

Confession & Repentance

If you've got a bible, go ahead and **turn with me** to **1 John 1**. We're going to briefly stop by that passage we just read in *Revelation*, but we'll eventually land there in 1 John. If you have trouble finding it, it's almost at the very back, right before 2 John, 3 John—you're welcome for that. Believe it or not, if you're *newer* to the bible, 1 John is actually not the first book *named* John in the bible, believe it or not. We did it that way just to confuse you.

If you're new to our *church*, you've hopped in with us on **week 3 of a series** we've called *In Knoxville as it is in Heaven*. Basically, we've been talking about how God's ultimate desire is not just to evacuate us all up into heaven one way when we die, but how ultimately his desire is to bring *heaven* to *earth*. And how he wants to do that one day, completely in the *future*, but also how he wants to use *us* to do that *incrementally* in the here and now.

So we're spending **the rest of the series** talking about a number of different ways that we participate with him in that. **Each week**, we're taking a glimpse at one *aspect* of what heaven will *be like*, and then talking about how we "*practice*" for that reality in the here and now. Last week, we talked about the idea of *intimacy* with God: how one day, we will experience perfect, unbroken, *uninterrupted* intimacy with him, so we practice for that day by learning how to experience intimacy with him now.

This week, we're going to look at the *twin* practices of **confession and repentance**. **Now**, if you haven't spent much time around *church*, I'm aware that there may not be two words in the English vocabulary that sound more churchy and stuffy and fundamentalist than those. Maybe just by me bringing them up, you're expecting me to find a sandwich board sign and a bullhorn and go yell at people on Market Square. And I get that. But it's unfortunate that those words have gained that sort of reputation. Because in *reality*, there may not be two more beautiful words in the world for a follower of Jesus.

It's kind of like this. There is a relatively new restaurant on Gay Street called **Kopita**; anybody been there? Yeah, it used to be two different restaurants (Kopita Meat and Kopita Vegan), but they've now combined them into one. And it's about the most authentic Mediterranean food I've ever had—shwarma, pita and hummus, falafel—the whole nine. Really, really good spot to eat. They have what *I think* is the best *falafel* in Knoxville. Knoxville's got a few places with good falafel. But I think theirs is the best. It's always freshly cooked, nice and crispy on the outside, soft on the inside—it's just perfect.

But do you know **who doesn't think** they have the best falafel in Knoxville? My friend William Bitterman, who's a member here at City Church. He thinks that their falafel tastes like—and I'm quoting *directly* here—"trash." He thinks it tastes like *trash*. Which is just an offensively wrong opinion. You can say you don't like it, or that you don't think it's the best falafel in town, and that's fine. It's *wrong*, but it's fine to say. You're allowed to have a difference of opinion. But to say it tastes like *trash* is just verifiably incorrect. It's almost like something is wrong with his *taste buds* or something. Because he's saying that something absolutely *wonderful* is *repulsive* to him.

Now the **reason I tell you that** story about falafel—aside from just wanting to make fun of William—is because I wonder if something similar hasn't happened with our gut feelings towards the words "confession" and "repentance." **I wonder if our "taste buds" aren't actually off, when it comes to those two words. I wonder if we haven't decided that two of the most beautiful, most life-giving ideas in the world are somehow bad for us.** And I want to see if we can change some of that this morning. Sound good? **Are you all just thinking about falafel now? That's my fault...**

Okay. Let's **start off with our glimpse of heaven** from the Revelation passage we heard just a few minutes ago. In that passage, probably a couple things stuck out. First, there was a lot of **"light" imagery**, right? It said that in the new heaven and new earth, there won't be a sun or a moon, because we won't need them for light. But that *instead*, *God himself* will be the light. That's the *first* idea. And *then* it said that nothing that is *impure* will ever be there, nor anything that is "shameful or deceitful."

Now those **may seem like very different ideas** from one another, but really they're two ways of saying the same thing. In the bible, really cover-to-cover, *light* is a metaphor for God, or God's presence; while *darkness* is a metaphor for sin, or the shame *associated* with sin. **We see this in the opening pages of Genesis. We see it in Isaiah when it starts talking about the arrival of the Messiah. We see it in the beginning of the gospel of John. We see it lots of places.** So when the passage talked about God being *light*, and how nothing *impure* will ever be present, those are actually just explaining the same idea, two different ways.

They mean that one day, we will experience a reality where sin is no longer present in our world at all. Which, in the context of this series, might make you think, "okay, **how do we practice for that** aspect of heaven?" Because if *you're* looking at the same world *I'm* looking at, there seems to be plenty of sin and brokenness and injustice

to go around. Right? Like it doesn't seem a sin-free existence is in the cards for us anytime soon. Until Jesus comes back, we aren't going to experience a sin-free *environment* or a sin-free *world*.

But we *can practice* for that day by **identifying and removing sin** from our own *hearts and minds*. And according to the Scriptures, *that happens through a process called confession and repentance*. So let's kick things off with some *definitions*. What do we mean when we talk about *confession* and *repentance*? We could probably define them a few *different* ways, but here's the definitions we'll work from this morning:

Confession: being honest about your sin

Repentance: turning from your sin, and turning towards Jesus

This morning, we're going to spend the **first half** or so of the teaching on confession, and the **second half** or so on repentance. So let's start with confession.

Confession

One of the clearest places in the bible that unpacks *confession* is **1 John 1**. In theory, you're already there and wondering why we haven't read it yet, so let's pick it up in v. 5:

*[5] This is the message we have heard from him (Jesus) and declare to you: **God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.** (I.e. what we just heard from our Revelation passage: God = light, sin = darkness. Which means, v. 6... [6] If we **claim to have fellowship** (or relationship or intimacy or oneness) **with [God] and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth.***

So if you think about it, that **logic checks out**, right? If God is light, and in him *is no* darkness, then it would follow that anybody who claims to have fellowship with him while walking in darkness...would have to be *lying*. Because that's not possible. "But," continuing in v. 7...

*[7] **But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another** (more on that in a few), **and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.** [8] If we claim to be **without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.** [9] If we **confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.***

The other *option*, John says, is that we choose to “walk in the light.” Which he clarifies next, refers to the act of *confession*: being honest about our sin. Now, notice that we are only given two options. Option A: walk in the darkness by continuing in sin and not confessing it, or option B: confess your sin to God and to others. There is no option C. There’s not a third category where, like, we *know* that we *have* sin, and we understand that about ourselves, but we’re kind of a private person, and we don’t really like to focus on the negative, or air our dirty laundry, so we kinda just keep it to ourselves and try to do better. *That* response, according to the passage, would put you squarely in option A: walking in darkness. **The way to be sure we are walking in the light of God’s presence and grace is to confess our sin.**

But also notice *why* it says we confess our sin. It says **we confess because we know when we do, the blood of Jesus purifies us from all sin.** There’s that language again: sin makes us *impure*, while Jesus through his blood makes us *pure*. And when we confess, that process does its work. “God,” it says, is “faithful and just and will *forgive* us, as well as *purify* us.”

So here’s the idea: **the good news about Jesus has already outed you and I as sinners**, right? We shouldn’t have any pretense about that at *all*. **By deciding to follow Jesus and accepting his free gift of grace towards us, we are inherently acknowledging that a relationship with God is not something we were able to accomplish on our own.** That’s *assumed* in the whole thing. It’s kind of the main part of *it*. **Romans 3** puts it this way—if you’ve been around church very long, you’ve probably heard this verse before:

...for all (how many? All. All...) have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

That’s **the reality for all followers** of Jesus. **If you were hoping that you could follow Jesus and maintain the illusion that you are a perfect person, I regret to inform you that you’ve made a huge mistake.** Just by coming to Jesus, we are readily admitting that we are sinful, broken, flawed human beings—who are in need of incredible amounts of grace and mercy from God. That’s the *basis* of our entire relationship with Jesus.

Now, **once you realize that**, all **confession** is, is *owning* that reality about you. It's simply acknowledging the truth about you: that you are a sinner. Now, it's important to mention that you're not "*only* a sinner"—you're also a human being that was made in the image and likeness of God. But something called *sin* has infiltrated your heart and mind, and done *damage to the* image of God in you and in others. Which makes you and I, and everyone in this room, in need of God's mercy and transformation. So **when we confess, we are simply intentionally acknowledging our need for God's mercy in specific arenas of our life**. Does that make sense?

But that does **raise the practical question, "acknowledging it to *who (whom?)*?"** Who are we *confessing to*? Because if you grew up in a Catholic tradition, the answer to that question is "to the priest," right? You go into a confession booth and you tell the priest what you did wrong, and then that priest tells you what you need to do to *absolve yourself of that sin, to be forgiven*. But you may have noticed there are no confession booths in our building, and neither I nor the other leaders are itching to be the main people that you confess your sin to. So who does this happen with, exactly?

Biblically, the **answer to that is twofold: we confess to God**, and to **each other. It's both/and**. We confess our sin to *God*, because all sin is first and foremost against him. So we go to God in prayer and we say "God I've sinned against you in *these* ways..." If you want an example of what it looks like, Psalm 51 is a great example of a prayer of *confession*. So we confess to God.

But we also confess to *each* other. We get this from passages like James 5, where it says "*confess your sins to one another, that you may be healed*." But we **also** get it from passages like **1 John**. I don't know if you noticed, but that passage said when we confess our sin, we have fellowship "*with one another*" as a result. Wasn't that interesting? The idea there is that when we confess to one another, we see *ourselves* more accurately, *and one another* more accurately. When we are honest with others about our sin, we can no longer in good faith situate ourselves over and above them in self-righteousness. Because they know the truth about us.

Which means **when we confess, it not just restores right relationship with God; it also restores right relationship with one another**. If you want to see a community *kill* self-righteousness in their midst, watch what happens when every person regularly confesses their sin. You'll find that self-righteousness and spiritual pride just start to immediately dissolve in the midst of that community. And you'll find a culture of grace start to take root in the midst of it. That's the *fruit of confession*.

Now, it is **worth noting** that **biblically, confession is just step one** of a **two-step process**. Confession is not an *end in itself*, but rather a means *to an end*. Because on its *own*, confession doesn't actually change us. **I can go around confessing my sin all day long, and still remain stuck in the same sin afterwards. Confession is the first step towards freedom, but it doesn't accomplish freedom on its own.** (We also need *repentance*.)

Not to mention that if we're not careful, **we can participate in a version of confession without even being followers of Jesus**. We can do it *without* being motivated by the gospel at all. Here's why: right now, our society *values* things like *openness*, and *honesty*, and *vulnerability*—and *authenticity*, right? And confession, on the surface, can look like just one of *those* things. **So you could be in one of our LifeGroups right now, and just be an incredibly open and vulnerable person—and not necessarily be following Jesus.** Because confession at least runs *parallel* to several things that our culture inherently values. What runs in the complete *opposite* direction of things our culture values is actually...

Repentance

In our society, repentance is swimming directly *upstream*, *against* the current. Because remember: *repentance* is turning from your sin, and turning towards Jesus. Which means to a lot of people, **feels like denying parts of who you are**—or at the bare minimum, things that you really, really like and want. And in the society that you and I live in, *that* is basically *heresy*.

One of our culture's *highest values* is to **"be true to yourself."** We hear that message dozens of times each and every week. It's in the shows we watch, the books we read, the ads we see, and nearly everywhere else. "Being true to yourself" is about the only universally agreed upon doctrine in our society. So the moment you start talking about something like *repentance*, which is quite literally *denying* yourself, you will often be accused of saying something harmful and oppressive and cruel to whoever you're saying it to.

But **let's talk about that mantra**, "be true to yourself." Just for fun, does anybody know where that phrase *originated*? Any *English* majors in the room? It actually first appeared in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. "To thine own self be true." But do you know *who delivers* that line in the play? It's a character named *Polonius*, who is essentially the *village idiot*. He's

the butt of every joke, he makes horrible decision after horrible decision. And in the part of the play where he delivers that *line*, it is in the context of completely *tone-deaf advice* that he is giving his kids. So there you have it: **modern American society has gone all in on the advice of the fool from a fictional play.** I'll let you draw all the conclusions you want to draw from that.

But on a more serious note, “**be true to yourself**” is **not just bad advice**—it’s actually **nonsensical**. For instance, what *version* of my “self” should I be true to? Should I be true to the version of myself that wants to have fast food and soda for every single meal, or should I be true to the version of myself that wants to live *past* the age of 45? Seems like at some point, I’m going to have to *suppress one* of those selves. Should I be true to the version of myself that wants to ridicule and shame every person who shares stupid opinions on the internet? Or should I be true to the version of myself that wants to have friends? Gotta deny one of *those* selves at some point, too.

So this is the real reason that “be true to yourself” is such **royally bad advice**: it actually gets you *nowhere*. At any moment, every one of us is a complex *collection* of selves that have *dozens* of conflicting desires from *one another*. So “be true to yourself” doesn’t actually give us *any practical help* on how to live our lives. So followers of Jesus live by a *better* mantra, and it’s this: **be true to your new self**. Look on the screen with me at Ephesians 4:22-24:

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

Through Jesus’ death and resurrection, God has given you a new self, a new life, a new hope, and a new future. You have been granted a new self that looks *different* than the old one. That fights for what is true and good and beautiful in yourself and in the world. And **repentance is choosing to put off—to cast aside—our old selves, over and over again, and to choose instead the new self that God has made possible through Jesus.** *Repentance* is the process of choosing, time and time again, to *forsake* our sin and turn *towards* Jesus.

So let’s get practical for a bit before we’re done about **how to repent**. When it comes to *repentance*, it can be a little more “choose-your-own-adventure,” if you will. **There are several different methods for going about repentance, and you might want to use**

one of them, or two of them, or *all* of them depending on what it is you're repenting of. So I'll just give you the big ideas, and trust the Holy Spirit in you and in other followers of Jesus to help you discern which ones would be most helpful. First...

Elimination

One strategy for repentance is what we might call *elimination*. There are some temptations that are so strong and so constant, that one of the best strategies, at least in the short-term, is to just completely *remove* the temptations from your view. This is what Paul is getting at when he tells people at one point to "*flee from sexual immorality.*" Sometimes, the best thing to do is just to get as far away from your particular temptation as possible. To do your best to *eliminate* those things from your immediate surroundings, or to *remove* yourself from those situations.

So I know people who have traded in their smartphone and gotten a "dumb phone," either because their smartphone was a temptation when it came to looking at porn, or just because the constant apps and information on their phone was distracting them from things that mattered in life. I know people that have deleted the Instagram app off their phone, because they started realizing that it was making them constantly discontent at the stuff they owned or the type of life they led, and making them constantly *envy* other people.

I know people that have gone through their pantry and taken out any and all junk food, because they knew overeating was a temptation for them. I know people that have personally decided to not go to places that serve beer or wine because they noticed a regular tendency in them towards drinking more than they should. All of these things are examples of people using *elimination* as a strategy for repentance. Just getting their particular temptations as far away from them as possible to eliminate *unnecessary* contact with them. Sometimes that's a great method for repentance. But then there's also...

Accountability

The reality is that there are some temptations you *can't* eliminate from your life. If your tendency is to obsess over work or overwork, it's not like you can not have a *job*. If your tendency is to obsess over your kids' environment or over keeping them safe, it's not like you can just ship your kids off somewhere forever so you don't struggle with it anymore. Sometimes you *can't* eliminate.

So **in that setting, accountability** might be the more practical option. It might look like having a friend or two or three that you let into the specifics of the particular temptation, so that they can regularly ask you questions and check in with you about it. **If it's work, letting somebody know who cares about you that you're obsessing over work, and giving them questions to ask you and ways to help you fight against it. If it's control when it comes to your kids,** letting somebody know so that they can check in with you and remind you of who God is in the midst of it all. **If it's gossiping about other people,** telling somebody who's around you a lot that that is a tendency, so that they can hold you accountable if you start gossiping about someone.

Sometimes accountability is an equally good way (or the *only* way) to walk in repentance in certain areas. And lastly, there's...

Replacement

Finally, sometimes a great step of repentance is to replace whatever your particular tendencies are **with something better.** Because remember: the goal of following Jesus isn't just to remove sin from your life, but also to *add righteousness to your life.* It's not just to eliminate *vices* but to cultivate *virtues.* So sometimes, repentance looks like replacing the bad in your life with good.

So the **next time you're tempted** to objectify another person, maybe you could let that be a prompt to look the other way and take a second to remember that that person is an image bearer of God with a heart and a soul and a story and a history, and maybe take a second to pray for them as you remember that. The next time you're tempted to **spend money** on something you don't need, you could choose not to do that, but instead find a way to use that exact amount of money to bless someone else with something *they do* need. ~~Again, if it's gossip, maybe instead of saying something negative about a person, you look for a way to praise something about them.~~ Sometimes, the best way to repent is to *replace.* To replace temptations to sin with opportunities to pursue what is good and right and beautiful and just in the world.

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So **elimination, accountability, and replacement.** **Three different methods to practically help us turn from our sin, and practically turn toward Jesus.** And like I said, it's going to take some wisdom on your part, some guidance from the Holy Spirit, and some counsel from other followers of Jesus to help you discern whether one of those or all of those are needed in various scenarios. But hopefully that at least gives us some steps to think on.

Now, **last thing:** there's a good chance that when you do any of these three things, it's going to feel **unnatural** at first. It's going to feel—to use some buzzwords—*fake* or *inauthentic*. But we have to remember that **as followers of Jesus, there is a much higher objective than just being true to ourselves. There's being true to our new selves.** There's aligning ourselves with the kingdom of Jesus who invites us out of our sin and into his grace. Out of the darkness, and into the light. And through that, us learning to live a little bit less like earth and a little bit more like heaven.

And that's what we're after. Let's pray.