

Reconciling with One Another: Forgiveness, Part 1

Selected Scriptures

Whether we are reconciling with God or with one another, you cannot move forward in reconciling if you are not willing to acknowledge your sin. So humble yourself. Confess your sin. Shouldn't be hard; you have had practice at it because if you are a Christian and you claim the name of Christ, you had to do that to become a Christian. You had to acknowledge your sin before a holy God. As the Psalmist said in Psalm 130, "There is forgiveness with you, so that you may be feared." And so that's the only source of forgiveness is God. And so if we are gonna come before God, we have to seek his forgiveness, which means we have to confess our sin. We have done it before; let's continue doing it. We've got to humble ourselves and confess our sins to one another. We want to start first in confession by confessing our sins toward God. All sin, whether it is a private sin or a public sin, all sin is against God.

Whenever we become aware of sin, we need to confess our sins, first and foremost to God. We reviewed this amazing

promise of his in 1 John 1:9 that God will forgive us when we confess sin. It says there, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." God is gracious with us, to bring sin to mind, isn't he? And especially so when you, as a Christian, have the habit of cultivating a sensitive conscience before God. If your conscience is sensitive, then you will be aware when he is bringing sin to mind. God gave us the conscience for that very purpose, to bear witness to our sin.

The conscience is that spiritual, you might call it a spiritual member, that mechanism within us which becomes sensitive to the guilt of our sin. It is that internal sense of shame that we feel, that spiritual warning light that goes off when we become aware of our guilt. When that is a regular experience for you of that warning light going off, and that's a good thing. Because, it's a sign of a sensitive conscience, which is a healthy thing. The conscience brings sin to mind and the conscience will either accuse us of committing sin, tell us we are indeed guilty, or it will excuse us in a matter.

Our conscience is not an infallible guide; it's a warning light. It's like a nerve ending, sometimes your nerves fire when they shouldn't. Sometimes your conscience fires when it shouldn't. So your conscience is only as reliable as it is

biblically informed. So we need to not only cultivate a sensitive conscience, but we also need to educate our conscience so it works properly. So it fires when it should, and it doesn't fire when it should not. When it alerts on something, we need to pay attention to that thing. We need to test those thoughts biblically and see if anything in our life is out of sorts.

We are very wise if we pay attention and examine that thing biblically. So whenever we confess the sins that we become aware of, God promises to forgive those sins. That's what 1 John 1:9 says, "He is faithful." That is to say, his immutable nature, the fact that he is unchanging, means he is totally reliable. When he says he is going to do something, we can count on it. He is also just, which means that he dealt with our sins and he dealt with our sins justly and permanently and fully when he punished Christ for our sins on the cross. That's the promise of 1 John 1:9.

But that promise goes further still. He not only promises to forgive the sins that we've become aware of; he also promises to cleanse us of all unrighteousness. What's that? That's a promise to wipe the relational slate clean. Every time we come to confess our sins to God, he is going to wipe the slate clean. What a promise! Because we're fallen creatures, we tend to be

spiritually insensitive. We are never going to be as aware of how fallen we actually are as God sees us to be. We're never going to be aware of the myriad of ways we have sinned against God or even comprehend the true gravity of our sins because we are fallen, because we don't see things as clearly as we should.

But God tells us, even though we will continue to be dull and insensitive, whenever we come to confess the sins that he reveals to us, the sins that we know about, we're still guilty of many sins we don't know about, right? But God is gracious to receive us anyway, to clear the entire balance of our guilt for unconfessed sin, to cleanse away all the attendant unrighteousness of all sin, whether it's known or unknown. That is what is called magnanimous grace, or what the hymn writer described poetically as "marvelous, infinite matchless grace, freely bestowed on all who believe." That in and of itself is compelling motivation for us to keep short accounts with God, isn't it? To go daily and examine ourselves before him to see if there is anything outstanding with God and to take care of it because he promises here to forgive us, to wipe the slate, relationally, wipe it clean and embrace us in his holy love.

So we confess our sins to God, but we also confess our sins to one another, right? James 5:16 was our verse, "Confess your

sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed.” That verse encapsulates this entire process of biblical reconciliation that we’re talking about right now. To confess our sins to one another, that in and of itself acknowledges the obstacle that’s hindering our relationship, that’s creating any sense of division or disharmony. And what follows from that confession of sin is the asking and granting of forgiveness, and that’s summarized here, and we’re going to get to that and unpack it more in a moment.

But then in James 5:16, to pray for one another that’s the positive outworking of love toward one another especially, particularly, when we pray for those who have so deeply hurt us, who have offended us. That is the genuine God-like love that marks a true Christian. That is the remarkable evidence of genuine salvation, to forgive, and to love, and to pray for those who have offended you and hurt you with their sin. Only Christians can do that because only Christians have experienced that kind of love from God. We love because he first loved us. Those who do not love like God loves; they don’t know God. So we’re to reconcile with one another, and we learn biblically the first step in that process is to confess our sins. This is the first of three steps. Step one: Confess your sin.

First of all, sub-point A: Clarify whether or not this issue is truly a sin. Right? Clarify whether or not it's truly a sin. We talked about sin as any want of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God. So if it's that, then it's a sin. It's not a mistake; it's not an accident; it's a sin. If it's a sin, then proceed to sub-point B: Clarify whether or not the sin is known to someone else. That is to say, if you sin in a way that only God knows about, you've had a prideful thought, you've had a flash of anger toward somebody, you've had an instance of covetous desire, lustful desire, something like that, if it's a sin that's contained in the mind and the heart, then deal with it in the mind and the heart before God. Don't bring that out. But if that sin goes outside, that anger turns into a verbal attack on somebody or that impatience you feel inside bursts forth in an impatient word, an unkindness; if it gives birth to an external fruit, then and that sin has had a social effect. That sin has hurt another human being. That sin has become known to somebody else and so you can proceed to sub-point C.

Sub-point C is confess your sin to God. God is the one you've ultimately offended, and that's what we just talked about in 1 John 1:9. Right after that, right after you confess your sin to God, asap, you need to confess your sin to the person

that you've offended. So sub-point D, confess your sin to the person you have offended. Confess your sin to one another. Just as you confessed your sin to God, you confess your sin as sin, you call it sin, don't try to soften the offense by calling it a mistake. Don't call it an error, an unfortunate lapse in my judgment. If you sinned, own up to it and call it a sin. Not only that, but confess your sin using biblical terms, not worldly terms, biblical terms.

To help us avoid ambiguity, God has defined our sins for us so that there's no confusion, no mistake. We need to use his words when we're confessing sin because it's his law, after all, that we've violated. It is so important to confess our sins to one another using biblical language, using God's language. This isn't about just being fastidious to a certain set of words. This is really profound. This actually helps in the confession of sin and in reconciling with other people. Why? Because it rightly acknowledges that our human relationships, our horizontal relationships, are conducted beneath the interested and involved authority of our holy God, who is by nature relational.

It's him who governs the way we need to deal with one another. If he is not above us telling us how we need to deal

with one another, you know what? Then there is no authority. You're your own authority and you deal with people however you want to just like this world is. But if God is the one who's above us, if God is the one commanding the way we speak and the way we act and the way we conduct ourselves relationally, we need to use his words. He sent his son to die, to reconcile us to himself. And when Jesus died on the cross, he didn't have ambiguity in his head; he didn't have confusion in His head. He didn't die for mistakes, he died for specific sins that you and I committed against him, against his father. So this obviously matters very much to God.

God revealed himself using words written and revealed in a holy book, and he wants us to use those words with one another. So when we confess those sins as sins, when we use God's Word to identify and describe them, we rightly acknowledge the authority of the God to whom we are all accountable; ourselves, the ones who commit the sin, and also to the person who has been offended. That person, also, needs to submit themselves to God even in their offense. Listen, as much as you've ever been offended by somebody else for their sin against you, have you been offended as much as God has been offended? I don't think any of us has the temerity, the audacity, to say that. That's a good thing. We need to use God's Word. We need to rightly

acknowledge the authority of the God to whom we are all accountable. We need to acknowledge his authority even in the middle of that situation, which is going to govern every step of reconciliation within that situation. Now all of that was review, and we're ready to take the next step.

Biblical reconciliation starts with confessing our sins, taking personal responsibility as we formally admit our sin and our guilt before God. But we need to go further to complete the reconciliation that started with confessing our sins. So let's go to Step two, ask for forgiveness. Step two, ask for forgiveness. Jesus said in Matthew 5:23-24, "whenever you remember that your brother has something against you," that is, even if you are in the middle of worshipping God, if you're there at the altar, Jesus said you need to stop, waste no time, but "quickly go," Matthew 5:24, "and first be reconciled to your brother." Then after you've been reconciled, "then come and offer your gift." When you go to your brother, what are you going to do? You're going to go to him and you're going to confess your sins and you're going to seek his forgiveness. Jesus referred to that pattern of confessing sin and asking for forgiveness often in his teaching. It's all through his teaching, but he illustrated it very poignantly when he told the story of the prodigal son, and I'd like you to turn there.

Turn over to that story, over in Luke 15. This is such a fantastic story that Jesus told to illustrate the heart of his father in heaven who forgives sinners. Jesus actually told the story as an appeal to the Pharisees because they grumbled against Jesus because Jesus received sinners and ate with sinners. Jesus sat down with tax collectors and the like, those who hung around tax collectors, which, make no mistake, they were not good people. They weren't people you would want to have over to dinner. Jesus sat down and he ate with those whom he forgave.

He was there with their friends, and he taught the truth to their friends, that they might also be reconciled to God, and the Pharisees were those who hated him for it, if you can believe that. They didn't understand forgiveness. So Jesus told them the series of parables in Luke 15 to help them understand the heart of God, that they too, even in their pride, even in their Pharisaical thinking, they too, could be reconciled to God, even in spite of that sin. Let's start reading in Luke 15 and verse 11. "Jesus said, 'There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me." And he," the father, "divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far

country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs.'" Hard for a Jewish boy to humble himself to that level. "'He was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.'"

We'll stop there for a second. When Jesus told that story, you need to understand the level of outrage among those who heard that story for the first time. Because for this young man to ask his father for an early distribution of his inheritance, you know what that was saying? That was tantamount to saying, I wish you were dead and out of the way because the only thing about you that I care about is your money. He had no desire for a relationship with his father. He was willing to trade his father's love and care and household and provision and the righteous atmosphere of the home for whatever he could find at the end of his journey that would satisfy his lustful desire. Is that wicked, or what?

The level of this boy's disdain for his father is an out-and-out absolutely shocking portrayal of dishonor. And the fact that he found himself wallowing in the mud and the slop with the

pigs, among those who first heard this, there was absolutely no sympathy for the prodigal in that picture that Jesus told. No, no sympathy whatsoever, none. For those who heard the story about this rebellious son groveling with unclean swine would have thought to themselves, Good, serves him right. This ungrateful, dishonorable, profligate wretch who wanted his father dead, it serves him right. In fact, death's too good for him, wallowing with pigs, that's right, that's exactly what he deserves. They would have considered this prodigal's predicament to be the just retribution for his sins, nothing to be pitied.

This is where the story takes quite a radical turn. Jesus told the story, inserting a number of elements that would just tweak and provoke this sense of outrage for these listening Pharisees. And he's about to take this way, way over the top. Notice what happened starting in verse 17, when this young man came to his senses. "When the young man came to himself," verse 17, "he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. And I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'"

Let us stop there. We'll finish reading the outcome in just a moment. But I want to stop and note how this prodigal's confession of sin applies directly to our subject. This is an excellent description of the pattern we need to follow whenever we confess our sin to someone else. Whenever we ask that someone to forgive us. Notice how biblical reconciliation requires, demands, a transaction between two people. If we're to reconcile with one another, both the offender and the offended have a role to play in completing that transaction of reconciliation. That's what's about to happen here between the son and his father. That's what he's mentally preparing for and rehearsing look what he actually does say. He says, "I have sinned against heaven," God first, "and before you." That is the essence of confessing sins, that's what we've been talking about. Again, the authority of God, clearly acknowledged from the very first word. What this young man had done was to commit an offense against God. It's not his dad who gave the fifth commandment, "Honor your father and your mother." God gave that commandment.

Well, we've talked a lot about that already; let's keep moving and notice, second, how this young man has humbled himself before his father. He's gone very low in this case; he truly is the flesh and blood of his father. But he is at this point, he not willing to trade on that fact, and this is another

acknowledgment of the seriousness of his sin. His sin, which was essentially a killing off of his father to get his wealth. He acknowledges that he's done that. Rather than appealing to the relationship that he has disdained, that he has demolished, that he has destroyed, the young man, in an attitude of true repentance here, utter humility, meekness, deference. He comes before his father and he acknowledges his unworthiness. At the same time, he doesn't just grovel there in his unworthiness; he expresses his desire to be restored. He said, I realize I'm not worthy to be called your son. But I do want a relationship with you, I've come to my senses, I want to return to you, I want to be restored in fellowship with you even if it is in a limited form, not as your son but as a hired servant, even if it is limited because of my sin. What else could he say, rightly, righteously?

What else could he say? That is all a penitent sinner has the right to say. He has no claim on his father's forgiveness, no right to be forgiven. So he comes forward in meekness, simply to acknowledge his guilt, to confess his sins, to ask for a restored relationship. He seeks reconciliation with his father. He seeks to be forgiven of his sin and when he asks, he asks in humility. Notice how he doesn't come in prideful expectation; he doesn't demand forgiveness. He realizes forgiveness is not a

right, it's a grace. It's what he seeks, it's what he hopes for. He recognizes that he is at the mercy of the one he has offended, in this case his father. Forgiveness is his father's, either to grant or to withhold. That's what we need to do with one another as well.

We need to identify our sin biblically. We need to be specific, using biblical language in the way that we have offended that person. We need to confess our sin, to acknowledge our guilt before God and before that person. We need to ask forgiveness of that person and then wait. Wait. Once you've asked forgiveness, you have discharged your responsibility before God. You've done what's right. You have fulfilled your part in the transaction of reconciliation.

By confessing your sins and seeking forgiveness, you have shifted the responsibility from yourself onto the person that you've offended. And now it's up to that offended person to respond righteously, but that's for them to deal with before God. The person you've offended in his or her conscience before God, he's the right to decide whether he'll please the Lord by granting forgiveness or whether he'll displease the Lord by withholding forgiveness.

But for your part, you've done what's right. You've fulfilled your responsibility to restore a broken relationship; you cannot force somebody to reconcile with you. But you must do your duty and provide them with the opportunity to reconcile as, as Paul put it in Romans 12:18, "If possible as far as it depends on you," what? "Be at peace with all men," right? As far as it depends on you. So once you've confessed your sin, asked for forgiveness, you've done what God wants you to do. You've discharged your responsibility before the Lord, and now it's up to the person you've offended to complete the transaction of biblical reconciliation.