

# HUNGRY FOR GOD: STUDIES ON PRAYER

## 8

### CONFESSION

#### Psalm 51

By Mary Youtz  
and Beth Crawford

*“He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.”*

Proverbs 28:13

*“Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.”*

James 5:16

*“‘But isn’t confession a grace instead of a Discipline?’ It is both. Unless God gives the grace, no genuine confession can be made. But it is also a Discipline because there are things we must do. It is a consciously chosen course of action that brings us under the shadow of the Almighty.”*

Richard Foster

*“How can a Holy God pour Himself through a believer whose life is clogged with the debris of this world? Sin causes indifference and it is impossible for indifferent people to change the world.... Confession is crucial for all spiritual growth, not merely for effective prayer. The Holy Spirit works best through a clean vessel, and confession begins the process of cleansing. A careful reading of Scripture reveals how important confession truly is. Those mightily used of God were also those most willing to confess their weaknesses.”*

Dick Eastman

## AIM OF STUDY

- To understand what confession is and why it is necessary for spiritual growth, and to include this in prayer on a regular basis.

## KEY VERSES

“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. ...Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.”

Psalm 51:1–2, 4

## PREPARATION

Read over the notes on “**How to Teach the Bible in Small Group**” and “**Some Practical Suggestions for Leading a Small Group Discussion**” in Vineyard Church of Columbus’ *Small Group Leadership Training Manual*. Before you read over the Scripture, pray that God would give you direction for leading your group and teach you something relevant. Then, read through the passage and the Bible study below. **You will need to go over the questions and choose which ones you want to emphasize and which you could eliminate if your time is limited.** Note that the application questions are marked with an asterisk (\*). Rather than leaving these to the end of the study, ask one or two as you work through the passage so people are being confronted by Scripture’s truths and applying them to their own lives. If you find you are falling behind schedule and need to move ahead, you could summarize some of the passage and then go to the final questions.

These studies contain more background material and information on the passages than any group will cover in a meeting. The authors are supplying this for the leaders’ benefit—to help reduce your study and preparation time; to provide resources for possible questions group members may raise; and to clarify some gray areas of doctrine that may be in your mind as you prepare. Obviously, we cannot exhaust any one subject in a document like this, so you may want to do further reading and discuss doctrine with your pastor. We highly recommend *The New Bible Dictionary* or *The New Bible Commentary* as excellent resources for study.

## OPENERS

**What are some of the tabloid headlines you have seen or heard lately?**

**Why do you think people want to know about others’ personal failures and intimate lives?**

**Why do you think it's easy for people in our culture to expose their dirty laundry to the media, but we in the church find it so hard to confess our sins to God and one another?**

Often we in the church are quick to criticize the failings of the media and pop-culture idols, but are slow to examine our own actions and attitudes. In this study, we are going to discuss confession, the honest admission of our sin to God and one another. This doesn't appear to be a "feel good" topic, and some of us may already feel uncomfortable just hearing the word "confession." However, think about how you feel when you are aware of sin in your life. Do you feel good carrying around the weight of guilt and unconfessed sin? Do you feel better when you withdraw from others so that they won't be able to observe the sinful habit you are struggling with? Are you happy attending a church activity while trying to hide behind your smile or cover up your guilt and shame?

The Bible tells us that sin is destructive to us, and to our relationships with God and others. Scripture also tells us that sin and the resultant guilt are burdensome and unhealthy for us to endure. In Psalm 32:3–4, David wrote, "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer." A well-known Christian author wrote about her own experience with unconfessed sin.

I remember having resentment towards my husband for words he said that hurt me deeply. As long as I held on to the hurt and resentment, it made me feel physically ill. I didn't want to confess it, because I thought my feelings were justified and *he* was the one who was wrong. But I finally realized that all sin is sin, so I confessed my resentment to God as sin—and the moment I did, the feeling of sickness in my body left. ...

Nothing is heavier than sin. We don't realize how heavy it is until the day we feel its crushing weight bringing death to our souls. We don't see how destructive it is until we smash into the wall that has gone up between us and God because of it" (Omartian, p. 39).

David went on in his psalm, "Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD'—and you forgave the guilt of my sin" (Psalm 34:5). The Christian author also found freedom and health when she finally confessed to the Lord. She learned,

That's why it's best to confess every sin as soon as we are aware of it and get our hearts cleansed and right immediately. Confession gets sin out in the open before God. When you confess your sin, you're not informing God of something He doesn't know. He already knows. He wants *you* to know..." (Omartian, p. 39).

In this Bible study, we hope to find the freedom to be real with God about our sins and to reinforce that to confess them and be cleansed is far more desirable than to drag around the weight of guilt and shame.

## **INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY**

[These notes are for leaders. You may determine how much to share with your group.]

Psalms 51 was written after King David had sinned through adultery with a married woman, Bathsheba. When she became pregnant, David tried to get her husband, a faithful soldier, to come home and be intimate with his wife. When his attempt to cover up the affair failed, David arranged for her husband to die in battle. The Lord sent the prophet Nathan to confront David, who then readily admitted his sin against the Lord. (See 2 Samuel 11 and 12 for the historical narrative.)

What is confession? The Hebrew word for **confession** can mean either “praise” or “thanksgiving” (Psalm 100:4; 145:10) or “to confess one’s sin” (Psalm 32:3–6; Daniel 9:19). We can publicly or privately confess our faith, thus praising God, as well as our faults. In the Bible we read about admitting sin to God alone, to the person someone has wronged, to a priest or confessor, and occasionally to the church (Jacobs, p. 759).

The New Testament Greek word for “confess” means “to say the same thing, or to agree” (Jacobs, p. 759). “When we confess our sins we are agreeing with God concerning the sin in our lives, as revealed through His Word by the Holy Spirit. Confession is to verbalize our spiritual shortcomings and admit we have sinned. . . . It is important to God because it indicates that we take seriously our mistakes and failures . . . Confession is conditional to cleansing. There can be no healing *within* until there is confession *without*” (Eastman, pp. 42, 44).

In Psalm 51, we have an honest confession of the king’s sin and his heart-felt cry to be reconciled to God. Remember that when we read and interpret a psalm, we need to see it as poetry, and look for parallel or repeated ideas and symbolic language. [See more information on interpreting the Psalms in our study on “Devotional Prayer: Psalm 131.”]

## **STUDY THE PASSAGE: Psalm 51**

**Let’s read this psalm before we discuss it. We’ll need volunteers to read verses 1–6, 7–12, and 13–19.**

### 1. What is David's heartfelt cry in verses 1 and 2?

David cries out for God to have mercy on him. He asks God to blot out his transgressions, wash away his iniquity, and cleanse him from his sin. In other words, David feels burdened and guilty. He wants to be set free from his sin.

David has asked God to “blot out” his sin like removing an ink mark on a financial ledger. In pleading to be washed, he is using a verb associated with laundering dirty clothes. In requesting that God “cleanse” him, the idea is that of a smelting process that would remove any impurities (Williams, p. 363).

The three words used to refer to sin, which also appear in Psalm 32:5, are used as follows: “The noun *“transgression”* means rebellion against divine authority. ... *“Sin”* means missing the mark or standard. ... *“Iniquity”* means straying from the straight path” (Williams, pp. 239–240).

### 2. What character traits (or attributes) of God does David appeal to in verse 1?

David relies on God's “unfailing love” (NIV) or steadfast love (RSV) or “lovingkindness” (NASB), which denote the unchanging love God promised in His covenant with Israel. David also appeals to God's “great compassion” (NIV) or “abundant mercy” (RSV).

### 3. What does David admit in verses 3–4?

David is no longer concealing his sin. He straightforwardly admits that he has sinned against God. He has broken several of God's primary commandments: “You shall not commit murder. You shall not commit adultery....You shall not covet your neighbor's wife...” (Exodus 20:13, 14, 17). While he also sinned against Uriah, the murdered husband of the woman David committed adultery with, and lied by covering up her pregnancy by quickly marrying the widow, he is most concerned here with the evil he has done in God's eyes. He acknowledges that he deserves whatever punishment God decides. In confession, we “agree with God” concerning His opinion of a matter. It also means, “to admit my guilt.”

### 4. Why is David so uncomfortable with his sin?

The Old Testament speaks of the barrier that our unconfessed sin creates between holy God and us (Isaiah 1:15; 59:2; Ezekiel 39:23–24; Habakkuk 1:13). There are also verses that suggest God would not listen to the prayers of those who rebel against Him (Isaiah 1:15–16; Psalm 34:15–16, 66:18; Proverbs 15:8, 28:9; Lamentations 3:40–44). While the Old Covenant was in place, God required a blood sacrifice to accompany one's confession of

unintentional sin (Leviticus 4:1–6:7). But, when someone knowingly broke one of God’s primary commandments, such as murder, adultery, incest, child sacrifice, etc., that person was punished by death (Leviticus 20). This was so that the people of God would reflect His holiness to the rest of the world (Leviticus 20:26).

David was chosen by God to replace Israel’s first king, Saul, who did not obey the Lord (1 Samuel 14:10–15:13). David had a close relationship with God. He was described as a man after God’s own heart (1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22). Many of the psalms he wrote reveal his great passion for God. Therefore, knowing that his sins of adultery and murder generally were not pardonable, and that these sins greatly damaged his relationship with God, was painful for him.

We now live under the new covenant, promised by God since His people could not meet their obligation to love and obey Him exclusively (Jeremiah 31:30–34). In the new covenant, Christ died to take away all our sins (Hebrews 10:1–18). Therefore, Christians do not lose their salvation when they sin. Wayne Grudem states:

When a Christian sins, his or her legal standing before God is unchanged. He or she is still forgiven, for ‘there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus’ (Rom. 8:1). Salvation is not based on our merits but is a free gift of God (Rom. 6:23), and Christ’s death certainly paid for all our sins—past, present, and future—Christ died ‘for our sins’ (1 Cor. 15:3), without distinction. In theological terms, we keep our ‘justification.’”

Moreover, we are still children of God and we still retain our membership in God’s family. In the same epistle in which John says, ‘If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us’ (1 John 1:8), he also reminds his readers, ‘Beloved we are God’s children now’ (1 John 3:2). The fact that we have sin remaining in our lives does not mean that we lose our status as God’s children. In theological terms, we keep our adoption (p. 504).

However, sin does result in a disruption in our relationship with God. God may not stop loving us, but He is displeased. For example, we can grieve the Holy Spirit of God (Ephesians 4:30) and God may need to discipline us (Hebrews 12:9–10; Revelation 3:19, cited in Grudem, p. 505).

**5. In verse 5, to what root of sin in his life does David refer? Do you think he is blaming others for his sin?**

Here, David referred to his sin nature, the tendency in all humans since Adam and Eve’s disobedience in Genesis 3, to rebel against God. This is our human condition. We are by nature rebels against God, dead spiritually, and under His sentence of death until we turn in faith to Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:1–9).

Be sure that no one interprets David as blaming his mother and father for his sin nature; he simply pointed out that sin has been a part of his life from conception. Also, David was not calling intercourse sinful. Since holy God designed human procreation, there is nothing inherently wrong with sexual intercourse between a husband and wife, unless it involves violation of one party or some type of perversity.

**6. What does God want David to be like (v. 6)? How has this added to David's sense of guilt?**

David refers to God's desire for truth in the inward being (RSV). God has taught David His wisdom, the way to live a godly life. But David has made foolish choices, which contradicted God's teaching and moral standards. If he had followed God's ways, he would not have to suffer the consequences of his sin. Nathan the prophet, whom God sent to confront David, announced the following (2 Samuel 12:7–14):

- David's family would not be free from violence. [One of David's sons raped his half sister. The girl's brother avenged that act by murder. Another son tried to get the appearance of being in line to inherit the throne by asking to marry David's harem virgin. He died at the order of David's rightful heir to the throne.]
- One of his sons would lie with David's harem trying to prove his right to the throne. He would do this in broad daylight, in contrast to David committing adultery in secret. [He died a violent death even though David wanted to spare his life.]
- The child conceived in adultery would die soon after birth.

**\*How uncomfortable are you when you sin or become aware of your sin? Do you experience any of these: true guilt, godly sorrow, shame, fear of others' finding out, or fear of disapproval?**

Guilt needs to be distinguished from shame. Guilt can be a fact and a feeling resulting from a moral transgression. We experience the condition and sometimes the emotion of true guilt when we violate God's holy standards of behavior in thoughts, words, or deeds. But some guilt that people feel is false guilt, an erroneous sense of having committed a wrong that is not rooted in Biblical truth.

Shame is a deep painful feeling that we are substandard or defective in some way. However, the person feeling ashamed is often using or being measured by cultural standards. Therefore, reasons for shame change and differ in various times and places in the world. Shame comes from the feelings (or reality) that we do not "measure up" to something expected by our peer group, workplace, church, neighborhood, or society. An example of shame in the

United States today could be that some folks feel inferior for not being able to afford designer jeans or tennis shoes.

**\*How can we distinguish between conviction of sin by the Holy Spirit and condemnation?**

It is important to learn to distinguish between God's conviction and the enemy's condemnation. Conviction is awareness the Holy Spirit brings of having sinned in specific thoughts, words, and actions. We can find Bible verses to verify that we have truly gone against God's ways. Condemnation is a general sense of worthlessness and is often a tool of the enemy, our accuser (Revelation 12:10). It is more vague, such as ideas of "you have really ruined the situation" or "you can't repair the relationship now." The enemy may use experiences in our past, disapproval of others in the present, and slanderous thoughts to attack us.

**7. What does David cry out for again, now that he has confessed his sin (vv. 7–9)?**

Again, as in verse 2, he asks for cleansing, but he uses a word that translates as "un-sin me" (Williams, "Psalm 51," p. 366) and is connected with the hyssop plant, also mentioned in verse 7. This plant was used in the first Passover and subsequent celebrations of that event (Exodus 12:22). The plant was dipped in the blood of the slain Passover lamb and used to apply the blood to the doorposts. It was also used in rituals for purifying people with leprosy and related diseases (Leviticus 14:4,6 and Hebrews 9:19, cited in *Naves Topical Bible*, "Hyssop plant," p. 459). When David asks to be "whiter than snow," we may think of God's promise to do this hundreds of years later, through the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 1:18, cited in Williams, "Psalm 51," p. 366).

He also asks to be able to rejoice or worship with others again once he has been purified and can approach the Lord's presence. The image of God breaking his bones probably refers to his feeling the Lord's conviction. As he asks again for the record of his sins to be blotted out, he wants God to no longer look on them (Williams, "Psalm 51," pp. 366–367).

God promises to forgive our sins in Isaiah 43:25, I John 1:9 and other Bible passages. Moreover, many Bible verses teach that God does not remember our sin after it has been confessed! These would be wonderful verses to encourage your group members to memorize.

- Psalm 103:12—our sins are removed as far as the east is from the west. Note that if one is traveling in either direction they will never go the other direction. The comparison shows that the sin is totally gone.
- Micah 7:18,19—sins are cast into the sea.

- Isaiah 43:25—God does not remember our sin.
- Isaiah 44:22—sins are swept away like a cloud.

**8. What does David ask God to do in order to help him feel close again (vv. 11–12)? How might these changes help him resist the temptation to sin in the future?**

David doesn't just ask for a clean heart, he asks for a new heart! He asks for a pure, not sinful, heart and for a spirit that is willing and determined to obey God. In other words, he wants to be a new person (Williams, "Psalm 51," p. 367). Those of us who have been born again by faith in Christ are new creations (2 Corinthians 5:17). We have a new heart; we have the life of Jesus in us; by faith we can live out of His obedience and His purity. That comes to us as we turn from our old patterns of behavior, renew our thoughts by Scripture reading and study, and rely on the Holy Spirit's power to imitate Jesus.

David shows how much he cherishes the Lord's presence by asking twice to remain in fellowship with God: don't cast me out, and don't remove your Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the presence of God in our lives, and He guides us in truth, convicts us of sin, and comforts us when we are in distress (John 14–16).

2 Corinthians 7:10–11 demonstrates the positive effects of confessing our sin. You may want someone in the group to read this aloud. Godly confession of sin is painful for a short time but produces positive long-term results. Denying sin, blame shifting, or trying to avoid sin only makes our sin problem worse. Confession is one part of the "truth in the inward being" mentioned in verse 6. Confession frees us from guilt, removes the barrier sin causes in our relationship with God, and is one step in the process of changing sinful thoughts, speech, and actions.

**\* Contrast how you have felt when you were hiding sin with how you felt after you had confessed and dealt with sin properly.**

**10. What will David do when he is free of guilt and restored to God (v. 13–15)?**

**\*What impacts can our obedience or our sin have on others? How often do you think about this? Why would this make confessing our sin more important?**

**11. What change does God want to see in us when we confess our sin (vv. 16–17)? Why do you think a contrite heart is more important to God than sacrifices?**

If anyone is not familiar with the Old Testament, you can briefly explain that animals were sacrificed in David's time for sin offerings and refer people to the book of Leviticus for more study. Since animal sacrifices have not been made for sin in the New Testament, you may want to discuss what kinds of external sacrifices (i.e. religious activity) people might engage in when they do not want to deal with their sin.

Help the group see that God wants to change the root causes of sin in us. Two examples from daily life can illustrate this. First, a broken bone may heal by itself, but it may heal incorrectly on its own. A doctor has to set a broken bone for it to heal properly. Second, a leak in a roof will cause damage to the structure below it. The only way for a lasting solution is to repair the roof, not to patch and/or paint the ceilings below.

**12. What does King David, who lived in the capital city of Jerusalem, pray for in verses 18 and 19?**

David prayed that the seat of his government and the central location where they worshipped God would be strong and full of proper praise and worship to the God whose forgiveness he seeks. We sometimes overlook the stain that a leader's sin can have on those he or she regularly influences or on the nation, but David knows that God will hold him accountable and may punish the nation, not just the king (2 Samuel 24).

**APPLICATION**

**\*What has the Lord been impressing on you through this study? What do you think He wants you to do in response?**

**\*What is the difference between apologizing and confessing? Which do you do more often? Is confessing sin something we practice with non-Christians? Why?**

Confession is more than psychologically good. "It involves an objective change in our relationship with God and a subjective change in us. It is a means of healing and transforming the inner spirit" (Foster, p. 126).

**\*In preparation for confession, how can we examine ourselves without falling into unhealthy “navel gazing” or introspection?**

We might pray Psalm 139:23–24, “Search me, O God,...test me...see if there is any offensive way in me...” asking God to search our heart for sin. Instead of gazing inwardly for too long a period of time, allow *God* to reveal sin through the work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus told us that the Holy Spirit would convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgment. He is also God’s voice for bringing conviction to the believer.

Dick Eastman suggests making a quick mental trip of the last 24 hours to reveal sins (p. 47). Martin Luther used the 10 Commandments as a checklist that he would regularly review (Foster, p. 132). People in your group may have other methods they have used.

To help those who want a more concrete way to work through confession, you could share with them three things that are necessary for a good confession: “an examination of conscience, sorrow, and a determination to avoid sin” (St. Alphonsus Liguori, cited in Foster, pp 132–133).

Examining our conscience involves opening ourselves to the “gaze of God.” We agree with God as He points out definite sins. They may be both outward actions and inner attitudes (Foster, p. 132). If we do not confess specific sins, we may deceive ourselves by not dealing with the depth of evil in our hearts. Nor will we have the same sense of assurance of forgiveness when we have not mentioned particular sins that trouble us (Bonhoeffer, pp. 116–117).

The sorrow related to confession that Liguori mentioned is not simply an emotion, but a deep regret for having offended God. Foster says it “...is a way of taking the confession seriously” (Foster, p. 133). 2 Corinthians 7:10 speaks of the benefit of godly sorrow: it brings repentance that leads to salvation.

A determination to avoid sin is the positive desire to live a godly life. It is wanting to no longer sin, to change our wills, or to be willing to avoid sin (Foster, p. 133). It is praying, “God, help me hate what you hate and love what you love.”

## **SUGGESTED GUIDELINES FOR CONFESSING SIN TO ANOTHER PERSON**

[You can discuss this with the group in your application time, or consider reproducing it as a handout.]

### **\*Why should we confess our sin to another person?**

Jesus Christ came to earth to reveal God in the flesh (John 1:14; Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3). He also came to die as the perfect sacrifice for all sin (Colossians 2:13–14; Hebrews 10:10–12). This fulfilled the Old Testament and Old Covenant requirement of the shedding of blood or taking of a life for the payment of the death penalty in order for God to forgive sin (Leviticus 16:11; Hebrews 9:22).

Jesus gave the authority to hear confession of sin and to pronounce forgiveness in God's name to His followers (John 20:23). This is the privilege and calling of each Christian: to speak the mercy of God into the life of another believer. This is also the means of great hope and power for each Christian. We do not have to be trapped by the domination and guilt of sin or have to hide in shame. By confessing sin to at least one other follower of Christ, we bring our sin out of the darkness and into the light of the gospel. This helps break the power of sin and the isolation that many experience (Bonhoeffer, pp. 112–113).

### **\*Do we have to confess to others? Isn't it enough to confess our sin to God alone?**

All of us should confess our sins to God for the reasons we have already discussed. However, sometimes we do not experience the certainty of our forgiveness, or freedom from guilt or shame, or a lessening of a particular sinful habit until we confess to another. We are instructed in Scripture "...confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed" (James 5:16). Bonhoeffer sees several benefits to confessing our sin to one other Christian brother or sister.

- We are not self-deceived by simply confessing to ourselves and easily excusing our sin rather than truly repenting of sin and experiencing the pardon of God.
- It is better to confess and bring a sin into the light now and hear God's forgiveness pronounced than to wait for the Day of Judgment.
- We may more fully accept and internalize the forgiveness God offers when we hear it spoken by another human being (Bonhoeffer, pp. 115–117).

Richard Foster also warns us that we may try to confess sin as a way to earn our forgiveness. By bringing our sin and confession before another follower of Christ, we are humbled, but also protected from turning it into a self-righteous work by which we think we will merit some greater favor with God. Likewise, knowing we are going to confess our sin to another may make us more repulsed by the idea of sin in the first place, something God feels, and be a deterrent to sinning in the future (Foster, p. 130).

You may want to refer to Matthew 5:23–24 and Matthew 18:15–17 if questions arise about forgiveness and reconciliation with others. Generally, we confess sin to and ask forgiveness of only those who are aware of or impacted by our sin, such as those who heard us tell a lie or who overheard us gossip. In other words, we should confess that sin to the Lord, go to the people who heard us tell a lie or who heard us gossip, and confess our sin to them, and ask for their forgiveness. If the lie or gossip harms another brother or sister, we should go to the person wronged, confess, and ask his or her forgiveness. If we commit lust in our hearts, we do not need to go to the person we lusted over and tell them. However, it may be appropriate not only to confess that to the Lord but also to go to a mature Christian and confess it in order to develop some accountability in our struggle with that sin area. If we express inappropriate anger at someone, we confess that to God and the person we hurt to in order to seek forgiveness. Also, refer to Rich Nathan’s sermon, “Where Is God When People Hurt Me?” from July 24–25, 2004, for more help with this topic.

**\*How do you think we could practice confession and forgiveness in our small group?**

Be sensitive to the responses you get to this question. Some people may react to the idea of “confession” because they’ve seen this performed regularly in other churches, but didn’t see real change in people’s lives. Remind them that the purpose of confession is to agree with God about what is true, that we all are sinners. Confession is a normal part of walking with God rather than rebelling against Him. For your group, keep confession of sins focused on specific sins and ensure that confession remains in a relational context: it is part of maintaining a loving relationship with our Perfect Father.

Confessing your sins is **not** the same as confessing your sinful nature. Confessing your sins means **specific sins**. For example, “I confess my pride” is confessing the sinful nature. Confession of sin means you examine exactly what “pride” *means* in this instance. What specific behavior/incident is pride linked to and where and/or when did that specific behavior/incident become apparent? **Confession is not about how you “feel.” It’s more about what you *did* in terms of specific behavior or thoughts when you violated Christ-like attitudes and behaviors.** All of us violate these attitudes and behaviors, but all of us also have the chance to confess our sin(s). When we confess our sins,

we can *all* be forgiven and we can *all* move on from there, knowing Jesus still loves us and wants us to continue to press into our life with Him and with others (Christensen and Shreve).

**Whenever people bring their sin into the light, God expects us to guard their dignity. Nothing confessed to either the group or one-on-one should ever be repeated or discussed, even with other group members.** It's possible that someone in your group has previously confessed or shared a sin struggle with others only to be hurt by them. This could make it very painful for that person if you ask the group to confess sins. First of all, it's very important to emphasize the need for confidentiality and avoiding anything that would expose another's sin, such as probing questions or insensitive remarks. If someone has a deep problem with trust, you may want to suggest he or she gets additional prayer or peer counseling to work through forgiveness and healing from any wound. Be wise about balancing the needs of one damaged person who may need more help at another time with the whole group's application of the teaching on confessing sin.

Some group members may feel more comfortable confessing sin to just one other person. Dietrich Bonhoeffer claims that we can confess our sin to one other brother or sister, because God has given this responsibility to the church, and that person can act on behalf of the church community (p. 113). By confessing sin to at least one other follower of Christ, we bring our sin out of the darkness and into the light of the gospel. This helps break the power of sin and the isolation experienced by many who are burdened by their sin (Bonhoeffer, pp. 112–113).

It's important for us to be loving and non-judgmental when another brother or sister "comes clean." Only those of us who recognize the depth of sin in our own hearts will not be surprised by the confession of others (Bonhoeffer, pp. 118–119). Our role is to listen, to show Jesus' unconditional love for them, and to pronounce them forgiven by His blood (1 John 1:9). For some who easily feel condemned, reassure them that nothing can separate them from the love of Christ (Romans 8:1, 31–39, cited in Nathan, Rich, p. 1).

In your ministry time, you may want to invite group members to join you in confessing specific sins to Jesus. You might have people pair up and confess to just one other person. [Of course, men should confess only to men, and women should confess only to women.] Take time to receive and extend His forgiveness and give thanks for His purifying touch. Assure people that no one is being forced to admit anything he or she is reluctant to make public. Again, be sensitive in case some believers are used to confession being transacted only with an ordained clergy person or have been hurt in prior experiences.

## **WRAPPING IT UP**

God sees the damage that sin can do to us, and the way that guilt can burden us. He has designed confession of sin to free us, to begin the process of healing us, and to renew the intimate relationship He desires with us. As we learn to humbly and honestly take our sin to the cross of Christ, where all sin has been paid for, we can grow to appreciate the privilege we have of confessing and receiving forgiveness. This week, let's make ourselves available to God's Spirit convicting us of those things that are crippling us in our walk with Him, and let's pray for one another that we would learn to dispose of our sin in a Biblical manner.

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