

Summer Sermon Series
WORSHIP THE LORD! An Inside Look At How & Why We Worship
Week 3: CONFESSION & ABSOLUTION

Come Clean!

Dear Friends in Christ,

It's a strange thing. It's a strange thing we Lutherans do at the start of each service...every Sunday...all year long, strange to those of other denominations and faiths. Immediately following the Invocation, the call to order, the acknowledgment that we are here to worship the Triune God, we launch into the Confession of Sins...a public, corporate confession of sins each service, every Sunday.

Is it just that we Lutherans are SO SINFUL that we insist on beginning each Sunday worship service with a confession? Or are we particularly 'hung up' with the idea of sin? In the current issue of our Wisconsin Synod periodical *Worship the Lord*, the author of the lead article says, "Let's face it: we Lutherans are simply different from many of the "popular" churches in town...Our sermons, packed with objective justification aren't welcome in Reformed pulpits. Our corporate confession of sin and pronouncement of absolution makes many churchgoers shudder." Now, I was watching a few minutes ago as we read responsively the portions of page one in today's bulletin which are printed in blue. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I really didn't see any of you shudder.

But I think I know what the author is talking about. It's a popular sentiment today that church should be a happy place, a "cool" place, a place where you hear only good things, a place where you hear things that make you feel good. "We don't want to make people feel bad about themselves," church leaders say. "We just want to encourage people. We want to uplift people. We want to make people feel better about themselves." Well, starting the service with talk about sin, with a confession of sins doesn't seem like something that's going to make you feel real good about yourself...so why do we do it?

This summer sermon series, *Worship The Lord*, is subtitled "An Inside Look At How & Why We Worship." So today we are going to see why in the world our Sunday services start with a confession of sins and an absolution. You will see:

1. The Purpose of Confession, and
2. The Power of Absolution.

Our text is **1 John 1:8-9**

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.*

1. The Purpose of Confession

You know folks, if the truth were known, I don't really want you leaving here today feeling bad about yourselves. I want you to be uplifted. I want you to be encouraged. I want you, as a child of God, as a believer in Jesus to "feel good about yourself" but for the right reasons. And I don't want you to gloss over or ignore something very serious, and that something is sin.

Sin is a very powerful and a very dangerous thing. Did you realize that sin is the one thing that can separate you from God. Sin, left untreated, can separate you from God not only in this life, but also into eternity. And sin is something that affects us all. Verse 8, *If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.* If you say that there is no sin in your life you are self-deluded and you're a liar. If you say, "I'm not a sinner!" The Bible says, "You're a self-deluded liar!" Why, because sin is present in everybody's life. The Bible says you're born sinful and you daily sin much, every day, right up to the day of your death.

You aren't really going to understand how great God is until you know the magnitude and multitude of your sins. If we as your pastors don't talk about sin, if we don't talk about the reality of sin in your life, the destructive power of sin in your life, the eternal consequences of sin, then we aren't doing our job. If we don't make you realize that sin is every single act, every single word, every single thought that is in the least bit out of line with God's will, then we aren't doing our job.

You may think, "I'm not such a bad person. I've never killed anybody." But you said to your spouse just the other day, "I still hate that guy who got the promotion back in 1998! If it weren't for him we'd have it a whole lot easier today." The Bible says, "*Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer...*" 1 John 3:15. Hatred is murder of the heart, a terrible sin. Not only is adultery a sin, but so also are lustful thoughts. Not only is it wrong to lie about someone, but so also is it a sin to gossip. Not only is stealing wrong, but even wanting something you shouldn't have is a sin. Envy, greed, pride, gluttony, anger, worry, selfishness all of these things are contrary to God's will...they are sins. And sin, left untreated, unforgiven, can separate you from God.

The first purpose of confession is **sin-awareness**. It is an acknowledgment not only that there is sin in your life, but it is also an acknowledgment of the magnitude of sin and the multitude of sins in your life. Confession is admitting the wrong, feeling sorrow for the wrong, and taking responsibility for wrong.

The second purpose of confession is **humility**. What better way to begin a service of worship and praise to God than humbly coming before him admitting that you are a sinner in need of his salvation? What better way to show honor and respect for his greatness and glory than admitting you are not great and you have done some inglorious things? Confession humbles you. It reminds you just who you are and just who God is.

The third purpose of confession is **God-awareness**. All sins, every single sin is committed either directly or indirectly against God. Remember what the young man Joseph said when he refused to commit adultery with Potiphar's wife? "*How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?*" Of course it would have been a sin against Potiphar and a sin against the laws of Egypt, but first and foremost it would have been a sin against God. Every sin is ultimately a sin against God.

Confession is admitting wrong to the one you've sinned against. Confession is admitting wrong to the one (the only one) who has the power to forgive sin.

The fourth purpose of confession is **to unburden the soul**. King David knew what it was like to have a soul burdened with guilt. Listen to his words from our first lesson today. ² *Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him...* ³ *When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.* ⁴ *For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.* (His conscience was tormenting him.) ⁵ *Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD"—and you forgave the guilt of my sin.* What an immediate unburdening of the conscience! Can't you just hear David's sigh of relief?

Once there was a little boy visiting his grandparents on their farm. He was given a slingshot to play with out in the woods. He practiced in the woods, but he could never hit the target. Getting a little discouraged, he headed back for dinner. As he was walking back he saw Grandma's pet duck. Just out of impulse, he let a stone fly with the slingshot. He hit the duck square in the head and killed it. He was shocked and grieved. In a panic he hid the dead duck behind the wood pile, only to see his sister watching. Sally had seen it all, but she said nothing.

After lunch the next day Grandma said, "Sally, let's wash the dishes." But Sally said, "Grandma, Johnny told me he wanted to help in the kitchen." Then she whispered to Johnny, "Remember the duck?" So Johnny did the dishes. Later that day, Grandpa asked if the children wanted to go fishing and Grandma said, "I'm sorry but I need Sally to help make supper." Sally just smiled and said, "Well, that's alright because Johnny told me he wanted to help." She whispered again, "Remember the duck?" So Sally went fishing and Johnny stayed to help Grandma. After several days of Johnny doing both his chores and Sally's, he finally couldn't stand it any longer. He went to Grandma and confessed that he had killed the duck. Grandma knelt down, gave him a hug and said, "Johnny, I know. You see I was standing at the window and I saw the whole thing, but because I love you, I forgave you. I was just wondering how long you would let Sally make a slave of you.

Whatever is in your past, whatever you have done, no matter how long ago, God was standing at the window and he saw the whole thing. He has seen your whole life and he knows the guilt you bear. He wants you to know that confession is the way to unburden that guilt and because of your faith in Jesus, you are forgiven.

2. The Power of Absolution.

At the start of each service...every Sunday...all year long...whenever there is a public, corporate confession, it is always followed by the Absolution. To absolve someone is to declare that person free from guilt. 1 John 1:9, *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*

God himself has told us in his word that he is a just and holy God who hates sin, a just and holy God who must punish sin. And yet he says in Romans 8:1...*there is now no condemnation* (no punishment) *for those who are in Christ Jesus...* How can there be punishment for every one of your sins, but no punishment for you? The answer is found in Jesus. Isaiah the prophet said it so well. *But he was*

pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, (that's where your punishment went!) and by his wounds we are healed.

It is because of the life and death of Jesus that God can forgive sins. Earlier in this first chapter of 1 John we read ⁷...*the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.* The death of Jesus has paid the penalty for sin. All who turn to Jesus in faith as Lord and Savior receive the benefits of his life and death. Ephesians 1:7 *In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins...* This is the simple Gospel message. Through faith in Jesus you have the forgiveness of sins, new life and salvation.

The absolution which we pastor speak to you after your confession is merely a specialized form of Gospel preaching. Absolution applies the message of grace and forgiveness to you in direct response to your confession of sin. Now who are we to stand up here and absolve you? Today's Gospel lesson gives you the answer. In John 20 Jesus gives the gift of the ministry of the keys to believers. ²² *And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."*

The Christian congregation, and the pastors acting in the name of the congregation have the power and the authority to remit sins. Neither the congregation nor the pastors do the actual forgiving, only God can do that. The absolution of the church is based on the absolution of God. The pastors transmit to you the forgiveness of God. For this reason it is as valid and certain in heaven also as if Christ, our dear Lord, dealt with you himself. So absolution is not an empty word, but real forgiveness...God's forgiveness is announced, offered and assured to you.

So, why do we do what we do at the start of each Sunday service? As a believer in Jesus, you live in a state grace, a state of forgiveness. And as a believer, you also live in daily repentance. But on Sunday morning, when you gather in the presence of God for worship and praise, you begin by confessing your inherited and actual sins and asking God to grant you forgiveness because of Jesus' perfect life and innocent death. You do this in humility, for sin-awareness and God-awareness and to unburden your soul.

We pastors respond by announcing your forgiveness, appealing to the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ as the basis of forgiveness. But there's one more part...let's not forget. When you reply with the word 'Amen' you're saying, "Yes, this is true. My confessed and forgiven sins on earth are also pardoned before God in heaven."

Let us pray:

Gracious Lord, Heavenly Father,

We give you thanks for the opportunity to gather with fellow believers and join in worship and praise. To you alone be thanks for the gifts that are ours each service through the Gospel in word and sacrament.

May our public confession of sins always be a heartfelt and sincere confession and not something done in an unthinking way or done mechanically. Help us to receive the true comfort and assurance that you intend for us in the absolution of our sins.

To you alone be all the glory! In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.