



Shaping the Heart

Spiritual Formation & the Christian Life

Because confession and repentance are ongoing marks of every Christ follower, they become a part of our **being** as much or perhaps more so than they are a part of our **doing**. For example, honest is a way of being; truth-telling is a way of doing. As disciplines or habits, the emphasis is on who we are, our moral identity; not so much on what we do, our activity.

Confession

As a social discipline confession occurs in the context of a relationship built on trust and acceptance. In biblical terms, "confession" is agreeing with or speaking the same thing about a matter, a condition, or state of affairs. Confession requires honesty with ourselves and transparency with God (**Ps 139:23-24**). At the ground level, all confession involves not only what we have done or failed to do, but who we are as sinners by nature and by choice. Most importantly, confession is always a means to some other end; namely, repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation.

1. **Above all else, we must personally confess "Jesus is Lord" (Rom 10:9-10; Philip 2:10-11).** This involves at least three things:
 - a. **Confession means change (2 Tim 2:19).** Without confession, there is no repentance and without repentance there is no forgiveness. Confession sows the seeds of change and yields the fruit of repentance resulting in forgiveness that produces reconciliation and a harvest of righteousness.
 - b. **Our confession that "Jesus is Lord" is an ongoing claim we make each and every day.** If Jesus is Lord at salvation, then he remains Lord throughout our sanctification. After all, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (**Heb 13:8**).
 - c. **Confessing "Jesus is Lord" promotes a healthy distance with our brothers and sisters in the faith.** Although Scripture tells us to confess (some of) our sins to others (**Jm 5:16**), we do so because we are serious about change in our lives and need their encouragement and prayer. This does not mean that they rule or govern our moral lives. Why? Because "Jesus is Lord" and he does not share his Lordship with others.
2. **Personal confession displays the virtues of intellectual honesty and biblical humility that results in a restored relationship with God (1 Jn 1:9).** Rather than denying sin is present in our lives (**1 Jn 1:8**), we continually confess (= admit as true) our sinful behaviors asking God for his pardon. Contrary to some teaching, forgiveness is not unconditional (cf. **Ps 32:1-5; Pr 28:13; Mt 6:14-15; and Lk. 17:3** for conditions of forgiveness). *God forgives confessed sin.* Nevertheless, we must not confuse conditions with causes. Our confession does not cause God to forgive; it is the condition he set and one that he enables. Anyone who teaches believers to merely accept God's forgiveness, without meeting the condition of confession and repentance, profoundly misunderstands how a healthy family relationship operates. Jesus insists we must regularly seek God's forgiveness (**Mt 6:12**), which means we regularly must confess and repent.
3. **Public confession nourishes our sense of being loved by others and promotes physical and spiritual healing in the Body of Christ (Jm 5:16).** Because God heals and forgives (**Jm 5:14-15**) we can safely confess our sins to one another. When we do this regularly (note the present tense in vs. 16 suggesting ongoing practice) we experience God's affirming love from our spiritual family and the blessings of restored physical health. In times of physical illness, it is always appropriate to examine our spiritual lives. Unconfessed sin can be a burden to the body as well as to the soul (**Ps 32:3-5**). Although we need not publically confess all sinful behaviors, James likely has in mind those sins that are committed publically (cf. **Mt 5:23-26**), especially those that result in physical brokenness (see **1 Cor 11:30** for an instance of physical sickness tied to sin. Alternatively, not all illness



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or physical brokenness is directly related to personal sin, cf., **Job**; **Jn 9:2-3**. See also **2 Cor 12:7-9** for an instance of God not healing despite confession.).

4. **Public confession promotes intimacy with others and breaks through the artificial, manufactured, and frivolous social arrangements often encountered within church.** Confession makes restitution possible and promotes consonance rather dissonance in relationships (**Heb 12:15**; **Jm 3:14-16**).

Repentance

Repentance is far more than a change of mind; it's a change of masters. It is a determined, intentional response to abandon a lifestyle or behavior dominated by sin. In fact, in several instances Scripture indicates repentance is a necessary condition for forgiveness (**Lk 17:3-4**; **Acts 2:38**; **5:31**; **8:22**). Repentance is not only desired but demanded by God (**Acts 17:30**; **2 Pt 3:9**) and was the beginning and end of Jesus's message (**Mt 4:17**; **Lk 24:46-47**). Repentance involves turning away from everything(one) that rules our lives and turning to God as the sole Lord, Ruler, and Master of all (**Mt 6:24**; **12:30**; **Acts 3:19**; **14:15**; **20:21**; **26:20**; **1 Thess 1:9**).

1. **First and foremost, our ability to repent is not within us but is a gift of God to us.** Therefore, we must seek God to grant it. Not only is repentance unto salvation a gift from God (**Acts 5:31**; **11:18**; **2 Tim 2:25**), it remains a gift after our salvation and we should long for God to ignite within us the holy fire of lamentation.
2. **Like confession, repentance is a social discipline, but can also be a public discipline.** In **Ezra 9:6-10:1**, one man's lamentation and repentance moved an entire nation to repent. In fact, repentance is never a private matter because sin is never solely private, affecting only one. Sin impacts everyone, not just the offender. Why did Ezra include himself in the sins of others (see also **Dan 9:4-19**)? Because Ezra understood there's a kind of moral solidarity in God's people such that when one member fails, all fail (see also **Rom 5:12**). The Western Church (esp. America) could use a healthy dose of this collective accountability.
3. **Getting a theological grip on God's mercy and grace increases our incentive for repentance.** Because the gravity of our sin is always greater than the punishment we receive or the consequences we experience (**Ps 103:10**), our heavenly Father always welcomes us back as the father welcomed the prodigal. Knowing that God is not obligated to forgive and that pardon for sin is never our due, we are moved to repent by the sheer, undeserved grace of God.
4. **Getting a theological grip on God's justice and holiness decreases our need of repentance.** Though God's mercies are evident even in our punishment, they must never be taken for granted. Keeping our eyes on God's moral purity while not losing sight of his riches in mercy and grace reduces our desire for repeat offenses and increases our longings for holiness. Once these theological truths take hold in our hearts and the repeated practice of repentance is embraced, then naturally our sinful behaviors decrease and our holy habits increase.