

# Leader Guide for Study 3: Confession of Sin

## Introduction

This week we will discuss the Confession of Sin portion of liturgy, which is a time for the congregation to collectively admit to and repent of our sin, and ask for God's forgiveness made possible by the sacrifice of His Son Jesus.

In the order of liturgy, Confession of Sin occurs after **Affirmation of Faith**, when we specifically affirm what we believe, and before **Pardoned**, when we are reminded of God's faithful forgiveness of our sins. **Confession of Sin** and **Pardoned** go hand-in-hand, and therefore sometimes appear to be one section in the liturgy.

Confession of Sin is led by one of the Elders or Pastors and involves a predefined confession prayer for the leader and congregants to read together.

## What does it mean?

### Discussion:

1. What examples of confession in the public sphere (e.g. politics, sports) can you think of? What does our culture today (e.g. movies, TV, news) think of confession?

In general, confession means we "admit" or "agree". Our context here is confession of sin, so we are admitting we have sinned and are agreeing with God's definition of righteousness (I John 1:9, Psalm 51:4). The outward confession is not sufficient, but instead we must accept responsibility and examine our hearts to understand what is the root cause of our outward behaviors (Psalm 139:23-24). Furthermore, we are meditating on the consequences of our sin on Christ when he accepted our punishment on the cross (Isaiah 53:5).

In the context of congregational confession, we are confessing out loud as one body the things we have done that we should not have done (commission) and that we have not done the things we should have done (omission). In short, we are admitting that we were wrong and God and His law is correct, and asking God to renew our hearts.

### Read the following passages:

- I John 1:9
- Psalm 51:4
- Psalm 139:23-24
- Isaiah 53:5

### Discussion:

1. What perspective does our culture today have about sin? (possible answers could be that certain foods are sin, we get nervous when people talk about real sin, some people don't believe in sin)
2. Have you experienced group confession at a church before coming to Canyon Creek? If so, how was that experience different?

### Why do we practice it?

Even though Confession of Sin is counter-cultural, we practice confession as a group on a regular cadence since it is commanded in the Bible and has proven to be beneficial to our spiritual growth.

### Read the following passages:

- I John 1:9
- James 5:16
- Nehemiah 9:3, 16-17, 26-35

### Discussion:

1. What are the attributes of the confession described in each passage. What is similar / different about confession described in each passage?
2. What are some of the benefits of confession described in the passages?
3. Why do you think God's people collectively confessed sin in Nehemiah 9? (possible answers found in vv 26, 29, 34-35)

These passages make it clear that both private and public confession is an essential step before we can be forgiven and restored in our relationship with God and others. In the example detailed in Nehemiah 9, we see that pervasive idolatry over centuries amongst God's people led them to publicly confess their sin as a group. There are at least three spiritual benefits to public confession that can be observed in this passage: awareness, restoration and gratefulness.

The first benefit observed is **awareness** of their sin and its impact on their relationship to God. This awareness was caused by Ezra the priest reading the law before the assembly (Nehemiah 8). Even though God clearly told the Israelites through Moses not to mingle with the pagans since it would lead to idolatry, we see this behavior consistently throughout Israel's history. Ezra's reading reminded people of God's standard and the consequences of our sin. This awareness naturally led to confession by the assembly so they could experience God's forgiveness. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor killed for his anti-Nazi beliefs, wrote this about public confession:

'In confession there takes place a breakthrough to community. Sin wants to be alone with people. It takes them away from the community. The more lonely people become, the more destructive the power of sin over them. The more

deeply they become entangled in it, the more unholy is their loneliness. Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light. In the darkness of what is left unsaid sin poisons the whole being of a person. This can happen in the midst of a pious community. In confession the light of the gospel breaks into the darkness and closed isolation of the heart. Sin must be brought into the light. What is unspoken is said openly and confessed. All that is secret and hidden comes to light. It is a hard struggle until the sin crosses one's lips in confession. But God breaks down gates of bronze and cuts through bars of iron (Ps. 107:16) Since the confession of sin is made in the presence of another Christian, the last stronghold of self-justification is abandoned. The sinner surrenders, giving up all evil, giving the sinner's heart to God and finding the forgiveness of all one's sin in the community of Jesus Christ and other Christians. Sin that has been spoken and confessed has lost all of its power. It has been revealed and judged as sin. It can no longer tear apart the community.'

The second benefit of confession observed in this passage is that their relationship with God is **restored**. Throughout history, God forgives the sins of His people and shows his mercy and grace (vv 16-21, 28). Recently before this scene, the Israelites had returned from Babylon to rebuild the temple and the walls of Jerusalem. The desire to rebuild the temple and worship God only happened after God had delivered them into captivity (vv. 32-37) and Israel confessed their sins. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that "In confession there occurs a breakthrough to new life. The break with the past is made when sin is hated, confessed, and forgiven. "Everything has become new" (2 Cor 5:17)."

The third benefit of confession seen in Nehemiah 9 is **gratefulness** for God's grace and mercy. It is only by first recognizing what is the fair punishment for our sin (Rom 3:23) that we can then recognize the true cost of Jesus' atoning sacrifice (Is 53:5). In this passage, the Israelites express gratefulness for God as one "...who keeps covenant and steadfast love steadfast love..." In this covenant, God promises many things, including that Israel is God's prized possession, is a kingdom of royal priests, will be protected by God, and will receive God's mercy and gracious forgiveness. In spite of Israel's repeated violation of this covenant, God continued to keep his end of the agreement. As Paul stated in Romans 2:4, "The "kindness of God leads us to repentance".

A modern example of group confession can be found within our denomination. In 2016, our denomination's General Assembly published a confession for past racial sins. Some of the statements in this confession include:

"...[we] recognize, confess, condemn and repent of corporate and historical sins, including those committed during the Civil Rights era, and continuing racial sins of ourselves and our fathers such as the segregation of worshipers by race..."

“...the General Assembly urges the congregations and presbyteries of the Presbyterian Church in America to make this resolution known to their members in order that they may prayerfully confess their own racial sins as led by the Spirit and strive towards racial reconciliation for the advancement of the gospel, the love of Christ, and the glory of God.”

This public confession was an essential step in admitting past behavior toward minorities was sinful, unloving and damaging to the diversity of the body of Christ. It communicates a desire to restore relationships, and leads us to be grateful for God’s lovingkindness.

## How do we practice it?

Here is an example of a Confession of Sin that could be used in a church service:

You asked for my hands, that you might use them for your purpose.  
I gave them for a moment, then withdrew them, for the work was hard.  
You asked for my mouth to speak out against injustice,  
I gave you a whisper that I might not be accused.  
You asked for my eyes to see the pain of poverty.  
I closed them, for I did not want to see.  
You asked for my life, that you might work through me.  
I gave a small part, that i might not get too involved.  
Lord, forgive my calculated efforts to serve you--  
only when it is convenient to do so,  
only in those places where it is safe to do so,  
and only with those who make it easy to do so.  
Father, forgive me, renew me, send me out as a usable instrument,  
that I might take seriously the meaning of your cross. Amen.  
*(a contemporary Confession of Sin from the Worship Sourcebook #35)*

This prayer is a good example since it has similarities with the confession prayer detailed in Nehemiah 9:

- Awareness (admission of sin and its effect on relationships)
- Restoration (asking for God’s forgiveness and renewal)
- Gratefulness (acknowledging the beauty of God’s design for our lives and for God’s forgiveness)

Depending on your previous faith tradition, you might be wondering why we utilize prepared texts such as this. First, there are many examples of recited prayers, such as Nehemiah 9 or the Psalm of Ascents, recited by Jews as they were traveling into Jerusalem. Also, reciting a pre-written prayer can make us aware of blind spots in our hearts. Furthermore, this helps us focus on a few specific sins, which is helpful as we seek to keep each other accountable. In addition, much like Jesus’ example of the Lord’s prayer teaches us how to pray, public

confession teaches us a methodology for confession and repentance. Lastly, a pre-written prayer allows us to read out loud together, instead of a spokesperson speaking on our behalf.

**Discussion:**

- 1) When has Confession of Sin not been beneficial for you?
- 2) What about Confession of Sin during church makes you uncomfortable?
- 3) What emotions do you feel during Confession of Sin?
- 4) How does this practice help you confess throughout the week?

**Conclusion**

Confession of Sin is a time when we can come together as a congregation and focus on where we have fallen short of God's design for our lives and our community. Confession is commanded in scripture, and is beneficial for us as it increases our awareness of sin, leads to restoration, and stimulates gratefulness in our hearts.

**Discussion:**

1. How should we respond to what we have learned today?