

Community Teaching 03:

Confess Your Sins

Intro:

- Story #1:
 - The home community was the best anyone had ever experienced; the group lived within walking distance from each other; they were together all the time, not just on Wednesday nights for their weekly meal; they would keep Sabbath together, go on vacation together, play together, and worship together on Sunday with their wider church. People were being transformed ... until COVID broke out and 9 of the 12 people in the group moved away ...
- Story #2:
 - The Ramirez family befriended a single mom with full custody of her kids; they felt moved by the Spirit to invite her to move into their neighborhood and join their community. The community came around her, watching her kids multiple days a week so she could work and genuinely enjoying her company. But in spite of living in community, her mental health began to deteriorate. The group was unprepared for mental illness. In the end, the community fractured and fell apart.
- Story #3:
 - Ray is a middle-aged pastor who went through a heart-wrenching leadership breakdown at his old church; in the end, he had to leave the church, tearing his family away from their community. Recently, he became a pastor again at a new church in a new city, but now he carries this fear inside him that other pastors can't be trusted, and that it will all go bad again. Will he heal and grow through this new community? Or will his wounding become a self-fulfilling prophecy?
- I've changed names and details out of respect for confidentiality, but these are real stories of real people.

Set up line: All of these people were hurt deeply by community, yet the only way they will ever

heal is by living *in* community.

- And I'm sure you have your own stories, too, of community breakdown.
- It's easy to become guarded, or even emotionally allergic to community because of our wounding. Yet, we can't give up on community. We have to move toward the very thing we fear because *that* is the place where we will heal and grow.

Challenges:

- We've been tracing the vision of community through the library of Scripture for the last few sessions and exploring how essential it is for our apprenticeship to Jesus.
- But living in community in a culture of radical individualism is *not* easy.
- There are many challenges that keep us from living in healthy community.
- Let me name just a few ...
- The number one problem for most people is just ...

1. Busyness

- It takes a lot of margin to live in community.
- Relationships take time.
- But most of our schedules are far over capacity; we don't *have* any time to spare.
- Remember Dunbar's four circles of community?
- Dr. Jeffery Hall from The University of Kansas conducted research on how much time it takes for a relationship to move through Dunbar's circles of community.¹
- He found that it takes about 50 hours for an acquaintance (from your village) to become a friend (in your kinship group or community), and 200 hours for a friend to become a close friend.
- But racking up two hundred hours can take years in our busy time.
- Secondly ...

2. Transience

- Just as you are finally getting to know someone, they often move away.

- As a general rule, our culture values career over community.
- People — especially “successful” people — often move from city to city, working their way up the career ladder.
- Many others are getting pushed out of cities by gentrification or cost of living.
- But even if we stay in the same place for a long time, we face the challenge of ...

3. Digital distraction

- Thanks to our devices, we know more people than our grandparents would have ever dreamed. Yet we don’t really *know* people at all.
- Because *connectivity* is not the same thing as *community*.
- Social media has dramatically changed the way we do relationships: first by speeding up the process of making new “friends,” and then by dramatically lowering the bar for what it means to *be* friends.
- And related to this is ...

4. Flakiness

- Not only has tech made us less focused and more distracted, it’s made us more flakey, as we’re conditioned to always keep our options open.
- One sociologist who was researching the effect of text messaging told the story of his teenage son who had a weekly phone call with his grandparents every Sunday afternoon. Most weeks, he didn’t want to talk to them, but they didn’t have cell phones, so to cancel, he would have to actually call *them* and say, “I’m sorry, I can’t talk today.” To which they would say, “Why not?” Since he had no good reason other than he’d prefer to play video games, he would call them every Sunday.
- But with texting, we can offer a vague excuse the moment we’re tired, or unmotivated, or a better option comes along.
- We are reluctant to even schedule anything more than a few days in advance, then we wonder why we are alone on a Friday night, or why, even if we go out, we feel lonely in our souls.
- And, as my friend Jim McNeish of Scotland put it to me, “Intimacy only resides in the safety of commitment.”
- Finally, the byproduct of all this is ...

5. Decreasing relational skills

- According to a recent study of more than 200,000 people across 160 countries, since 2011 there has been a steady decline in emotional intelligence by about 5% per year.
- Due to the rise of easy divorce and digitally distracted parenting, many of us have never seen emotionally healthy models of communication and conflict resolution.
- This has created an entire generation that lacks the relational skills to go deep and stay together with others over the long haul.

Seam: My point is: We're just too busy, too transient, too distracted, too flakey, and too emotionally immature. And these are just a *few* of the challenges we face in the modern West!

Hinge:

- This is one of a thousand reasons we can't just wing it and hope for the best; we have to live with a high degree of intentionality — we have to *practice* community.

Seam: But here's the thing ...

The deeper problem: Shame

- Even if you do this ... If you find a community and set a time for a weekly meal and put in the hundreds of hours required for friendship and intimacy to grow ...
- There is a far more *ancient* challenge that you will still face; one that predates the modern world by millennia; it goes all the way back to the Garden — *shame*.
- People struggled with relationships long before the iPhone.
- Many of the challenges I just named — busyness, transience, etc. — are just symptoms; the disease itself is much deeper.
- Genesis tells us that we were created in the “image and likeness” of a relational God. Meaning: We were created *by* community *for* community.
- But the story doesn't end in Genesis 2. In Genesis 3 we read of what theologians call “the fall.”
- And the literary seam between the two stories is this line, from Genesis 2v25:
 - “Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame”.
- This is the author's one-line summary of the state of humanity before sin — two people,

utterly naked before each other, with no shame.

- The Hebrew Bible scholar Carissa Quinn interprets Genesis 2 this way: “The ideal picture is one of relational safety, vulnerability, trust and acceptance of the other.”²
- But this all goes away with sin, and in its place comes shame.
- Think of how fascinating it is that the author of Genesis chose *that* word to name the fallout of sin — “shame.”
- He could have said they felt no fear, or no anger, or no hate, or no sadness, or no despair.
- But instead, he says no *shame*.
- Meaning, on the flip side: “shame” is the author’s one-word summary of all that comes *after* the fall.
- Shame isn’t just feeling bad about yourself; it’s a deep fear that you are unloveable; that if people knew who you really were, they would reject you and cast you out. That’s why it feels so scary; our fear isn’t just that we’re bad, it’s that we could lose connection to those we love.
- And this fear isn’t based on a fantasy, but on the reality of sin.
- Once sin enters the human story, the result is ruined relationships.
- Sin is primarily about relational rupture, and not only does sin disconnect Adam and Eve from God, it also disconnects them from *each other*.
 - First Adam and Eve blame each other.
 - Out of that broken marriage, their children, Cain and Abel, fight and kill each other.
 - From there it spills beyond the family to the wider society.
- We often hear this as a story about sin, and it is; but it’s also a story about sin’s shadow, *shame*.
- What’s the first thing Adam and Eve do after they sin? They make coverings for themselves to hide their nakedness, from God and from each other. Instead of moving *toward* God, they move *away*.
- This is a vivid metaphor for shame.
- Sin is what causes us to reject another person, but shame over our own sin is what causes *us* to hide from *them* out of fear they will reject *us*.
- Shame is a *disconnecter*; it makes us hide from each other, blame each other, wound each

other. It makes us hide from God. It even makes us hide from ourselves.

- Shame is not only the *byproduct* of sin; it's often the cause.
- Many of us don't realize how much of our dysfunctional behavior in relationships is caused by shame.
- We constantly self-sabotage our genuine desires for love and intimacy.
- Psychologists call this "self-betrayal," the way we provoke in others the very behavior we hate.
- As a dad, I want to be warm, wise, and forgiving. I want my kids to be open with me, honest, and transparent. I want to be the person they come to when they mess up. Yet I find myself getting emotionally upset and becoming critical and controlling; I watch them wall up before my eyes!
- We can call it self-betrayal.
- But it's shame, our ancient enemy, wreaking havoc yet again.

Seam: But there is "good news."

Turn: Turn in your Bibles to Romans 7 ...

- After writing about what psychologists call now self-betrayal, the way that shame causes us to do the very thing we don't want to do, *and not do the very thing we do want to do*, Paul writes this ...

Romans 7:

So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7v21-25).

- Next line, chapter 8 verse 1 ...

Therefore, there is now no condemnation [another way of translating that is: there is now no shame] for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.

This is the Gospel, or good news:

- Jesus the Messiah has come to set us free from sin *and* its corollary of shame, to *reconnect* us to God *and* to each other in a thick bond of love.
- Through Jesus' coming, his life and teaching and Way, his death and burial and resurrection, his ascension to the Father's side to lead the world into a new future, and the pouring out of his Spirit upon his followers, freely giving us grace to be and do all we were made to be and do, we can live in restored relationships with God and each other.

Seam: But this raises the question, how?

How?

- It sounds nice and pious to say that Jesus is the answer to the problem of sin and shame.
- But many of us love Jesus deeply, and have been following him for years, yet we still struggle with sin.
- We hear "There is now no condemnation," yet we still *feel* shame.
- Our parents couldn't even stay married; our community group couldn't stay together; our pastor couldn't stay faithful.
- How does the gospel of Jesus become a reality not just in our minds but in our bodies?

Confession:

- Well, anyone who tells you the answer to that question is simple is likely selling you a line.
- The wound of sin goes deep, and it is not easily healed.
- Relationships expose the raw edges of our souls, where *all* of us are in process.
- Through living in community, God gently but persistently unearths layer after layer of our shadow sides.
- Painful parts of ourselves, that we would much rather not face, are exposed.
- In many ways, this is the spiritual journey that we walk one step and one layer at a time.
- But while there is no silver bullet to the problem of sin and shame that will set you free in a moment, *there is a practice* that goes all the way back to Jesus' earliest followers.
- This practice is so powerful and liberating, that for over a thousand years it was considered *essential* to the Church of Jesus and a key part of what it meant to be a part of a community of Jesus.

- Yet strangely, it's been lost in recent church history.
- It's called: the discipline of confession.
- The first Christian theologians often likened sin to a disease of the soul, based on Jesus' famous line in Mark 2v17:
 - "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."
- For centuries, pastors were called "doctors of the soul," because their job was, like a doctor, to help the soul heal from sin and shame.
- And confession has long been one of the most effective therapies.
- There's a saying in Alcoholics Anonymous: "We are only as sick as the secrets we keep."
- The same is true in the spiritual life.
- For many of us, the beginning of our healing is to tell our secrets, or in the language of Scripture, to "confess our sins."
- Contrary to what a lot of people think, confession is not about beating yourself up or telling all the bad things you did that week to a priest to get off the hook.
- It's about courageously naming your wickedness and your woundedness — the sin done *by* you, *to* you, and *around* you — in the presence of loving community who are walking with you on the long journey to wholeness.
- It's not just about the confession of sin; but also the confession of God's love for us *in* our sin.
- It's not just about saying how you messed up; it's about voicing who you *are*, and who you are called to become in Christ ... *and* hearing another trusted friend *tell you who you are*, by voicing God's love and mercy over you: "In Christ's name, you are forgiven."
- It's about coming out of the shadow and into the light and leaving behind not only sin, but *shame*.
- And confession is *our* part in the healing of sin.
- You have to go to the doctor and tell them what's wrong in order for them to heal you.
- And when it comes to the deeper sins, where we are most in bondage, that's often all we *can* do — set our sin before Jesus. Only he can heal and set us free.
- *His* job is to deal with our sin; *our* job is to confess our secrets.

- But the way he does this is usually through relationships. Which is why we don't just confess to God; we confess to our community.
- The way many modern Protestant Christians practice confession is by saying sorry to God in their minds at church or in prayer. Not out loud to a trusted brother or sister.
- And that's not bad, but *true* confession is more like sitting down at an AA meeting and saying, "Hi, my name is John Mark, and I'm an alcoholic. Last week I ..."
- It's *naming* your sin to loving *community*.
- The writer James says this in the NT:
 - "Confess your sins *to one another* and pray for one another, that you may be healed." (James 5v16)³
 - Notice his word choice:
 - "To one another," not just to God in the privacy of your mind.
 - "That you may be *healed*," not just forgiven, but healed!
 - Because confession is ultimately about experiencing the love of God through another person in such a way that what caused the sin in the first place is made whole.
 - God often waits to heal the deepest parts of our wounded selves until we share it with another.
- For this reason, for centuries, and to this day in many streams of the church, serious Christians would identify a "confessor."
- This could be a pastor or priest, or a spiritual director or therapist, or it could just be a trusted friend.
- What the ancient Celtic Christians called an *anam cara*, a soul friend.
- One of my mentors calls his best friend of thirty years, every single morning at 6:45 for a 15-minute chat, where they confess any sins from the day before and pray for the day ahead.
- That's a confessor.
- I'm in a three-person discipleship band, where we meet regularly to unburden our souls and confess our sins to each other.
- And while this may sound terrifying at first, it is a crucial practice for all those who want to make genuine progress in the spiritual life.

- As they also say in AA: “I get drunk, but we stay sober.”

Seam: And not only does the discipline of confession set our hearts free from sin and shame, it reconnects us to God *and to each other*. Sin and shame are the great disconnectors; they create distance between us and God and between us and each other; confession is the great *reconnector*.

Summary:

- So, living in community in our time of radical individualism is not easy.
- We face all sorts of challenges — busyness, transience, flakiness, and more.
- But the underlying problem we face is *shame*.
- And it is through the discipline of confession that we come out of the shadows into the light where we can be healed.
- For years, we lived in the Pacific Northwest, where, due to all the rain and moody weather, toxic mold is a huge problem in a lot of houses. It grows invisibly in the dark and makes entire families sick.
- But it cannot survive in the light. Sunlight is the most potent disinfectant. It purifies.
- You find mold in basements and dark corners, not in the living room in front of a large window facing the sun.
- Shame is like that toxic mold, festering in the hidden places of our heart; but when we bring it out into the light through confession, we are made whole.

Seam: Again, there is no easy three-step formula to overcome sin, but there is a way: the way of confession and community.

Ending:

- We can't live without sin, not 100%.
- But we *can* live without shame.
- You can come out of hiding; you can know and be known.
- You can reconnect to God and others.
- And in doing so, we can increasingly, year over year, become more and more free of sin and healthy in our whole beings.

- Simply through being loved as we actually are, with all our shadows.
- This is what we most deeply crave.
- As Tim Keller has said:
 - “To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God.”⁴
- So the question is not just, “Will you love? Will you get into community and love other people?”
- But, “Will you let yourself *be* loved ...
- ... in community?”

Notes

1. Hall, Jeffrey A. “How Many Hours Does It Take to Make a Friend?” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 36.4 (2019): 1278–96.
2. *Connected* (and is also referenced in David Kim's book, *Made to Belong*)
3. James 5v16 (ESV)
4. *The Meaning of Marriage*