

The Biblical Meaning of Confession

The word “confession” is often misunderstood and misapplied. We think of confession as an uncomfortable person-to-person event – whether before a professional clergy-person or with a friend we’ve wronged. If we were to draw a picture of someone confessing, we’d probably draw an embarrassed expression on their face. A YouTube clip would show someone giving scant detail so they, at least technically, weren’t *lying*. Also, they’d be looking down at the carpet as they wait for the other person to tell them how to make up for what they’ve done.

In the opening chapter of 1 John, verse 9 gives us an accurate picture of what confession involves. If *we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*”

Common Misunderstandings About Confession

- Confession does *not* mean asking for forgiveness. God doesn’t tell us to ask for forgiveness. When we confess, we can *expect* forgiveness. God promises. He also promises to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.
- Confession is *not* a person to person event. It’s a conversation that takes place between a person and God.
- Confession is *not* something we do to earn forgiveness. We don’t earn our forgiveness; Jesus has already earned the forgiveness and cleansing that God grants us as a gift.

What Confession *Really* Means

The Greek word John uses for “confess” means “to say the same thing.” To say the same thing as who? To say the same thing that God says. When we confess, we describe something exactly as God describes it. Confession is no more, and no less, than being honest and transparent before God.

What Cleansing Involves

The Greek word for “clean” means “unmixed” (Like pure water with no sugary flavoring stirred in.) When we confess to God that we have tried to live independently from Him, and want to join ourselves to Him, He responds by cleansing us (i.e. making us pure) at the core of our being. That initial cleansing is a one-time event that happens at salvation.

But then there are our current daily screw-ups. Those need to be cleansed as well. How? It’s easy (though humbling). Each time we fall short of God’s character we agree with God by naming to Him our faulty attitude or unkind words or selfish actions exactly what God names them. That’s what confessing involves. John isn’t talking about salvation, he’s talking about the moment-by-moment cleansing that needs to follow our moment-by-moment sins.

Jesus said much the same thing to Peter in John 13:10. Peter was arguing with Jesus about whether Jesus should wash more than his feet, and Jesus told Peter that he was already clean [the one-time event] but that he still needed dust washed off his feet [a repeated event]. And so with us. John tells us that if we agree with God that we have “dusty feet” (confess), Jesus will send away (forgive) the “dust” and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. And then we walk around a while, again get our feet dirty, tell Jesus about it, He re-washes our feet, and we are once again (albeit temporarily) clean. It’s a repetitive process. It’s also a repeated opportunity to be thankful.

Confession and Thanksgiving

More and more nowadays, rather than *asking* God for forgiveness, I *thank* Him for forgiveness. It's the only way I know to keep His gift at the front of my mind. When the Lord shows me that I've (once again) resisted Him, rather than wallowing in guilt (and ignoring Him, I agree with Him – I confess. Then I thank Him for His forgiveness and cleansing. It looks like this:

- Lord, I was just performing so I could feel special. I was ignoring the worth you've already given me. Thank you for forgiving me. Thank you that, once again, you have made me clean.
- Lord, I just (again) interrupted my husband. I thought my words more important than his. I was arrogant. Thank you for forgiving me. Thank you that, once again, you have made me clean.
- Lord, I confess my pushiness this morning when I wasn't noticed. I was making room for myself when you say you'll make room for me. Thank you for forgiving me. Thank you that, once again, you have made me clean.

You'll notice that I confess not just behavior, but also heart attitudes. I confess both observable and secret sins because all sins need God's forgiveness and cleansing.

Putting This into Practice

Each time you substitute your will for His (likely many times each day) I encourage you to be honest with God – to confess – and then follow your confession with a thank-you. Then go on to whatever the day holds with a sense of freedom, cleanness, and the goodness of knowing that you and the Lord are in agreement with each other.

Is it ever appropriate to name our faults to other people? Sometimes, but only if it would be helpful for them to have that knowledge. Ask the Lord. He'll let you know. And be sure that you've received God's forgiveness and cleansing *before* you interact with the person you've wronged.

As you practice confessing and thanking God, please comment to let the rest of us know how this practice impacts your life. Are there heart changes you've noticed? Do you sense a different kind of connection with the Lord?

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