

Sermon for April 29, 2018 - Confession and Absolution

1 John 1:8-10 (EHV)

Theme: **Confess your sins to Christ.**

- 1) So as not to deceive yourself all the way into hell
- 2) So as to receive his wonderful forgiveness.

⁸ *If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.* ⁹ *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* ¹⁰ *If we say we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar, and his Word is not in us.*

Believe it or not: I have actually met people who claimed to be sinless. “I never murdered. I never stole. I never committed adultery.” they say, “I don’t sin.” The problem is that God not only condemns outward evil acts against our neighbor, but also any inclination of our heart that won’t submit to everything he commands. In other words, there is absolutely no way that anyone (other than Jesus) can claim to be without sin. And yet, people try. We all try.

“Wait a second pastor,” you might be thinking, “did you just say that *we all* claim to be without sin? I have never made such a claim in my life!”

Let me ask you this: Have you ever felt as if God might be giving you a raw deal: that you *deserve* better, because you are basically a good person? Have you ever thought to yourself, “Even though I don’t go to Church all the time, I still pray a lot and try my best – and that’s all that really matters anyway”? I have some news for all of us who have thought this way at one time or another (and yes, I include myself in this): such thinking is no different than saying that we have no sin.

“But Pastor,” someone might be thinking, “I don’t claim to have *no* sin. It’s just that my sins aren’t that bad. I never murdered, stole or committed adultery. . .”

But here’s the truth: there is no “minor sin” in God’s sight – as St. James once wrote: “*whoever keeps the whole law but stumbles in one point has become guilty of breaking all of it.*”ⁱ Every hateful word and lustful thought, every time you failed to help someone in need, yes, every failure to give the LORD the perfect fear, love and faith that he deserves is damning sin that has merited nothing less than an eternity in hell. This is the truth God wants us to acknowledge about ourselves. Why? So that we turn to Jesus in repentance and faith in order that he might forgive us!

With the apostle John as our guide let us, therefore, considered the importance of repentance, under the theme: **Confess your sins to Christ.** 1) So as not to deceive yourself all the way into hell, 2) So as to receive his wonderful forgiveness.

Part One: Confess your sins to Christ, so as not to deceive yourself all the way to hell.

The apostle John seems to have originally written our sermon text in response to a false doctrine called “Gnosticism” that was starting to plague the church at that time. Among other things, it taught that a person could free his “spirit” from the flesh and, thereby, attain a state of sinlessness. It seems as if some teachers were already claiming to have achieved such a state.

To this John replies: ⁸ *If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.*

It is the height of self-deception to think that we have no sin, and yet this is exactly what our corrupt nature wants to imagine about itself. None of us want to think that we are bad people. None of us want to imagine that we actually deserve eternal damnation in hell.

To illustrate this point, I want to tell you a story about the first time I preached to the inmates at Ozaukee County Jail – some of whom, if I recall correctly, were newly incarcerated leaders of Milwaukee’s infamous Latin Kings gang. In the introduction of my sermon I mentioned that all people are sinful – deserving of God’s punishment. To my surprise, I heard a number of voices say: “I don’t think that about myself. I am a pretty good person I don’t deserve to be punished.” How could these incarcerated gang members say that – given their situation, I wondered? As I mentioned before, our corrupt human nature does not want to believe that we actually deserve hell – even if we are sitting in jail, convicted of a crime. We want to believe that we have some good, something to show God and say: “See Lord, you owe me.”

But the truth is that God owes us nothing. How do I know? Because the Scriptures say so much. Consider St. Paul’s confession recorded in his letter to the Romans: *Indeed, I know that good does not live in me, that is, in my sinful flesh.*ⁱⁱ Or consider what God said about the heart of mankind, recorded in Genesis: *every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood.*ⁱⁱⁱ Or what the Holy Spirit inspired David to write in the Psalms: *² The LORD looks down from heaven on all the children of Adam to see if there is anyone who understands, anyone who seeks God. ³ Every one of them has turned away. Altogether they have become rotten. There is no one who does good. There is not even one.*^{iv}

No matter how “good” we might imagine ourselves to be, the Bible clearly states that we are corrupt, sinful and deserving of hell. To think, say or act otherwise is not only the height of self-deception, St. John also says: ¹⁰ *If we say we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar, and his Word is not in us.*

Should we add this sin to all the others we commit against God and accuse him of lying? May that never be; and yet this is exactly what we do when we downplay the seriousness of our sins.

Instead of downplaying your sins (which will only result in your deceiving yourself all the way into hell) take to heart what God says about the total corruptness of your heart and freely confess your sins to Him – trusting in His promise to forgive us, as John says in our sermon text:

Part Two: Confess your sins to Christ. . . . So as to receive his wonderful forgiveness.

⁹ *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

The first and often greatest step in solving a problem is acknowledging that a problem exists. If this is true regarding earthly things, how truer it is regarding our need for forgiveness.

St. John urges us to confess our sins to God, but what exactly does he mean? First of all, he means admitting the truth about ourselves and the countless ways we have broken God's commandments. And we can only make this great first step with the help of the Holy Spirit. Why? Because confessing our sins to God is to do the opposite of what our sinful nature wants us to do – hide all our wickedness under a mountain of pride and self-deception. To confess our sins to God is to admit the truth that, yes, we have broken God's commandments and justly deserve his wrath and punishment for it. We ask God to forgive our sins – not because we deserve it, but simply because he promises to do so for Christ's sake.

And do you know what happens when we are thus moved to confess our sins to God? He, faithful to his promises, forgives our sins. Why? Because his justice demands it.

God's justice demands that he forgives us? How can that be? Doesn't God's justice demand the punishment of sin and payment of debt? It certainly does. How, then, can John say that the LORD – according to the justice of his nature - forgives all our sins, and cleanses us from all unrighteousness when we confess our sins to God? He can say that because God's only begotten Son has already paid for our sins in full by suffering and dying on the cross for them in our place, as St. John writes in a verse immediately following our sermon text: *we have an Advocate before the Father: Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.* ² *He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the whole world.*^v

Did you know that Jesus' payment for our sins on the cross was so complete, that God the Father would actually be "unjust" if he refused to forgive us? That's right, not only does God's faithfulness to his promises compel him to forgive us our sins when we repent, so does his justice.

And exactly how much does God forgive us? Does he only wash away 75% of our sins and leave the rest for us to deal with ourselves? No, rather – as our text says – he cleanses us from *all* unrighteousness. In other words, there is nothing more to be done on our part because Christ has done it all. We are at peace with God.

Ok, now that we have clearly seen the importance and blessing of confessing our sins to God, the question arises: how, exactly, do we confess our sins to God? Do we have to enumerate every sinful thought, word and deed we have ever done to some priest in a special booth, like they do in the movies?

No, God doesn't require us to enumerate all our sins to a pastor. Such a task would be impossible, as the Scriptures say: *Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden faults.*^{vi} What God desires, rather, is that we prayerfully enumerate to him only the sins we can remember - asking Him to also forgive the sins we either don't know about or have forgotten.

And to a fellow Christian or pastor: what sins do we confess to them? Only those sins that particularly bother us. And do you know what a faithful pastor or fellow Christian will tell us if we confess our particularly bothersome sins to them? That, God forgives our sins for Christ's sake!

What a wonderful joy it is to hear these words spoken to us by a fellow Christian! It's as refreshing as the warm, spring sun after a cold, long winter. It makes us feel as if the gates of heaven have been flung open with Jesus standing there, ready to give us a hug. The news of our forgiveness in Christ brings us such happiness and peace, that it literally changes our lives. No longer do we wish to live in sin. We now want to live for our LORD who loved us so much, that he sent his only begotten Son world to suffer and die in payment for our sins.

And how do we know that the free forgiveness offered to us by a Christian family member, friend or pastor is real? Because God himself has commanded them to speak the words of forgiveness to everyone who repents – something we studied last week, when we looked at the doctrine of the Keys.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: it is human nature to hide sin. We don't want to appear weak or vulnerable. We don't want to face the fact that, yes, we are *that* evil before God so as to truly deserve His wrath and punishment in hell. But here's the truth: when-ever we hide our sins from God, all we end up accomplishing is hurting ourselves. We become like the proverbial frog in a pot who, as the water got hotter, imagined that he was ok – not realizing that he was about to die.

Better than hiding our sins is confessing them to God. Why? Because his own faithfulness and justice demands that he forgives us for Christ's sake. Oh, that we would all take this truth to heart and let God free us from all the guilt, spiritual sorrow and sin that burdens our souls - for this is exactly what he promises to do for Christ's sake. Amen.

ⁱ James 2:10 EHV

ⁱⁱ Romans 7:18 EHV

ⁱⁱⁱ Genesis 8:21 NIV84

^{iv} Psalm 14:2-3 EHV

^v 1 John 2:1b-2 EHV

^{vi} Psalm 19:12 NIV84