

“Confession: A Necessary Evil?”

Message @ Jericho Ridge Community Church – Sunday, June 24, 2012

Text: Psalm 32 // Series: “Taste & See: A Journey Through the Psalms”

Well good morning, friends. Dan’s video and our text today reminded me of a story, more of a series of stories or a pattern really, from my growing up years. You see I’m the oldest in my family so those of you who are firstborns know that when a fight breaks out amongst the children in the family, the eldest often gets charged with the crime of instigation. As an example, let’s say mom and dad are reading in another room, and an argument breaks out amongst us kids at the kitchen table. And the argument gets way out of hand to the point that feelings are hurt and pushing and shoving begins. At this point, we’re making enough noise that mom and dad come into the room to intervene and what’s the first thing they ask? “Brad: what’s going on here?” And once my side of the story came out, in which of course, I was always the hero and someone else was always the villain, then my folks would sit us down and make us look one another in the eyes and say “I’m sorry for hitting you” or “I’m sorry for putting bubble gum in your hair while you were sleeping. Or “I’m sorry for lighting your toy on fire by strapping it to my model rocket” or whatever the offense may have been. In our family growing up, as the guilty party, you looked the offended person in the eyes and asked for forgiveness.

Now there were some rules around this: it had to be genuine. Your confession couldn’t be coerced or manipulative or mom and dad would see through it – I think that’s why they made us look into each other’s eyes so they could get something of a picture of what was going on in our little souls. But the next step was perhaps even more radical. The offended party was to look you in the eye and offer genuine, non-coerced forgiveness. Their words “I forgive you” had to be spoken, not mumbled begrudgingly or faked. If the confession was genuine, then the forgiveness offered in return had to be genuine. Now I *hated* the process at the time – mostly because I was usually playing the role of the offending guilty party, but looking back on it now, I think it taught me a few valuable lessons that we’re going to unpack today. Unknowingly, this shaped my personal expectations of and experiences of relating to God. Because beyond the initial experience of salvation, where God wipes the slate clean for those who invite Him to be their forgiver and leader of their lives, there is a profound value and indeed a healthy necessity in doing the hard work known as confession. Where you and I “own up” as it were to the shortcomings and offenses that we commit, against God and others. In our text today we learn that confession is so much more than a necessary evil. It is a wonderful and powerful privilege that wipes the interior slate of our lives clean again and brings us a sense of joy and peace and freedom.

If you've been with us this past month, we are currently in a teaching series called "**Taste and See**" where we are exploring various expressions of relating to God through the Psalms. And several weeks ago, I was reading through our Momentum Journaling and I came across a Psalm that struck me. It struck me because it was so eclectic and surprising that I just had to learn more about it. But it also poses a very intriguing question for me that we'll be exploring here today. A common question that I get asked as a pastor is "if God knows everything already, then he knows what I have done, right? And if God knows all the wrong things that I have done, He also knows that I'm sorry for them. So why in the world do I need to tell God that which He already knows? Why bother with the discipline of confession? I want you to keep that question in your mind as we read through this text because I think it hints at some profound and practical answers that you and I can put in place in our lives today.

We're going to read Psalm 32 corporately today in four parts. Because many of these Psalms were written as songs or liturgies for public corporate worship in ancient Israel and they certainly still have a place in that realm – that's why so many of the songs that we sing find their lyrical roots in this wonderful book of the Old Testament. So I've assigned each section of chairs a small chunk of verses which will all be contained on a single slide and then we'll all finish strong together, alright? So look up to the screens where your text will be drawn from the New Living Translation and we'll begin reading together. I'll read with each group – there is no prize for the loudest or best reading, by the way so there's no need to rush or try to out-do your neighbour in enunciation. Are you ready section 1?

**Scripture – 5 slides.**

Even in therapeutic culture, the idea of confession makes us nervous, doesn't it? We live in a world that advocates that when you or I make a mistake that my first response is to foist the blame off on someone else or to internalize it and never tell anyone my secrets or shortcomings. The whole notion of confession confronts and indeed assaults our sensibilities as individuals because it puts us in touch with our failures. I'm not sure what images come to mind for you when you think about confession – a dark little booth with a priest sitting behind a slotted wooden window listening in confidence to the details of your darkest past or perhaps people spilling their guts in a small group setting or even a larger public gathering. There have been historically and culturally a wide range of practices around confession but this morning we are going to focus more on the vertical relationship than on interpersonal confession. Because 32:5 indicates that the author confessed his sins to the Lord, so we're going to focus there though the text certainly has application in other places.

So let's begin by asking what does this text teach us about the place or **the purpose of confession** between you and God? Why should I bother if God knows already? This text seems to hint that confession is, or can be, a joyful experience, but why do I need to do it if God already knows?

In his excellent book *The Celebration of Discipline*, writer Richard Foster has a whole chapter on confession. His emphasis is slightly on more the corporate nature of confession but he rightly suggests that one of the primary things confession does biblically is that it puts us back in touch with who we are and who God is. "The discipline of confession **brings an end to pretense**" Foster says. I don't know about you, but I have a very high capacity for self-deception. I can do something wrong and I can find 15 ways immediately to justify it or to make it seem not as bad as it really was. We tell ourselves all kinds of things to avoid confession: "Oh, I'm just Irish so I have a temper." "Oh that? Well, everybody does that, and I certainly don't do it as much as so and so!" But the process of confession is really the process of telling myself the truth that God already knows. Confession is not giving God new information, it is coming to Him with a new posture.

And the amazing thing is that as I begin to tell myself the truth about who I am, God begins to reveal more of who He is. **Confession allows God's grace to flow into my life.** Just like my conversations with my siblings growing up, when you and I come to the place where we are ready to look God in the eye, so to speak to tell Him the truth about the status of our hearts, to say "I am sorry, God" His response is wonderfully predictable. Look at the three images that help describe what God is doing with my sin when I come to Him in confession: The first picture is that I my sin is

1. **Forgiven: "lifted up"; burden removed (v.1)** – even a cursory browsing of the psychological literature around guilt is depressing to read. Right here in verses 3-4, the author talks about how his guilt over wrong doing was eating away at him internally. There was this weight that he felt – that caused him psychological and even physiological manifestations... When he moved to the place of honesty with God in confession, it was lifted up or removed. Imagine what it would feel like to walk out of here today with that weight lifted. The second picture is that God takes our sin and "covers" them
2. **Covered: "buried" or forgotten about (v.2)** – Missionary and stateswoman Cory Ten Boom used to say "God takes our sins, and throws them in the deepest sea. And he posts a sign that says "No Fishing!". God really can forgive and forget. Romans 8 says there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Some of us have a nasty and unhealthy habit of confessing, then getting out

- our fishing rods dragging up old smelly fish carcasses. But God has put that sin out of sight. His grace applied to your life because of the work of Jesus on the cross. This is hard work for many for us to receive it – when we go to pray time, let us pray for you in this. The third picture of what God does when we confess is similar:
3. **Not counted: accounting ledger (v.2)** – When you wrong me, I count a strike against you. You are in a deficit position in my books. When you do enough good things, you move out of deficit and into positive territory. But what this picture reminds us of is that God’s accounting system operates on a fundamentally different platform than our accounting system. God doesn’t keep score in that way. He doesn’t have some kind of heavenly abacus that he’s busy writing down all of the bad things you do and all of the good things you do and if only when you get to the end of your life, the good things outweigh the bad, then He’ll let you into heaven. God’s accounting system is built on the premise that only the pure in heart will see God. My sins don’t just have to be minimized or outweighed by my good deeds, it has to be gone. And genuine confession is the only key that unlocks that door. When you and I come to trust in Jesus alone God takes His perfect record and applies it to my life. I love how verse 10 reads in the King James Version, that God’s mercy will completely encircle or enfold those who trust in the Lord. They will not drown in the floodwaters of judgment in verse 6.

At the marriage seminar with the Parrotts here in Friday night, they used a phrase that I think captures and binds together these three pictures of what happens when I engage in confession: “unswerving authenticity”. When I move to a place where I am willing and ready to face up to the things that God already knows to be true of my heart, motives, thoughts and speech, then we can move to a new depth of relationship. It wasn’t that God didn’t know them, it’s that I wasn’t telling myself the truth about them... I love the message translation of verse 2: **“God holds nothing against you when you are holding nothing back from him”** (The Message)

This all sounds great, doesn’t it, but there’s this tonal change in the middle of the Psalm that we have to deal with. It actually contains both a warning and a promise that could be illustrated by a story, again from my childhood. (stayed late, in order to avoid punishment, I set my watch back to 5 minutes before the time I was to be home, sauntered in as casually as I could... who me? Late? No! Eventually, under cross examination I was discovered and I came to find out that contrary to my initial opinion, that

my parents weren't actually mad that I was late. They were mad that I had lied to them and intentionally engaged in a cover up strategy.

Perhaps the most often quoted verse by parents to our children is Numbers 32:33 "Be sure your sins will find you out". This echoes the warning of Psalm 32:6 which says "let the godly pray to you while there is still time". You see, while God can cover our sins and forget them, we have a nasty propensity toward coveting our sins and telling ourselves "I'll deal with that later". The problem with that strategy is that none of us as humans are ever promised tomorrow. And so 32:6 is a subtle but dire **Warning: Don't fall into the trap of believing that we can confess any old time we want to.** There is an arrogant presupposition that undergirds this idea that is so subtle but so dangerous. We tend to put off till tomorrow the difficult and rigorous work that ought to be done today. But sin is like plaque deposits that clog our arteries. Over time, if unattended to, the buildup more and more and more till the blood flow is so restricted that none passes. If you feel far from God, one question to ask yourself is when was the last time I was unflinching honest with myself and with God about my sin? When was the last time I engaged in the discipline of confession? Perhaps today is the time to clear out your arteries.

In these verses, God makes an incredible and highly personal promise: that He will instruct you personally. That He will watch over you, personally. That He wants to teach and instruct you and me in the ways in which we should go. I will nudge you, internally speak to you, prompt you by my Spirit in your heart and mind and through others. I will watch over you – what an amazing promise from the One who hung the stars in place and who is the Judge of heaven and earth. The proviso is that you and I need not to act like an ass that doesn't want to go in the way in the way it should without the use of force. This is why the text says that sorrows come to the wicked, because they don't follow God's ways and instructions which are true and are for our good. God has given us the gift of confession that we can experience freedom from guilt. SO that we can know that the forgiveness He offers us is real and eternal and can produce JOY in our hearts! You and I don't have to walk around with the weight of guilt on our shoulders. And this loops us right back from the end of the text to where we started: that the pure JOY is reserved for those whose hearts and hands and lips and mind are pure. Not perfect as in I've never done anything wrong. But pure, as in "I've done plenty of things wrong, but I am trusting in the grace and forgiveness that God offers to me that purifies and sets me free". The **Promise: In times of personal distress, those who live with unswerving authenticity toward God and others will find safety and comfort.**

We're going to move into a time of response. I can tell you about confession but I can't confess for you. During this time, I want to offer the following thoughts **for reflection and action**:

The first is to ask you to consider which side of a continuum you live on: **Beware of living in the extremes: either consumed with guilt over unconfessed sins OR drifting towards a hard & calloused heart (which do you think you tend toward?)**

Ask God to attend to your soul this morning. I tend toward minimizing and telling myself nothing is wrong. Others live in other places. Where are you?

Prayer team will be available as Renee and team come and lead us in worship in song. This first song may be new or unfamiliar to you and so I invite you not to sing if you don't want to but if God brings something or someone to your mind, act on it. Might be just with Him. Might require you to attend to unfinished business with someone else who is here. Might require you to write a note or send that e-mail (IF TIME: sending the e-mail from the plane).

**Begin the hard process of asking God to search your heart so that you can experience His freedom, peace and Joy.**

Let's pray.