

1John 1:1 – 2:2

Confession

If we confess our sins... v. 9

The subject of confession is raised in our text. *If we confess our sins*. The practice of confession is as old as the ceremonial law in Old Testament times. So we read in the book of Leviticus, that book which established the order of worship in the Old Testament in 5:5 *And it shall be, when he shall be guilty in one of these [things], that he shall confess that he hath sinned in that [thing]*. Confession is mentioned in this verse in connection with the trespass offering.

On the day of atonement the picture of the removal of our sins was portrayed by the High Priest. Confession was a part of that ceremonial procedure. So we read in Lev. 16:21 *And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat, and shall send [him] away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness.*

Two goats were utilized on the day of Atonement. One was used as a burnt offering which pictured God's wrath against sin being appeased – propitiation, in other words. The other goat, which is the goat we just read about in v. 21 – This goat was released into the wilderness signifying the removal of the sins of God's people, what is referred to as expiation. But what I want you to note here in particular was what preceded the releasing of the scape-goat. Aaron was first to lay his hands upon the head of that goat and confess over that goat the iniquities of the children of Israel and all their transgressions in all their sins. So throughout the history of Israel confession was a part of the sacrificial system, thus making it a part of their worship and a part of their lives.

At a much later period in Israel's history – following the time of their captivity when they were allowed to return and rebuild Jerusalem, we read of them in Neh. 9:2,3 *And the seed of Israel separated themselves from all strangers, and stood and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers. And they stood up in their place, and read in the book of the law of the LORD their God one fourth part of the day; and another fourth part they confessed, and worshipped the LORD their God.*

What a solemn occasion that was for the Israelites. It required the putting away of their Gentile wives which they should never have taken and in the course of their repentance we see how great a part confession of sin played in their worship. A fourth part of the day was devoted to confession.

This practice of confession also made its way through that time of transition between the Old Testament and New Testament dispensation. John the Baptist was arguably the last of the Old Testament prophets and certainly his ministry signified the beginning of the New Testament period. And we read of his ministry in Mt. 3:5,6 *Then went out to him*

Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan, And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins.

When you add to this broad survey of the history of redemption the truth of one of the most familiar verses in the Bible to Christians – 1Jn. 1:9 *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness* – we can certainly see how prominent a place confession has always had and must continue to have in God’s plan of salvation.

The importance of the matter is perhaps captured best by Paul in Romans when he writes in Rom. 10:9,10 *That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.* The important thing, I believe, that is found in this passage in Romans is the connection between the heart and the mouth. This is not merely a verbal confession that is referenced by Paul but a confession that springs from a changed heart. We’ll see more about this in the course of our study today.

Our time around the Lord’s table is a time of confession. And I’m referring, now, to a broader concept than only confessing our sins. This is a time when that is done, but much more than that is confessed when we partake of these elements. And so what I’d like to do this morning in preparation for the Lord’s table is to simply analyze this practice of confession. And in this analysis we shall cover the following points:

The Meaning, Substance, and Benefits of Confession

I. The Meaning of Our Confession

If we confess our sins – our text reads. The word *confess* in this text as well as in a number of other places in the New Testament comes from a Greek word $\omicron\mu\omicron\lambda\omicron\gamma\epsilon\omega$. $\omicron\mu\omicron$ – which means *the same* and $\lambda\omicron\gamma\epsilon\omega$ - which means *to say*. *To say the same* is the literal rendering. And from this word we define confession as *a saying of the same thing that God says*. We agree with God, in other words, on the subjects that God has addressed in his word. In particular we agree with God on the subject of sin and on the subject of Christ.

We acknowledge or agree with God that sin deserves death – that sin is an affront to God’s holy character. We acknowledge the truth in our confession of sin that we were born in sin, and that we continually sin. I read a blog article the other day in which a question was asked *Should I take communion if during the previous week I’ve been a terrible parent*. I love the answer given on the blog. The answer, in effect, pointed out to the man that by God’s standards the man is always a terrible parent. And if the quality of your parenthood was the standard for partaking of communion then the man would never have the right to partake.

I love that answer because it corresponds to the standard of God's revealed law. That law measures our actions and our words and our thoughts and our motives. It measures our transgressions as well as our failures. And when we confess our sins we are agreeing with God that we were born in sin, that throughout this previous week we have sinned and have sinned more times than we even know. We are agreeing with God that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God and the word *all* includes me.

So the word *confess* means to agree with God on what God says about sin. But that same word is sometimes translated in the AV by the word *profess*. So we read in 1Ti 6:12 *Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, whereunto thou art also called, and hast professed a good profession before many witnesses*. We profess that we're Christians. We profess that we believe in the person and work of Jesus Christ. And the fact that a Christian would make a good profession before many witnesses is a sure indication that the professing Christian is not ashamed to own the name of Jesus Christ under any circumstances.

Here, then, is a challenge we face. Do you profess to be a Christian? Are you unashamed to identify with Christ before many witnesses? Do the people you work with know that you profess Christ? In Acts 11:26 we're told that *the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch*. The thing I've noted in the past about this verse is the passive force of the verb. They were called Christians – which means, then, doesn't it, that others were assigning that label to them. Their profession of Christ was so open and so known among their peers that they were called Christians by others. Here's the challenge – do others call you a Christian? Do others know that you profess Christ?

The importance of such a profession becomes all the more magnified when we learn in the New Testament of a confession that we not only make, but there's a confession that comes to us from Christ that we desire. Listen to the words of Mt 10:32. This is Christ speaking when he says: *Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven*.

May God help us, then, to be unashamed to confess the name of Jesus Christ. There's grace behind such a confession. It takes nothing short of the work of God's Spirit on our hearts to enable us to agree with God about our sin and to confess the name of Jesus Christ. This truth comes out later in John's first epistle when he writes in 1Jn. 4:2 *Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God*. And a few verses later in v.15 *Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwelleth in him, and he in God*.

The natural man, you see, won't confess Christ. The gospel is foolishness to him. And he certainly won't confess his own sin. He may in his condescending pride acknowledge that he's less than perfect but to agree with what God says about sin is to agree that you are hell-bound and hell-deserving. That's not a confession the natural man will make but it is a confession that the true child of God can make.

By partaking of these elements this morning we are basically agreeing with God on the subject of sin. And we're confessing that nothing short of the broken body and shed blood of Jesus Christ could avail to deliver us from sin's guilt and sin's power. So we see the meaning of confession. Would you consider with me next:

II. The Substance of Our Confession

What are we confessing? In our text we're told that we're confessing our sins. *If we confess our sins*. In such a confession we acknowledge what we are – sinners by nature, sinners by birth. We acknowledge, as best we can, our transgressions and our failures – the sins of commission and the sins of omission.

I should point out here that in our confession we are addressing God and not men. There is no ecclesiastical office ordained by God to hear the confessions of other men's sins. We have access directly to God through Christ, our Mediator. There are no mediators between us and Christ.

So we confess our sins and we also confess the name of God. Listen to these words from the dedication prayer of King Solomon. When the temple was completed back in Solomon's day there followed one of the greatest worship services in all of Old Testament history. If you read 1Kings 8 you find there what may be likened to the Old Testament version of the Day of Pentecost. The Shekinah glory of Jehovah fills the place and men are at once aware of the awesome presence of Christ. And in his dedication prayer Solomon anticipates the need that there would be in Israel's future for their sins to be forgiven.

Listen to how he prays in 1Ki 8:33,34 *When thy people Israel be smitten down before the enemy, because they have sinned against thee, and shall turn again to thee, and confess thy name, and pray, and make supplication unto thee in this house: Then hear thou in heaven, and forgive the sin of thy people Israel, and bring them again unto the land which thou gavest unto their fathers.*

And a few verses later in vv. 35,36 *When heaven is shut up, and there is no rain, because they have sinned against thee; if they pray toward this place, and confess thy name, and turn from their sin, when thou afflictest them: Then hear thou in heaven, and forgive the sin of thy servants, and of thy people Israel, that thou teach them the good way wherein they should walk, and give rain upon thy land, which thou hast given to thy people for an inheritance.*

In these two instances the thing that is confessed is the name of God. You know, of course, that the name of God is a very broad concept that encompasses all the attributes of God. To confess the name of God, then, is to confess the holiness of God, and the sovereignty of God, and the justice and power of God. In such a confession we are basically agreeing with God that sin is an offense to God's holiness and sin is the failure to submit to God's sovereignty and sin is a breach of God's justice that calls for the power of God's judgment.

But such a confession of the name of God is not a complete confession unless it is accompanied with the recognition that God is also the God of all grace and mercy and love and forgiveness. I love the Lord's own proclamation of his name in Exod. 34. This is what we confess. Listen to vv. 6,7 *And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation.*

We are, of course, in our partaking of the communion elements confessing the name of Christ – that he is God come in the flesh and that he has through the shedding of his blood forgiven our sins and transgressions, borne our judgment, propitiated and expiated our sins.

Before I leave this point let me point out that the substance of our confession also consists in our acknowledgement of the truth of God's revealed word. Listen to Paul's confession to the Roman governor Felix in Ac 24:14 *But this I confess unto thee, that after the way which they call heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the law and in the prophets.*

You see the connection between Paul's confession with all that was written in the law and the prophets. The Jews may regard Paul's worship as heresy but the thing that keeps Paul out of the realm of heresy is the fact that his worship and beliefs are based on the written word of God.

We, likewise, profess to believe God's word about sin and about Christ and about salvation. Our Westminster Confession of Faith is basically a statement of what the Bible teaches. And we confess the teachings of the Bible to be true.

And then would you note with me also one more ingredient, if you will, to our confession. In that great faith chapter of Heb. 11 we read a statement in v. 13 that is applied to all who live by faith. *These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of [them], and embraced [them], and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.*

Here is another aspect to our confession that poses a challenge to us. Do you confess to be a stranger and pilgrim on the earth? And if so, is there evidence in your life behind such a confession? Or would the world look at you and say – *he looks and acts like one of us?*

This is the substance of our confession, then. We confess our sin – we confess the name of Christ – we confess God's revealed truth and we confess that we are strangers and pilgrims on earth. May our time around the Lord's table this morning afford us the opportunity to confess these things anew as well as to seek God for the help we need from his Spirit to make our confession good. It remains for us to consider:

III. The Benefits of Our Confession

We've seen the meaning and substance of our confession. Let's close with a couple of thoughts about the benefits. And these benefits are clearly revealed in our text. *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

You see first in this verse the benefit of forgiveness. We did a study on forgiveness a few weeks ago and in the course of that study I noted that this is the greatest and the deepest need that we all have. We cannot function without it. It's a wonder to me that lost sinners do as well as they do these days. For they carry with them where ever they go the heavy burden of guilt. I think one of the reasons that drugs and alcohol play such a role in many sinners lives is because those things help desensitize their conscience from its gnawing power that reminds them that their guilty.

We, as Christians, on the other hand, have been set free from the heavy burden of sin. And we haven't gained this freedom by denying our guilt, or blaming others for our guilt – no, we've gained our freedom by being honest about our guilt – by confessing our sins, by saying the same thing God says about our sins which is that we are guilty and lost.

And in the freedom of our forgiveness we have found the grace to forgive others. Others may treat as wrong but no one will treat us as unjustly or unfairly as Christ was treated. And he endured the treatment he received in order for our forgiveness to be secured. So we are free from the guilt of sin because we've been forgiven.

But not only have we been forgiven, but we've been cleansed. *He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* This cleansing, of course, brings us to the communion table where we remember how our cleansing was procured. It was procured by the shed blood of Jesus Christ. So we read in Heb 1:3 *Who being the brightness of [his] glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high.* Where is Christ today? – you ask. And the answer is that He's ascended into heaven and has taken his place at the right hand of God the Father. And what this verse in Heb. 1 tells us is that there was a work to be accomplished by Christ before he could take his place there. The fact that he is seated at the right hand of the Majesty on high indicates to us that his work has been accomplished and our sins have been purged.

And then we also read in Heb 9:14 *How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?* Here is another testimony to our cleansing. We've been purged by the blood of Christ and in that purging we've been set free to serve God from hearts that are filled with praise and thanksgiving.

There is one verse in the New Testament where the word *confess* is translated by the phrase *giving thanks*. In Heb 13:15 *By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of [our] lips giving thanks to his name.* And so we can

include thanksgiving as a part of our confession. We confess his name by giving thanks for who he is what he's done.

So we have the benefit of forgiveness – we have the benefit of cleansing. In closing let me just say that we also have the benefit of assurance. Notice again what our text says – *He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*. In a sense this brings us full circle because we are back now to confessing his name. His name, you remember, speaks to us of his characteristics or his attributes and in our text that attributes that are brought out are his faithfulness and his justice. *He is faithful and just*.

This is where we draw our assurance that God will never fail to forgive us and he'll never fail to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. We ordinarily think of salvation in terms of God's grace and his love and his mercy and it's certainly good and appropriate for us to think of salvation in those terms but in this verse we see that our assurance is based on his faithfulness and his righteousness. We can assured that God will never fail the forgive and cleanse us because it is the right thing for God to do. And you can be sure that God will be faithful to himself. God will be faithful to his own standard of righteousness.

And the reason that forgiveness and cleansing are compatible with God's righteousness is because Christ is the propitiation for our sins. He shed his blood to forgive and cleanse us and the price he paid for our forgiveness and cleansing met the demand of God's law completely. And because that demand was met God will never demand from us what he's already received from his Son.

What great benefits we gain from God, then, upon our confession. And when you think about it this way, how can you avoid concluding that God forgives us and cleanses us when we're honest with him. When we cease from all self-righteousness and acknowledge that our sins are as filthy rags and then we confess Christ's righteousness then what we're doing is being honest and being true.

And so as we partake of these elements this morning, let's make this a time of confession. We confess our sins – we confess our Savior and we draw to ourselves anew and afresh the benefits that come from such a confession. We gain forgiveness and we gain cleansing and we gain assurance that God will never fail to bestow these benefits upon us.