

## Rhythms Week 9

### Cultivating the Virtue of Honesty Through the Practice of Confession

What makes for a beautiful, compelling life? What characterizes and cultivates such a life? ***Rhythms of Renewal***\* is a program designed to help us grow in the virtues that characterize a beautiful and compelling human life by helping us engage in practices that cultivate such a life. What makes for a beautiful, compelling life? This week, we will seek to grow in the virtue of Honesty by engaging the practice of Confession.

**Honesty** is a virtue we all value and recognize as closely related to other significant character traits we admire: authenticity, integrity, trustworthiness, etc. Honesty is the foundation for trust in relationships, and it is widely recognized as a key component of a happy and fulfilling personal life.[1] Yet, if we're being honest, most of us have to admit that we value honesty more in others than we do in ourselves. Cognitive scientist Dan Ariely argues that most of us convince ourselves that we are more honest than we really are because we rationalize our dishonesty and tell ourselves that we are honest about things that really matter and dishonest only about things that are relatively insignificant.[2] *For this reason, many of us can lie while thinking of ourselves as honest people, experiencing little cognitive dissonance.*

**Confession** is a practice that cultivates the virtue of honesty because it is a specific kind of truth-telling that operates in the domain so often dominated by dishonesty: the arena of our guilt and shame. Dr. Alex Lickerman observes that the main reason we lie is to protect. We lie to protect ourselves, our interests, our image, and our resources. *Confession, on the other hand, involves our entrusting all these things to God's protection as we surrender our demand for control and trust God's promise: "If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).*

Of course, our shame is a powerful hindrance to such a practice of confession. Shame isolates, hides, detaches, and deceives. Shame makes us want to keep our sins hidden in darkness rather than bringing them into the light of Christ. In *The Soul of Shame: Retelling the Stories We Believe About Ourselves*, Dr. Curt Thompson explores the deep and pervasive effects of shame on the human brain, our relational attachment to others, our self-defense mechanisms, and our narration of the stories of our lives. Shame, Thompson argues, affects everything and everyone, breaking down relationships and causing us to turn inward on ourselves. Yet, we are not left without hope. Thompson maps out a path to healing and wholeness: "[B]eing known as God would have it heal our shame by drawing our attention to the story that Jesus both occupied and paid attention to himself. It is a story in which Jesus looked forward to the joy that will come in the presence of a great cloud of witnesses gathered around the throne of God. This process of being known opens the door not only for healing but for the expansion of our capacity to co-create with God renewed mind and hearts, out of which burst a kingdom of goodness and beauty in the face of shame's withering onslaught." [4]

Jesus exemplifies a life of honesty and invites others into a restorative practice of confession by embracing sinful people (Luke 19:1-10), speaking the truth in love to those stuck in their sin (John 4:10-19), and offering liberation to those trapped in sin, shame, and brokenness (Mark 2:1-12; 5:25-34). "The truth will set you free," Jesus teaches us (John 8:32), and most remarkably, Jesus claims that he himself is that liberating truth: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

The New Testament explicitly links our growth in honesty through a practice of confession: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8-9). And in the book of James, we see this practice of confession directed not only toward God but also toward one another: "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed" (James 5:16). This is what it looks like for us to practice living into the liberating truth of Christ.

In the words of Tish Warren: "Confession reminds us that none of us gather for worship because we are 'pretty good people.' But we are new people, people marked by grace in spite of ourselves because of the work of Christ.... We -- each and all -- take part in gathered worship as unworthy people who, left on our own, deserve God's condemnation. But we are not left on our own. Repentance is not usually a moment wrought in high drama. It is the steady drumbeat of a life in Christ and, therefore, a day in Christ." [5]

A note of encouragement: Not ready to move on? That is okay! Continue practicing last week's rhythm. If you're ready, read on. As always, do not feel the pressure to read everything or implement everything at once. Take your time with this rhythm over the week. Choose one or two questions to dwell on at a time. Choose one or two practices to implement at a time. Start where you are and let the Holy Spirit build your rhythms slowly. The hope is grow to be deep people over time, not all at once.

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### **1. REFLECT. Consider these questions on your own or with a prayer partner/group :**

- What makes honesty such an integral aspect of a beautiful and compelling life?
- What do you make of the statement that we rationalized our own dishonesty for the sake of self-protection?
- Why do you think confession is a practice that cultivates honesty?
- What does practicing confession have to do with trusting God?
- What do we risk when we confess our sins? What do we risk when we don't confess our sins?

### **2. UNMASK THE CORE LIE:** Recognize the power of the interplay of two core lies we

often believe: “I am unacceptable” (or perhaps “I am unworthy” or “I am bad”) on one hand, and, on the other, “I am good enough” (or perhaps “I am one of the good ones” or “I am better than ‘those people’”).

These competing lies draw our hearts into a ruthless game of tug-of-war between shame and pride, both of which oppose the truth and lead us into dishonest ways of living toward God, ourselves, and others. Read the anti-Psalm[6] below as a way to reflect on this.

### Anti-Psalm 51:1-18

There is no mercy for me.

God’s kindness and compassion are not big enough to blot out my offenses.

I must blot them out myself - out of my mind, out of my reputation,  
out of my story, out of what anyone knows about me, out of reality.

No one can know. Deny, hide, lie...

Sometimes I feel so dirty that I will never be clean.

Then again, other times I feel like that’s not fair or a realistic assessment of who I am.

In fact, sometimes I feel like I’m one of the few good ones around.

Why can’t other people see things the way I see them or value what I value?

They are part of the problem; I’m not.

I mean, I am (because we all are), but at least I’m self-aware.

God will judge those people harshly.

Evil people who stand for evil things should pay for it.

I’m getting angrier the more I think about it.

The world would be a better place if God wiped those people out.

God shouldn’t show kindness to people like that.

I’m glad I’m not like those people.

I know I have my own faults, but I think God should go easy on me.

After all, if God looks deep within me,

I think God will see that my heart is in the right place.

I don’t need to be pure; no one is.

I just need to be one of the good ones.

I’m good enough. At least I’m not one of the bad ones.

Unlike other people, I do my part.

I think I’ve done that pretty well,

and a lot better than those other people, anyway.

Those people are unacceptable.

Become curious about your believing the core lie. Where in your life do you notice yourself believing the lie: “I am unacceptable” or “I’m good enough?” If neither of those feels like your core lie, what do you think it might be? Ask the Spirit to give you wisdom. *Notice the core lie at work in your life.* Where in your life do you notice yourself believing the lie: “Loving my neighbor is not worth the cost to me.” If that doesn’t feel like your core lie, what do you think it might be? Ask the Spirit to give you wisdom. Become curious about your believing the core lie. What do you feel when you are believing this? What

thoughts or behaviors accompany or follow this belief?

**3. REMEMBER THE CORE TRUTH.** God knows you completely, accepts you as you are, and loves you wholeheartedly. You are God's beloved child. You are also a sinner who needs God's forgiveness, healing, and transformative intervention in your life. The way into an experience of God's gracious embrace is not through hiding or denying the sins you feel make you unacceptable, but through a radically honest confession of those sins that allows God's mercy to touch even the most shame-covered parts of your life.

*Psalms 51:1-18*

Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy  
blot out my transgressions.  
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin.  
For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is ever before me.  
Against you, you alone, have I sinned,  
and done what is evil in your sight,  
so that you are justified in your sentence  
and blameless when you pass judgement.  
Indeed, I was born guilty,  
a sinner when my mother conceived me.  
You desire truth in the inward being;  
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.  
Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.  
Let me hear joy and gladness;  
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.  
Hide your face from my sins,  
and blot out all my iniquities.  
Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.  
Do not cast me away from your presence,  
and do not take your holy spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and sustain in me a willing spirit.  
Then I will teach transgressors your ways,  
and sinners will return to you.  
Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,  
O God of my salvation,  
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.  
O Lord, open my lips,

and my mouth will declare your praise.  
For you have no delight in sacrifice;  
if I were to give a burnt-offering, you would not be pleased.  
The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

*Become curious about believing the core truth.* What do you feel when you are believing the truth instead of the lie? What thoughts or behaviors accompany or follow this belief?

**4. FOOD FOR INSPIRATION & IMITATION.** Look at how Jesus exemplifies honesty and confession in John 4:7-29.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water." Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"

**5. GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS.** Consider these questions on your own, with your City Group, or a prayer partner.

- When you think about becoming the person you long to be, what do the virtue of honesty and the practice of confession have to do with your becoming that person?
- How do you think practicing confession might help you become a better friend, neighbor, family member, ally, spouse, parent, roommate, or co-worker?
- What do you find inspiring about Jesus' life of honesty and confession, and what's one way that you can imitate Jesus's practice of forgiving others?
- In light of this conversation, where in your life do you need God's help right now?

**6. MICROPRACTICES FOR THE WEEK.**

"Arrow Prayers" — We'll offer some of these each week. The title comes from Sally Lloyd Jones, whose "Jesus Storybook Bible" many of us have loved and used. The idea is that prayer doesn't have to be complex to be meaningful and real. Here are some "arrow prayers" for this week's practice:

- Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner.
- Create in me a clean heart, O God.
- A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.
- Jesus, Great Physician, heal me.
- Gracious God, deliver me from my sins, my shame, and my deceit.

Habit Stacking — Habit-stacking is the practice of adding a new habit onto something you already do habitually (e.g. brushing your teeth, doing the dishes, or walking to work), a term we learned from James Clear, Atomic Habits. Some ideas:

- While you do your household chores this week, reflect on the secrets you keep. What have you never told anyone? What does it feel like to be unknown in that way? What is the cost of keeping this secret, and what would you risk by confessing it? Ask God for help to confess your secret to someone trustworthy.
- As you stay "safer at home" this week, listen to Dr. Curt Thompson talk about the importance of "Being Known" ([Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#)).
- At the dinner table, talk about the best and most difficult parts of your day. If you spoke harshly or acted unkindly toward someone else in your house today, confess it and ask forgiveness.

Micro-Practices of Prayer in Community & Mission

- Want to become more honest? Try the Examen. Use [the "Daily Examen" resource](#) to help you be honest with yourself about your experiences of the day. Review your thoughts, words, and actions throughout the day, and take some time to confess your sins to God and ask for God's help for tomorrow.
- Not everyone needs to know everything about you. But nothing about you should be unknown to everyone. What are you keeping secret? Discover the freedom of coming clean to someone you trust.

### Sources Cited

[1] For example, see Joshua Becker, "Why Honesty is the Best Policy," accessible online: <https://www.becomingminimalist.com/why-honesty-is-the-best-policy-for-simplicity/>.

[2] *The Honest Truth About Dishonesty: How We Lie To Everyone - Especially Ourselves* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012).

[3] "Why Be Honest?" in *Psychology Today* (Feb 23, 2014), accessible online: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/happiness-in-world/201402/why-be-honest>.

[4] *The Soul of Shame: Retelling the Stories We Believe About Ourselves* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP, 2015), 132.

[5] Tish Harrison Warren, *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP, 2012), 57.

[6] We got the "anti-Psalm" idea from Dr. David Powlison, "Anti-Psalm 23," which we use as a model for exploring the Psalms devotionally as windows into both our own hearts and the mercy of God.