

CONFESSION
1 John 1:5-2:2

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A mother remembers introducing her son to the cleansing power of confession.

It was a bright afternoon in the early fall. My youngest son and I had just come home from kindergarten – he was a student there, I was a helper. I was fixing lunch when I heard it. Overhead, he was pacing back and forth, up and down, across the floor of the bedroom above me. I listened for a moment, puzzled, but I knew it couldn't be anyone else. We were the only two home.

I hesitated, then knocked lightly on his door jamb. “Honey,” I said, “what’s wrong?”

He didn't even look up. He just shook his head miserably and kept on walking.

“What is it?” I insisted. Again, no answer.

“Are you in trouble at school?” He shook his head.

“Please tell me what’s bothering you.” I entered the room and touched him on his shoulder.

“I can't.”

“Of course you can. You can tell me anything.”

“No,” he said. “I don't want you to know.”

“Have you done something wrong?”

He looked up. “Yes,” he said.

“Well, could you tell Daddy about it when he gets home?”

His whole body seemed to shake. “I don't want him to know either.”

“Is this something that would make Jesus sad?” I was fishing now.

He gave a vigorous nod – yes! – and sat down on his bed, dejection causing his little shoulders to droop.

Feeling helpless, I looked at him. Only five years old and so distraught. I needed to help him, but how?

Suddenly it came to me. "I know someone you could tell," I said. Someone who could help you make things right with Jesus, but who wouldn't tell anyone else – not even me and Daddy. Would that help?"

He looked surprised and brightened a bit. "Yes," he said.

"Okay, then," I said. I sat down beside him.

I put my arm around him. "We can go to the priest," I said. "We can tell him what we have done wrong. He can help us confess to Jesus, and we can receive forgiveness. And he'll never tell anyone what we said. It's up to you," I said to my son. "But when I really feel bad about something wrong I've done, it always makes me feel better," said the Catholic mother, "to go to confession. Would you like to try it?"

"Yes," he said.

"Okay then. Let's go down to the church and see if we can find the priest."

I still remember the walk down to the parish church at the end of our block, his small trusting hand clasped in mine. We didn't talk. I was praying as hard as I could that we would find a confessor for this little soul.

The church inside was dark as we came in from the bright sunlight, but as our eyes adjusted I saw a figure kneeling in one of the pews – a priest I knew well from the nearby Jesuit college.

"That's Father Schmitt," I told my little boy. "He's very nice and very close to Jesus. Shall I ask him to help us?"

He nodded.

The priest's eyes smiled as I explained our request. He squeezed my hands as I explained that my child was really too young for formal confession.

"One is never too young to feel sorry for wrongdoing," said the priest. "Guilt is a gift."

Guilt is a gift! I had time to wonder how many adults would agree with that as I knelt far back in the church and watched the drama of forgiveness take place before me. Hair of iron-gray for the one. Blond curls for the other. The two sat on the marble step in front of the altar.

I could see that Father Schmitt would ask a question, and the child would nod or shake his head and sometimes give an answer. The interchange took several minutes as I knelt, watching and being grateful for the “accident” that had placed the Father there that day.

Then it was done. Both figures rose – the tall and the small. The priest gave my son a hug, and down the center aisle the child came – skipping. Skipping! His face was lightened by his smile.

“Let’s go,” he said happily when he got to me. We went. We did not speak of it on the way home or even after that. Since that day, I’ve never really learned what was troubling my kindergartner’s heart. But now he’s grown up into a man – a good man, a good salesman – with a strong sense of right and wrong that will not let him misrepresent his product, even when to do so just a little would help him make the sale.

“I just can’t do it,” he will say. “It just wouldn’t feel right.”

I have pondered, writes the mother, Father Schmitt’s statement that “guilt is a gift,” when in the world today the Eleventh Commandment seems to be “Thou shalt not get caught” – and if you do, deny or put the blame on someone else.

I have thought about how the world would be transformed if everyone in it, from the leaders on down, when they made a mistake, when they committed a sin – even a big one – would say, “I did it. It was wrong. I’m sorry.” I think there would be a lot more time for smiling and maybe even some skipping. (Janelle Lazzo, “Never too young for the gift of guilt,” *National Catholic Reporter*, 10/23/98)

I. The first thing I want us to see from this writing of the Apostle John is that to deny is to deceive.

Notice what he says in verses 8 and 10. He says in verse 8, “If we say we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves...” To deny is to deceive. “...and the truth is not in us.”

Look at verse 10. “If we say we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.”

To deny is to deceive.

How many times did he wonder, when the phone rang, if it might just be the dreaded call? When I read this story I pondered how many times, when he heard a car pulling into the driveway did he wonder if this might be the car that was coming to take him away. How many times when he saw an official envelope in the mail did he ponder that it was the message – the dreaded message – that would end the deception, that would bring his life to a screeching halt? How many times? How many days? Was it for months? Did the paranoia go on for years? Did it go on for decades? Did it go on for nearly half a century? Just how long – how long did he live fearful that he just might get caught and his deception would be discovered, that his sin would be made known?

Eddie Brown suffered from diabetes, high blood pressure, heart problems, and much more. He spent 44 years scrubbing floors, doing porter work, working in restaurants, shining shoes in the World Trade Center. He did anything – anything that wouldn't require a security check. He spent the five years as a security guard at a grocery store, earning \$150 a week to watch the door from his car.

He always took jobs hoping that no one would do just enough background check to discover just who he really was. He'd gotten away with it for 44 years.

His wife knew about his past, but not his children. Not his grandchildren. He'd never told them. He'd lived a quiet life, a respectful life – worked hard those 44 years. But it was 44 years of deception. Forty-four years of denial.

Finally, it was a minor traffic accident. The police, lights flashing and glaring, happened to check his license. If he'd never had the accident, perhaps he'd never been caught. He'd been denying and he'd been deceiving for these four and a half decades.

You see, Eddie Brown – loving father and grandfather – was a chain gang escapee. He could be extradited, in his poor health and retirement age, to have to serve out the remaining four and a half years on his sentence for a holdup he committed when he was 19 years old. Nineteen years old – and now caught at 64.

“I hope I don't have to go back to prison,” he said. He was sitting with several of his 27 – yes, 27 – grandchildren on the stoop of his Brooklyn row house. “God knows that's my hope – that I don't have to go back.”

His lawyer, Scott Buell of the Legal Aid Society, was negotiating with the Florida authorities in hopes that Brown could somehow, someday avoid doing the jail time that he'd escaped. (*Amarillo Daily News*, 8/31/96)

He had been living – for 44 years – a life of denial, a life of deception. How many times did he ponder, “Is this the moment I'm going to be caught?” When the minor traffic accident occurred and someone called the police, when he saw the officer approaching the car, surely he knew that after four decades of successfully deceiving the world, he'd now been caught.

To deny is to deceive.

Some of us live like that. We don't just deceive others. We deceive ourselves – saying that we have no sin, that we, ourselves, have not broken God's commandments, we have not failed in living the life of a faithful disciple.

It wasn't ignorance that was a problem for those to whom John writes. It was a cover-up. It was deception. It was denial. We cannot deny our sin by seeing it simply as a mistake or result of a poor education or a poor choice or a poor childhood. Sin is rebellion against God. Sin is disobedience to His commands.

We are really, in many ways, calling God a liar. Verse 10 says as much. “When we say we have not sinned, we make Him – God – a liar, and His word is not in us.” For God Himself has declared that all have sinned and fallen short (Romans 3:23) of the glory of God. There are no exceptions. There is not an exception in this room today. There is not an exception listening by way of television or radio.

Those in John’s day were arguing they did not need cleansing from sin because they had no sins from which to be cleansed.

A Presbyterian minister told the story about his first year at a certain congregation. His predecessor had abolished the general confession of sins from the Sunday liturgy. One of the first things the new pastor did was try to reinstate the confession. There was a lot of resistance to change in that church – as there usually is in churches. Some members thought the confession of sins was just too morbid a thing to do in church, where one’s spirits were supposed to be lifted up. During the heat of the debate one woman, an elder in the church, exclaimed, “But I don’t have to apologize to God for anything!” The pastor was dumbfounded. His seminary training had not prepared him for this, he told a friend.

What could she possibly have meant by saying she didn’t have to apologize to God? Did she mean that she hadn’t committed any of the big sins and, therefore, had no real need to apologize? She might have meant that, but she would have been wrong because anger is God’s concern as much as murder, and lust as much as adultery. So she’d be in trouble on those accounts.

She might have meant that her apology is due to the person against whom she had sinned or transgressed and she hadn’t sinned against God. Perhaps she had forgotten the cry of the Psalmist when he said, concerning his own sin, “Against you, God, and you only have I sinned and done this evil in your sight.” All sin is sin against God. (Miroslav Volf, “Is it God’s Business?” *Christian Century*, 11/8/2000)

We cannot deny – we need to apologize to God for a lot.

II. The second thing I want us to see is that to confess is the cleanse (v. 7 and 9).

Look at verse 7. “...but if we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son – look at the words – cleanses us from all sin.”

Verse 9. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Notice how they go together. Confession and cleansing. He cleanses (verse 7) if we confess (the condition of cleansing, verse 9). If we confess our sins – notice – He forgives, He cleanses.

To confess is to cleanse.

It is an amazing thing that God forgives us for all of our sins if we confess them. Jesus died for you. He bore your sins on that cross. It was you who should have been crucified. It was I who should have been crucified. But there He hangs – mocked, cursed, spat upon, bruised, broken body. He died. Not so that you would deny and deceive about your sin, but He died in order that you would confess and be cleansed.

There is nothing more rejuvenating, nothing that brings more renewal than repentance of sin. If there was one truth that I could wish for a congregation it is the truth of forgiveness. It is to wish that the people of God would understand the power of God. It is to wish that the family of God would understand the forgiveness of God.

I don't know why we do it, but so many of us – young and old, rich and poor – so many of us refuse to allow God to forgive us. With our minds we know – theologically so – that when Jesus died, He bore our sins on His shoulders, that when Jesus died, He paid the price, He met the requirement of the wrath of God on our behalf. Despite the fact that we understand the theological truths, somehow we never confess, we never receive the cleansing. Somehow we walk through life stained – stained with the sins of the past and stained with the sins of the present. Somehow we walk through life not wearing the garments of white of the conquerors and overcomers, the color of the people of God (see Revelation 22). We wear garments stained. For some reason we refuse to be washed. For some reason we refuse to be cleansed.

Do you dare attempt to comprehend the forgiveness of God today? Would you dare attempt, for the first time in your life, to grasp what it means for God to forgive you, for God to forget your sin? Would you grasp for the first time in your life what it means for your sin to be totally gone in the eyes of a holy and righteous God?

For to confess is to cleanse. “The blood of Jesus, His Son, cleanses,” says the Apostle John. The hymnist said it another way.

*There is a fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Immanuel's veins.
And sinners plunged beneath that flood,
Lose all their guilty stains.
Lose all their guilty stains.*

When William Cowper penned those words in 1771, he captured the thought and mind of the Apostle John. The blood of Jesus, His Son, cleanses us from all sin.

The opening line of Huxley's novel *Brave New World* offers an alternative to the cleansing that comes from confession. He penned, “Rolling in the muck is not the best way of getting clean.”

Some of you, despite the fact that Jesus has died for your sins – some of you, despite the fact that the Lamb has been sacrificed – some of you, despite the fact that God has forgotten – some of you are constantly rolling in the muck instead of getting clean.

III. There is a third and final thing I want you to see from this passage and that is to be forgiven is to be free.

Look at chapter 2.

My little children, I am writing these things to you that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate (*it's the word for an attorney, a counselor, a go-between*) with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation (*that means the payment, things that satisfy the wrath of an angry God*) for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.

To be forgiven is to be free. To be forgiven means that God has forgotten. To be forgiven means that you should forget. To be forgiven means that we are absolutely free.

When God forgives, God forgets.

Christ has already met the wrath of God. He is the propitiation. Therefore, we are free.

Perhaps you've had the opportunity to fly with an airline that allows some its passengers to fly backwards. It's the airline that doesn't give you an assigned seat, but rather gives you a slip, a number. You enter the plane and discover that there are a certain number of passengers who are going to fly looking the wrong way. People are going to fly focused on where they've been instead of where they are going.

For many of us that would be the seat of choice, for we look at life not looking at what's ahead but, rather, looking at what's behind. We live life forever looking at the problems of our past rather than the freedom of the future given the forgiveness of the Father.

The Psalmist declared, "Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is a man whose sin against the Lord does not count against him, and in whose spirit is no deceit. When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For night and day, Your hand was heavy upon me. My strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. When I acknowledged my sin to You and did not cover up my iniquity, I said 'I'll confess my transgressions, O Lord,'" and You forgave the guilt of my sin."

Forgiveness brings freedom.

How about you today? Finally, once and for all, you are willing to accept the forgiveness of God. Jesus has died for you. What more will you require from the Father before you will live in the freedom of forgiveness? If the death of His Son is not enough, what must He do? Are you going to arrogantly and cowardly hold on to the guilt and crippling powers of your sin because you think God is not loving enough to die for you, because you think God is not powerful enough to set you free?

What about you? Do you confess in order to be cleansed? Will you fly straight ahead – looking at the future and not the past?