

## “CONFESSION IS GOOD FOR THE SOUL”

### *Psalm 32*

Like many people, I’m sure, my mother had (still has, in fact) a fund of little sayings that are brought out at appropriate moments. When you’re young, these phrases and proverbs seem like nuggets of real truth and they seem to be spoken with a sense of gravity which adds to their seriousness. Whenever I did something wrong – a fairly frequent occurrence – and failed to own up – almost as frequently – my mum would say “Remember, confession is good for the soul.” Apparently it’s an old Scottish proverb, and actually says “**Open** confession is good for the soul.” No matter that the first word was always missing: we usually gave in and owned up – often adding in attempted mitigation, “But the devil made me do it!”

At somewhat greater length, David is saying the same thing here in *Psalm 32*. And, although he is writing many centuries before the advent of psychology and other branches of scientific medicine, he is also saying that confession is good for the mind and the body as well. If you look at what he writes in vv3,4, you’ll see that he is describing fairly accurately the effects of unconfessed sin on his whole life. Until he gets it off his chest, David is struggling psychologically and, to some extent, physically with this issue. And with the benefit of modern knowledge of how the body and mind work, we can see that there are occasions when not owning up to something we know is wrong can fester away in our minds and leave us with no peace. Indeed, there are those who maintain that harbouring bitterness, for example, or allowing resentment to take root in our lives can have an effect not just on our minds but also on our bodies, as we mentioned in passing just last week.

So, as David relates his own experience, he tries to encourage others to learn from his example and to take steps to deal with the things that they know are wrong in their lives. But, as is so often the case, not just in David’s writing, but throughout the Bible, we need to begin with the assurance that God loves us. It is within the security of a knowledge that God’s love is “unfailing” (v10) that we can come to ask his forgiveness. Indeed, the implication of David’s words here is that the wicked – those who do not confess their sins – will experience “many woes”, but that those who trust God enough to unburden themselves to him will always be surrounded by his love.

Surely, in the aftermath of the death and resurrection of Jesus, we should feel secure enough in God’s love to be able to come to him and confess our wrongdoings openly and freely. We know that he loves us and he has promised to forgive us if we do confess to him. *1 John 1:9* is the best known example of that promise being made – and many of us, no doubt, will be able to testify to the ways in which God has kept that promise in our own situations: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” But what does it all entail? There’s a kind of template here for our confession, so let’s have a look at it this morning.

#### 1. REALITY (v2)

The first thing to remember is that we need to be real in all of this. William James, the philosopher of religion, once wrote, “For him who confesses shams are over and realities have begun.” David says here that the person who is blessed is the one who has received forgiveness from God and “in whose spirit there is no deceit.” There is a need to be honest with God in all this. In a way, that is stating the obvious, because God can see what’s going on anyway. You can’t pull the wool over his eyes, so there’s no point in trying.

But we do, don’t we? We often seem to have this strange idea that somehow God can be fooled by our little stratagems, we can try to make out that we aren’t really doing wrong. That attitude is betrayed by the ways in which we refer to some of our sins – we call the “peccadilloes” or “weaknesses” or “little foibles”. Or we assume that, if we’ve managed to hide them from other people, we’ve succeeded in hiding them from God. Many things which would once have been considered sinful are so much a part of our lives in the culture that we’re a part of that we don’t even stop to think about them – our consciences have become

anaesthetised to them. And after a while, we can convince even ourselves that we aren't really doing anything wrong. If we aren't prepared to be straight, open and honest with God, we've got off to the wrong start. But it leads us into the second step.

## 2. RECOGNITION (v5)

Not only must we face up to the reality that we are all sinners, but we need to recognise what our sins are. That will often mean responding to the voice of our conscience. That's what David failed to do at first. He "*kept silent*" about what he knew was wrong in his life and the stress of that led to his difficulties. We cannot cover up our sins – even those which appear to have no consequences for anyone else, secret sins and victimless crimes, are still wrong in the sight of God. And we cannot explain them away, trying to dismiss our conscience as the result of youthful repression or some other kind of psychological malfunction. David knew that, and it took the problems he writes of in vv3,4 to convince him that he needed to do something.

If you want another "r", I suppose you could link this to repentance. Finally facing up to the things that were wrong in his life and confessing them to God put David on the road to repentance. As Edmund Gayton wrote: "*Confession is the first step to repentance.*" Are there things in your life that you are refusing to acknowledge as sin? Are there things that you have been doing for so long that you are now used to them and you've convinced yourself that they're OK really? Are there things that maybe you have become more or less addicted to, that you cannot seem to give up so you've learned to live with them and accommodate them? Then you need to acknowledge that, because without that recognition there will be no release, no relief for you. It is only when we confess our sins that God forgives, and takes away the sense of guilt and shame.

## 3. RESOLUTION (v9)

But simply confessing your sin is not the end of the story. St Augustine said: "*Confession of evil works is the beginning of good works.*" Repentance involves a resolve to stick at it, to avoid committing the same sins again. David tells his listeners not to be "*like the horse or mule, which have no understanding.*" You need to learn from your mistakes, he says. Don't go back to your old ways. Walk away from those things without the need for God to keep prodding you.

The Puritans used to talk of "*besetting sins*", those sins to which people would return again and again, sins it seemed almost impossible to give up. If your confession is to be worth anything, if it is to be authentic and offered with integrity, then you need to resolve to take such things in hand. There are ways of ordering your life to avoid occasions of temptation, to avoid getting into situations where you know you will be tempted at those weak points. There are ways of trying to hold yourself accountable to someone else – a trusted friend, for example. There are ways of seeking the power of the Holy Spirit to aid your resolve to stop committing the same old sins. And you need to ask for God's help particularly to help you keep alert. It's possible to make a sincere resolve to give something up and to stick to that for a while. Then suddenly, when your guard is down, temptation comes and you find yourself giving in again. Peter says, in *1 Peter 5:8,9*, "*Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith.*" But there's one last thing in this sequence.

## 4. REJOICE (v11)

The Psalm starts and finishes on a note of optimism. Those who do confess their sins are blessed because God forgives them. And they are to "*rejoice in the LORD and be glad.*" Rejoicing in our forgiveness and making the most of the feelings of relief and release that accompany God's absolving us help us to move forward in our relationship with him. It's so good to know forgiveness that we don't want to go back to

the state described by David in vv3,4. And the knowledge that we have been forgiven can also be a help the next time we need to ask for it – as we inevitably will.

Rejoicing in our forgiveness is really the natural outcome of all this. Jesus made that real for us as he died on the cross, taking on himself the consequences of our sins and opening the gate to God's forgiveness, even as he forgave those who had nailed him there. And it may well be true to say that only those who have truly known forgiveness can truly rejoice in God. We express it in our songs, in our prayers and in the exuberance of our daily lives. Those who are at peace with God because of confession and forgiveness have a joy and serenity about them that is not apparent in the lives of those who try to convince themselves, others and God that there is no problem.

So there we have it – a template for confession. At the risk of making it all seem a bit contrived, remember those "r"s. There needs to be **reality** in our acceptance that we all do wrong. We can then **recognise** our sins as we acknowledge them to God, **responding** to the promptings of our conscience as the first step on the road to **repentance**. We need the **resolve** to avoid making the same mistakes again, but as we enjoy the **release** and **relief** that God offers, so we can **rejoice** in him and in his forgiveness. Let's acknowledge that know as we sing *Only by grace can we enter*.

### **For reflection and discussion**

- 1) Do you think we are losing the concept of "sin" in our culture? Is it being replaced perhaps by other taboos? Why do think that is? Does it make sharing the Gospel easier or more difficult?
- 2) Do you think that it is true that unconfessed sin and the like can have physical effects on us, as well as psychological and spiritual effects?
- 3) In *James 5:16* we read "*Confess your sins **to each other** ...*" Should we still do that? Why/why not?
- 4) What practical steps can we take to avoid committing the same sins regularly/habitually? How does accountability to others fit into this?
- 5) What are you going to do in response to this Psalm?