When Sorry Doesn’t Cut It

The Prayer of Confession

By Jason Hubbard

I remember one night agonizing over stealing some nails from a local hardware store. I was ten years old, and I knew it was wrong. My dad got a call from the owner, proceeded downstairs to my room, and asked if I needed to tell him anything. I finally mustered up the courage to confess. He was gracious.

When we went to the store to return the nails, I vividly remember the relief I felt when I “came clean” and told the store manager I was sorry. He was so kind to forgive me—and thanked me for telling the truth.

David understood the power of confession when he wrote a psalm exposing the depth of his grief over his sin, the impact it had on him physically, emotionally, and spiritually, and the relief in knowing God as the One who forgives and restores.

He writes in Psalm 32:1–7:

> *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.*
>
> *When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.*
>
> *Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.” And you forgave the guilt of my sin.*

> *Therefore let all the faithful pray to you while you may be found; surely the rising of the mighty waters will not reach them. You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance.*

One of the things I admire about David is his confidence in God's relentless mercy! After much weakness and failure, he continues to come before God and declare, "Blessed is the one who transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered."

To be "blessed" is a promise of complete wellness of being and profound fulfillment. The most fulfilled life belongs to those who have been forgiven!

David sees himself as one who is blessed because he learned the discipline of "confession." He acknowledged his sin and did not hide from the iniquity of it. He says, "I will confess my transgression to the Lord." David understands that when he confesses his sins, God covers them and forgives him. Why? Because He doesn't count his sin against him.

For instance, let's say I got a D on a test in class. The next day the professor says, "I am not going to count that test toward your final grade." David is saying when he confesses his sin, God doesn't count it against him.

Pathway to Forgiveness

So, what does it really mean to confess? When you know you have failed and have acknowledged it's your fault, how do you get up again like David in such a way that you have more joy and peace than before?

This psalm reminds me of Luke 7 where Jesus meets a woman of the street, most likely a prostitute. She anoints His feet with her ointment and her tears, and then wipes them with her hair. Jesus declares to Simon, "Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But

whoever has been forgiven little loves little" (vs. 47).

Jesus says those who understand the depth of their sin and have accepted God's gracious gift of forgiveness demonstrate that they love well! Both David and this woman of the street help us understand that the most blessed, compassionate, fulfilled, and happiest people are those who know they are forgiven.

When it comes to forgiveness, there are often three types of people:

- those who have too high a view of themselves and don't see their real need of forgiveness
- those who have too low of view of themselves and believe they are too bad to be forgiven
- those who know they need to be forgiven much and yet have by faith accepted and received the work of Christ done on their behalf.

As Tim Keller says,

> *The Christian Gospel is that I am so flawed that Jesus had to die for me, yet I am so loved and valued that Jesus was glad to die for me. This leads to deep humility and deep confidence at the same time. It undermines both swaggering and sniveling. I cannot feel superior to anyone, and yet I have nothing to prove to anyone. I do not think more of myself nor less of myself. Instead, I think of myself less.*[1]

To be sure, confession is not a popular discipline in the Church today. Many of us shrink from sincere confession. We minimize sin, calling it a mistake or a blunder. It is easy to condemn the world's sin more than our own. We tend to judge based on externals and blame others when we do sin, rather than owning our sin. We can easily put sins in a hierarchy, and therefore tolerate some sins (especially our own) more than others.

To confess means to see our sins as God sees them, to hate them as God hates them, and oppose them as God in His wrath opposes them. For the believer, sin leads to uncomfortable feelings of guilt, shame, and anxiety. It disrupts our relationship with God. As Alvin VanderGriend writes, "Sin affects our intimacy with God, confession restores it."[2]

Practice of Confession

Confession does not resolve our sin. Admitting our sin is an important part of the process, but words do not resolve sin. We can be sorry for something we have done wrong and even confess it, yet still desire to continue doing it. Agreeing that we have done something wrong is not the same thing as trusting God with what we have done. Confession is not the same as truly needing God to free us of the sin we have done.

In confession, we need to practice three things on a regular basis:

1. **Decide what's true or false according to God's Word and His ways.** In Psalm 32, David admits his sin is sin because of the mind and heart of God disclosed in Scripture. The Bible determines the truth about one's sin. David doesn't hide or conceal his sin before God, but declares, "Against you, you only, have I sinned. . . " (Ps. 51:4).

Scripture is the plumbline. It doesn't matter what I feel, what my friends think, what the media says, or what my spouse tells me. Scripture is the straightedge of truth about what is right and wrong.

2. **Understand the sinfulness of our sin**. There is a difference between self-pity and godly sorrow. David not only confesses his sin, but the *iniquity* of his sin—the "sinfulness of his sin."

One of the keys to confession is getting in the shoes, so to speak, of the one you sinned against. Ask God to help you

understand what he or she feels—and give you empathy that leads to godly sorrow and grief rather than self-pity. Many will confess their sin, but then just days later—sometime even hours later—end up repeating the same sin again.

True biblical confession must involve understanding the depth of the sin against others. Instead of wallowing in self-pity, defending ourselves, or hiding from the truth of how we have wounded and wronged another, let's walk in the shoes of the person we have wronged.

Have you ever heard someone say, "Well, if I have offended you, I am sorry"? Excuse me! What they are really saying is, "I don't want to go to the trouble of admitting that I have hurt you."

Biblical confession says something like this: "I can hardly imagine, though I have tried, how you must have felt because of what I did. Therefore, I am truly sorry." To the Lord you might confess, "Oh, Lord, I can hardly imagine what it is like for You to give everything to me and to die for me, and then have me break Your heart when I sin like this. Please forgive me and give me a clean slate."

True repentance and confession begin when blame-shifting, self-pity, and self-centeredness end.

3. **Take full responsibility**. You can say you're sorry, but do you mean it? Does it bring about change? True prayers of confession are the expression of your repentance.

When you are truly broken and recognize your need to repent and turn, your prayers of confession will bring your heart change into alignment with God's heart. True confession with your mouth must be connected to your heart. James 5:16 points to confession of sins that leads to healing. Until we both repent and confess, we cannot live fully in the Kingdom of God.

David's confession in Psalm 32 came out of deep brokenness—and his belief that God is a good and loving God. David knew the good news that as we confess sin—*and* accept God's forgiveness—we are no longer headed to despair. We must pray for power to overcome sin and for God to reveal our next practical action step in moving toward change.

I remember a season in our marriage when I was struggling with lust. I couldn't just confess and say "sorry" to my wife. She certainly forgave me, but I had to take steps to put protection on my computer to block pornography, commit to a men's accountability group, and do some pastoral counseling sessions to uncover places of wounding that needed healing.

Preach the Gospel to Yourself Every Day!

Most of us want to hide from our sin rather than take full responsibility. As David says, the key is to hide in the Lord and allow Him to be our covering. I don't have to cover or defend myself anymore. Why? Because in the gospel God covers me and accepts me, not because I deserve it but because of His work on my behalf at the cross!

Crucifixion was the worst kind of execution. A criminal was stripped naked, exposed, and mocked—the ultimate dehumanization. Jesus was crucified on your behalf. He was stripped so you can be clothed, exposed so you can be covered! Because of the work of Christ on our behalf, we can declare with the apostle Paul, "there is now no condemnation for those who are *in* Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1, emphasis added). We say to Jesus, "You are my hiding place, You surround me, You cover me, and You are my real security!"

In light of God's holiness and my sinfulness, I run to the cross of Christ, knowing the "blessedness" of being forgiven! Grateful joy erupts in my life when I preach the gospel to myself every day—and believe this great good news! I remember His relentless mercy. God doesn't give me what I deserve

because of my sin, including punishment, wrath, and eternal separation in hell.

The amazing grace of Jesus gives me what I don't deserve—things like forgiveness of sin, eternal life, adoption into a new family, a future, and a hope. All satisfying joy is found in Jesus!

What a glorious gospel. Confess and be blessed!

[1]Tim Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York, Riverhead Books, 2008), 181.

[2]Alvin VanderGriend, *The Joy of Prayer* (Terre Haute: PrayerShop Publishing, 2007), 16.

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