

Holy Habits: Confession

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Luke 18:9-14

So we come to our second sermon in our *Holy Habits* series. In these sermons we will look at the different parts of our worship service and we will see how the Holy Spirit uses the habit of worship, the ritual of worship, to shape our lives. The rituals we practice, the habits we adopt, have enormous formative power. Worship is a holy habit. The Spirit uses this habit to bind us more deeply into the life of Christ.

Last week we talked about the beginning of our worship. We talked about how the first thing that happens in our liturgy is that God pulls our attention upward. We come to the service with our brain full of horizontal concerns – personal worries, societal worries – and then the service starts. In everything we do at the beginning of our service – the introit, the opening hymn, the processional – God pulls our eyes upwards to him. We see his glory and he gives us his grace and his peace.

So in the holy habit of liturgy, the first movement is our eyes going upward to his grace. What's the second move? In the second move our heads go down and we fall down on our knees in confession. In the second movement of the liturgy we become like the tax collector in the parable I just read. The tax collector comes to the temple, bows his head in shame, he beats his breast in sorrow, and he says "God have mercy on me, a sinner." The tax collector comes to the temple and confesses his sin. He offers to God a broken spirit and a contrite heart. And Jesus makes it clear that the Father receives his offering.

Every Sunday when we come to this place, we make a similar offering. We bow our heads and in our prayer of confession we say, "*God we are so sorry. We know we have sinned. Have mercy upon us.*" We did that this morning. We confessed that our hearts and minds have been impure, that we have sinned. And then three times we said just what the tax collector said: "*Lord, have mercy upon us.*"

If you are a regular LaGrave person you're used to this ritual. Confession has been part of our liturgy for as long as you can remember. But can we just stop and recognize how unique this is? Where else in society do we stand up and admit that we are a mess? Where else is there a ritual where we publicly admit our failure, our misery, our corrupt thought, our evil desires, our sin? In every other public place, in every other public ritual, our self-presentation goes in the opposite direction. We try to make ourselves look attractive and competent. At a job interview we give our resume. We don't fill our resume with our sins and failures. In 1996 I lost the Johnson account. In 2004 I was out of work for a month with depression. And when I was in my 20's I struggled with porn. We would NEVER take this posture in front of a potential boss, and yet when we come into the presence of the living God, right after he greets us and says sit down, we do exactly this. "Lord God have mercy on me, I am a sinner!"

A lot of outsiders look at Christians who practice this Holy Habit and think there's something wrong with us. They think that we are neurotic. *"What's the matter with you Christians?!"* they say, *"You make your children come together every week and say, 'I'm a sinner. I have failed.'?!"* *"That's messed up!"* *"They'll be damaged."* *"You are training them in guilt and self-loathing."* Some churches have also looked at this part of our liturgy and come to a similar conclusion. In the 80's and 90's a lot of what they called seeker sensitive churches decided to drop the prayer of confession from their order. They thought it was too negative. They thought that it would turn people off. They wanted the service to be more joyful and positive. *'We start the service out with a joyful song! We have God bless us with his grace and peace! Everything is positive and then we bring everyone down with the confession of sin. Why don't we just keep singing praise songs!?' Well... why don't we keep singing praise songs?*

Why do we keep having this moment of confession and godly sorrow at the beginning of our service? We do it because it tells the truth. When we confess our sins we tell the truth of who we are. We are sinners, we are broken. We do struggle with ourselves. We know that we are not the people we are supposed to be.

We also do it because it's Biblical. When we see and feel our brokenness, the Bible tells us not to hide it; instead the Bible teaches us to confess our sins before God, to bring him the offering of our contrite heart. You see that in the Old Testament. Chad read Isaiah 6 again this morning for our call to confession. Isaiah 6 is a heavenly worship scene. As Christians have thought about what proper worship of God looks like, Isaiah 6 is one of the passages we turn to. Just like in our worship, the first thing Isaiah sees is the Lord sitting in his temple, high and lifted up. And then what's the second thing he does. He falls to his knees and confesses, "I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips." The Old Testament is also the place where we find the penitential Psalms where David and the other Psalmists teach us to confess our sins instead of hiding them. Psalm 51, against you and you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight. Have mercy on me." It is Psalm 51 which says that an offering acceptable to the Lord is a broken spirit and a contrite heart.

Confession is also part of the New Testament. In the parable we read this morning, Jesus teaches us humble confession. The road to letting God's presence into your life isn't by giving God a resume of your awesomeness ("Look at me God! I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get"); it's by confessing your sin and asking for his mercy. And maybe you remember 1 John 1: "If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, he will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Confession is Biblical. It shows up in both the Old and New Testament. As Jesus' parable clearly shows, it's a holy habit that he wants us to practice. And when we practice this holy habit the Holy Spirit uses the ritual of confession to change us. If we practice confession every week how will the Spirit change us? What kind of shape will the Spirit be giving to our souls? I want to suggest three things.

First, the Spirit will give us a sacred lack of confidence. Yes, you heard me, a sacred LACK of confidence. In this parable, Jesus is trying to produce a

sacred lack of confidence. Look at who the parable is aimed at: *“To those who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else.”* If you let confession into your life, the Spirit will put a little voice in your head and that will say to you, “Remember Peter, you might be wrong. Remember Peter, your motives might not be as pure as you think.” If you practice confession the Spirit will teach you appropriate self-suspicion.

Generally speaking the world out there does not train us in self-suspicion. We take it for granted that confidence is a good thing. We aspire to confidence. We are always trying to build up each other’s confidence. Self-suspicion and self-doubt are treated as weakness. The voices that draw people in our society are the voices that are certain of their rightness and look down on everyone else. That’s true in politics. That’s true in the church. That’s true in sports commentary. The people who speak with swaggering certainty get all the attention. We are not drawn to leaders who say, ‘maybe’ and ‘perhaps’ and ‘I could be wrong.’ Our world needs more self-suspicion. Our world needs more people who are in touch with their own weakness. Our world needs more patience and listening. Our world could stand a little less swagger and a lot more humility.

Second, if we practice the holy habit of confession, the Spirit will also train us to start the fight against sin in the right place. We are called to fight sin in this world, to resist the evil one, to overcome evil. When you practice weekly confession, the Spirit trains you that the front line of that fight is in your own heart. It is so tempting to start the fight against evil by looking at other people’s sins.

Why are we tempted to start with other people’s sins? First, because they’re relatively easy to spot! There are lots of people doing sinful and destructive things. Every evening news cast, every social media feed will show us a long list of appalling people doing appalling things, and these media will invite us to be appalled at these appalling people and their sin. And we get swept along by that because the sin is real and it’s bad. And the second reason we start with other people’s sin is that it feels really good to be appalled. I know from personal experience how good it feels to sit in a room with group of like-minded folk complaining about other people’s sins. “What’s the matter with those people! Can you believe them? What are they thinking?!” That kind of talk is addicting. It makes you feel righteous and smart. It’s so tempting that we are constantly getting into conversations like this.

But if we let ourselves get swept along by those feelings we are behaving exactly like the Pharisee in this story. We are overconfident in our righteousness, and we are looking down on others. The Pharisee starts the fight against sin by looking at other people – “Thank you that I am not like that tax collector over there.” The tax collector shows us the right place to start. The tax collector starts with himself. Lord have mercy on me a sinner. When you start with looking at your own sins, it doesn’t mean that you never look at other people’s sins, or fight the sin out there, but by the time you get around to looking at the sin of other people you’re a lot more gracious and careful, because you know that you are a sinner too.

Which brings us to the last thing the Holy Habit of confession can teach us. It can also teach us deep communal joy. About ten years ago, Grand Rapids Christian High did an unusual chapel. It was on confession and brokenness and after the chapel, a wall in the school was set aside called the Speak Wall. On that

wall using sticky notes, kids could write an anonymous note in which they shared their brokenness, their sins, with the community. The chapel staff wasn't sure how that would all go, but the results were overwhelming. Hundreds of notes confessing and sharing some really personal things. Pretty soon the wall was covered in sticky notes saying things like: I was raped, I can't stop looking at porn. I'm gay and nobody knows. My father left our family and it's killing me. I can't stop drinking. I think about killing myself. An entire wall papered in hurt and confession. Students could come to the wall and also leave notes of encouragement and grace in red pen: "We love you." "I'm praying for you." "Jesus is stronger than your sin."

The wall was incredibly well received. The wall of confession brought the school community together. High school can be a judgmental place, a place where everyone is trying really hard to present a cool and attractive image of themselves, a place where everyone is terrified of other people finding out about their dark secrets and their failures. It can feel like a place where there's this constant struggle to show you matter and to win your place and the way you get a place is by being beautiful or athletic or smart or funny - preferably all of the above.

But standing in front of that wall full of confessions told a different story, a truer story. Standing in front of this wall student could see that this wasn't a school full of strong beautiful rich athletic kids; this was a school full of hurting and broken, sinful and struggling people. Standing in front of that wall you could also see that being funny, or athletic, or beautiful or smart wasn't going to be enough to overcome all these troubles. Standing in front of that wall you could see that the only hope and comfort against these sins and these sorrows was the grace of Jesus, the love of Jesus, the death and resurrection of Jesus. Every student who stood in front of that wall knew we are community of broken people saved by grace. *And the feeling that brought was hope and joy.*

This is where I disagree with those people who look at the ritual of confession and say that it fills us with self-hatred and neurotic guilt. No! Because we don't just confess our sins we confess them to Jesus and he forgives them. He washes us clean. Jesus died to save us from all these things and there is nothing in all creation that can separate us from his hand.

I said earlier that confession teaches us a sacred lack of confidence, that it teaches us not to be too confident in our righteousness. That's true but it doesn't leave us without hope. I am not confident in my righteousness, I am not confident in your righteousness, but I am completely confident in Christ's righteousness and its power to save us. I am not confident in my ability to lead the church and solve its problems. I am not confident in your ability to lead the church and solve its problems. But I am completely confident in Christ's ability to lead his church and work his purpose out. To him be the power and the glory forever.

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