

Have Mercy on Me, O God! - Confession and Intimacy

Series: Prayer

Date: 26 April 2026, 3rd Sunday after Easter

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: 1 John 1.5-2.2; Luke 15.11-24

The greatest need we have as human beings is to be known and loved. We might have food and drink and clothes and a place to sleep, but without love we wither and die inside. We all long for intimacy. We want someone who knows us in the depths of our soul and who we can love. But we also have a problem. If people really knew everything about us, if they knew all that went on in our heads, wouldn't they reject us? And so what do we do? We pretend. We put our best face to the world, and we hide the things we're ashamed of. Instead of the vulnerability needed for intimacy, we put up walls to protect ourselves.

We can be like that with God as well. You remember the story of our first parents. God came to walk with them as a friend. But they had disobeyed his command, and they realised they were naked. Shame entered in. They tried to cover themselves with fig leaves. They hid from God because they were afraid. When God asked Adam, "What is this you have done?" Adam said, "The woman you put here with me - she gave me the fruit and I ate it." Instead of owning up to what he had done, Adam blamed both God and his wife.

We've been living by the same script ever since. And what is the result? Alienation. We're separated from God and from each other. Isaiah 59.2 says, "Your iniquities have separated you and your God, and your sins have hid his face so he will not hear." The English novelist Francis Spufford calls sin "the Human propensity to [stuff] things up", although he uses more colourful language. The prophet continues with a devastating description of how this spirals out into communities: "So justice is driven back, and righteousness stands at a distance; truth has stumbled in the streets, honesty cannot enter. Truth is nowhere to be found, and whoever shuns evil becomes a prey."¹ It sounds very contemporary.

Today we're continuing our series on prayer. Wherever you are at with faith, whether you've been a Christian for years or you're at church for the first time wondering what this is all about, my guess is that you've prayed, or thought about praying. Prayer is a universal human experience. The goal of this series is to teach us to pray and get us praying more. 2 weeks ago we saw how Christian prayer is participating in the relationship of the eternal Son with the Father, and so our highest privilege and greatest joy. Last week we saw how

¹ Isaiah 59.14-15

we're invited to delight in God through praising him for who he is and what he has done. The title for today's sermon is, "Have mercy on me, O God", and we're looking at the topic of Confession. Some people say confession is morbid introspection. We're going to see how confession is the pathway to intimacy with God and personal transformation. It may not come first, but we won't get far in prayer if we do not confess our sins.

So where are we heading today? We'll answer 3 questions.

1. What is Confession?
2. Why should we Confess?
3. How should we Confess?

What is Confession?

The word confession means to acknowledge the truth. We sometimes call statements of what Christians believe "Confessions". But normally we use the word confession to mean the act of acknowledging the truth about our sins to God. So David writes in Psalm 32.5,

Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity.

I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD.'

We say a confession each week in our services in church. Because this is for all of us it is necessarily not specific. But it gives a shape for how to confess in our daily private prayers. There we can name exactly the things we've done that we shouldn't have done, and the things we haven't done that we should have done. We'll explore this more in point 3, "How should we Confess?"

The confessions we say in church remind us that we are not just acknowledging our sins before God, but we are also saying sorry for them and asking for his forgiveness. So did you notice what David says at the end of verse 5?

"And you forgave the guilt of my sin."

This is God's promise that we read in 1 John 1.9:

9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

If we confess our sins, God will forgive us.

Why should we confess?

The first reason is that in confessing, we are simply being honest and acknowledging the truth. So 1 John 1.8 says, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." To not acknowledge sin is to live a lie. And this tears at the fabric of our souls. In Psalm 32 David tells us what it feels like to live with unconfessed sin.

- 3 When I kept silent, my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
- 4 For day and night your hand was heavy on me;
my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.

I know this in my own experience. When I've done something wrong, I feel all churned up inside. I get anxious and irritable. I'm distracted. I'm at war within myself. I feel crushed, even physically exhausted. Confession is the way we receive God's forgiveness and are released from the burden of guilt. After all, if you don't acknowledge you've done wrong, then you're saying there's nothing to forgive!

The second and deeper reason we confess is because God is holy, and our sin is an offence against him. He is our Creator. He is the source of all that is good. When we trash his world, or other people, even ourselves, this offends against him. If we love him, we will be grieved that we have offended against him. The most famous confession is Psalm 51 by Israel's greatest king David. The title of the psalm says it was written after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba. He also tried to cover this up by arranging for her husband to conveniently die in battle. But when David confesses in the psalm he says to God, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight."² I think what David recognises here is that our sins against others are also sins against God. He needs God's forgiveness more than anything else.

There are two alternatives to confession. We've already seen the first. Hiding. Either we try to hide like our first parents, or we try to hide our sin, from God, from others, from ourselves. David shows how this can quickly spiral out of control leading us to do worse evil to cover up an initial transgression.

The second alternative is that we become hard. The pain of a guilty conscience is the gift of God to move us to confess and receive forgiveness. But we can harden our hearts to not feel that pain. That hardening deadens us to feel other things too: love, compassion, joy, pleasure. It hardens us against relationships. We become proud and despise others. C.S. Lewis perceptively writes, "Those who do not think about their own sins make up for it by thinking incessantly about the sins of others."³

The third reason we should confess is that God promises when we confess our sins he *will* forgive us! Here there are two things we must not forget. The first is that God's forgiveness

² Psalm 51.4

³ C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*, Eerdmans, 2014: 127

is free. The second is that it is costly. We cannot earn God's forgiveness through doing the right thing, going to church, giving to charity, working hard in our job, being faithful to our spouse; all good things though they are. Nor can we earn God's forgiveness through the depth of sorrow and feelings of guilt when we confess. I've tried that. It doesn't work.

There was a period in my life where I was struggling with a habitual sin. I would confess, repent, remind myself of God's promise of forgiveness, but I would still feel incredibly guilty, so guilty that I went back to the sin because it was a source of comfort in the short term. It was a spiral of guilt and shame. Through meeting with a Christian counsellor I came to see that my self loathing, even after I had confessed and repented, was a way of trying to earn God's forgiveness, to convince him I really deserved forgiveness because I was so miserable.

But the truth is God's forgiveness is freely given because it has already been purchased at the cost of his Son. What did we read in 1 John?

9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

God will forgive us, why does John say? Because he is faithful and just. Why just? John tells us, in the following chapter 2.

if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. 2 He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

Jesus is the atoning sacrifice for our sins. He has already taken the punishment for our sins and paid our debt. If we are in Christ, God *must* forgive us now, otherwise he would be unfaithful to the new covenant that he has made with us through the blood of his Son. And he would be unjust, because he would be demanding two payments on the same debt. But Jesus has paid our debt. No more is owed. And so he forgives fully and freely.

And this means we can freely confess our sins, because we know we won't be rejected by God. And our repentance becomes not a means to atone for our sin, but a way we can honour God and live for his glory.

The second thing we must remember about God's forgiveness is the cost. It cost the life of God's own beloved Son who died in our place. This tells us the seriousness of sin. It is not a light or trivial matter. It is deadly serious. It grieves our Father. But such is his love that he has purchased our forgiveness at infinite cost to himself. And this brings us to the question of How we should Confess.

How should we confess?

In 2 Corinthians 7, Paul contrasts worldly sorrow that leads to death with godly sorrow which brings repentance that leads to life and leaves no regrets.⁴ What is the difference between worldly sorrow and godly sorrow? This distinction brings us to the heart of confession.

Worldly sorrow is where we are grieved by the consequences of our sin on us. That is, you may admit your sin, but you're not really sorry about it, you're more sorry about the painful consequences for you. This is a kind of false confession and repentance, because it's really self pity, rather than a horror and revulsion at what you've done and the impact it has had upon those you've sinned against.

By contrast godly sorrow is contrition. It's where you are grieved by what you have done, because it is wrong. You're grieved by the fact that it's you who did it, and that it was an offense against the God whom you love. It's out of love for him that you then want to confess and to change.

I have never been a punctual person, and once when I started dating Claire I was catastrophically late for a date. I was struggling with depression at the time, and so it was hard to get out of the house, but she didn't know that. So when I finally arrived she was very upset with me. We talked it through and, incredibly, she forgave me. But it was a turning point for me. I saw the impact my behaviour had on her. I didn't want to hurt her like that again. And that made me want to change. I stopped thinking about me, and started thinking about her and what would please her. Love it turns out is a powerful motivation.

It's a somewhat trite example, but as we see God's love for us, the infinite cost of his forgiveness, so our hearts will be melted to confess our sins, and to leave them behind and live for God because we love him.

How do we put that kind of confession into practice in our daily prayers? Confession begins with self examination. Maybe it's when we sin and are convicted to repent immediately. Or at the end of the day, looking back, we can ask where we have sinned? and confess this to God. The two great commandments are a helpful starting point. How have we not loved

⁴ 2 Corinthians 7.8-10

God, with our whole heart and mind and soul and strength? How have we not loved our neighbours as ourselves?

The 10 commandments can help us get more granular. Have I put anything before God today? Have I misused his name? Have I not rested when I should because I didn't trust that God would provide? Have I dishonoured my parents or those God has placed in authority over me? I might not have murdered, but have I been angry with someone? Have I looked at anyone with lust? Have I stolen or cheated or manipulated things for my benefit? Have I been untruthful? Have I been envious of what others have?

Not only are there sins of commission, things I have done, there are also sins of omission, things I haven't done. The fruit of the Spirit are helpful here - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Where have I failed to show these today?

Having identified these sins in self examination, we can confess them to God.

Then second, we hold this sin up before the light of what we know about who God is and what he has done for us in Jesus. In his book on Prayer, Tim Keller uses the picture of the light of the sun causing the mildew and fungus of our fears, our selfishness, our pride, our wilfulness, our greed all fading away as we meditate on the radiance of God's glory, the ocean of his love, the costliness of Jesus' sacrifice, the tenderness and compassion of our Father, his infinite patience with us.⁵

Confession then becomes a moment where we can receive God's grace for specific sins and be freed from their burden and power. Here we see the fruit of confession, namely intimacy with God and the transformation of life, so that we put sin to death and live for God. Or put another way, that we become more like Jesus.

So let me finish with a worked example of what this might look like.

I look back on my day and recall I said something I shouldn't have said. On reflection, I realise I made that joke to fit in and get a laugh from my friends at school. I did that because I'm afraid of being rejected and crave the approval of others. I see this means I seek to win others over by flattery and sometimes lying. I confess all this to God and ask for his forgiveness.

⁵ Tim Keller, *Prayer*, 216

Then I begin to meditate on his free grace to me in Jesus. I see the cost of my forgiveness - that he was rejected by his own people, mocked and abused by the soldiers and the passers by and forsaken by his Father, all for my sake. And I see his gift to me, so that I might be accepted by God and adopted as his child. I remember the promises of his Word: that there is no condemnation for those in Christ; That no one can bring any charge against those who God has chosen; That I am utterly secure because Jesus says he will lose none that the Father has given him; That God loves me as he loves his Son, and nothing can separate me from his love.

As I rest in this, I realise I no longer need to perform or lie or do whatever to gain the approval of others. I have the smile of my Father in heaven and that is enough. So I can exercise self control with my tongue. I can use it to heal. I can use it to speak the truth in love, sometimes courageously and at cost to myself but for the benefit of others. I ask the Holy Spirit to grow these fruits in me.

You know one of the great frustrations of the Christian life is that you're never done with sin, at least not in this life. The longer you walk with Christ, the more you realise how unlike him you are. He keeps opening doors in your life to rooms he needs to clean out. You see more of how good and just and holy God is and how far short you fall of all he calls you to. Our temptation can be to either minimise our sin, or to try to perform and earn God's favour. But if we come daily to the cross, we realise that the wider the gap we see between God's holiness and our sin, the greater Christ is whose cross always bridges that gap.⁶ John Newton was a former slave trader, turned preacher, who penned the hymn Amazing Grace. His reported last words before entering into glory were these: "I am a great sinner, but Christ is a great Saviour". That's what daily confession is. To acknowledge your sin, and to rest in the arms of your great Saviour.

⁶ Cf. <https://www.psalms88.org/sanctification/>