenly you'll discover all sorts of things have piled up, and no one has had the will yet to sort it all out.

[3 : 55] And the truth is, clutter also builds up in our spiritual lives. This clutter, of course, comes in the form of sin.

Besetting sins, unresolved sin, compulsive sin. Perhaps it's a tendency to grumble, or an overly judgmental attitude, or perhaps a pattern of exaggeration.

But whatever it is, we all have some clutter. So what? Isn't clutter harmless? Well, in Hebrews 12, verse 1, the writer uses that striking phrase, the sin that so easily entangles.

And that's what clutter does, doesn't it? It entangles us. It makes us feel messed up. It gets us all stressed when we can't find what we are looking for, and then overwhelms and disorients us with its

sheer scale.

Same with spiritual clutter. It gets in the way. It trips us up. It clogs up the spaces of our minds and of our hearts. It blocks the light.

[5 : 17] And actually, that is a big problem. How so? Well, let me take you now to one of our Bible readings for today, 1 John 1.

Perhaps you might want to open your Bibles again to that passage if you have closed it. Look at verse 5. What does it say? God is light.

In him there is no darkness at all. John, of course, is giving us a statement about God's essential character and nature.

God is light. So he lights up our world. I'll put it another way. He gives life. He gives warmth. He showcases his glory.

But here is the problem. Light and darkness cannot mix. After all, what else does light do?

[6 : 16] It removes darkness. Darkness. That's what happens whenever you switch on a light in a room, right? Your finger goes click. And it's bye-bye darkness.

And God is light, blazing so bright that it is impossible to find a trace of darkness in him at all. He is pure and perfect in every way, all of the time.

That means God, in millions of years, has never ever once gotten mad in a bad way.

God has never said a gossipy word about anyone. Ever. In the face of a billion grievances that he could rightfully take up, God has never ever gotten bitter.

Not even once. God is light. But our clutter, to use the language of 1 John, is darkness.

[7 : 22] Our clutter blocks the light. Our clutter cannot mix with the light. So, as long as we have clutter, we are blocked from experiencing intimacy with God.

And that is a tragedy because we were made for fellowship with him. We were made to experience his life and his warmth and his friendship.

But now, the clutter of our sin has blocked us from all of that. And we desperately want to reclaim that intimacy.

So, what can we do? Well, the Bible says, the way back, as we will see later on in the sermon, is actually to confess our sin.

It is to bring our clutter to him for decluttering purposes. That's how we can reclaim intimate fellowship with God. That's why confession is necessary.

[8 : 31] But the truth is, we just don't like the idea. And that's why we so often default to the alternative. And that brings me to our second heading, the alternative to confession.

You see, what could we do instead of confessing our sin? We could conceal our clutter. We conceal our sin.

That's the alternative. Instead of bringing our sin into God's light, we prefer to hide it in some way, thinking that we can still maintain a vibrant relationship with God while doing so.

And that's what some of the people in John's day were doing. And honestly speaking, 2,000 years later, that hasn't changed. And it can be done in a couple of ways.

One way is found in chapter 1, verse 8. We can claim to be without sin. Or to put it simply, we claim sin isn't there.

[9 : 44] And so we say, yes, I'm imperfect. But deep down inside, at my core, oh, I'm not sinful. It's not really who I am. I'm good.

And we even say it to God. You know, sometimes God shines a light on our clutter. It could be through his word. It could be through another Christian.

It could even be through our conscience. But if we employ the 1 John 1, verse 8 strategy, the moment God spotlights our sin, we could clearly push it back into the shadows.

We put it out of our minds and quickly refocus on the parts of our lives that we think has no clutter.

And so we tell God, hey, forget that mess.

See how well I serve in church today? Or see how much I have read my Bible today? See how much better I was in comparison with that guy or that girl over there today?

[10 : 49] We become like shabby real estate agents, treating God as a client who can be fooled by just showing him the presentable parts of the house of our hearts.

When we do that, we know that we have become 1 John 1, verse 8 people. We claim we have not sinned.

But as the Bible teacher, Donald Bunthouse, once observed, what is tragic about becoming 1 John 1, verse 8 people is that once we believe ourselves free from sin, we believe that everything we do cannot be sin.

In other words, we believe nothing is my fault, so anything wrong must be someone else's fault. And so being a 1 John 1, verse 8 person means we actually become someone who often blames others, which makes us rather infuriating and unattractive, doesn't it?

Concealing our sin, ironically, simply makes us uglier, not prettier. So that is one way we conceal our sin.

[12:17] But another way is found in chapter 1, verse 6, which I suspect is more common to us. Let me read it. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth.

Now this time, we don't say that sin isn't there. Of course it is. We know our theology. We believe sin exists. But what we say now is that sin doesn't really matter that much.

Sin doesn't really matter that much. So yes, we nod our heads in agreement when the pastor at church talks about sin.

In our private prayers, we might even say sorry sometimes. But it is mere formality. Deep down, we believe we can still sin without it ever truly affecting our walk with God.

That's what verse 6 is getting at. And how do we know if we have become 1 John 1 verse 6 people? I think it's when we commit the sin of not dealing with our sin.

[13:48] That is how Pastor Wilson phrases it and I personally found that very convicting. When we commit the sin of not dealing with our sin, so often it's because we believe it doesn't really matter all that much.

Again, come back to that picture of clutter. And the thing about clutter is that as it accumulates, you know, you get used to it sometimes, don't you? You know, that rather musty smell or those little specks of dust or all those worn out boxes, you know, somewhere in the corner of your room. Well, it no longer bothers you the way that it used to. And since our spiritual clutter doesn't bother us, we decide it's okay to let it fester rather than deal with it.

We might be a little too judgmental or a little too cynical or a little too self-reliant, but we have decided, oh, it's okay, just let it be.

It's no big deal. But concealing our clutter is always a bad idea regardless of whether we do it in a verse 6 or verse 8 way.

[15:09] Why? We've already seen one reason it impacts our fellowship with God negatively. But another reason the Bible tells us is because whenever we do so, we are actually engaging in an act of profound self-harm.

This week as I studied this subject, I was especially struck by Proverbs 28 verse 13. Let me just read to you the first half of this verse. It should appear on the screen. Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper.

Did you hear that? God is saying this strategy is actually a recipe for failure. How so? Well, 1 John 1 verse 9 tells us it says that if we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves.

We are scamming ourselves. We are living out alive, as 6 says. We are pretending that things are okay when they are not. Like when a patient suffers a brain aneurysm, it just convinces themselves that they are just having a mild headache or something like that.

We sabotage ourselves because when we sin, we are guilty. And every attempt to deny or hide our guilt is like adding burning coals on ourselves.

[16:50] I don't know if any of you have ever read Edgar Allan Poe's short story, The Tell-Tale Heart. Now, in this story, the narrator has committed the perfect crime, or so he thinks.

He has murdered and hidden his victim under the floorboards. But all throughout, he cannot stop hearing a ringing in his ears. It sounds to him like the heartbeat of the man he has killed.

And throughout this story, this imagined heartbeat just keeps getting louder and louder and louder no matter what he tries to do to silence it until finally, he can bear it no more and he breaks down and confesses to the police.

And what the story is demonstrating to us is that all unresolved guilt places a burden on us that eventually becomes too heavy to bear.

In fact, in our other Bible reading for today, did you notice how the psalmist King David has more or less the same experience as the narrator of Paul's story?

[18 : 05] David, it seems, has committed some great sin, perhaps even the famous one where he commits adultery with Beersheba and has a husband killed, and he recounts his experience following his sin.

Just glance with me at Psalm 32 verses 3 and 4 on the screen. You see, without acknowledgement resolution, guilt will weigh us down.

We groan, we feel lethargic, our minds become unfocused. Even if we conceal our sin, it still affects us.

Because however much we try to suppress it, deep down we know our sin is there and it will keep bothering us mentally, emotionally, perhaps even physically.

And so we are desperate for release. And if that release does not come through confession, if we keep silent, it comes out through something else.

[19 : 37] Depending on our temperament, it will come out as anxiety, or anger, or overwork, or perhaps even as substance abuse.

concealing our sin doesn't end well. But if so, why do we still work so hard to conceal our sin then?

John Stott, one of our wisest pastors from the 20th century, helps us here. He says the real reason we tend to cover our sins before God is because we want to conceal them from ourselves.

We cannot bear the humiliation of seeing and facing ourselves as we really are. We love the fantasy image that we have created of ourselves too much.

And so if our sin is uncovered, it is too much of a shock to the system. It throws us off completely. It leaves us feeling too vulnerable, too unacceptable, too naked, or to use the language of Psalm 130, if you, Lord, kept a record of sins, who could stand?

[21 : 02] How can we show our face before God or look ourselves in the mirror if we know we are rightly condemned?

And that's why we conceal. We rather risk self-harm rather than be exposed as a lustful man or as a greedy woman.

But this is where the marvel of the gospel comes in. What if God says uncovering yourself doesn't lead to condemnation?

What if being exposed doesn't lead to denunciation? What if confession doesn't attract God's criticism but instead leads to healing?

What if it leads even to joy? What if there is even joy in confession? And that brings us to our third heading for today joy in confession.

[22 : 12] You see God says in the end we have two options when it comes to our sin. We can conceal or we can confess. And what does each lead to?

Now at first we think concealing is better because it means that we can still project that fantasy image of ourselves. But listen to Proverbs 28 verse 13 again this time in its entirety and notice how it turns our thinking upside down.

Proverbs 28 verse 13 should be on the screen. Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy.

Or listen to how it is spelled out more fully in 1 John 1 verse 9. If we confess our sins he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

You see God says if you try to cover up your sin all that will happen is that I will uncover them anyway and that won't be good for you at all.

[23 : 37] But God says here is my promise to you. Here is my gift to you. My gift to you is that if you choose to be totally honest with me if you leave your sin uncovered before me I will be more than happy to cover them for you.

If you confess your sins are forgiven you are cleansed. Now think carefully about what God is saying and not saying.

He doesn't say look you better clean yourselves up before you appear before me. Better get rid of all that clutter first otherwise you'll get my deaf stare.

No, God doesn't say that for the very simple reason he knows we cannot clean ourselves up. And so God says why don't you ask me to do the cleaning up?

Because that is what confession is. Confession is not us cleaning up. It is us admitting that we have messed up and now humbly asking someone else to do the cleaning up.

[24 : 59] We're asking God to clean up. We're doing what happens whenever there is a leak in my apartment. We call the plumber in to come in and fix things because I know that if I do it, I'll just

make things worse, not better.

The only reason I wouldn't call the plumber is because I want to try to repair the pipes, it's because I want to save my pride, but actually I'll probably just end up doing more physical damage to the pipes and more reputational damage to myself anyway.

And that is why we are encouraged to confess our sin. After all, the stain on our souls resulting from those sins are just too much.

And at best, we only have toy water guns when what we need is a powerful pressure jet. And the gospel tells us that the cross is the most powerful pressure jet of all.

For how is it that we are purified from all unrighteousness? John tells us in 2 verse 2, it's because our Lord Jesus Christ is the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

[26 : 20] Our Lord Jesus Christ took upon himself the full weight of all our transgressions and bore the punishment we deserve and in so doing removes the defilement of our sin and gives us the cleansing we so desperately need.

But maybe at this point a question has arisen in your mind. If Christ has offered this once for all sacrifice on the cross on our behalf, why do we still need to confess regularly?

Isn't our sin already fully forgiven? It is a question that the well-known Singaporean pastor Joseph Prince has considered. And his answer is that 1 John 1 verse 9 isn't actually a verse for believers, it's only for unbelievers.

In fact, he says, if you keep confessing sin as believers, you're simply putting yourself under bondage because it makes you too sin conscious.

You should to use his terminology, simply confess righteousness instead. Now, let's examine this, right?

[27 : 44] You can understand the pastoral impulse behind his answer, can't you? After all, how many of us have had an experience like this one? You know, we did something wrong, we know that we let God down, we risked sin, and we know that we are guilty?

And we know that we should come to God. But precisely because we have sinned and we feel guilty, we don't want to come to God because we are afraid that he'll simply get even more angry and grumpy with us.

But then we feel worse because now we're not coming to God, and we're not reading the Bible, and we're not praying, and then we're sinning even more. And then it just spirals out of control.

And Joseph Prince seems keen to help Christians from falling into such a vicious cycle. But unfortunately, his handling of the scriptures is completely wrong.

Now there are several ways we can show this, but for today let me just briefly show you one. In chapter 2, verse 1, notice who John is writing to. my dear children.

[28 : 52] In other words, believers. Now, Joseph Prince is aware of this, and so he says, oh, this only applies to chapter 2 onwards. It doesn't apply to chapter 1.

But notice how John continues in chapter 2, verse 1. My dear children, I write this to you. Now, what is the this?

In context, it can only be one John chapter 1. At the very least, from verse 5, onwards, so chapter 1 and chapter 2 cannot be separated.

His position is simply impossible to sustain. So, okay, Joseph Prince got it wrong, but pastor, you asked me, you still haven't answered the question.

If Christ died once for all, why do we still need to confess? Well, let me try to answer by way of illustration. What happens whenever we trust Christ as Savior and Lord?

[29 : 59] We have been invited into God's family home. We have gained the status of being His forgiven children, and we enjoy genuine fellowship with our Father.

And as long as we are trusting in the Gospel, we never leave the house. Now, that is wonderfully true. But remember that image of clutter?

Now, imagine if you just let all sorts of clutter build up in the house to the point that it's actually very disruptive. In fact, it hinders your relationship with your father.

Now, you're not out of the house, but you don't enjoy living in the house because you feel the need to hide away in your bedroom, away from your father because you're so embarrassed about the clutter.

But here is the thing. As long as you are not confessing, there is no decluttering happening because you're not admitting that the clutter is there and you're not asking for it to be cleaned up.

[31 : 08] And so, you're straining the relationship. But the truth is, God is just waiting for you to confess to him, not because he wants to have a go at you, but because he wants you to enjoy your relationship with him once again.

And that is why God wants us to confess. That's why he says it is a gift. Because, yes, thanks to the cross, we are guaranteed a place in his house.

That is once and for all. But precisely because we live in the house, in his house, we never want clutter to build up. And regularly confessing our sin allows decluttering to happen and for us to enjoy living in God's house.

But perhaps we worry. What if after we ask God to declutter, we find that it accumulates all over again? You know, isn't that what always happens?

Like, eh, I thought I just decluttered last year and then I opened the closet again and oh, why are all these things doing here again? And isn't that how the Christian life is often like?

[32 : 25] You know, no matter how hard we push back against sin, we find that we won't be totally rid of it in this life. In fact, sometimes it seems like the longer we live in God's house, the more we begin to see that we clutter it in ways that we didn't realize before.

So how? John says, don't worry. Because 1 John 1 verse 9 doesn't just say God will come with the pressure jet once, he doesn't declutter once, rather it says he is faithful and just to do it every single time we confess.

Because Jesus has already paid for our sins, and so he will never stop advocating for us. Now do you see how reassuring that is?

God has bound himself to forgive all those who are truly trusting in Christ. There is never a time where he says, enough, no more, you have run out of credit.

And that's why there is joy in confession. That's why I call it a habit of grace, because it is a grace-empowered spiritual discipline. And maybe I should call it a habit of joy, too, because that is certainly the experience of King David, isn't it?

[33 : 53] Can you hear just how happy he is in Psalm 32, verses 1 and 2? Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.

Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against them, and in whose spirit is no deceit. You see, when you know you need forgiveness, and you know you've got it, you're truly blessed. And that is what confession helps you know. So please don't listen to Joseph Prince and let him rob you of this wonderful gift. But before we end, we have one last heading to look at, and that is the practice of confession.

how can we cultivate this habit of grace? Well, let me just give you a few pointers. Firstly, acknowledge your sin whenever God shows it to you.

Now, remember David's experience prior to being forgiven? In Psalm 32, verse 4, he says that God's hand was heavy upon him. It was pressing his guilt upon him.

[35 : 10] And by the way, when I say guilt here, I'm genuine guilt, not false guilt. So whenever you feel God's hand pressing upon you, recognize it as mercy.

Because that means he has not left you alone with your sin. Rather, he is kajow-ing you out of love to get you out of that sin.

He is showing you your sin in order to free you from it. And so whenever God reveals our sin to us, let's be quick to do what David does in verse 5.

Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, I will confess my transgressions to the Lord. We should confess.

And by the way, I almost made it to the end of the sermon without ever formally defining what confession is. So let me do that now. The Greek word for confession is homologio, which is a combination of two words.

[36 : 17] Homo, which means the same, you know, like homosexual, same sex. And logio, you know, logos means word, so logio to speak. So put together, it's something like to speak the same thing.

And so to confess simply means you agree with what God says about you. If God says, Brian, you are lying right now, or Brian, you are being too self-indulgent right now, we don't argue with him. We agree, we acknowledge, and we confess. God, you are right. I am indeed being too self-indulgent right now.

Please forgive me. we are saying the same thing as God. And it helps to be specific. Don't hide our sin in generalities.

Don't minimize it. Instead of being vague with God, sorry, I struggled with lust, tell him, Lord, I grieve you by logging onto my computer and looking at that specific pornographic website.

[37 : 31] When we do that, we are staring our sin squarely in the face, which hurts, but we are also paving the way for healing, because we are telling him specifically what kind of clutter has been blocking us from him.

And it is best done quickly. The longer we wait, the more we are likely to become more reluctant or to rationalize it away. And then secondly, receive God's forgiveness.

Now look again at verse 5. What is the sentence right after David says he confessed? I said I will confess my transgressions to the Lord and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

That's it. And you say, really? Yes, that's it. You know, isn't that wonderful? Sometimes we think that confession means that we have to take a very prolonged woe is me attitude.

Now, we should grieve whenever we displease God, but God is not interested in us beating ourselves up. He says, hey, Jesus has already paid it all, remember?

[38 : 48] In a sense, he has already been beaten up for you. No need to do all that. Because as verse 7 says, the Lord is already our hiding place.

He has already surrounded us with songs of deliverance because Jesus is our advocate. And that is why at the end of Psalm 32, verse 11, it says we can rejoice in the Lord and be glad.

We can sing because God has cleansed us and made us upright in heart. And thirdly, participate not just in private but public confession.

Now, in this sermon, I have mainly concentrated on just one aspect of confession and that is confessing to God. But did you know the Bible also encourages us to confess to one another?

Look at James 5, verse 16. Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. now, we have no time to talk about this today.

[39 : 53] Perhaps we might come back to it when we come to the fourth of our habits of grace later this month, talk about forgiveness. But I mention it just to say that this is also a gift God gives to us.

Because when we confess to others, we are inviting them to speak into and help us in our weaknesses and our temptations as well.

But I also mean public confession in one more sense. And that is the prayer of confession we say at church, whether formally, like we would do in a moment, or informally, when we are praying, not using said words.

Now, why is it helpful to confess not just individually, but as a church? There are a few reasons, but let me just give you one for today. Because it reminds us we are all in the same boat.

All of us have fallen short. All of us cannot claim to be without sin. All of us need forgiveness. You know, sometimes we might look around and we wonder, oh, am I the only one who is so sinful?

[41 : 07] Everyone else seems to be living such perfect lives. But confessing together reminds us that actually that is not true. And it reminds us what church is.

For what is church? Church is not a group of people who have everything sorted out. Church is not a group of people who claim to have no sin. No. Church is a group of people who know that they continue to have spiritual clutter in their lives and only God can sort them out.

And that helps us not to be self-righteous. That helps us also to be gracious to one another because we all know we have clutter in our lives. It's just a matter of what form it takes.

But confessing together also binds us together because we are helping each other remember what a great saviour we have.

He is faithful and just. Just. And so with that I want to invite all of us now to participate in corporate confession.

[42 : 18] Let me just invite all the musicians back up on the stage now and as the musicians come back up let us all bow our heads. Let us all approach the Lord resolving to take seriously whatever sin the Holy Spirit calls to our minds and to confess it to him.

And after a moment of silence we will say the prayer of confession that will appear on the screen together. But after that let us receive his forgiveness and be glad in the gospel.

For another gift that God has given to us to help us to be glad in the gospel is actually the Lord's Supper which is a vivid way of reminding us once again what Jesus has done by the breaking of his body and the shedding of his blood to cleanse us.

The Lord's Supper is a gracious invitation for us to draw near to him again by faith alone through grace alone. So let us be quiet now as we come to God.

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[44 : 16] Let us pray these words together based on Psalm 51. Have mercy on us, O God, according to your steadfast love.

Watch us thoroughly from our iniquity and cleanse us from our sin. For we know our transgressions and our sin is ever before us.

Against you, you only, have we sinned and done what is evil in your sight. Create in us a clean, hallowed God and renew a right spirit within us.

Cast us not away from your presence, but restore to us the joy of your salvation, that we may offer our lives as a sacrifice of praise to you.

Amen. Hear again those wonderful words from 1 John 1, verse 9. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

[45 : 26] That is why we can be glad in the gospel. So let us rejoice in what the Lord Jesus has done. And we will do that as we participate in the Lord's Supper together.

Amen. Amen.