

## **“Why Confess?”**

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James 5:13-18

The passage that I am going to read was written by a man named James. There are several men named James in the Bible, and sometimes it isn't clear which one we're reading about, however it is likely that this letter was written by James, the brother of Jesus.

Now, can you imagine growing up as the younger brother of a man who rocked society and the world in the way that Jesus did? Imagine living in the shadow of one who eventually came to be understood as God's unique child who brought God's love and peace to save the world and alter the course of history.

I bet James struggled with his place in his family as well as in this new community that had formed around his older brother.

So, what place did James have in the new community?

We often hear about Peter being the leader of the new Church in the first century, centered in Jerusalem. However in the book of

Acts there is a point of transition where Peter began traveling and James took the helm as the leader of the new Church.

So, James was a strong leader and the people listened to him. It was very clear that the Holy Spirit was moving powerfully through him and he was inspired to lead in a very complex season when the Church needed to address the difficult challenges of dealing with traditions and conventions and establishing a new community.

Listen now to James' words in the final sentences of his letter to the believers of Jesus scattered throughout the land in and beyond Jerusalem.

### **READ JAMES 5:13-18**

James' words here anchor on prayer as a unifying and powerful practice for those following Jesus.

Through prayer the people had access to God's power which brought healing, restoration, encouragement, and forgiveness.

James used the example of one of the greatest of the old prophets, Elijah, and how God heard his prayers and even stopped the rain for three-and-a-half years until the people repented from their sin.

An interesting point here is that James said that his audience (the early Church community) was akin to this great prophet and that God would listen to their prayers in the same way God listened to Elijah.

This is striking considering that prophets were understood as people with unique access to God, different from everyone else.

But that is no longer the case. All people in this new community of Jesus followers now have direct access to God, like the prophets of old. This is remarkable!

James wrote about how people might live together with strength as a community.

In the best of communities, people offer support and encouragement to all in the community. They are present when anyone has a challenging time or faces hardship, like when they are sick, when they are suffering, when they have sinned and hurt others or themselves.

These are occasions for the Church community to take notice and rally around those in need.

The community also rejoices with any individual in the community when something has happened to

lift their burden, cause them joy, or experience blessing.

For the Church, all suffering is divided, and all goodness is multiplied. This is the nature of God's economy!

Among these occasions to pray, James includes when people sin. Without going into specifics, he wrote that sins between people will be forgiven in God's community. This speaks to the character of the community.

But what does that look like? James said that forgiveness happens as people confess their sins to each other.

Confessing sin requires that people are humble and honest, truly owning the fact that they have hurt someone else or done something against the values of the community.

Now, as Jerri mentioned earlier, when we think of confessing in the Church, we most often think of the Catholic Church. If you've never been Catholic, perhaps you've seen the image in movies of the confessional boxes where a priest sits inside one and a confessing person sits in the box next to them. Then a little window is opened between the two boxes revealing a

screen through which the person confesses their sin to the priest.

When finished with the confession, the priest determines what action might be needed for full forgiveness and restoration to be experienced.

Using the formal confessional boxes are not a practice from the early Church, but began around 1563 and are used in both the Roman Catholic and some Lutheran churches in the United States, as well as in the Anglican Church in England.

Other branches of the Church, like the Eastern Orthodox Church incorporate confessional in other ways, but don't use the confessional boxes.

The idea of confessing to the priest goes back to the notion that the priest (like a prophet) was closer to God and able to administer God's grace and forgiveness where others in the Church could not.

However, when we read James, we are reminded that from the beginning of the Church the people of God were led to confess their sins to each other. All people were encouraged to confess directly to each other and did not need to go through any church leader.

We can ask, "Why confess?" But perhaps it is helpful to ask the question from the other way around. "What is the impact of not confessing sins to one another?"

I'll use the example of stealing something small, let's say a piece of gum. But consider that our sins against one another are often much bigger and more impactful than this.

Let's say you stole a piece of gum from a CVS store. You have an adrenaline rush because it was risky to steal, but you got away with it. You are out of the store with your "free" gum, skipping down the road.

What happens next? Of course at some point probably later that day you feel guilty. Maybe you are chewing the gum and start wondering if someone saw you when you weren't looking. You become a bit paranoid and start watching over your shoulder.

That guilty feeling continues to nag at you a bit at a time, but after the first day maybe you go to bed without telling anyone. Maybe for two days ... two weeks ... two months you say nothing, confessing nothing.

But, whenever you buy another piece of gum, are offered a piece of

gum, see someone chewing gum, or even when you walk by a CVS store you think about what you stole. You are reminded of your thievery. You know what you did and you feel just a slight bit guilty.

To ease the guilt, you rationalize it. The gum was only a small item, not very expensive. The owner of the store certainly didn't feel a financial hit. All your friends have stolen things much more expensive.

Along the way, it becomes easier to steal larger things.

You take it a step further, and when your friends steal something, you down play it as not a big deal, because if it isn't a big deal for them, then your guilt becomes just a bit less.

A huge impact of this is what you make it mean about you. Mind you, this isn't true, but in subtle ways you begin telling yourself that you are less.

The theft confirms to you that you're not worthy of certain roles, positions, or jobs. Over time, it may have you believing that you are not worthy of love from certain "good" people, because you are tarnished. Who would want a thief for a friend or a spouse, you think?

So you look to hang out with and date others who may have been in trouble with the law, or have a shady past.

Pretty soon you have built around your emotional self a ring of protections, rationalizations, and behaviors that shield you from guilt or the notion that you have done anything wrong.

The problem is that you still know that it was wrong and underneath it all, you still feel guilty.

Think of the ramifications and layers of impact on your life from one act. Nothing about living this way is clean or simple. It is a burden.

New scenario. Imagine that you steal the same piece of gum. Instead of hiding the theft, when you start feeling guilty, you go back to the store and up to the owner or cashier and confess to them what you did and offer to pay for the gum because you want to make it right.

With this confession, you have done several things. First, you have cleaned the slate and are free from carrying the guilt and shame any longer.

Secondly, you no longer need to hide or spend so much energy

watching over your shoulder and creating layers of justification, and rationalization. That energy can go into more productive things in your life.

Thirdly, you have begun to create a pattern of living in alignment with God. You affirm that God did not create you to steal, and you don't think of yourself as a "thief." You are building the muscle of synergy with God.

Fourthly, you have repaired the broken relationship with the shop owner, with yourself, and with God.

Literally, confession has made you free! And God is the Lord of a free community.

This is a completely different life from the prior example of the prison you built for yourself.

The reality is that there are people who have gone back and confessed to something as simple as stealing a piece of gum years after the act and found a burden lifted instantly.

We have been talking about something as simple as stealing a piece of gum, but consider that the ways we hurt others and ourselves usually are much bigger, and have deeper consequences.

We cheat on our spouse. We abuse our children. We degrade and discriminate against others then pridefully assert we are right to do so. We don't follow through to help someone when they are in a desperate situation.

We engage in the degrading practice of prostitution, which ultimately leads to such a blow to self esteem and unmanageable guilt, that living seems impossible. Consider the suicide of Jeffery Epstein yesterday. Epstein, the famous convicted sex trafficker.

Once confession is made, sometimes there is a long road ahead to heal broken relationships, there is trust to be rebuilt, there is pain to let go. But all of this work moves us in the direction of well-being, the direction of restoration, the direction of healing. And all of these are foundational in God's family.

So, let us confess to one another and be free!