

## “The Best Prayers in the Bible” (Part 4)

Psalm 32.1-7; Psalm 51; James 5.16

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

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We’ve been talking about prayer the past few weeks. Today, we turn to prayers of confession, and we have two great examples here in the Bible. But first, let’s think about what a prayer of confession *is*. We do them here every week; this is familiar territory. It’s a *prayer*, first of all; it’s *us* talking to the *Almighty*. To the one who sits on the heavenly throne, looking out over this magnificent creation, *all* of it. This is a *big* universe; God’s got a *lot* to watch over – yet he cares about what *each of us* does. None of us are too insignificant to escape his notice. He’s given us a tremendous amount of freedom, and sometimes we use that freedom wisely, and other times we royally screw up. He *cares* when we get it right – *and* he cares when we screw up. So we come to him, week after week, and we devote a few minutes here in worship for us to tell God how we’ve screwed up. I’ve been enjoying the feedback we’ve been receiving from some people lately, telling us we need to have a longer period of quiet during that prayer of confession, because sometimes people come with a really long list and they need time to get through it all. I’m enjoying the feedback not because the lists are long – but because it means that people are taking this *seriously*. This prayer time is precious. It matters.

A prayer of confession needs to include a few things. First, it does need to be a *prayer*; it’s not just an exercise in self-reflection. We’re talking to *God* here. The assumption we’re making is that he’s listening. We need to tell him what we did. Or, sometimes, what we *didn’t* do, that we should have done. It needs to include some kind of acknowledgement that what we did was *wrong*, that we had made a poor choice; we had taken that freedom God had given us, and done something with it that didn’t honor God, and that may have hurt other people. Then, it needs to include a request for God to grant us forgiveness. Now we *know* as Christians that our sins are covered – that’s what the cross is about – but let us not be presumptuous. We *still* need to go to God and *ask* for mercy. I can imagine that sometimes this step might get skipped. We get so confident in what Jesus has done for us, we just take it for granted. No, we *need* to ask forgiveness. We need to humble ourselves before the Almighty. *He’s* the one we’ve really let down. *He’s* the one who loved us so much that he sent Jesus here in the first place. He didn’t *have* to do that. He could have just left us all to rot. He thought we were worth a second chance. So we still need to acknowledge God *as God*, humble ourselves, recognize that *he’s* the one who had – and still has – the power to make things right, and *apologize* for the fact that we took that precious freedom that he gave us, and squandered it. Don’t skip that step. It’s really important!

There’s another step that sometimes gets omitted. It’s one thing to confess your sin, the ways

you screwed up this week. It's another thing to ask God for help to become a different kind of person, so that you won't make that same mistake again. To ask God to work on your *heart*. "Create in me a *clean heart*, O God." We don't just tell God what we did wrong and ask for forgiveness; we *actually ask God to change us*. One of the caricatures of Christians is that we can screw up all week and then come here on Sunday to get our slate wiped clean, only to go back and do it all over again the next week. If that's our attitude, then we might as well not bother confessing our sins, because clearly we don't care enough to want to do things *differently* in the future. That's not what God envisions for us. God yearns for people who are willing to grow and change, to strive to become more like Jesus each passing year.

It's a remarkable thing, confession. It presumes that there's *Somebody* out there who has, or should have, ultimate authority over our lives, over the choices we make. In the society we live in today, it's kind of an unfashionable thing to do, because a lot of people don't believe there *is* any ultimate authority like that. Oh, sure, there's the police, so whatever you do, make sure you don't get caught – but *ultimate authority*? An *Almighty*? A divinity that cares about something called *sin*? A lot of folks have given up on that notion. But not here. Not here at this church, or any church worth of the name. We still believe there's a *God* who *cares* about what we *do*, about the *choices* we make. That there's such a thing as *the will of God*. And there's such a thing as *sin*. Things that we do that *let God down*.

So we have two examples of confessions of sin in our scripture passages this morning. Psalm 51 is pretty well known. Note the *earnestness* of this prayer. "I know my wrongdoings, and my sin is always right in front of me." This is King David talking, but it could be *our* prayer just as much as it was *his*. He's wracked with guilt. He *knows* that what he did was wrong. He knows that what he did was *evil*. We tend to reserve the word "evil" for people like Hitler, but what David is saying here is that there are things you and I can do that are just as evil in God's eyes as mass genocide. David was a good man who sometimes did evil things. Which, honestly, is true for all of us, isn't it? There's at least *one thing* you've done in your life that was *evil* in God's eyes, right? Then you're just like David, and his prayer can be your prayer. He asks God to wash him completely clean, to purify him. He uses that word twice. "Purify" means to "make pure;" if you are purifying a metal, you are trying to free it from anything that debases, pollutes, or contaminates; you're trying to get rid of all the stuff that doesn't belong. That's what David is asking for here – "Take my heart, Lord, and *cleanse it* of all that is filthy." In other words, *make me more like Jesus*. (Not that he knew who Jesus was *then*, but I think he does *now*!)

Psalm 32 is less well known, but similar. This is one of David's too. It's not clear what sin he is confessing here, and it really doesn't matter. Once again, he was wracked with guilt. "I was groaning all day long," he says; "my energy was sapped as if in a summer drought." It is that way, isn't it? When you *know* you have truly done something wrong, when you are carrying around all that guilt, it feels like it wants to consume you. You gotta find a way to get it off your chest. David does that by taking it to God in prayer. "I admitted my sin to you," he says; "I didn't conceal my guilt." And then, behold – "you removed the guilt of my sin." Once he took it to God, once he was reminded again of God's great love and mercy, the burden was lifted, he felt *free* again. "That's why," he says, "all the faithful should pray to you during troubled times, so that a great flood of water won't reach them." When you feel like you are drowning in guilt, you take your confession to God, and God lifts you out of that pit and puts you on a level plain. It's a wonderful and precious gift. "You surround me," sings David, "with songs of rescue!"

So there you go – two straightforward prayers of confession in the Bible. Words that we can use; models of what a prayer of confession looks like, and indicators of *how good it feels* to receive forgiveness, to rejoice in that *freedom*. We’re done, right? That’s all we need to talk about today, right?

Oh wait. There’s more. There’s that little line in the letter of James: “Confess your sins *to each other* and pray *for each other* so that you may be healed.” James is telling us to do something that we Presbyterians don’t typically do. Don’t just confess your sins to God – confess them *to one another*. Out loud. Verbally. To your Christian sisters or brothers. “I lied to my spouse.” “I stole money from work.” “I cheated on my taxes.” “I slandered someone.” “I make sports my god.” “I gossiped about somebody at church.” “I used the Lord’s name in a bad way.” “I bribed someone to keep quiet about something I did.” “I cheat on my spouse.” Can you imagine what a church would be like if people actually *did* this? If we were willing to be that brutally honest with each other? To take all those things you confess to God *quietly* during our formal prayer time in worship, and say them *out loud* to somebody else here?

There are Christian traditions where confession is a *verbal* activity. The Catholic Church, for example, has the Sacrament of Reconciliation. *Confessional* is the common name, when somebody goes to a priest and confesses their sins, and the priest – who stands “in the person of Christ” – grants absolution. Reports suggest it’s happening a lot less frequently now than it used to, partly because of the shortage of priests, partly because of scandals that rocked the church, partly because a lot of people don’t feel comfortable confessing their sins out loud – or just don’t want to. But there are other, less formalized ways that verbal confession can happen. There’s nothing quite like sitting with a Christian friend or mentor or group of friends you *really trust* (and *trust* is a key word here), and unloading your sin, the things you’ve done that you feel wretched about, and maybe there are tears streaming down your cheeks, and to hear that person (or those persons) say, “*God still loves you.*” I’ve had that opportunity, from time to time in my Christian journey; those sacred spaces of abundant grace; it is *so* healing, *so* cleansing, *so* therapeutic – I think that’s why James recommends the practice; “so that you may be healed,” he says. I don’t think he was envisioning a formal, institutionalized process. I think he was envisioning something more *personal*, something more *intimate* ... something more *real*.

So – confess your sins. We have a formal process here, every Sunday. You can always offer a prayer of confession on your own, at home. But from time to time, you may need something more. You may be so burdened with guilt that you need someone to unload to. I’ve had people in my office, from time to time, unloading great sin and shame, needing love, needing grace, needing guidance. I’m happy to offer that, but I also know – some of you may need somebody else. A Christian friend, a mentor, someone you feel that you can be completely real with, and that might not be me, and that’s okay. Look around. Who is someone you can trust with your deepest sin, your darkest shame? Also be open to the possibility that someone might need to come talk to *you*. Maybe you have *earned* that person’s *trust*. They come to you, they’ve got something they need to share, to get off their chest. Let them unload. Pray with them – pray for healing, pray for the restoration of their heart. Reassure them: “God’s mercy is great ... and he *still* loves you.” In our tradition, you don’t have to be a *priest* to do that. Or perhaps I should say ... you *are* a priest, *when* you do that – offering *God’s forgiveness* in the name of Jesus Christ.

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