



ANGLICAN CHURCH OF PAPHOS

Lent Course 2025 A Deeper Walk

Week 6 CONFESSION (1 John 1:5-10)

15 APRIL 2025 - Revd Paul A. Carr

Introduction

Richard Foster suggests that Spiritual Disciplines aim to replace old destructive habits with new life-giving ones. Thinking of confession as life-giving practice may seem a little unnatural because it necessitates identifying some ‘not so good’ stuff in our lives - and who wants to do that? But as the first letter of John tells us, *“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”* 1 John 1:8

Confession is far from straight-forward, but we are going to simplify it to three (not so easy) steps. These three steps offer a process for thinking about the discipline of confession. The first step then, like any road to recovery, is admitting you have a problem.

Step One: Identifying What’s Gone Wrong

In our liturgy we have a moment given to self-examination where, as Douglas Steere puts it, *‘... a Soul comes under the gaze of God and where in His silent and loving presence this soul is pierced to the quick and becomes conscious of the things that must be forgiven and put right before it can continue to love the One whose care has been so constant.’*

In step one we admit we have a problem, and the problem is that most unpopular of subjects – Sin. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Life Together) *Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light. In the darkness of what is left unsaid sin poisons the whole being of a person.’*

Even in church I’m not sure we’ve understood sin. You will have heard it taught that sin is all the bad things we do. But it is not. At least, it’s *not just* the bad things we do. If sin is merely reduced to a list of bad things like murder, slander, vanity, drunkenness, gluttony, greed, promiscuity, rage, adultery... we have missed the point. Indeed, all these things are sins, but they are not what sin is.

There are plenty of good, healthy, innocuous things that can become sinful. Actions that may seem perfectly harmless can be actions of sin. Like Adam, eating fruit from a tree for example or suppose if Jesus had turned those rocks into bread in the wilderness. These actions in themselves are not obviously bad but they are made bad by their context. So, what is sin’s context? *“... sin is anything that distracts us from obedience to God. Sin summed up, is disobedience.”*

Obedying a list of ‘dos and don’ts’ is hard but it masks the even tougher task of identifying the broader sin-networks in our lives. These networks can be small day-to-day decisions to live other than God would have us live. For example, there is nothing inherently sinful about having a sports car, building a house conversion or taking expensive annual holidays.

All these things on face value are not ‘sinful’ but it is our relationships with them, our reliance upon them, their status above the needs of others or what our pursuit of them might lead us to neglect, that can incrementally result in them revealing sin in our lives.

Take a moment, on your own, to think about those things that interfere with your following God each day. Not just the obvious 'sins' but the everyday distractions that can become unhelpful and ultimately sinful in your life.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Life Together) *Sin that has been spoken and confessed has lost all of its power. It has been revealed and judged as sin. It can no longer tear apart the community.* ' When we have identified what's wrong, once we have named sin for what it is, there is a next step.

Step Two: Saying Sorry

Some of the most difficult words to say when put together are "I'm sorry." Once we have admitted to ourselves that we have sinned (step one) it can't stop there. Something needs to be done about it. We must find a way of saying sorry (step two). The danger of not doing so is we can get trapped in guilt that can lead to debilitating and corrosive consequences. That's why we are urged to keep short accounts with God.

Hebrews 12:15 says, '*See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it many become defiled*'. Failure to progress in the process of confession gets us all bunged up with guilt. Guilt's not all bad yet it is another word that gets bad press. Could it be though that occasionally guilt is necessary? Just as severe pain in a bone after a fall might indicate that something is broken, could it be that guilt helps us know when healing is necessary? Could it be that guilt helps us know when a sorry is needed?

The important thing to remember is that the Christian story does not end with sin and guilt. They do not have the final word. After identifying sin in our lives (step one), we take the next step in our journey of confession. The Christian life is not about sitting around feeling rubbish and guilt-ridden about the past. After admitting to ourselves that we have sinned, the next step is to speak it out "I'm sorry!"

In twos and threes ponder one or both of the following questions from Foster's study guide:

How would you distinguish between false guilt and genuine guilt?

When is the discipline of confession an unhealthy preoccupation with sin and when is it a proper recognition of our need for forgiveness?

Is Confession Public Or Private?

Throughout Christian history there has been much discussion over whether confession is a private or corporate discipline. Richard Foster lists it as a corporate discipline he tells us it's not a matter of 'either/or' but 'both/and'. He says, "*We are grateful for the biblical teaching ... 'there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus'* (1 Tim.2:5). *We are also grateful for the biblical teaching... 'confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another...'* (James 5:16) Foster, p.181

While private confession is certainly theologically adequate (Jesus is the only one who can deal with sin) we might feel certain instances where a more corporate and shared confession with another or others can be beneficial. The Book of Common Prayer makes provision for this at that moment in the liturgy of self-examination, saying "*If there be any of you who by this means cannot quiet his own conscience herein but require further comfort or counsel, let him come to me [the minister] or to some other minister of God's word, and open his grief ...* " It can help to physically say the words aloud, making the confession audible either in the presence of another or even by oneself. Saying "I am sorry" leads us to the third step.

Step Three: Accepting Forgiveness

Have you ever felt unforgiven? Perhaps by family, friend, colleague or stranger? You may have recognized your sin against them, (step one), you may have spoken it out “I’m sorry” (step two) and then ... silence or worse still, hostility! The third step in confession is accepting forgiveness. But whereas steps one and two are predominantly our action (with the help of the Lord as we ask), step three feels more out of our hands.

It can be hard to accept forgiveness. Perhaps you find it difficult even if you have been affirming the liturgy of The Creed for years, I believe in the forgiveness of sins.’ The people who put together the Creed obviously thought this was something worth reminding ourselves of! The good news is we don’t have to wait like Noah for the Dove to return with the promise of hope for the future. Our hope is secure from the moment we express our remorse. 1 John 1:9 assures us “*If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*”

Proverbs 28:13 says, *No one who conceals transgressions will prosper; but one who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.* We can be sure of God’s forgiveness. This is unsurprising given what the Psalmist tells us of God’s character in Psalm 145:8, *The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love.* These five qualities are like peeling away the layers of an onion. The outer layer is made up of God’s works and faithfulness. The second layer is made up of God’s goodness and God’s kingdom. The third and innermost layer is made up of God’s love. You peel away God’s works, rule, faithfulness, and His goodness and you see the core is God’s love.’

In twos and threes can you share examples of unforgiveness (not necessarily from personal experience but from public life, news, politics, famous personalities, national conflicts etc.)? Using the examples you have thought of, now consider how forgiveness might have changed that story?

The effects of unforgiveness or delayed forgiveness can be devastating. That’s why we are to forgive those who trespass against us and as it says in Romans 12:18 ‘*If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*’ The key to restoration and healing of strained relationships is forgiveness. How? By intentionally forgiving others, by accepting true repentance at face value even when the offence is repeated - which is of course extremely difficult when you’re the wounded party. Harboring unforgiveness damages us, it undermines our faith and changes our character for the worse.

What Forgiveness Is And Isn’t

Professor Washington A.J. Okumu writes about his involvement in the ‘Truth and Reconciliation Commission’ in South Africa and the fight against apartheid. He writes: *Bitterness, however justified will just consume our souls and achieve nothing. We must, therefore, learn to forgive even if we don’t forget.* Because if we forget the past, he goes on to say, we never learn from the mistakes of the past in order to build a better future. Indeed, as Desmond Tutu once commented: Without forgiveness, there is no future. There are a lot of misconceptions out there about what forgiveness means. So, let’s start by clarifying what biblical forgiveness is not:

- ***Forgiveness is not approving, excusing, justifying, or minimizing the wrong done to you.*** It doesn’t mean acting like the offense was okay.
- ***Forgiveness does not reconcile the relationship.*** Reconciliation requires rebuilding trust and requires both parties. You can fully forgive someone even if you never reestablish closeness.
- ***Forgiveness is not forgetting what happened.*** Forgetting may be impossible if the wound was deep. True forgiveness remembers graciously.
- ***Forgiveness is not pardoning what took place.*** They may need to face secular justice.

What, then, *is* forgiveness according to the Bible? In essence, forgiveness is choosing to release the offender from the debt they rightfully owe you. It's deciding not to hold their wrong against them, seek revenge, or let bitterness take root in your heart. As Christians, we forgive by faith out of obedience to God - whether the person deserves it. Colossians 3:13 says, *"Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."*

Take a moment to reflect prayerfully:

Who is God calling me to forgive today?

Who do I need to ask forgiveness from?

How could choosing forgiveness supernaturally change my life and relationships?

Seven Steps In Forgiving

In the Bible, *Love is a verb*. It's a doing word: it is first and foremost a decision to seek the very best for the other person whatever it may cost. Initially, at least, it is an act of the will. These seven steps in forgiving might be helpful: 1) Make the choice not to tell anyone. 2) Be pleasant to them. 3) If you talk to them, say that which will set them free from guilt. 4) Let them feel good about themselves. 5) Protect them from their greatest fear. 6) Keep it up. 7) Pray for them.

If you need to work through the topic of forgiveness, RT Kendall has written an excellent book 'Total Forgiveness' that I have found very helpful. I have included a four-page summary (by Alison Morgan) on the 'Deeper Walk' web page.

Moving On: The Value Of Confession

Confession is a sign of our repentance and to repent literally means to turn, *"...do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."* Confession is an act of turning away from sin towards new life in Jesus. Together our three steps of confession reveal our true desire, to seek God's grace to change and never look back. Confession is more than psychologically therapeutic. It is a means of healing and transforming the inner spirit. It brings about objective change. As we keep check on ourselves, as we identify and deal with sin, we can't help but change little by little because confession is to keep company with Jesus. *'Looking to Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.'* (Hebrews 12:2)

Confession is part of the ongoing work of sanctification in our lives. Philippians 2:12 *"Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling."* It is unsettling to examine our own sinfulness, but the outcome of our confession is the affirmation of life. The result of confession is that we are blessed. Psalm 32:1-2 reminds us! *"Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit."*

Foster is right after all; confession is indeed a life-giving habit because it reorients us to live in Jesus. The discipline of regular confession helps us live unburdened lives. Confession helps the believer to grow *"until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."* (Ephesians 4:13)



W paphosanglicanchurch.org

P 99 103976 E churchsecretary04@gmail.com

FB facebook.com/Anglican Church of Paphos

1 Chrysopolitissa Street, Kato Paphos 8041, Paphos, Cyprus