Being Honest about our Sins

Ash Wed. 2017

# Scripture: 1 John 1:5 - 2:2

# Key idea: Acknowledging our sin to God leads to forgiveness and renewal.

# Intro:

Ash Wednesday is distinguished first of all as the first day of Lent.

Lent is a season of forty days, not counting Sundays, which begins on Ash Wednesday and ends on Holy Saturday. Lent comes from the Anglo-Saxon word “lencten,” which means “spring.” The season is a preparation for celebrating Easter. Historically, Lent began as a period of fasting and preparation for baptism by converts and then became a time for penance by all Christians. (The United Methodist Book of Worship p. 320)

But what does Ash Wednesday stand for?

Ash Wednesday comes from the ancient Jewish tradition of penance and fasting. The practice includes the wearing of ashes on the head. The ashes symbolize the dust from which God made us…Ashes also symbolize grief, in this case, grief that we have sinned and caused division from God. Writings from the Second-century Church refer to the wearing of ashes as a sign of penance. (http://www.catholic.org/lent/ashwed.php)

Tonight I would like us to turn to 1 John chapter 1 which was the text for our Bible studies this past week. It also happens to be one of the best passages for Ash Wednesday. It helps us to have the right attitude toward our sins.

Well, what is a good attitude for us to have about our sins?

# Unhelpful attitudes towards sin

## Denying that one is sinful

Some people basically deny that they are sinful. They do this in different ways. Some of the people to whom John was writing had the idea that their sin did not really matter. This is very close to the view of some very modern people who are hesitant to label anything as sin. The idea of such a view is that they just refuse to label anything as sin. I guess the idea is that if we don’t recognize it, then we don’t have any. John refers to these kind of people as those who say they have no sin (1 John 1:10). Some might do this as a way of rejecting God’s authority over their lives. Other people might do this because they are just not listening to God’s Spirit of conviction. Others might say they do not have sin because they do not want to face their sins. In any case, John tells us that the real problem is that God’s Word is not in those kind of people. They are not in touch with how their behavior compares to God’s standards which we learn about in God’s Word. Such people do not know God’s law at all, or they don’t consider God’s law as normative, or they are just not willing to compare their behavior to God’s law. But John says that what is really happening is that they are making God out to be a liar. John says this because the Word of God clearly tells us that all of us are sinners; there are no exceptions. To say otherwise is to attempt to contradict God.

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Rom 3:23 NIV

Even in the Old Testament we read:

All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one. Ps 14:3 NIV

So there is no use denying that we are sinful creatures. Using some kind of philosophical meandering to get around the idea will not change the basic fact of our sinfulness.

## Appearing religious while hiding unacknowledged evil deeds

A second type of dangerous attitude towards sin is to live a hypocritical life. This kind of person is essentially living a double life. They may appear to be very religious. Most people might even consider them a “good Christian.” But people who know them very well know that their deeds do not match their profession. Their Christianity is a façade; it does not have integrity. John describes these kind of people as those who “claim to have fellowship with [God] and yet walk in the darkness (1 John 1:6).” The appearance of their lives makes one claim, but their actual lifestyle tells a different story.

I’m sure all of us can point to people whose hypocrisy was blatant. But often times, hypocrisy is less obvious. It can be simply a matter of an unexamined life. A person comes to church, attends services, maybe even attends Bible studies, but never applies the Word of God to their personal life. This is a fatal mistake. Jesus ended the Sermon on the Mount by warning his listeners against this mistake. He told them that those who build upon the rock are those who hear his words and put them into practice (Matthew 7:24).

# God directs us to confess our sins

So what is the Biblical approach toward our sins? What attitude does God’s Word tell us to take toward our falling short of God’s laws? John gives the answer in this passage.

 “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”
1 John 1:9 NIV

What does the word confess mean? In a general sense, it means to acknowledge the truth.

What does it mean to confess our sin? It means to agree with God when what we have done is wrong. It means to acknowledge that God’s standards are holy and just and righteous and that we have violated them in a specific way which we now acknowledge as well. Genuine confession is also accompanied by our declared desire to return to following God’s ways.

“He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.” Pr 28:13 NIV

The life of King David gives us an excellent example. After his grievous sin of adultery with Bathsheba and then arranging for the murder of her husband at the hands of the country’s enemies, King David was confronted by the prophet Nathan. To his credit, rather than killing the messenger as OT kings sometimes did, David repented. He wrote about his confession in Ps. 32.

Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.
 Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit.
 When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.
 For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.
 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. (Ps 32:1-5 NIV)

This is a great message for us about the inner healing that results from confession of sin. The NT also agrees that confessing our sin is a healing thing. James admonishes us,

“Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.” James 5:16 NIV

I am struck by the following passage from a classic Christian book titled Celebration of Discipline, written by Richard Foster.

“Confession is so difficult a discipline for us partly because we view the believing community as a fellowship of Saints before we see it is a fellowship of sinners. We come to feel that everyone else has advanced so far in the holiness that we are isolated and alone in our sin. We could not bear to reveal our failures and shortcomings to others. We imagine that we are the only ones who have not stepped onto the high road to heaven. Therefore we hide ourselves from one another and live in veiled lies and hypocrisy.

But if we know that the people of God are first a fellowship of sinners, we are freed to hear the unconditional call of God’s love and to confess our need openly before our brothers and sisters. We know we are not alone in our sin. The fear and pride which cling to us like barnacles, cling to others also. We are sinners together. In acts of mutual confession we release the power that heals. Our humanity is no longer denied but transformed.” (Celebration of Discipline by Richard J Foster p. 127)

Most of the time our confessions are simply between us and God. But sometimes it is very helpful if we confess our sins to a trusted pastor or counselor or Christian friend. This is what Richard Foster is talking about when he writes;

The discipline of confession brings an end to pretense. God is calling into being a church that can openly confess its frail humanity and know the forgiving and empowering graces of Christ. Honesty leads to confession, and confession leads to change. May God give grace to the church once again to recover the discipline of confession! (Richard Foster in Celebration of Discipline p. 137)

# God’s response when we are honest

How does God respond to our acknowledging that we have messed up and sinned against his plans, his rules and his advice? Is he like a prosecuting attorney waiting upon every word so that he can use it against us? No, that is not his mentality. He does not need our confession to know about our sins. He already knows.

Your ways are in full view of the Lord, and he examines all your paths. Prov. 5:21

In fact, he knew about all our sins long ago. That is why Jesus went to the cross. Through the cross of Jesus, God has provided a solution for guilt and our sinfulness.

Without the cross, the discipline of confession would be only psychologically therapeutic. But it is so much more. It involves an objective change in our relationship with God and a subjective change in us. It is a means of healing and transforming the inner spirit. (Celebration of Discipline by Richard J Foster p. 126)

So God desires to heal us. And confession is part of the Rx that he has designed for our healing.

As one Christian leader put it;

“In confession…we open our lives to the healing, reconciling, restoring, uplifting grace of him who loves us in spite of what we are.” Louis Cassels (Quotations #1602)

How is it healing? For one thing, as soon as we confess, we no longer are carrying the burden of guilt. When we confess, God forgives. Our guilt is gone. We are free of that impediment. As E. Stanley Jones put it, “Inner guilt throws sand into the machinery of human living” (Growing Spiritually p. 236). So confession and forgiveness is God’s plan to keep us healthy both spiritually and in other ways as well. Our freedom from guilt is the release of which David testifies in Psalm 32.

Secondly, confession is healthy because God does not just release us from our spiritual debt, he works to continue to purify us and help us to actually walk in his ways. God wants to help us not just to be legally cleared of our offense, so to speak, he wants to help us to begin to actually do the right things. As theologian Charles Carter put it,

“God for Christ’s sake reckons the sinner to be righteous (imputed righteousness), but more than that, it is the function of the Spirit to impart the righteousness of God to the believer.” (The Person and Ministry of the Holy Spirit, Charles W Carter p. 262)

God has good things prepared for us to do (Eph. 2:10) and He will begin to enable us to accomplish them.

# Conclusion

I found a Dennis the Menace cartoon I had saved. Dennis is kneeling by his bed and seems very serious. He is looking up to God and the fading light of late evening is shining through the window upon him as he gets ready for bed. He prays, “But don’t worry, it wasn’t your fault!”

Well, the right question is, will we take responsibility for our sins and confess them to God. That is what Ash Wednesday is about. That is what 1 John 1:9 encourages us to do. And that is the way to receive God’s healing in our lives!