

## Spiritual Disciplines Handout: **Confession**

- *Spend time throughout the week reading, meditating on, and praying through these scriptures.*
- *Read the attached readings with enough time to really process through the content.*

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

[1<sup>st</sup> John 1:9 New International Version \(NIV\)](#)

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

[James 5:16 New International Version \(NIV\)](#)

Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper,  
but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy.

[Proverbs 28:13 New International Version \(NIV\)](#)

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.

[Psalm 32:3-6 New International Version \(NIV\)](#)

Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the sins of their ancestors. <sup>3</sup> They stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the Lord their God for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshiping the Lord their God.

[Numbers 9:2-3 New International Version \(NIV\)](#)

let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you.

[Nehemiah 1:6 New International Version \(NIV\)](#)

## **Celebration of Discipline by Richard Foster: Excerpts from Ch. 10, “The Discipline of Confession”:**

At the heart of God is the desire to give and to forgive. Because of this, he set into motion the entire redemptive process that culminated in the cross and was confirmed in the resurrection. ... Jesus knew that by his vicarious suffering he could actually absorb all the evil of humanity and so heal it, forgive it, redeem it.

This is why Jesus refused the customary painkiller when it was offered him. He wanted to be completely alert for this greatest work of redemption. In a deep and mysterious way he was preparing to take on the collective sin of the human race. Since Jesus lives in the eternal now, this work was not just for those around him, but he took in all the violence, all the fear, all the sin of all the past, all the present, and all the future. This was his highest and most holy work, the work that makes confession and the forgiveness of sins possible.

... This redemptive process is a great mystery hidden in the heart of God. But I know that it is true. I know this not only because the Bible says it is true, but because I have seen its effects in the lives of many people, including myself. It is the ground upon which we can know that confession and forgiveness are realities that transform us. Without the cross the Discipline of confession would be only psychologically therapeutic. But it is so much more. It involves an objective change in our relationship with God and a subjective change in us. It is a means of healing and transforming the inner spirit.

... The Discipline of confession helps the believer to grow into “mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13).

... *[Confession is both private and corporate];*

- *[Private]* “there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5).
- *[Corporate]* “confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another...” (James 5:16).

Both are found in Scripture and neither need exclude the other.

Confession is a difficult Discipline for us because we all too often view the believing community as a fellowship of saints before we see it as a fellowship of sinners. We feel that everyone else has advanced so far into holiness that we are isolated and alone in our sin. We cannot bear to reveal our failures and shortcomings to others. We imagine that we are the only ones who have not stepped onto the high road to heaven. Therefore, we hide ourselves from one another and live in veiled lies and hypocrisy.

But if we know that the people of God are first a fellowship of sinners, we are freed to hear the unconditional call of God’s love and to confess our needs openly before our brothers and sisters. We know we are not alone in our sin. The fear and pride that cling to us like barnacles cling to others also. We are sinners together. In acts of mutual confession we release the power that heals. Our humanity is no longer denied, but transformed.

... If penance is viewed as a way of earning forgiveness, it is dangerous indeed. But if it is seen as an opportunity to pause a moment to consider the seriousness of our sin, then it has genuine merit. Today we take our offenses to the love of God far too lightly. If we had only a tinge of the sense of revulsion that God feels toward sin, we would be moved to holier living. God pleads with us, “Oh, do not do this abominable thing that I hate!” (Jer. 44:4). The purpose of penance is to help us move into that deeper sense of the sinfulness of sin.

How can this be done? Perhaps a living example will aid in making these concepts more concrete.

### **Diary of a Confession**

Although I had read in the Bible about the ministry of confession in the Christian brotherhood, I had never experienced it until I was pastoring my first church. ... I felt inadequate to deal with many of the desperate needs that confronted me. There had to be more spiritual resources than I was experiencing... “Lord,” I prayed, “is there more you want to bring into my life? I want to be conquered and ruled by you. If there is anything blocking the flow of your power, reveal it to me.”

He did. Not by an audible voice or even through any human voice, but simply by a growing impression that perhaps something in my past was impeding the flow of his life. So I devised a plan... I came before God in prayer and meditation, pencil and paper in hand. Inviting him to reveal to me anything during my childhood that needed either forgiveness or healing or both, I waited in absolute silence for some ten minutes. Anything about my childhood that surfaced to my conscious mind, I wrote down. I made no attempt to analyze the items or put any value judgment on them. My assurance was that God would reveal anything that needed his healing touch. Having finished, I put the pencil and paper down for the day. The next day I went through the same exercise for my adolescent years, and the third day for my adult years.

...I cannot say I experienced any dramatic feelings. I did not. In fact, the entire experience was an act of sheer obedience with no compelling feelings in the least. But I am convinced that it set me free in ways I had not known before. It seemed that I was released to explore what were for me new and uncharted regions of the Spirit. ...

### **Counsel in the Giving of a Confession**

... A generalized confession may save us from humiliation and shame, but it will not ignite inner healing. The people who came to Jesus came with obvious, specific sins, and they were forgiven for each one. It is far too easy to avoid our real guilt in a general confession. In our confession we bring concrete sins. By calling them concrete, however, I do not mean only outward sins. I mean definite sins, the sins of the heart—pride, avarice, anger, fear—as well as the sins of the flesh—sloth, gluttony, adultery, murder. We may use the method described earlier. ... We may be led to another approach altogether.

In our desire to be specific we must not, however, run to the opposite danger of being unduly concerned to rout out every last detail in our lives. ...

“Sorrow” is necessary to a good confession. Sorrow as it relates to confession is not primarily an emotion, though emotion may be involved. It is an abhorrence at having committed the sin, a deep regret at having offended the heart of the Father. Sorrow is an issue of the will before it is an issue of the emotions. In fact, being sorrowful in the emotions without a godly sorrow in the will destroys the confession. Sorrow is a way of taking the confession seriously.

...“A determination to avoid sin” is the third essential for a good confession. In the Discipline of confession we ask God to give us a yearning for holy living, a hatred for unholy living. ... It is the *will* to be delivered from sin that we seek from God as we prepare to make confession. We must desire to be conquered and ruled by God, or if we do not desire it, to desire to desire it. Such a desire is a gracious gift from God. The seeking of this gift is one of the preliminaries for confessing to a brother or sister.

Does all this sound complicated? Do you fear you might miss one of the points and thus render everything ineffectual? It is usually much more complicated in the analysis than in the experience. Remember the heart of the Father; he is like a shepherd who will risk anything to find that one lost sheep. We do not have to make God willing to forgive. In fact, it is God who is working to make us willing to seek his forgiveness. One further note on the preparation for confession; there must be a definite termination point in the self-examination process. Otherwise, we can easily fall into a permanent habit of self-condemnation. Confession begins in sorrow, but it ends in joy. There is celebration in the forgiveness of sins because it results in a genuinely changed life.

Then there is the practical matter of to whom we should go to confess. It is quite correct theologically to say that every Christian believer can receive the confession of another, but not every Christian believer will have sufficient empathy and understanding. Though it is unfortunate, it is a fact of life that some people seem unable to keep a confidence. Others are disqualified because they would be horrified at the revealing of certain sins.

Still others, not understanding the nature and value of confession, would shrug it off with a “That’s not so bad.” Fortunately, many people do understand and would be delighted to minister in this way. These people are found by asking God to reveal them to us. They are also found by observing people to see who evidences a lively faith in God’s power to forgive and exhibits the joy of the Lord in his or her heart. The key qualifications are spiritual maturity, wisdom, compassion, good common sense, the ability to keep a confidence, and a wholesome sense of humor. ... Often ordinary folk who hold no office or title whatever are among the best at receiving a confession...

### **Counsel in the Receiving of a Confession**

Like any spiritual ministry there is a preparation involved in being able to hear rightly the confession of a brother or sister.

We begin by learning to live under the cross. Bonhoeffer writes, “Anybody who lives beneath the Cross and who has discerned in the Cross of Jesus the utter wickedness of all men and of his own heart will find there is no sin that can ever be alien to him. Anybody who has once been horrified by the dreadfulness of his own sin that nailed Jesus to the Cross will no longer be horrified by even the rankest sins of a brother.”

This is the one thing that will save us from ever being offended in the confession of another. It forever delivers us from conveying any attitude of superiority. We know the deceptiveness of the human heart, and we know the grace and mercy of God’s acceptance. Once we see the awfulness of sin we know that, regardless of what others have done, we ourselves are the chief of sinners.

Therefore, there is nothing that anyone can say that will disturb us. Nothing. By living under the cross we can hear the worst possible things from the best possible people without so much as batting an eyelash. If we live in that reality, we will convey that spirit to others. They know it is safe to come to us. They know we can receive anything they could possibly reveal. They know we will never condescend to them but, instead, understand.

When we live in this spirit, we do not need to tell others that we will keep privileged information privileged. They know we will never betray a confidence. We do not have to tell them. Nor will we ever be tempted to betray it, for we know the godly sorrow that has driven them to this difficult step.

...As we prepare for this sacred ministry it is wise that we regularly pray for an increase of the light of Christ within us so that, as we are with others, we will radiate his life and light into them. We want to learn how to live so that our very presence will speak of the love and forgiving grace of God. Also, we should pray for an increase of the gift of discernment. This is especially important when we minister to them following the confession. We need to be able to perceive the real healing needed in the deep, inner spirit.

It is important that when others are opening their griefs to us we discipline ourselves to be quiet. We will be tempted severely to relieve the tension of the situation by some offhanded comment. This is very distracting and even destructive to the sacredness of the moment. ... the best method is to wait silently and prayerfully.

...It hardly needs to be said that as they share, you are praying for them. ... it is extremely important that you pray for the person and not just counsel with them. ...

...The Discipline of confession brings an end to pretense. God is calling into being a Church that can openly confess its frail humanity and know the forgiving and empowering graces of Christ. Honesty leads to confession, and confession leads to change. May God give grace to the Church once again to recover the Discipline of confession.