

Our Strength, His Power

Who We Are and Why It Matters

This study was originally prepared for a Men's Retreat but can easily be adapted to all adults.

Introduction: Our Identity and Our Focus

Our Identity: Crucified with Christ

There's a lot of identity theft going on these days and Satan is the key criminal. As the master deceiver he steals our true identity in Christ weakening our ability to live for Christ. And so it's easy to forget that in every capacity of life we've been given a moral and spiritual identity that goes with us wherever we go. Whether as husband, parent, grandparent, professional, neighbor, or citizen, our essential identity is defined by Christ. Paul proclaims to the Corinthians "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17). The Roman believers are admonished to "clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 13:14). Paul's entire outlook was so consumed with the notion that his life was Christ's life that he could confidently assert "to live is Christ" (Philip 1:21).

No clearer statement on our identity is found in all the New Testament than Paul's words to the Galatian believers, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." (Gal. 2:20). It's interesting to note that Paul uses the perfect tense in the expression "I have been crucified" denoting that his old way of life was not only put to death once but continues to be put to death. He is not merely looking back at a moment in time when Christ died for him but looks to the present as one always being crucified with Christ. That is our identity. That is who we are. *We have been crucified with Christ and we continue to be crucified.* It is no longer we who live but Christ lives in us! Wherever we go and in whatever capacity we function we are to consider ourselves "dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 6:11). That is our essential moral and spiritual identity. Satan, though a master thief, cannot steal that from us. In one way or another every battle fought on the front of spiritual warfare begins and ends with who we are in Christ. And so, with this new identity comes a new outlook; a new perspective on everything.

Our Focus: Looking Up, Leaning Forward

Since our "life is now hidden with Christ" (Col 3:3), we have been given a unique orientation. Scripture is replete with examples of *looking up and leaning forward*. Paul, for instance, writes "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature think this way" (Philip 3:13-15). Hebrews admonishes us to "run with endurance the race that is set before

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us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross” (Heb 12:1-2). *As we look up to Jesus we lean forward in holy living.* John tells us that “we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself [present tense] as he is pure” (1 Jn 3:2-3). *Our certain future must impact our present living.*

In fact, Peter insists that looking up and leaning forward must have a huge impact on our ethical living, because “the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.” (2 Pt 3:10-14). I honestly believe that if our daily lives were governed more by the anxious expectation of our Lord’s return and its implications for our lives, there would be far less psychosis and far more hope-filled believers who anxiously live for Christ. Indeed, it is this forward focus that propels our new life in Christ. It provides a fresh and exciting orientation for living our lives as men of God whose identity is found solely in Christ Jesus.

You see, when Christ enters our lives we are set on a new course. Quite simply, being born again means that something happens to us at the deepest level of our existence. Being born again is the activity of God whereby he radically transforms our moral, mental, emotional, and volitional fiber through the unique power of the Holy Spirit. Our value systems are wholly renovated, not just modified as old impulses and habits are gradually yet certainly replaced with new ones (Gal 5:19-24; Col 2:11-12). In our second birth a spiritual death takes place of the old self or nature (Gal 2:20), which was dominated by sinful desires and activities (Rom 6:1-11), and we are given a new life that is inclined to love and serve the living God who by grace alone through faith alone saved us to a living hope that is never to be corrupted (1 Pt 1:4). Being born again begins this new journey or the process theologians call “sanctification,” which we’ll broadly define as *the gradual but certain transformation of our lives in growing conformity to Christ’s life through*

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the power of the Holy Spirit. It is to this doctrine that I now turn and I pray that we realize our strength on this journey is found solely in God's power.

Setting the Theological Stage: Two Preliminary Considerations

1. God not only declares us righteous (Rom 5:1) but determines to make us so (Philip 1:6). Though sin is present in our lives, we are free from its power over our lives. Consequently, progress in the faith, though gradual, is certain (Rom 5:1-5; 2 Cor 3:18).
2. We are saved *for* good works, not *by* good works or *from* good works. Scripture insists that works are the consequence of not the condition for salvation (Eph 2:8-9; Tit 3:5). Our works are the fruit of an abiding relationship with Christ. They are indicators of authentic faith (Jn 15:1-8; Eph 2:10; Jm 2:14-26), not prerequisites for coming to faith. Works are to faith what heat is to fire. "Christ justified no one whom he does not at the same time sanctify" (John Calvin). Therefore, be assured that God's workmanship in your life *will* be accomplished.

Sanctification: God's Continuing Work

Autonomy or Interdependency? Since becoming a Christian many run around trying to figure out their Christian lives on their own, as if they're autonomous beings who decide, choose, and will for our own sake or for the sake of others. While claiming to be children of God we act like we're orphaned! This disconnect is most often related to a deficient or distorted understanding of the relationship between God's Spirit in us and his requirements for us. Put differently, exactly what is the relationship between God's work in my life and the things he expects me to do? Since becoming a Christian am I left to my own strength for living the Christian life? Has God done his part in my salvation and the rest is up to me? If God assists me in my walk with Christ, why don't I experience his presence and power during difficult times? What exactly does it mean to live a sanctified life? What role do I play and what role does God's Spirit play in living out the Christian life? What does God's Word say about all of this?

First of all, let's narrow down the definition of sanctification: *Sanctification, narrowly defined, is a divine-human operation prompted, enabled, and ultimately completed by God the Holy Spirit* (Philip 2:12-13; 1 Thess 5:23-24; Tit 2:12; Heb 13:20-21). In explaining the doctrine of sanctification, I'm going to say four things that will help us get a biblical picture of this important teaching.

- 1) *Sanctification is not entirely monergistic (involving one agent only) but synergistic (involving two or more agents).* Augustine says it best, "Without God we cannot; without us God will not." In some sense, every command issued to believers to live a holy life assumes we have the capability to carry out that command (2 Cor 7:1; 1 Thess 4:3-4; Heb 12:1; 1 Pt 1:15-16). Yet, Scripture also insists that it is God who, by his grace, initializes and accomplishes everything that is holy in you (1 Cor 15:10; Col 1:28-29). Just as no one can take credit for their salvation, so no one can take credit for their sanctification. The same grace that saved us is the same grace that sanctifies us. At the end of the day, it is God alone who gets the glory for any spiritual progress made, though we are privileged to participate in the process.

Nevertheless, our participation is not entirely passive since we are responsible to live out what God is doing in us. No passage is clearer about this synergistic model than Philip 2:12-13.

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- a) Contextually, this passage has nothing to say about “getting/becoming saved.” Rather, it speaks to us who are saved and how we should walk in our salvation, particularly in the church and in the world (see, Philip 3:16-18 for the latter).
- b) The phrase “working out your salvation” complements “as you have always obeyed.” In other words, Paul is exhorting the Philippians to grow in obedience (“salvation” here is tantamount to obedience). It is a call to obedient living as depicted by a life already saved.
- c) “For it is God . . .” is better translated ‘*because* it is God . . .’ In effect Paul is telling us that we are not left to our own resources. All of God’s gracious activity in salvation, from first to last, is accomplished by him who will “carry it on to completion” (Philip 1:6).
- d) This activity of God is dynamic and ongoing. Paul sees no tension between exhorting us to do something on the one hand, and showing confidence that it is accomplished by God on the other (comp., e.g., Rom 8:12-14 with Rom 8:4).
- e) Obedience is always good for us because it is God’s purpose in us, even though we don’t always know precisely how this might look (cf., Gen 22:1-18; Heb 11:8).
- f) Philip 2:12-13 beautifully and unashamedly illustrates the relationship between God’s sovereignty and human responsibility.
 - i) The text does not say “Work to gain salvation, because God has done his part.” Or, “Perseverance depends entirely on you.” Nor does it say, “Relax! You’re one of the frozen, chosen.” Still, it does not say that God is doing the “work” for us since the command is to us to do something.
 - ii) God works deep in our souls at the level of our will to inspire us with the determination to obey and provides the power to carry out his “good purpose.” We could almost say that the work of sanctification is ultimately and finally accomplished by God, despite our cooperation (Philip 1:6)! That you do occasionally obey demonstrates the reality that God “works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.”
 - iii) Hence, the ability to “work out” our salvation, though *in us*, is not *from us*. A will inclined toward God is always a product of God and never solely the result of self-determination (Jn 15:1-5).
 - iv) Finally, coming to grips with the reality that God is mightily at work in us is anything but a disincentive. The profound significance that God’s sovereign rule over the universe will never be made contingent by the “free” choices of humans should not only inspire us at the intellectual level, but ignite in us a firm resolve at the practical level to live every waking moment for Him who died, has risen, is coming again, and empowers our will for his glory at every turn! *To this we were called. For this we are chosen. By this we are empowered.*
- 2) *Behind every New Testament imperative (i.e., command) is the assumption that God’s Spirit is present in us to empower our will to act.* It is by the Holy Spirit’s strength that we fulfill God’s righteous requirements for holy living (Rom 8:3-4; 13-14). In fact, without the Spirit’s presence one cannot be a genuine believer (Rom 8:9). *The Spirit of God is the presence of*

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God in us and where God's presence is so too is his power to live for him! Christian, do you know who you are?

In Eph 1:13-20 Paul clearly alludes to God's powerful presence in us as we look up and lean forward.

- a) Eph 1:13: Note the progression of events that led up to you receiving the Holy Spirit: "you heard," "believed," "were sealed." One does not receive the Holy Spirit apart from faith. Hearing is necessary but not sufficient. You must believe!
- b) In Eph 1:14 the Holy Spirit is referred to as a "guarantee," or "pledge," like a deposit, earnest money, or "down payment" (see also 2 Cor 1:22; 5:5). God's initial installment of the Spirit guarantees our inheritance of eternal life. Note it is "God" who makes the guarantee, not us. Paul just proclaimed that God is the one responsible for our salvation, not us (see vv. 3-9, "he blessed us," "he chose us," "he predestined us," "he has freely given us," "he lavished on us," "he made known to us"). Moreover, Rom 8:29-30, Tit 3:5-7, and 1 Pt 1:2 insists that it is God who actively pursues us in salvation and I submit to you that God continues to pursue us in our sanctification. We need Christ at every turn subsequent to salvation because "apart from me you can do nothing" claims Jesus (Jn 15:1-5). Praise God that he has put a down payment on our lives guaranteeing our inheritance!
- c) When does this guarantee expire? "Until the redemption of those who are God's possession" (NIV). It is God who is the ultimate Promise Keeper and he has promised you eternity with him! *Christian, do you know who you are?*
- d) In Eph 1:15-19 Paul prays that we may have a kind of "spiritual eyesight" whereby we may know a) the hope of our calling, b) the riches of our inheritance, and c) the "immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe." Specifically, the power Paul has in mind is God's life-giving power that raised Christ from the dead (Eph 1:20; see also Rom. 6:4-8; Philip 3:10). For the Christian, the Resurrection means:
 - i) Death does not have the final word. The resurrection of Christ assures us that we will some day be raised and that something better does indeed lie beyond our existence here on earth (Rom 8:11; 1 Cor 15:54-57; Philip 3:21).
 - ii) Not only is our future resurrection guaranteed, but we will be reunited with our believing loved ones (1 Cor 6:14; 1 Thess 4:14).
 - iii) The world is not merely a product of mundane principles of cause and effect, physical laws of nature, and social interaction between humans, but an open system where miracles of God are not only possible but actual in history!
 - iv) Because Christ rose and ascended to heaven the bestowal of spiritual gifts for authentic Christian service empowers you, the Church, with purpose (Eph 4:7-10). A purpose driven life is a Spirit empowered life!
 - v) Christ's resurrection demonstrates God's power to transform history's greatest injustice (the crucifixion of Christ) into the greatest glory of the entire universe.
- e) Listen to me! The greatest display of God's power was not at creation or in the daily sustaining of the universe. God's power was comprehensively and supernaturally

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displayed in Jesus' resurrection. It showed not only God's ability to reconstitute your material body thus demonstrating his power over your *mortal* life (Rom 8:11), but the resurrection shows God's power to wholly refashion the immaterial order of the universe thus demonstrating his power over your *moral* life as well. This is so important for us to realize that Paul asserts elsewhere regarding Jesus' resurrection "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin...But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 15:54-56). And so Paul can appeal to you "Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits at God's right hand in the place of honor and power. Let heaven fill your thoughts. Do not think only about things down here on earth. For you died when Christ died, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God. And when Christ, who is your real life, is revealed to the whole world, you will share in all his glory" (Col 3:1-4, NLT). The same power that raised Christ from the dead is present in you right now to live the life God has called you to live. *Christian, do you know who you are?*

So far we've seen that 1) sanctification is a divine-human operation prompted, enabled, and ultimately completed by God the Holy Spirit and 2) that sanctification assumes the presence of God's Spirit who empowers you to act in ways that please God.

- 3) *God performs his work of sanctification by empowering our response to his promptings.* That is why it's reasonable for Paul to admonish us to actively put to death the deeds of our flesh (Rom 8:12-14). We no longer live under the tyranny and reign of sin (Rom 6:11-14; 18), since we "have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness" (Rom 6:18). There simply is no such thing as absolute freedom or autonomy for the believer or unbeliever. Every human is either a slave to sin or a slave to righteousness. *Genuine freedom for the Christian is being free from the power and penalty of sin but not from its presence.* The good news is that we are now free to live the life that God intends because of his Spirit in us, whereas before becoming a Christian we were slaves to our sinful natures.
- 4) *Spiritual or Carnal? Why are some "Christians" seemingly disinterested in the spiritual life? Does Scripture support two classes of Christians, carnal and spiritual?* How long must I struggle with sin in my life?
 - a) *Spiritual maturity is always a goal to be achieved, not a quality that we possess (Eph 4:13; Philip 3:12-16).* Maturity is a process *in* you, not a character trait *of* you. Until we are glorified in Christ's presence, we live between two tensions expressed in this phrase: "always aspiring but never attaining." In this life we will always be aware of our sinful tendencies and inclinations (2 Cor 11:29; 1 Tim 1:16; Jm 3:2; 1 Jn 1:8), we will occasionally falter, but regularly seek forgiveness, and gradually grow by the power of God within us. That is the biblical reality of our human condition. We are a work in progress. But, we God's work that *will* progress!
 - b) *It follows, therefore, that while it is true that every believer has been "washed" and "sanctified" (1 Cor 6:11), it is equally true that every believer is characterized by varying degrees of holiness and sinfulness.* Hence, the terms "spiritual" and "carnal" apply in some measure to all of us.

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- c) *Sin, for those truly born of God, is episodal not habitual (1 Jn 1:8-10; 3:9).* In every case where sinful patterns persist, they are always condemned and never condoned (cf., Heb 5:12-14). Therefore, the popular designation “carnal Christian” may be true of genuine believers temporarily but not true of genuine believers indefinitely (1 Jn 2:4). If there is a group of “Christians” who are “carnal/worldly,” Scripture clearly does not support it or see it as the “norm.” It is an aberration from biblical standards (1 Cor. 3:1-4). Although sin never leaves us after regeneration (1 Jn 1:8), we have no excuse for being slaves to sin. What changes after regeneration is our relationship to sin. Before Christ we were dominated by sin, whereas after Christ we are now dominated by the Spirit (Rom 6:6-7, 14, 17-18; 8:12-14; Gal 5:22-24). We have a new master. The Spirit’s domination is not coercive, however, but graciously and lovingly subdues our wills to want to do the things that please God.

The Road to Maturity

Hindrances to Holiness: Before we look at some habits for holiness, let’s look at some things that obstruct our spiritual progress. Can you identify a “sin which so easily entangles” your growth in Christ? Is there a pattern of behavior that needs correction? For your progress in holy living are you willing to be held accountable by a maturing believer? Take approximately 25 minutes and reflect on the following material and honestly confront yourself and ask another to encourage you toward maturity. *Hindrances to holiness include....*

1. While you may have overcome blatant sins and obvious moral weaknesses, there remain attitudes of pride, anger, lust (succumbing to sexual attraction toward others), greed (devotion to material comforts), and indifference to others in need, disgust, jealousy, indulgence (food!), or envy.
2. You may not characterize what it means to be lazy or slothful but you waste a large amount of time watching television, playing golf, shopping, or surfing the Internet rather than reading your Bible, encouraging others in their walk with Christ, service in your church, or being devoted to prayer or the other Disciplines.
3. Spending inordinate amounts of money on yourself, your wife, or your home(s) to bring maximal pleasure, beauty, and convenience without regard to the poor as if to idolize (read “prioritize”) material comfort and pleasure. How much is enough when it comes to your personal pleasure? Do you intentionally set limits on your material comforts so as to avoid indulgence?
4. Lying may be absent from your day-to-day interactions with others, yet you find it all too convenient to withhold some truth that might shed an unfavorable light on yourself that could potentially compromise your social standing (Caveat: Assuming others have the right to know the whole truth and will not misuse a portion of the truth for immoral gain. In other words, not everyone has the right to know everything.).
5. Insisting that your (grand)children or others obey the laws of the land, yet you mindlessly slip into habits of exceeding speed limits, running stop signs, etc. as if no “One” is really watching.
6. Finding it easy to judge others in areas where you’re strong while spending little or no time reflecting on your own weaknesses.

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7. Resisting and/or refusing to listen to the wise, biblical counsel of others but instead reacting in disagreement. When confronted by others do you reflect on what they say *before* you respond?

Can you think of other hindrances to holy living?

Habits for Holiness

1. Maintain a biblical attitude toward the presence of sin in your life by recognizing that moral failure can be a sign of new life in Christ.

"Since becoming a Christian, you have become more and more aware of the sin in your life, and you are discouraged by it. But what discourages you, I see as a sign of life—not the sin itself, but the fact that you are discouraged by it. If you professed faith in Christ and it did not make any difference to your values, personal ethics, and goals, I would begin to wonder if your profession of faith in Christ was spurious (there are certainly instances of spurious faith in the Bible—for instance, John 2:23-25; 8:31ff.).

But if you have come to trust Christ, then growth in Him is always attended by deepening realization that you are not as good as you once thought you were, that the human heart is frighteningly deceptive and capable of astonishing depths of selfishness and evil. As you discover these things about yourself, the objective ground of your assurance must always remain unfalteringly the same: 'if anybody does sin we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One' (1 John 2:1). Let your confidence rest fully in that simple and profound truth.

What you will discover with time is that although you are not as holy as you would like to be or as blameless as you should be, by God's grace you are not what you were. You look back and regret things you have said and thought and done as a Christian; you are embarrassed perhaps by the things you failed to think and say and do. But you also look back and testify with gratitude that because of the grace of God in your life, you are not what you were. And thus, unobtrusively, the subjective grounds of assurance also lend their quiet support."

-- From Letters Along the Way, D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, p. 23.

2. Learn about and exercise the spiritual Disciplines (see <http://www.tmch.net/inperson.htm#sd>).
3. Recognize that whereas Spirit-enabled fruit pertains to character (Gal 5:22-23), Spirit-enabled gifts pertain to service (Rom 12:6-8; 1 Cor 12:8-11; Eph 4:11; 1 Pt 4:11). Set up accountability mechanisms to ensure a measure of progress in both. This includes, but is not limited to...
 - a) Asking a few maturing believers to pray for you, suggest methods of growth to you, and periodically check on your progress
 - b) Writing down what needs changing, then refer to it each day for prayer
 - c) Take seriously the purpose of communion (1 Cor 11:28-32)
4. Yield to the clear teaching of God's Word (1 Pt 2:2-3). Don't rationalize or theorize about sin. Obey God because it's good for you and listen to your spiritual leaders and imitate their faith (Heb 13:17).

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5. Allow for God's discipline to shape your character (Heb 12:5-13).
6. Endure hardships as part of God's means to make you more like Christ (Rom 8:18; Jm 1:2-4).
7. Because righteous living cannot occur in a social vacuum, nurture holy living in Christian community by discovering and implementing your spiritual gift(s) (see, 1 Cor 12:8-28; Rom 12:6-8; Eph 4:11; 1 Pt 4:11).
8. Pursue contentment in relationships, possessions, and circumstances (1 Tim 6:6). Set limits on your personal comforts and be frugal so you are positioned to help those in genuine need and give generously when God has burdened you to do so.

Conclusion

We *are* a different species of humanity. We have a new identity given to us by Christ. Satan cannot steal our identity because real men recognize that real power is found in God's strength. Men who are maturing spiritually are those who intentionally seek to be more like Christ. The more we invest in habits of holiness that reflect his life and his strength the more we realize God's presence and power within us. As we increasingly look up and lean forward we will find God's power to transform our lives and we will say without reservation and with full conviction, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." *Soli Deo gloria!*

Personal Application for Follow-Up

1. In spite of his maturity in the Lord, or his knowledge of the Lord, Paul longed to grow closer and closer to the Lord (Philip 3:10). Read Ps 42:1-2. As a rule, is your daily walk characterized by eagerness to grow closer to Christ? Explain.
2. Read 1 Tim 1:16. Is it evident to those who know you that your life is an example of divine grace and patience?
3. Read 1 Cor 2:1-16; 2 Cor 4:6. Doctrinal knowledge is no guarantee of spiritual comprehension. One could explain the entire Bible and still fall short of spiritual wisdom and understanding (1 Cor 13:2). When hearing a sermon or reading the Bible, are you listening for what God is telling you?
4. Read Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18; Philip 3:12-14; Heb 12:2-3; 1 Pt 2:23. Are you more concerned about the speed of your growth than the direction of your growth?
5. What areas of your life are disciplined for the purpose of godliness (1 Tim 4:7)? What areas need improvement? How do you plan on improving in these areas?
6. Read Mt 7:7-11 and Jm 1:5-6. When you pray, do you present your requests to God with a sense of anticipation and expectancy? Explain.
7. Read Scripture regularly with the following guidelines:
 - a) Ask God to give you insight, so you can clearly see what you must to change (Ps 119:18).
 - b) Recognize that not all knowledge can be applied immediately. Don't be too hasty. Take time to reflect. Be patient to understand first before applying a passage.

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- c) If there's a command to obey and it applies to you, obey it! If God says you ought to do or not do some thing, it means you *can* comply. God is not unreasonable and He will give you the strength and skill to avoid sin (1 Cor 10:13).
 - d) Be specific about what must be changed in your life. For example, read Philip 2:5-7. Rather than say: "I need to be more of a servant like Jesus," you should say "I realize I haven't been serving the people in my home/church/community/job and I'm going to begin by . . ."
 - e) Strategize to optimize. Don't bite off more than you can chew. Be reasonable. If a pattern of sin exists (such as a sinful attitude toward a friend, family or church member), start with just two or three areas that you can change.
8. Confess your sins, whether personally before the Lord or publically before others (1 Jn 1:9; Jm 5:16). Above all else, do not neglect this discipline. Without it, there is no forgiveness! With it, there is forgiveness, healing, restoration, peace, and progress.