

## Confessing our Sins

Last week, we considered Daniel's confession of sin on behalf of Israel (technically, Judah). The text yielded five guidelines for confessing sin:

- (1) Why confession is possible (9:4a): because God is powerful yet loving;
- (2) Why confession is necessary (9:4b-6): because man is rebellious;
- (3) Why confession is urgent (9:7-14): because God judges sin;
- (4) How to confession (9:15-19): (a) appeal to God, (b) admit guilt, (c) plea for forgiveness, (d) ground the plea in God's mercy and glory.
- (5) What confession accomplishes (9:20-27): God forgives and restores, though he may not remove all of sin's consequences.

We also noted that while the passage applies more directly to confession of collective sin, such as the sin of a national or local Church, or even a nation, it also serves as a model for the confession of personal sin.

What we had no time to consider last week was how any of this changes once Christ comes. Given that Christ died for sin, it is fair to assume that his death will affect how we confess sin. This week we draw six guidelines from Galatians regarding Christians and sin.

### Day 1 Galatians 3:13-14 The confession of sin is no longer primary

We are no longer *primarily* people who confess sin, for the simple reason that we are no longer fundamentally people who live under threat of judgment.

Instead, the most basic truth about our identity is that our sins are forgiven. "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole.' He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to [us] through Christ Jesus." We are no longer under judgment; we are redeemed. We are no longer under a curse; we are blessed.

This is the crucial starting point when we talk about the confession of sins. The topic inevitably skews our self-perception as 'sinner'. That may indeed have been an appropriate characterization of Daniel's audience, and of us before we came to faith in Christ. But once Christ's death is applied to our sins, our fundamental identity is now no longer 'sinner' but 'redeemed', no longer 'cursed' but 'blessed'.

Many tender-hearted Christians are over-scrupulous, faulting themselves for all manner of misconduct and transgression. In Christ, that is no longer who we are. We may still have occasion to confess sin, but that is no longer our fundamental identity.

**Day 2 Galatians 5:24-25 Sin is no longer primary**

Yesterday's reading focused on our identity: we are no longer characterized by sin, but by redemption. That would be just 'legal fiction', however, and a license to sin with impunity, if all Christ did were to die for our sin. If he died merely to alleviate the consequence of our sins, merely so that we could escape curse and judgment, then nothing would remain to restrain our sin, and Christ would be found to condone sin. But Jesus changes much more than just our identity; he also transforms our nature and conduct.

Paul writes, "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit." Our identity is no longer 'sinner' because our nature is no longer 'sinful'. Our old nature has been crucified with Christ; it is dead. And with Christ, we have risen to new life, a life directed and empowered by the Spirit. Fundamentally, Christ has changed not only our identity (yesterday's point), but also our nature (today's point).

Insofar as the need for confession persists – and, as we shall see, it does, at least to some extent, persist – it is now an anomaly, even an oxymoron. Like hot snow. Or cold fire. Though, in our case, sin does happen; yet it makes no sense.

This reality reshapes our perspective on confession. Daniel's generation needed to confess sin, because they were by nature sinners and so in fact sinned. So were we, and so did we, before coming to Christ. But now that we have come to Christ, two realities have changed about us: (a) Christ died for our sin, removing the curse on us; and, (b) we died with Christ to sin, removing the sin nature within us.

Fundamentally, we are no longer people who confess sin, because we are no longer people who commit sin. So, in essence, we are no longer about sin or confession: at core, we are now about forgiven-ness and transformation.

**Day 3 Galatians 5:17 Sin still lurks around us**

How great it would be if what is true of us theologically and essentially were equally true of us experientially. It will be so one day: "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). But that day, sadly, is not yet here.

Despite our fundamental change in identity, Paul explains, and despite the crucifixion of our sinful nature, another contrasting reality co-exists: our sinful nature somehow survives crucifixion! And that persistent sinful

nature wars against our new, spiritual nature. “For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit, what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.” And, obviously, we do what we do not want.

We do not do what we want; we do what we do not want. Despite the change in our identity, and the change in our nature, we do not live entirely for God; instead, we do commit sin. Thus, our need for confession. One theologian calls this the ‘impossible possibility’ (or the ‘possible impossibility’, I forget which). That is our crisis, and the reason we need to confess sin: we are not always experientially what we are already essentially.

#### **Day 4 Galatians 6:7-8 Sin is still deadly**

Christians universally recognize that they continue to sin, even though at some level, this is constitutionally impossible. Few Christians realize, however, that the consequences of sin are the same as they have ever been: “God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.”

Paul provides no easy escape from these stark alternatives. He does not write, “Whoever sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction, *unless he prays to receive Christ.*” He does not suggest that those who want eternal life can *either* live as the Spirit directs or pray for forgiveness, their choice. Salvation is conditional upon holiness, no less for those who profess Christ, than for those who never own his name. Sin – a least, a consistent engaging in sin – brings judgment, for those who profess Christ, no less than for those who never accept Christ.

So sin continues to pose a threat to salvation. And, thus, confession remains an important remedy.

#### **Day 5 Galatians 5:19-21 When – which sins – to confess**

At first glance, the answer seems obvious: confess all sins. The problem is that over-scrupulous Christians can turn everything – a sour glance, a random thought, a failure to infer someone’s need, a grumpy mood – into sin. Paul seems not to have been nearly so introspective or self-critical. In each of his letters, he includes a list of sins which preclude entrance into heaven. While the lists do not correspond exactly – he is not working with a detailed template – the same items tend to reappear.

In Galatians 5, the sins which preclude entrance into heaven include sexual immorality, hatred, jealousy, rage, selfish ambition, factionalism,

drunkenness, and so forth. At the very least, these sins require confession. By inference, a great many of the little things that we fuss over appear to be not sins but minor peccadilloes. The problem with lumping together big-ticket items with little flaws is that it tends to reduce them all to mid-level improprieties, taking the former too lightly, and the latter, too seriously. We want to avoid making personality molehills into moral mountains, so that we can recognize – and deal appropriately – with the mountains as they rise up.

### **Day 6 Galatians 6:1-2 To whom to confess**

In an era when prime-time TV dramas imbue all characters with deep moral flaws and dramatic dysfunction, we develop an appetite for scandal and unmasking, and we carry that appetite with us wherever we go, even to church. In a culture which frowns on gossip, the best alternative is public confession of sin: who cheated or stole, who was sexually or physically abused, who slept with whom outside of marriage, etc. On occasion, the judicious sharing of intimate life details can be beneficial, whether to the individual, to the group, or to both. But sometimes all it does is to excite prurient interest.

However all that plays out culturally, it is notable that Scripture advocates public confession largely in two contexts: (a) the rebuke of a persistent, recalcitrant, egregious sinner (e.g., Matthew 18:15-18; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13); and (b) the rebuke of an elder who sinned (1 Timothy 5:20). For the rest, on those few occasions when it calls for public confession (e.g., James 5:16), there is no indication that the confession is best delivered before hundreds of people (in fact, given that the early church met in homes, which were generally much smaller than ours, a big house church might include thirty people).

The best justification for any sort of personal confession is to provide the context for fulfilling Paul's exhortation in Galatians 6:1, "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently." When sin besets and overpowers, when it proves insurmountable, when we fall repeatedly to the same temptation, the prayerful support and personal nurture of a small group of fellow-believers can be a powerful help for the struggling. This is the strongest justification for all of us to be in small groups designed for encouragement and accountability, to support our pursuit of holiness, and to call us back from sin. Such groups work only if members are vulnerable and transparent. This is the best context for public confession of sin, within an 'encouragement and accountability' committed to helping the fallen return to God and pursue holiness.