

I. Introduction

A. Welcome / Introduction / Today we begin a new series. It's called The Way Forward and it's designed to look at the way we can grow closer to God.

1. You might remember that during the summer Mike did a series called Unstuck – in which we looked at things that hold us back. In this series, we are looking at the things that pull us forward.
2. It's important to realize that: 1) we cannot ultimately change our heart. That is a work of God; but, 2) we can put ourselves in a spot where life change – where Holy-Spirit-fueled growth – is more likely.
3. It's also important to note that, while we generally want the quick fix – a miraculous reworking of our heart and soul - that is not what happens. Indeed, the very things that help us heal, grow and become more like Christ are hard and long.

B. Today Mike is going to talk about confession - about recognizing our brokenness before God and others. Right now...

II. Introduction

A. There are a few occasions in the Bible where it appears as though someone preached a one word sermon. (Don't get your hopes up. It's not happening today). But there are times when it looks like the message was briefly and to the point. For instance, in Matthew 3 we are told that John the Baptist went to the crowd in Jerusalem and said, "repent."

1. I doubt he said, "Good morning. Glad you're here. Hope you fill out a guest card. So the message today is: repent. Let's pray."

B. The same kind of thing was in play in Acts. Peter's first message – in Acts 2 - was about, repentance. And then in Acts 3 he preaches again and stays on point. Perhaps he used more than one word, but it appears to have been one topic. And that makes sense, because the idea is a key one. We can't go far without embracing the discipline of confession.

C. We are starting a series of sermons called, “The Way Forward.” The assumption is three-fold: 1) we can get better – we can grow and become more disciplined and godly; 2) we want to get better. I sure do. I am tired of being a selfish idiot. I am tired of hurting people I care for; and point 3) there are things we can do to get better. The first one we are going to look at is confession – which, technically means “to agree.” As in, I agree with God, I agree with the truth, I agree that I was wrong; I agree that I am broken.

D. Confession and Repentance are joined. To repent – the Greek word here is *metanoia* – and it means “to turn,” as in, turn from evil and turn towards good. We wake up to our sin - our error, our pride, greed, lust, whatever. And we stop going in the wrong direction and we turn around. That is, “we repent.” Then confession is the conscious acknowledgment of that – perhaps to God in prayer, perhaps to someone we have wronged or to a mentor or friend.

E. What I want to set in front of you today is the idea that this unfolds at three different levels, and one is right for you.

III. The first way the term “confession” gets used is as part of the process of coming to faith – i.e., stepping over the line, opting in.

A. Confession is part of acknowledging that: There is a God; He is holy; we are not; as a result, a gap exists; we are estranged from Him; but He has built a bridge for us to be carried back and we can opt in. Men and women, God loves you, not because you are good, but because He is loving. And he has done everything that needs to be done for you to be reconciled to him. We are invited to respond. To turn to him.

B. Last week, we had Luis Palau, a gifted evangelist, talk about this. Millions of people have responded to his talks by repenting – humbling themselves, turning around, and then confessing their need for God. This is the path we follow to be born again.

C. In I John 1, we are told that if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins. Note, it does not say he is merciful, but just. This might seem like an error, but if we confess, our sin is transferred to Christ’s account (2 Cor. 5:21). What I am talking about here is the Gospel. And it is a specific thing.

D. In my own study lately I have been in Galatians. And one of the first things I saw when I jumped into this book is that Paul comes out swinging. He is mad as fire because people have changed the message. Verse 3 reads:

1. I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—⁷ which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.⁸ But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel

other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse!⁹ As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse!

2. This is in stark contrast to what he says to the Philippians. Where he notes that there are people who are preaching the Gospel from wrong motives. They are trying to put Paul down, they are competing with him, apparently trying to be more prominent. And in response Paul says: I don't care if their motives are messed up, if they get the message right, I'm happy. So, good motives but wrong message: Stop everything. Bad motives and good message – the true Gospel – great.

E. Christianity may not be what you think it is. It is not a call to be good so God will love you. The Gospel is: God so loved the world that He gave His Son, and if you sign up to follow Him, then God accepts us.

F. The first way the term confess is used is to describe the act of agreeing that we are broken and need God and the Jesus is the way forward. Some of you need to get this settled.

1. Sign up for a Spiritual Check in
2. Make plans to attend Alpha

IV. The second use of the term refers to the breakthrough moments Christ-followers have from time to time when they step up and own something they have been trying to hide.

A. Some of these can be pretty significant¹ because we tend to let things pile up. We try to hide the bad we've done from others, sometimes even from ourselves. And over time that leads to one of two things happening: our hearts grow hard or we have a breakthrough moment where we repent and confess.

1. And this is all pretty complicated because guilt is complicated. Some people feel guilty over things they should not. Others do not seem to feel guilty for things they should. The Bible notes that our heart can be quite deceitful.

B. There are several occasions in my life when I confessed something to someone – some kind of moral failure.

1. I shared about an article on plagiarism that came out under my name that I didn't write.
2. I shared about cheating on a Greek quiz in seminary. In seminary! I didn't intend to. It happened quickly. And I was pretty sure I knew the answer anyway.

3. I could tell you about the time when I was probably seven or eight, and a neighbor kid and I stole some gum from a local store. We got away with it the first time, went back for a bigger haul and got caught. The store manager threatened to call the police. He also threatened to call our parents. Neither of us were prepared for either. We somehow got the sentence reduced to picking up trash in a littered field. That night I eventually told my Mom. Lots of tears. But great relief in the end.

C. I've had a half dozen other significant occasions where I have had to go to someone – sometimes to Sheri or to a friend and say, “I have sinned. I misled you. I...” whatever, and in almost every occasion there has been relief and people have responded with grace and love. Not always, but at one level, when you are under conviction it doesn't matter. Your willing to face the firing squad to stop hiding.

D. I have also been on the receiving end of people coming to me to confess ways they have wronged me. Or people come to me to confess that: 1) they had an affair; 2) they have a drinking problem; 3) in one case that they killed someone. And they want to be right with God and those they have wronged.

E. These are big and important turning points. We see an example of this in Psalm 51. If you are not familiar with the story you can read it in 2 Samuel 11 & 12.

1. One night while his men are at war and he is not, David walks out on his balcony, looks down and sees a woman, named Bathsheba, bathing. Whether the first look was innocent or not, the second surely wasn't. Nor was having someone find out who she was and bring her to him. At which point he moves from lust to adultery. And because she got pregnant and his initial attempts to cover-up their affair failed and he eventually orders the murder of her husband so that he would be free to marry her, he becomes guilty of murder as well.

2. Apparently believing that his secret was safe he seems to be moving on with his life when Nathan, a prophet, is sent by God to confront the king. And David wakes up to reality of what he did. And he is broken. And his confession and repentance are captured in writing and come to us as Psalm 51.

3. He calls out asking for help. “Have mercy on me O God, according to your unfailing love. This is a request from someone who has no right to make requests.”²

F. I'm not surprised David acted the way he did. A leader committing adultery – and covering it up in order to remain in power – is not exactly news. But this is a fascinating, shocking and surprising passage for a number of reasons.

1. First, that Nathan survived. Confronting a king is not a good career move. He could have easily been killed.
2. Second, that David comes clean. He confesses
3. Third, that he writes out his confession and publishes it. Where was his lawyer advising him to not say anything? Why didn't someone remind him of his Miranda rights?
4. And finally, I'm shocked that it made it into this book. The Jews publish this report in their holy book. David is the King. Beyond that he's a war hero. You'd expect party loyalists to keep it out of the press. But they do not.³

G. There are some key things to learn here.

1. Psalm 51 reminds us that the word is sin. I know this term lacks a certain PC sophistication, especially in an era when having self-esteem is considered vital. We are not inclined to say we are sinners.⁴ Instead, we talk today about mistakes being made or we blame circumstances. We blame others. We explain things away. None of that is confession. In confession we own and admit we do not rationalize and justify.
 - a) David says that what he did was sin. He doesn't suggest that his affair with Bathsheba was a private matter between consenting adults or the prerogative of the king. He doesn't try to explain it away or blame his parents. He calls what he did sin. In fact, he goes to such great lengths to emphasize the word that three different Hebrew terms get put into play. One suggests an offense against God, a second that suggests that what he did was wicked and a third that focuses on his act as one of rebellion.⁵
 - b) Men and women, the term is sin. We cannot repent of confusion or psychological flaws—we are stuck with those. But Christ died for sinners. We can repent of sin.
2. David's confession makes it clear that he has a deep-seated heart problem (he has been sinful from birth). This event reminds us that one sin tends to lead to the next. And it models the right response – to cry out to God for forgiveness.

H. Some of you are holding on to secrets. Please understand, you will only be as healthy as your worst secret. If we do not expose our secrets, our secrets will

expose us. Some of you need to confess to something. Some of you need to own something. Some of you have never come clean.

I. What does confession look like? I am not sure I always know. It can be complicated.

1. I am not an advocate of the tell all confessionals. Telling everyone everything. That is often TMI. It seems like sins need to be confessed to those affected.
2. Some of you may not be able to find a person you wronged or they have died. You may need to write them a note. You may need to confess to a friend.
3. It may be that you are going to have to make some things right – offer restitution. This may take time and reflection.
4. Confessing something may hurt someone – and so it needs to be thought through. Let me state clearly, if you have had an affair, do not go home today and blurt that out just to get it off your chest. You likely need to talk with someone else first and think this through.

J. But here is the deal, you can be free. If there is a check in your heart, something is not right. If you bow to pray and you feel conviction, you are going to have to deal with this.

1. A clear conscience is the ability to say, there is not a single person I have ever wronged or hurt that I have not gone back to and asked forgiveness and sought to make it right, or somehow sought to own this before others.

K. Some of you are going to need to own somethings because until you do, you are stuck. And over time your heart will grow harder.

V. The third kind of confession amounts to adopting an ongoing posture of humility

A. It recognizes that on an ongoing basis we sin and need to come before God and allow the Spirit to shape our heart and craft a posture of humility.

B. We see in the Bible that when people meet with God – come into his presence – they are humbled.

1. We see this with Abraham in Genesis 18. He says, “I am dust and ashes.” We see it with Job in chapter 42. He felt like he was owed an apology. When God showed up, Job fell on his face and repented. This was Isaiah’s response in Isaiah 6. When Jesus provided fish in Luke 5, Peter’s response was, “depart from me, for I am a sinful man.”

C. Sometimes there are specific things that are brought to mind. I remember being in my mid-twenties when I suddenly came under a lot of conviction over a chemistry lab nearly ten years earlier. I cut class one day and had a fraternity brother run my experiment and then I wrote it up as my own. And I had forgotten all about it. And now all of the sudden I saw that as cheating. I knew the school's policy on this because I had been involved with the dean on an academic integrity board and I thought, "If I admit to this, they might yank my diploma." But it was pretty clear to me that I had to do something, so I wrote to her and said, "While I was helping you on that academic task force, I cheated. Not sure what to say. I'll accept whatever punishment you decide on."

D. Confession needs to be a part of our life. We are reminded of this every time we pray the Lord's prayer. "Forgive us our debts..." We get this from the Psalms or if we follow the ACTS model of prayer. We get this in the Jesus prayer: Oh Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

VI. We are about to go to the Lord's Table. As we head in that direction, let me turn things over to the campus pastors.

A. By way of a summary of what I've said, let me read the first five verses of Psalm 32:

1. 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
2. When I kept silent (when I did not confess), 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.
3. 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.

B. What we want to do now is head into a time of confession. The first part of that will be corporate – based on Psalm 51, the prayer that David prayed not long after he had been outed for adultery and murder. And then I will give you a moment of silent reflection for confession. Join with me now as we confess our sin:

1. Leader: Have mercy upon us, O God, according to your loving kindness. In your great compassion blot out our offenses.
2. All: Wash me through and through from my wickedness and cleanse me from my sins, for I know my transgressions, and my sins are ever before me. Against you only have we sinned and done what is evil in your

sight. So you are justified when you speak and upright in all your judgments.

3. Leader: Purge us from our sins, and we shall be pure. Wash us, and we shall be clean indeed. Hide your face from our sins and blot out all our iniquities.

4. All: Create in us a clean heart and renew in us a right spirit, O Lord.

C. I invite you now to allow the Lord to bring any specific sin to mind that you need to confess. And as He does, own it and ask for his forgiveness and make note of it in the event that there is someone else you may need to go to in order to confess this. MUSIC PLAYING HERE

D. Let me repeat I John 1:9. It is a passage that Mike referenced earlier. “If we confess our sins God is faithful and unjust to forgive us.”

E. The Good News of the Gospel. For most of you, that is where this ends today. But let me note that there may be some of you for whom confession needs another step. I want to encourage you to take that step this week.

VII. Communion.

A. We now pivot to the communion table, where we are reminded of how desperately we need Christ, as we figuratively feast on his broken body and blood.

¹ I am not using these terms to refer to mortal and venial sins as a Roman Catholic might.

² If you dig here you see that by using the words “unfailing” or “steadfast” love – Have mercy on me O God according to your unfailing love – that David is appealing to the covenant. These are loaded terms. His tactic is not unlike like the prodigal son who, after acting in an extremely irresponsible way, goes back to his father and says, “Father, I have I sinned and should no longer be called your son.” He confesses that he has no rights and yet at the same time he appeals to the relationship. He doesn’t say, “Mr. Smith, I have no right to be your son.” He says, “Father.” David does the same thing. He pleads for mercy – confessing that he has no rights. But he uses that covenant language – he points back to the promise of an on-going relationship with God. And by doing so he beautifully captures the tension that we live under. We do not have any grounds to ask for God’s favor and yet, He has made it clear that He will look with favor upon us. There is a lot here. We could camp for weeks. But I would like to make a handful of observations related to the spiritual practice of confession.

³ Can you imagine something like this happening today? The contrast is so great that it seems unfair to dwell on it, but let me just say that several years ago we not only didn’t get Psalm 51, but we got words that were so measured that we weren’t sure whether there was an apology in there or not, and we were left to debate the definition of the word “is.” And former President Clinton is not alone. As Stafford asked, “if George Washington had been caught in adultery would his mea culpa been set to music for the Fourth of July? The answer is no. We come to expect these kinds of things from this book. And I think that is an endorsement not only of its inspiration, but also of Christ’s divinity. *My reasoning is as follow*: This incident in the history of Israel is almost normal. If you read the OT you

find that it tells us a great deal more of Israel's failings than it does of Israel's greatness. Of the hundreds of characters described, nearly all of them have some startling flaw. (Adam flunks right out of the gate; Abraham is willing to let his wife sleep with other men if it will keep him from harms way; Isaac does virtually nothing but fill space between Abraham and Jacob; the latter is a chronic liar; Moses loses his cool on several occasions. One results in murder the other keeps him from entering the Promised Land. Furthermore: 1) the big picture suggests that the Jews were a petty, whiny collection of people who deserved to be overrun by both the Assyrians and the Babylonians; 2) and these accounts are not being told by Woodward and Bernstein. These are not stories being published by muckraking journalists looking for the dirt. They are told by the Jews themselves. They are writing about their own country, their own leaders – their own selves. As Tim Stafford wrote: They laid themselves open to 2,000 years of Gentiles saying, "How odd of God to choose the Jews." And the New Testament is more of the same. In most religions, there is a need not only to deify the leader but also those around that person. In the New Testament, we get none of that. The disciples are portrayed in ways that suggest they seldom understood what was going on, even when it was going on six inches in front of their face. Sometimes they lacked common sense. They certainly lacked greatness. And in some cases, they failed miserably. Think of Peter. Not only does he deny Christ three times. But at one point Jesus rebukes him and says, "Get behind me Satan." This is not the stuff that a press secretary would release if they were trying to control the story. But it is exactly for this reason that it rings true. I'm reading Stafford again: If the Bible were like our Christian biographies, a steady stream of pious, faithful, insightful leaders, Jesus would seem to be one more example of selective reporting. But since the Jews' tendency was definitely not toward exaggeration—since even their great founding King David was described seams and all—Jesus and his holiness shine out, unparalleled. I think, in this odd, sort of backwards way, Psalm 51's surprising inclusion in the Book, argues very powerfully for the inspiration of the Bible and for the deity of Christ.

⁴ A few years ago, Garrison Keillor, of Lake Wobegone fame, argued that we are capable of doing some rotten things. He argued that ...not all of these things are the result of poor communication. Some are the result of rottenness. People do bad, horrible things. They lie and they cheat and they corrupt the government. They poison the world around us. And when they are caught, they don't feel remorse – they just go into treatment. They had a nutritional problem or something. They explain what they did. They do not feel bad about it. There is no guilt, just psychology.

⁵ This last one, is, of course, what set Sigmund Freud off. He advanced the view that feelings of guilt are not because we are guilty, but because of the church. He basically argued that ideas of right and wrong—good and evil—are man made constructs forced upon us. That morals in general are created by the church, by our parents and by other institutions—but especially by the church—to keep our wild ids in line. And that once you accept the validity of these rules you're in trouble. Either you fall in line – walk lock step behind the teachings of the church. Suppressing your true nature. Which leads to repression, lots of crazy dreams and Freudian slips and eventually, if we stay repressed, to neurosis. Or you follow your urges and violate the rules and live with the guilt. Which will also likely lead to some sort of neurosis. Now I could remind you that Freud developed his theories after spending his life talking to people who were neurotic. He didn't try to unpack the healthy psyche so his reference set was hopelessly skewed. But we won't go there. Sigmund isn't here to defend himself. So instead let me simply say: