

James 5:16
Confess to One Another
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Raise your hand if you remember a little program from the 60's *Gilligan's Island*? "*Gilligan, and The Skipper too. A millionaire and his wife, A movie star, The professor and Mary Ann, stranded there on Gilligan's Island.*"

There on the island with what little they had from the SS Minnow, this little community forged a simple life together. And though they were physically isolated, surrounded by miles of ocean on every side, they were not alone—for they had one another.

And the irony of this fictitious and terribly dated opening illustration is that in this day in age, in which we have instant access to every episode of *Gilligan's Island*—or about anything else we could want for that matter—we live in perhaps the most isolated time in human history. We live on our own little islands, but ours can be less like paradise and more like a prison. Chronic loneliness, depersonalized communication, and virtual—rather than real—lives have reached epidemic heights.

Studies reveal that what people desire today is immediacy, connectivity, and transparency, and we've never had more. And yet people today—especially young people—report lower levels of trust and intimacy than ever before. Despite the ease of communication, something is getting lost in translation. And it is into this cultural dilemma that something as archaic as ink on a page in a book that's 2000 years old, that we find the answer for our day.

The good news is that there is a cure for this disease of isolation, but it doesn't come easy. It's not intuitive, but it can be the answer to deeper community with one another and a deeper experience of God's rich grace. So I invite you to stand with me as you are able as we read together from James chapter 5 verse 16.

Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working (or as it's written in the old King James: **the prayers of the righteous availeth much**).

There is an answer to the hurts and heartaches we experience, there is an answer for the brokenness that afflicts our families and our communities, and it is something that has become something of a lost art in the Christian Church. It is the practice of confessing to one another.

The mere mention of this probably conjures images of a little wooden booth, with a priest on one side of the screen and contrite confessor on the other. But for many in our day this is a mere relic of a bygone era. We no longer have to confess, because we now have an answer to all of the issues that used to plague us. Thanks to modern psychology and sociology, we've come up with the answers to just about everything. But in all our wisdom, does it seem like we've gotten any closer? Does it seem like we're happier? The statistics aren't showing we have.

There is a deep sickness in our culture, and it is only worsened by the denial that anything is the matter. People wonder if we as Christians simply have this penchant for self-abuse by pointing our

shortcomings and faults among one another. “There’s nothing wrong with us, it’s all a matter of our circumstances.” But the deeper we go into this thinking, the further we are from true healing. The place we begin is by admitting that something is wrong—in our minds, our communities, our families. The first step in this process called confession is admitting that we are fundamentally flawed, broken, sinful people. We need a great physician.

In Mark 2, Jesus says: **“those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”**

The first step in this process called confession is admitting there is something wrong. If we do not acknowledge that there is something deeply wrong with us, we will never be motivated to pursue change.

But to get to this place of open and transparent confession with one another, it seems to me that there are three hurdles that need to be overcome.

The first obstacle is getting beyond this notion that sin is something that is outdated. That, as a society, we have evolved beyond the need to think of our flaws in terms of sin. After all, we have the science to explain why we behave the way we do, isn’t it sort of clunky and archaic, all this talk about sin?

Instead, what we’ve done is to give new, more palatable terms for sin. We no longer call it sin; we call it maladjustment, or abnormal behavior, or crimes against humanity, or a breach of contract or violation of civil rights. We call lying spin, we call cheating a competitive advantage, we call envy motivation, and we call arrogance self-confidence.

But tell me, do any of these adequately describe the horrors of rogue gunmen opening fire on a ballgame, or child’s school? Can you describe the horror of tragedy without the language of sin and evil? Sex slavery, African genocide, Isis beheadings...

In the book of 1 John, it says: If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. A writer by the name of Mark McMinn talks about meeting with a group of young people when a girl who was raised in a house of self-esteem, where her parents told her how talented, good looking, and smart she was. And yet somehow, deep down she knew that she was never quite as great as her parents told her she was. Something was deeply wrong, and what she needed wasn’t another self-esteem pep talk. What she longed for was an authentic awareness and a language to describe her good and bad qualities, and a love that was big enough to embrace her regardless.

As Barbara Brown Taylor writes, in this respect, “sin is our only hope.” You see, when we remove the discussion of sin, all we do is leave ourselves without a vocabulary to understand the deep hurt and brokenness of our world. And we also remove the one who is able to come and offer us hope of a cure for that woundedness. Recapturing an understanding of sin in our lives is our prelude to grace.

There is a beautiful painting by the Dutch Master Rembrandt Van Rijn called the Return of the Prodigal Son. It depicts the power of Jesus’ Parable from Luke 15. In it you see the younger son knelt before the father, in contrite brokenness, after realizing how self-indulgent and self-deceived he has been. After squandering his entire inheritance he throws himself on the mercy of his father.

But before he gets to this point, the son, the Bible says, “comes to himself.” He realizes what he has done and knows that the only way for healing is to throw himself before the father and confess.

This brings me to my second point. Confession takes place between you and God, but it also must take place between you and the person you’ve wronged. During the great period of the church’s history known as the Protestant Reformation, one of the developments that emerged was the promise that Jesus offers us direct access to the Father, that our faith and forgiveness didn’t need to be mediated directly by the local priest. Because Jesus alone is our great high priest. However, like many things in the church’s history, the baby may have been thrown out with the bath water.

How many of you have ever heard this one: “I don’t need church, or I don’t need anyone else to know about my spiritual life, I can go directly to God”? The problem with this is that when we’re left to ourselves, when we’re alone, the sins of our heart never seem quite so bad. It’s easy to rationalize when it’s only us. But this is just like drinking the poison more slowly. It may not get us now, but in the end it does just as much damage.

Life Together quote: “In confession the breakthrough to community takes place. Sin demands to have a man by himself. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous is his isolation. Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light. In confession, the light of the Gospel breaks into the darkness and seclusion of the heart. It is a hard struggle until the sin is openly admitted. But God breaks gates of brass and bars of iron (Psalm 107:16).”

When Jesus ascended his throne as our one and only Great High Priest, he also said that we would be a kingdom of priests, and instituted something called the priesthood of all believers. Where each one of us acts as an intercessor—or in our terminology, a “prayer partner,” someone who intercedes on our behalf to God.

Confession is something we need in order to be free. The younger son, when he came to himself, would not have been free if he had gone home and said, “Don’t worry about it, pops, me and God talked about it already and we’re all good.” There was a deep rift caused by his sin, and the road to redemption would only lead back to his Father’s front step. To be truly free, we need one another, we need to know that as people—all of us—have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We need accountability, we need the mirror of another to show us the error of our ways. Because when you’re in the middle of it, it doesn’t feel like sin, does it?

We need to reclaim the verse that says **you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.**

I want you to turn to your neighbor sitting next to you, and I want you to confess to them the most significant sin of this week. Just kidding. But I would like to challenge you to do something this week. Invite someone out for coffee or a meal, and I want you to share something with them that is challenging you and then ask them to pray for you. This is the combination James uses in chapter 5. He says confess your sins and then pray for one another, so that you might be healed.

So the first thing is find someone you trust, and if you can’t think of anyone...woah!

The second thing is to think of something that you struggle with. And if you're sitting there and are thinking, I can't think of anything that I struggle with, double woah! If this is the case just sit down with that person and say I can't think of any of my flaws, can you tell me what they are? They'll help you.

So if what we need is to reclaim the notion of sin in our lives, and also cultivate relationships in which we are able to confess to one another in trust and love, the third thing we need to know is that as a community we are more deeply sinful than we realize, but at the same time we are also more deeply loved and forgiven than we could ever imagine.

Remember back with me to the Parable of the Prodigal Son. After having squandered his father's wealth in dissolute living, the son comes to himself. What have I done, this is not right, even my father's hired hands have more than this, I will return and work off what I have squandered. And so he begins the journey home, rehearsing his apology as he goes.

And do you remember what happens next? Does the father sit on his fatherly throne ready to hear his son's pleas for mercy? No, the text says that the father, while his son is still far off, hitches up his robe and starts to run.

Really quickly, as an aside, when this parable was read to Bedouin audience by a scholar by the name of Ken Bailey, do you know what their response was? Absurd laughter. This scene is utterly absurd. No father with any dignity would ever go out to meet a child, especially one who had publicly shamed him in this way. Everyone in the village would have known what this younger son had done. Not only would the father not have gone to meet him, but he certainly wouldn't run. It would have been beneath him, debased, undignified.

And yet this is exactly how this father, and exactly how members of a community who understand the depth of their own sinfulness, respond to the humble and contrite. You are more sinful than you could ever realize, and yet at the same time you are more loved and forgiven than you could ever imagine. Without an environment of openness and vulnerability, that is honest enough to admit we don't have it together, that we are just a bunch of blind beggars, a bunch of reprobate children, fooling around and missing the mark, we will continue to live in our little sin imposed prisons. The key to unlocking these cells of shame and remorse is to admit to one another, both honestly and specifically, that we need the mercy and grace of the father. And the good news I have for you today is that there is healing available to you. It is there for you to reach out and receive, if only we will confess to one another that we are all desperately in need of it.

For as James writes a few verses earlier: **Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. For the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.**