We’ve all heard the saying ‘confession is good for the soul’. Do you believe that? Maybe some of us believe it because we’ve seen it happen in our lives. Maybe you think confession will do exactly the opposite. Maybe you think that it will ruin our lives, it will make people see you for who you really are. The person you try so hard to keep hidden behind the curtain.

All of us have probably had very different experiences with confession. Maybe it’s something you know you should do, but you aren’t very good at it. Maybe you just don’t know how to go about it. Maybe confession is something you grew up with if you grew up in a Catholic family. Maybe that was a positive experience, maybe not. Maybe confession is something you’ve never thought about before.

No matter what kind of experience you’ve had with it before, confession plays a big role in our life and relationship with God. The problem is that confession is scary. Confession means baring the deepest darkest parts of ourselves before God and before other people.

We can look at confession as the recognition of God’s holiness in comparison to our sinfulness. Confession is where we can take off the mask, stop pretending to be someone we aren’t, stop pretending to be holier than we are, and be honest with ourselves and with God about who we really are, what we really struggle with. The main function of confession is to bring sin out into the light so it can die.

Satan loves darkness. He loves it when our sins remain behind closed doors. Then he can continue to use it to manipulate us and create doubt and guilt within us. But when we share our sin with God and with others, it brings that sin out into the light. It frees us of that guilt. It makes it that much harder for Satan to use our past against us.

Confession can transform us. Through confession God can do away with the guilt and the darkness within us, but only because of the forgiveness of God and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Without that, it’s just a psychological exercise. But because confession involves the real sacrifice of Jesus, and the real forgiveness of God, it also means that our relationship with God is changed. As a result, we ourselves are changed as well.

Confession is part of the process of discipleship. It is through confession that we continually give over the parts of ourselves that are not in line with God’s plan for our lives. The are the things that hold us back from becoming more like Jesus. That act of giving those things over to God is confession. Telling God and other people what it is that is keeping you from following after Jesus so that you can get it out of the way.

The sin in our life acts as a roadblock to becoming more like Jesus. The discipline of confession helps us to get those roadblocks out of the way so we can do what Paul talks about in Ephesians 4.

Paul says that God gave us all the gifts that he did: **Ephesians 4:12–13 (NIV) — 12** so that the body of Christ may be built up **13** until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

That’s our goal, to attain to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. To be as much like Jesus as possible. But those roadblocks of sin in our lives keep us from doing that. So we need confession in our lives.

There are a lot of things that keep us from confession. The primary one is fear. Often times we have a fear of confession because we have a fundamental misunderstanding of God. We are afraid to confess because we look at God as some tyrant who wants to punish us all for the bad things we do. But at the very heart of God is forgiveness. In order to get to confession, we have to understand God’s forgiveness first, understand that he longs to forgive us, he longs to give us grace.

It was not God’s anger and wrath that brought Jesus to the cross, it was his love for us. It was because at the core of who God is, he loves us and wants to forgive us. If we look at God as someone who is always looking for a way to punish us, then we will always shy away from confession.

Jonathan Edwards was a pretty popular preacher back in the 1700’s, and one of his most famous sermons is entitled ‘Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God’. In fact most people remember him for that one sermon, which is really unfortunate, because he wrote and taught a whole lot of other stuff that wasn’t all fire and brimstone. If we think of God like that, as if we are just sinners in the hands of an angry God, then we will never realize the true depth of God’s desire to forgive us.

If we instead look at God as a loving God who would like nothing more than to forgive us, to restore us, and to redeem us, then we will be much more willing to come to him in confession. We need to replace the idea that God is angry at us because of our sin with the idea that God hurts when we sin because he loves us and wants the best for us.

God knows what happens when we sin. He knows the consequences that will come from our sin. He knows the hurt and the scars it will cause in our lives. And He knows the separation that it causes from him. That’s what he wants us to avoid it. That’s what he wants to heal and restore for us when we have sinned.

A couple of weeks ago when Beth and I went to the Spire conference I went to a session about preaching in today’s culture that was taught be a guy named John Tyson who is the minister of a church in New York City. In that session someone asked him what he did to maintain a good relationship with his kids as a minister of the church, and his answer has really stuck with me.

He talked about how he makes sure to block off one on one time for each of his kids on a weekly basis and he really tries to empathize with them when they come to him with problems. Then, the one that really stuck with me, he said that he always tries to be the one that his kids come to with their sin. He said his son went to a party and his friends started looking at things online they shouldn’t have been. His high school age son came to him afterwards and told him all about it and told him about how tempting it was to join in with them.

His kids aren’t afraid to come to him to confess what they’ve done wrong. They know that they might have consequences, but they also know that their dad loves them and is there to help them through whatever they are struggling with.

Then he said something that broke my heart. He said, “How many people do you know that have that kind of relationship with their father?” I can’t say that I know anyone who would voluntarily go to their father to confess their sin on a regular basis. Most people won’t offer that kind of thing up because they are afraid of the consequences. If they just keep quiet about it, then maybe they can get away with it.

That’s not what God wants for us. He doesn’t want to be the one that we are afraid to go to. He doesn’t want us to be afraid to talk to him and tell him what we struggle with. God wants to be the one you run to when things are hard. The one you pour your heart out to when you’re not sure you can do it on your own. The one whose feet you lay your burdens down at.

God wants to help us through our struggles and redeem us from them. If all he wanted to do was punish us for what we had done wrong, he never would have sent his son to die in our place. He could have let us bear the full brunt of the consequences of our sin. But he loved us too much to do that. He loved us so much that he sent his son to die so that we could be forgiven and redeemed. That’s the God we serve. We are not sinners in the hands of an angry God. We are sinners in the hands of a God who loves us so much that he gave his son to set us free of our sin.

Another thing that keeps us away from confession is that we think it means confessing publicly. The good news for those of us who are afraid of that is that public confession is a rarity in the discipline of confession. There are generally two ways to go about practicing this discipline of confession.

The first is private confession. That’s just between you and God.

**1 Timothy 2:5 (ESV) — 5** For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,

In Jesus’ day, only the priests could offer up sacrifices for sins, only they could mediate between people and God. There was even a veil, a heavy curtain that separated the Holy of Holies, the place where the presence of God resided on earth from the rest of the Temple. The High Priest was the only one who could go into the Holy of Holies, and even he could only go in once a year.

But when Jesus died on the cross that veil was torn in two. God was no longer inaccessible to the people. He was no longer only available through a human mediator, a human priest. When Jesus died and rose again he became our mediator. He became our high priest. He became our intercessor. He is the one that gives us access to God.

**Hebrews 4:14–16 ESV — 14** Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. **15** For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. **16** Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

That means we can confess and be forgiven through Christ alone, without the help of any human mediator or priest. The healing and forgiveness that comes through confession is available to us at all times, we just need to go to God and confess to him.

But sometimes you’ll find with private confession that stays between you and God that there is no release from the hold that sin has on you. When that happens sometimes the thing to do is seek out another person to confess to. When you confess only privately before God you are confessing your sin to a God who knows you better than you know yourself. He already knows the sin we are confessing to him.

God still wants us to talk with him. He still wants us to have a conversational prayer life with him. He still wants us to bring our sins and our failings before him. But remember that sin thrives in the dark. Sometimes it’s enough to just bring it before God and give it over to him. But sometimes you will find that you will still be shackled by your sin until you bring it out into the light with other people as well.

**James 5:16 (ESV) — 16** Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.

At certain times in the history of the church, confession was a corrupt and oppressive, even manipulative thing. But when the formal confessional system was first introduced into the Catholic church, it sparked a wave of revival and personal piety and holiness. When done right, confessing to our brothers and sisters in Christ can be one of the most freeing things we can do.

But confessing our sins to other people is scary. It’s difficult to do. Usually confession is difficult and scary because we have a fundamental misunderstanding of other people.

When we think of the people that we worship with on a Sunday. The kind of people who go to church, who sing praise songs, who pray and read their Bibles, the people who sit right next to you in the chairs, we tend to think they are people who have it all together. We look around at church and think that these are people who don’t struggle with prayer, who don’t struggle to make time to read their Bibles, to spend with God. Most importantly, we think of them as people who don’t struggle with sin like we do.

We put other Christians on a pedestal. We tend to think they are so much more advanced in their faith and their holiness than we are. They are so much better at following Jesus than we are and we can’t measure up. Those people couldn’t possibly struggle with sin like I do, could they?

It makes us feel alone and isolated in our sin and we end up feeling like we can’t reveal our failures and shortcomings to others for fear of what they might think of us. So we come to church on a Sunday with a nice smile on. When people ask us how we are we say ‘I’m good’ instead of saying ‘I’m really struggling right now and could use some help from a fellow believer in Christ’.

We also tend to put sin on a scale. Some sins are really bad and we would never dream of doing those. But some sins we really seem to be okay with most of the time. That way we feel better about ourselves when we compare ourselves to other people.

But to God, all sin is the same. Whether it’s murder and adultery, or white lies and gossip. All sin is the same to God. Every sin is rebellion against God. Every sin has consequences. Every sin separates us from God, no matter what it is. Sometimes we feel like we can’t tell others about our sin because we feel like our sin so much worse than theirs. We hear ‘everyone is a sinner’ and our first thought is ‘Yeah, but not as bad as me’.

The truth is everyone is a sinner and that all sin is equal in God’s eyes. If we can get those two things straight in our heads then the fear of going to other people with our sin begins to diminish. Because now we aren’t alone in our sin. We aren’t isolated. If we are all thinking the right way about sin, then we don’t have to fear other people thinking poorly of us because we are sinners just like they are.

In many cases, when one person breaks though that fear and confesses their sin, it opens up the door to other people doing the same. At Lincoln Christian University, several years before I got there, there was a Wednesday night worship service throughout the year that they called Focus.

One week at Focus the teaching was on confession. The service was just about to dismiss when one brave soul went up to the microphone and, in front of everyone there, began to confess a sin that was weighing heavy on his heart that night. Just as he was about to get down, another student stood up for his turn at the microphone. That continued until about 4am. One person who had the courage to break through the fear of confessing his sin before other people. One person who let go of the fear of other people judging him for being a sinner just like they were opened the door for many other people to let go of that fear as well.

When we start to recognize each other for who we really are, sinners who are only saved by the redeeming grace of Jesus Christ, then we can be free of the fear of what other people will think when they hear about our sin. There is incredible healing that comes through mutual confession. When we do that, we are no longer bound by our sin. We are no longer afraid to let it come to light. We are freed from it and can begin to be healed. Our humanity and sinfulness is no longer ignored and kept quiet. It is laid out so that it can be transformed into something better, something a little more like Jesus.

But when we confess to someone else, it has to be the right person. I had a professor that was teaching on confession and one of the students jokingly said to the professor something along the lines of, ‘So what are your deepest darkest secrets?’ The professor who was usually really light hearted, got really serious all of a sudden and said ‘You haven’t earned the right to ask me that question. In fact none of you have’. He said, ‘I am a sinful person, I do have my failings just like everyone else, but there are only 3 people in the world who have earned the right to ask me about that, there are only 3 people in the world who I would answer any question they asked about myself’.

I think more education about confession was done in those few moments than in the rest of the class. Trust like that has to be earned, you have to know that the person you are confessing to will absolutely keep your confidence. You have to know they aren’t going to start looking at you like you’re crazy for the sins you have committed. It needs to be someone who understands sin, understands sinners, and has known the forgiveness of God themselves.

Someone who will take the confession of another person needs to be someone who is spiritually mature, wise, compassionate, has good common sense, can keep someone’s confidence, and has a good sense of humor.

St Alphonsus Liguori said three things are necessary for a good confession: an examination of conscience, sorrow, and a determination to avoid sin. The first part of confession is to examine yourself. That means being honest with yourself. Confession doesn’t work if you are trying to lie to yourself. It means naming your sin. We can dance around our sin all day and talk about it in general terms. It’s easy to admit that we are sinners. I’ve only ever met one person that was convinced they no longer sinned. But when you leave it vague and open ended, sin is still in the dark. You haven’t gotten the specific sins you are dealing with into the light yet.

When we name our sins, we claim them. We don’t leave any room to call them an error or momentary lapse in judgment as if we’re normally perfect, we just slipped up this time. We don’t leave any room to blame them on other people. When we name our sins, we are saying, ‘I have sinned, and this is what I chose to do’. It’s calling our sin what it is, a willful disobedience to God on our part. It makes us take responsibility for what we have done.

The second part of confession is sorrow. Sorrow doesn’t have to be a deep emotional thing, it just means striving to hate the sin you have committed as much as God does. It means recognizing how deeply your sin has hurt the heart of your Creator, because that’s exactly what our sin does.

That means recognizing the gravity of our sin. It’s easy to just gloss over our sin and treat it like it’s not a big deal. We know we should do better, but sometimes we just don’t care enough to change our behavior. Being sorrowful over our sin means recognizing just how big of a deal our sin really is. To recognize how powerful it can be and how much Jesus went through to redeem us.

This is different from the kind of sorrow we see in the world. Paul says **2 Corinthians 7:10 NASB — 10** For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death.

God uses that sorrow over sin to produce repentance in us, and that repentance leads to our salvation through the grace of Jesus.

We often treat our sin like it’s no big deal, like it’s okay that we sinned because Jesus’ fixed that for us on the cross, no worries. But it was our sin that put Jesus on that cross, it is our sin that separates us from God and keeps us from getting closer to him.

**Jeremiah 44:4 (NIV) — 4** Again and again I sent my servants the prophets, who said, ‘Do not do this detestable thing that I hate!’

Do you hear the passion in the voice of God as he says how much he hates sin? Confession and repentance are the things the help us get rid of that sin in our lives. They help us to get rid of those detestable things in our lives that keep us from getting closer to God.

Third is a determination to avoid sin. The words of repentance come easy. The actions of repentance are hard. This is a battle we go through over and over again in our house. Our kids constantly just say ‘sorry’ in kind of a flippant way. So Beth and I explained to them over and over again that saying you’re sorry doesn’t mean anything if your actions change. That is so ingrained in our kids heads that when they say sorry, I simply ask them what I’m going to tell them next and they know exactly what I mean.

Confession is when we come to God in repentance. But part of repentance is turning away from our sin, going and sinning no more. Does that mean we will be perfect, no. Does that mean we will never commit that exact same sin again, no. It does means we will do everything we can to avoid sin in the future.

The good news about confession is that when we come to God in true repentance, we have the promise given to us in **1 John 1:9 (ESV) — 9** If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

One of the times of confession that was the most powerful in my life was when I was on a spiritual retreat through school, it’s actually where Beth and I met. The leader of our trip had us pair off with someone and confess, be accountable for our sins, and he had us write them down. That was my first semester at Lincoln, so I didn’t really know anyone yet. It was kind of difficult to do that with someone I didn’t know well, but it worked because we were all followers of Jesus.

Then we came together afterward and sat around a fire and then he had us throw those papers with our sins written on them into the fire. We watched them burn until they were just a pile of ash. Once on a mission trip we wrote our sins on rocks and threw them out into Lake Michigan. Both of those things are getting at the same idea. Once we confess our sins, we are forgiven.

**Psalm 103:11–12 (ESV) — 11** For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; **12** as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.

**Colossians 2:13–14 ESV — 13** And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, **14** by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

Jesus took all our sins upon himself, and then they died with him there on the cross.

It’s hard enough to wrap our minds around confessing ourselves. But what happens when someone else comes to us to confess? Maybe having someone confess to you sounds scarier to you than actually confessing yourself and sometimes it can be. After his resurrection, Jesus said this to his disciples:

**John 20:22–23 (NIV) — 22** And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. **23** If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

Sounds like a lot of responsibility, doesn’t it? But as followers of Jesus who have received the Holy Spirit, we have the authority to receive a confession and forgive sin in Jesus’ name. If you want to take it a little deeper, Peter tells us we are all a part of the royal priesthood of Jesus Christ.

So if a brother or sister in Christ comes to you and wants to confess a sin, what do you do?

Well first, you have to realize that all sin is the same. Richard Foster talks about it as living at the foot of the cross. Living in constant recognition of the depth of our own sin and unworthiness, and the enormity of Jesus’ sacrifice for us. Seeing ourselves as the chief of sinners no matter what other people have done. That’s something we should be doing simply as followers of Jesus, but it’s essential if someone wants to confess to us.

Once we realize that everyone else is exactly the same as we are, it doesn’t matter what the sin is. It doesn’t matter what they’ve done or how many times they’ve done it. That allows us to respond with grace. Listening to a confession is one thing, but knowing how to respond is quite another. Many times our reaction when we hear a confession is to tell the person how wrong they were, or how they should do better. But that’s not what they need at all. If they are confessing, they already know that part. Someone confessing needs us to respond in grace. All they need to hear is that promise in **1 John 1:9 (ESV) — 9** If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

That’s all our response needs to be. Responding in grace means reminding that person that they are forgiven. Here’s my advice to you: memorize that verse 1 John 1.9, and if anyone ever confesses to you about anything, tell them that verse and then pray with them. Simply reassure them of God’s forgiveness and pray. That’s what the Bible tells us to do.

Confession begins with sorrow over our sin. But it ends in joy because of the forgiveness of a God who came after us and died to give us grace while we were still sinners. It ends in joy because on the other side of confession is a God who wants nothing more than to forgive you, to have a relationship with you, to show you his love, and to change your life forever.