

“Confession: Key to Recovery”

Theme: 12 Steps to a New Beginning, part 5

I John 1:5 - 2:2; James 5:16



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For the past several weeks we have been using the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous as a model for the Christian walk and as a helpful spiritual discipline. Last week, Tom examined Step Four, the step that calls us to make a searching and fearless moral inventory of our lives, looking at our character defects: resentments, fears, guilt, shame, dishonesty, gossiping, blaming others, and our self-centered controlling behaviors—as well as looking at our assets and gifts. Step 4 prepares us for Step 5. In Step 4 we assess who we are and what has happened to us. In Step 5, we share what we have learned with God and with another person or persons.

Step 5 may be one of the most challenging steps we face in our spiritual journey—in our walk toward spiritual healing and wholeness. This step asks us to bring our self-centered behavior out from the darkness into the light of day. One of the greatest dangers of our sin-disease is that it keeps us in a shadowy world of denial, deception and half-truths. So it is very

painful when we have to face up to specific, negative traits in ourselves, and to the wrong we have done to ourselves and others.

But we can do it, because in Step 3 we have given ourselves to God. We know that God is with us and for us and we have nothing to fear. We have turned our wills and our lives over to the care of God, and we have experienced God’s love and forgiveness. So we can share our problems with the Lord. In sharing with God, we become able to share with others. In sharing with others we start to get well. Step 5 enables us to break the power of secrecy in our lives.

Even a quick reading of Step 5 reveals that it is a form of confession. It is a recovery of an incredibly healing and restoring Christian practice. From the very beginning Christians have believed in confessing their sins to other Christians. The author of James described it clearly as part of the healing process. “Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.” (James 5:16)

The worship of the early church began with a time of self-disclosure and confession of sin; although the great reformers, Martin Luther and John Calvin, attacked the misuse of church confession in their day, which had to do with buying forgiveness. Still, both Luther and Calvin were strongly in favor of confession. In one of his writings, Luther states, “Confession is useful, even necessary. I would not have it abolished. Indeed, I rejoice that it exists in the church of Christ, for it is a cure without equal for distressed consciences. For when we have laid bare our conscience to a brother or sister and privately made known to that person the evil that lurked within, we receive from our brother’s or sister’s lips the word of comfort spoken by God. And if we accept this in faith, we find peace in the mercy of God speaking to us through our brother or sister.”

Whenever the church has neglected the healing confession/forgiveness process, either rigid legalism or spiritual apathy has been the result. While central to every renewal movement of the church has been the continual surrender to God and the facing and confession of sin. Such renewal movements have been characterized by a release of freedom, joy and hope.

For example, in East Africa there is a “revival movement” that has been going on for over 50 years. People from various tribes all over that region have been coming to the Christian faith in great numbers. This is not simply a matter of adopting a new religion. Lives are being revolutionized as people are becoming deeply honest in all their relationships and activities. Lying, cheating, stealing and other forms of anti-social behavior are being given up for the new life in Christ.

At the heart of this revival movement is the concept of “walking in the light”, described in the Biblical passage we just read in I John. The way this concept is brought into everyday life is through regular, small group meetings (in some areas, daily meetings) during which there is confession of sin to one another. In this way, they seek to maintain transparent honesty in all their relationships. It is very important to these Christians that they constantly “walk in the light” by confessing any darkness in their lives.

Steps 4 and 5 give us practical, concrete ways to see our sins, confess them, and be healed and made whole. The honesty involved in doing these two steps helps us to see the specific sinful acts as symptoms of a basic and all-encompassing self-centeredness, a need to control in order to get what we want, and a self will which prefers “my way to God’s” and which puts “me” in the center where only God should be.

One of the requirements for me in working as a clergy consultant at the alcohol treatment center was to do a fourth and fifth step. As I shared with my supervisor my fourth step and as I listened to what he heard from that step, I began to see that the exact nature of my wrongs was not so much the specific things I had done or not done that had hurt myself and others, but more the underlying things that drove that negative behavior...things like a pattern of fear that caused me to try to control things I should have no control over, and a perfectionism that covered a lot of self doubt.

There is great power in openness. There is something very freeing about saying what we are to others. No longer do we need to exert such great energy in maintaining our illusion of perfection. As we come out of the shadows into the light, we can breathe a sign of relief, relax, and get on with the issues at hand. As we break through the power of secrecy we discover a new freedom and confidence in our lives. It's the difference between living a lie and living the truth. Once our masks are down, and we're being real with each other, we can move into the task of helping each other find healing and freedom.

Step 5 sharing—this form of confession—gives us a very vivid experience of how God works through others. Often people already sense our struggles. They have not been deceived and they can help us see what we have missed about our controlling, self-centered behavior. They can help us see the way things really are. As they accept our confession and convey God's forgiveness we are led into greater healing and wholeness.

Step 5 also urges us to come clean with God. We can do this because we have committed our lives to God. We have found that God loves us and will for-

give us. So we offer to God all the garbage of our lives, knowing that through God's power we can put all that behind us.

But how do we go about actually doing a 5th step? Admitting to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs? There are opportunities for us to do both informal and formal fifth steps. The informal fifth step is ongoing. Every time we attend a worship service and reflect on our past mistakes and present errors and confess those to God, we take a miniature fifth step. And every time we talk to our pastor or a friend and are candid about our problems and the ways we are dealing with them, we take another informal fifth step.

To take the formal fifth step, people usually choose someone whom they consider trustworthy, compassionate, understanding, and a good listener; a person who can keep confidences. Then they set up a meeting with that person to share all that they have learned about themselves from the fourth step—all their character defects, specific sins and controlling, self-centered behaviors, and all their gifts and strengths. After sharing themselves with that person they then listen to any feedback the listener has for them, and takes it in. Brutal honesty about ourselves is a powerful thing, but we must be careful to be selective about what we share with whom. There's a great release and freedom in being able to be open and not hold back with people who understand our situation and can help us understand what they are hearing in our story.

After listening to several hundred formal fifth steps over a ten year period, I have witnessed over and over again the deep change that often happens to people after taking step five. Many people report a new sense of being loved by God, a sense of overwhelming gratitude and relief, freedom from loneliness

and isolation, and the opening of a door to a new kind of spiritual growth. And always there is a new self-acceptance as they no longer need to carry and defend that eight foot image of themselves they couldn't relax with.

Few experiences in life are more humbling than admitting to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs. And yet, few experiences are more necessary to long-term peace of mind, to spiritual wholeness in Christ, and to finding the serenity and joy of living in God's light than this significant step. Thanks be to God who gives this life-changing opportunity through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen.