



Spiritual Discipline of Confession and Self-examination

CONFESSION MAY BE GOOD FOR THE SOUL, but it can be very hard to do. We are invested in looking like good moral people. After all, appearing good is one way of dealing with the notion that something is wrong with us. We haven't murdered anyone or robbed a bank. Furthermore, when we do wrong, we try to fix it and make it better. We can put a great deal of energy into maintaining the image that we are good moral people. But this very appearance of goodness can be a way we defend ourselves against our sin. For when we can't see our sin, we have nothing to confess.

The truth is that we all sin. Sin is anything that breaks relationships. Jesus is totally realistic about broken relationships. He experienced them. He was put to death by them. Yet Jesus taught that the damage done through sin was not the last word on life. Sin could be confessed. Sin could be forgiven. And sinful people could be set free. Much of Jesus' teachings and at least a third of his parables are about forgiveness. Over and over again he modelled what it looked like to bless when you are cursed and to forgive when people don't deserve to be forgiven. Furthermore, one of the central pleas of the Lord's Prayer focuses on confession and forgiveness: "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us."

True repentance means we open the bad in our lives to God. We invite him to come right in and look at our sin with us. We don't hide by being good, moral people or in neurotic self-recriminations. We don't pretend to be other than we are. We don't disguise the truth by carting out all the disciplines we practice. We tell it like it is-without rationalization, denial or blame-to the only person in the universe who will unconditionally love us when we are bad. We hand over the pretence, image management, manipulation, control and self-obsession. In the presence of the holy One we give up on appearing good and fixing our sin. We lay down our ability to change by the power of the self. We turn to Jesus and seek forgiveness.

Jesus, the only Son of God, died a violent, unspeakable death so we could know what freedom from sin tastes like. Jesus laid his power down, suffered and became sin so that we would not be condemned. Every time we confess how we have missed the mark of God's love and truth, we open ourselves up to the mending work of the cross. Jesus' wounds hold true life-changing power. This is the shocking reality that confession can open up to its. Through confession and forgiveness, we live into the truth of being God's new creation! The old is gone. The new has come.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Does your confession tend to be along the lines of "Forgive my sins, dear Lord" rather than specifically naming your sins one by one before the face of God? What does the lack of specific confession do to self-awareness?
2. What experiences have affected your ability to give and receive forgiveness? Talk to God about what this means.
3. When have you tasted the joy of forgiveness? What was that like for you? What is it like for you to confess your sins before a friend or confessor? Which of your sins hurts those closest to you?

SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

1. Imagine you are in a safe place, surrounded by the love of God.
 - Ask God to help you see yourself as he sees you. Remember he sees you absolutely and with love.
 - Using the Ten Commandments as a guide, journal your sins. When you have finished, go through each commandment one at a time, asking God to forgive you and help you to change.
 - Then burn your list in a symbolic act of what it means to have God remove your sins from you.
2. Set aside some time for confession and self-examination. In the presence of God ask for light to pierce your defences.
 - Then ask yourself; Who have I injured recently through thoughtlessness, neglect, anger and so on?
 - As the Holy Spirit brings people to mind, confess your feelings about these people to God. Ask God to forgive you and if need be to give you grace to forgive them.
 - Write an apology, make a phone call or confess out loud in an attempt to put the relationship back on track.
3. Make a life confession-alone or to a trusted friend or confessor.
 - Dividing your life into seven-year segments, reflect on the sins particular to each segment.
 - Confess your sins aloud. Receive the freedom that comes in knowing you stand completely in the clear before a holy God.
4. Ask some of your family and close friends to help you see your blind spots. Ask questions like; What do I do that hurts you? How could I better love you? What is it like to be with me? Do I show interest in others or talk mostly about myself? Let their answers guide you in a time of confession.

5. Enter into a covenant group or an accountability relationship where you cannot hide. Tell the truth about who you are and ask your partners to pray for you and help you change.
6. Imagine the kind of person you would like to become in your old age. Then look at your life and assess whether or not the way you live now is preparing you to become this person.
 - Confess where you need to change. Ask God and the community of faith for help.
7. Turn to Psalm 32 or Psalm 51. Use the psalm as a way of bringing your own sins before God.
 - How does God meet you in these confessions of David?
8. How in touch do you feel with your own sin?
 - If you feel out of touch with your sin, honestly consider where some of the following sins show up in your life: envy, lust, greed, gluttony, deceit, lying, exaggerating, envy, anger, pretence, avoidance of responsibility.
 - What do you see about yourself? How do you want to talk to God about these things?
 - Confess where you have fallen short of God's expectations and receive his forgiveness.
9. Begin to notice your strong emotions. When do you feel yourself getting hot, defensive, angry, withdrawn? What is motivating your emotion? What behaviour stems from your emotion?
 - As you attend to this internal world, ask God to make you alert to what triggers strong emotional reactions. Confess any sin relating to these reactions.
 - Practice noticing your internal world, and begin to develop a habit of immediate confession.