

God's Invitation to Confession and Pardon
Psalm 103:1-2, 8-14, 21-22; 1 John 1:5-2:2
October 21, 2018

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Psalm 103:1-2, 8-14, 21-22

Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name.

Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and do not forget all his benefits.

The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

He will not always accuse,
nor will he keep his anger forever.

He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.

For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far he removes our transgressions from us.

As a father has compassion for his children,
so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.

For he knows how we were made;
he remembers that we are dust.

Bless the LORD, all his hosts,
his ministers that do his will.

Bless the LORD, all his works,
in all places of his dominion.

Bless the LORD, O my soul.

1 John 1:5-2:2 (Common English Bible)

This is the message that we have heard from him and announce to you: “God is light and there is no darkness in him at all.” If we claim, “We have fellowship with him,” and live in the darkness, we are lying and do not act truthfully. But if we live in the light in the same way as he is in the light, we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from every sin.

If we claim, “We don’t have any sin,” we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from everything we’ve done wrong. If we claim, “We have never sinned,” we make him a liar and his word is not in us.

My little children, I’m writing these things to you so that you don’t sin. But if you do sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one. He is God’s way of dealing with our sins, not only ours but the sins of the whole world.

“It’s such a downer!”

“Worship is just getting rolling with a great hymn, and then we have to stop and confess our sins. It’s like ‘mwa mwah.’”

“I don’t come to church to feel depressed about how awful I supposedly am.”

“What’s up with the prayer of confession?”

During this sermon series, we’re looking at various aspects of the worship service, and what God is up to when God invites us to take part in them. Today we’re looking at the part of the service that has the prayer of confession in it. And those comments are all things I have heard or read about this part of the service.

We have to admit that it is a little counter cultural. There was a 2017 survey by LifeWay Research which asked 1000 Americans what they think about

sin. Turn to one of your neighbors and guess with each other what percentage of Americans say that they are not sinners.

The answer? 33% of Americans—a third of us—say that we are not sinners. They say “sin does not exist” or “I am not a sinner” or “I prefer not to say.”

Seems like the third of us who think that there’s no sin or that they are not a sinner would learn something if they read the New Testament scripture for today. Here’s the way John puts it:

If we claim, “We don’t have any sin,” we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

If we claim, “We have never sinned,” we make him a liar and his word is not in us.

It’s consistent throughout scripture, both the Old and the New Testament. We fall short of what God wants for us. Isaiah tells us even our best efforts are like filthy rags compared to God’s holiness. All the way back in Genesis we hear that sin is crouching at our door. Romans chapter 3 is a litany of a dozen scriptures telling us we miss God’s mark.

So it seems like the third of Americans who think they don’t sin would do well to learn from these scriptures.

It also seems like they would do well simply to open their eyes and look around. One of my former colleagues said that the doctrine of sin was her favorite Christian doctrine, because it is the only one that is empirically verifiable—the only one that you could prove by simply looking around.

I think she’s right. It doesn’t take long to notice how people lie, gossip, think too highly of themselves, devalue the poor, prioritize themselves over others, covet what others have that they do not, hate others, etc., etc. We sin—not just in big ways like murder or stealing, but in small ways by what we say and what we do, by what we don’t say and don’t do. We fall short.

We fall short, so we confess so that we can get ready for a closer relationship with Jesus Christ. We talked about this at the women's Bible study this past Wednesday. They said that praying a prayer of confession at the beginning of our worship service is like washing our hands before we eat. It's a way that God gets our attention and helps us to hear the rest of what's coming in worship. One person said that it's kind of like clearing brush away.

We are able to hear Christ more clearly having confessed our sins. We are able to connect with him more closely.

And that connection is vital, whether we think our sin is minimal or life-altering.

I got some insight into this a few years ago when I met a young man I'll call Sam. Sam's a Christian and his wife was five months pregnant when she found out that past week that he was having an affair.

I don't think I've ever met someone who was so consumed with guilt as Sam. He said he hadn't eaten for a week and had hardly slept. I believed it. He knew he had no one to blame but himself. He said how sorry he was—how much he worried that they wouldn't be able to reconcile—how he feared she would never forgive him. You could see it in his eyes, how much he felt like he had thrown his whole life away. He didn't know how he could have stepped so far outside of what God wanted for him. The guilt was overwhelming.

After we had talked for a while, I asked him whether or not he thought God could ever forgive him. He was so wracked with guilt that I was sure he would say, "No. How could God forgive me for such a horrible mistake?"

But that's not what he said. He said, "The knowledge that God can forgive me is the only thing that keeps me going. If God is the God that he says he is, I *know* He'll forgive me. Christ's death on the cross is the only thing I can hold onto. Not even this affair can keep God from forgiving me. God's forgiveness is the only reason I can face another day."

Sam knew that God has invited us to confess our sins, and he's made that confession. And he also knows that God has invited him to be pardoned for them, and he's received that forgiveness. This powerful reality gives light when darkness seemed to be falling all around us.

After all, our passage makes it clear that even though we sin, God has given us a gift in Jesus Christ that takes care of its penalty. Not that Sam's relationship with his wife was reconciled—I never saw him again and I don't know what happened there. But I am certain that God has forgiven him in Jesus Christ, and that this forgiveness has given him hope.

This is how John puts it in our passage:

We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one. He is God's way of dealing with our sins, not only ours but the sins of the whole world.

Jesus advocates for us—he supports and defends us. He pleads our cause. And through his death on the cross, he takes away our sins. Not because we are so amazing or because we deserve it so much, but because he shows grace to us that we could never earn.

So going back to that Lifeway survey, I want you to take a guess at another number. What percentage of Americans answered that “I am a sinner, and I depend on Jesus Christ to overcome sin.”

It's 28%. Around one in four who understand that Jesus is God's way of dealing with the sins of the world, as John puts it, because we can't take care of the impact of our own sin. It's out of our hands. God invites us to put it in Jesus' hands. That's why we have a prayer of confession and an assurance of pardon each week.

Now, the survey respondents got something else right. About a third of them answered, “I am a sinner, and I work on being less of one.” After all, part of answering God's invitation to confession and pardon is

understanding that we turn away from the sins we have been committing and strive to become more like Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

But if I were writing the survey, I'd ask the people who said "yes" a follow-up question: *why* are you working on being less of a sinner? Are you doing it to try to convince God that you are good enough to go to heaven? Are you trying to do good deeds in order to gain your salvation?

In the Reformed tradition we understand good deeds differently from this. We do good deeds because we're grateful that God has already saved us. We give thanks because of God's grace to us in forgiving our sins.

My favorite theologian, Karl Barth, says that grace and gratitude go together like the voice and an echo, like thunder and lightning, like heaven and earth. They go together like peanut butter and jelly, Sonny and Cher, and north and shore.

Okay, he didn't say those last three, but he did say that when we experience grace, the only natural response is gratitude. When we realize that God has forgiven us in Christ, gratitude is what comes next.

I heard a story this week about one way this has come true. You may know that several people from the church go up to the Neal School in North Chicago once a month to serve the staff a great homemade meal to support them as they teach sixth, seventh, and eighth graders in very challenging circumstances. Many people join in to help, and the core group has been going to the school for ten years now.

One of the people who go up to help serve the staff from here had their birthday this week, on the day that they were scheduled to go serve. I'll call her Millie. She said, "Well of course what else am I going to do on my birthday? I don't want to miss it!"

Somehow the staff found out it was Millie's birthday. They made her a cake. They brought her a tiara. They sang for her. They marched her to the

principal's office so they could get a picture together—tiara and all. They overwhelmed her with love and care.

They didn't do any of this in order to earn Millie's care for them. They didn't do it because they needed somehow to convince her that they were worth loving or supporting.

No—they did it purely out of gratitude for the grace that Millie has been showing them, month after month, year after year, for ten years.

God's invitation to confession leads to grace, and grace leads to gratitude.

And gratitude leads to action. Like giving someone a cake and a tiara. Like sending someone a thank you note. Like paying it forward to someone else.

And during this stewardship season, like committing ourselves to give back to God from what God has given us. Not to prove to God that we are worth loving, but to thank God because we are loved. Not to prove to God that we have to be forgiven, but to thank God because we are.

We'll have the chance to make our pledges for the new year on November 11th. I hope you'll be generous — not to prove to Jesus that we were hanging on the cross for, but to thank him because while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.