

What's your favorite form of exercise? Our answers will be different—walking, running, biking, swimming, skiing, tennis, lifting weights. Some people don't like to lift weights, but lifting weights is good for us. One weight-lifting exercise called a "farmer's walk" involves taking a dumb bell in each hand and carrying it for a distance or for a period of time. It's a very good whole-body exercise that increases your heart rate and especially improves your grip strength. What do you think is the heaviest weight you could carry in each hand and walk with for at least a minute? As you ponder that, I also want you to think about the World's Strongest Man Competition in which the athletes do crazy things like lifting round stones weighing hundreds of pounds and pulling trucks weighing much more. Regardless of how much weight you can carry in a farmer's walk or even how much weight the world's strongest man can lift, pull or move, **it's light compared to the weight of guilt we feel when we know we've done something wrong. The discipline of confession relieves us from the crushing and destructive weight of guilt.** That is what *Psalm 32:1–11 (NRSV)* makes clear.

"Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit **there is no deceit. While I kept silence,** my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night **your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up** as by the heat of summer. **Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,' and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you;** at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them. **You are a hiding place** for me; **you preserve me from trouble;** you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you. Many are the torments of the wicked, but **steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord.** Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart."

Psalm 32 begins by stating a fact, **"Happy,"** or **"Blessed are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered."** **The first thing to know about confession is forgiveness feels good.** When it comes to our sins, errors and mistakes when we confess them, and we're forgiven, it's like a weight is lifted off our shoulders. We release it to God and don't have to strain under the burden of carrying it any longer. **Forgiven—literally means, "taken away," as opposed to retained** (see *John 20:23*). In talking about confession, we must acknowledge that some people don't see the need for it. For example, a person who has never felt the need to ask God for forgiveness, someone who doesn't believe in the concept of sin, or someone who having made a mistake lacks the decency to accept responsibility and express regret, these sorts of people will not see the need for confession because they don't think they've done anything wrong. They don't feel remorse or accountable to God or anyone else. Confession only benefits those of us who have the humility to recognize we make mistakes and fall short of who God wants us to be and who we desire to be. Confession lightens

the burden of those who believe we serve a Holy God who has high expectations of us as well as amazing love and grace for us.

If we're a person of integrity, honesty and faith then unconfessed sin feels bad. *Psalms 32:3-4* describes the physical symptoms of one who is **carrying around the weight** of unconfessed sin. "While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night **your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up** as by the heat of summer." If we've ever sinned and known it and not confessed and asked for forgiveness, we know exactly what these verses are describing. Release and relief come when we do what verse 5 says, "**Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,' and you forgave the guilt of my sin.**" The rest of the *Psalms* goes on to affirm God's caring protection, deliverance and steadfast love that "surrounds those who trust in the Lord." Rather than living with the torment of unconfessed sin and guilt, like the Psalmist, we can confess, be forgiven and (verse 11), "Be glad in the Lord and rejoice...and shout for joy..."

Sometimes when we've made a mistake, our tendency is to beat ourselves up over it, rather than confessing it and moving on. That isn't good for us or for anyone else. It's not healthy or helpful. Some people may wonder what harm there is in not confessing our sins. One result can be that powerful, pent-up emotions of guilt, fear, shame and anger can come out in negative ways that hurt other people, sometimes even total strangers or family members who had nothing to do with our real issue, because we won't face up to our own responsibility.

If we refuse to confess our sins and choose instead to bury our guilt and pain thinking no one else will be at risk, we're deceiving ourselves. For 43 years Zinaida Bragantsova told people there was a World War II bomb buried under her bed. The story began in 1941 when the German army advanced toward the Ukrainian city of Berdyansk. One night at the very start of the battle, she was sitting by the window at her sewing machine. Suddenly she heard a noise and a whistling close by. She got up and in a moment was struck by a blast of wind. When she came to, the sewing machine was gone and there was a hole in the floor as well as in the ceiling.

Zinaida couldn't get any officials to check out her story, so she just moved her bed over the hole and lived with it—for the next 40 years! Finally, as phone cable was being laid in the area, demolition experts were called in to probe for buried explosives. "Where's your bomb, grandma?" asked the smiling army lieutenant sent to talk to Mrs. Bragantsova. "No doubt, under your bed?" "Under my bed," Mrs. Bragantsova answered dryly. Sure enough, there they found a 500 pound, 43-year-old bomb! After evacuating 2,000 people from the surrounding buildings, the bomb squad detonated the bomb. According to the report, "The grandmother, freed of her bomb, will soon receive a new apartment." Many people live like that grandmother—with a bomb under their bed—unconfessed sin, a terrible secret or a simmering shame that lays there corroding for years while everyone goes about their business. No one is safe or truly free until it's removed.

Confession is a very timely and relevant subject because there is much that needs to be confessed both individually and as a nation, yet we live in a time when there is little shame, remorse, or even understanding of what is right or wrong. People engage in all seven of the

deadly sins (pride, greed, lust, gluttony, wrath, sloth and envy) without any remorse or regret. People lie and share lies without any concern for the consequences. This is partially due to the age we live in where many people subscribe to the idea: “You do your thing I’ll do mine. There are no truths that apply in all times and places. Believe whatever you want.” People say and do things that would make a sailor blush and not only do people not feel guilty about it, but they also seem proud and defiant. The idea that what I do is my own business, that it only impacts and concerns me and not other people is not true. Most of the good we do and most of our sin directly involves, influences and impacts other people and it indirectly influences many more. Not only that, but the scriptures teach that when we wrong another person, we not only wrong them, we wrong God. It’s stunningly disappointing to me how many people in the public eye who claim to be Christians, live as if they have no fear of a holy God who commands us to live lives of love, justice, truth and empathy. Some people also seem happy to confess the sins of their neighbors which they themselves don’t commit while being silent about the sin in their own lives.

Listen to *Numbers 5:5–7*, “The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the Israelites: **When a man or a woman wrongs another, breaking faith with the LORD, that person incurs guilt and shall confess the sin that has been committed.** The person shall **make full restitution** for the wrong, adding one-fifth to it, and giving it to the one who was wronged.”

Some people are so self-indulgent, ignorant or evil; they have no sense of shame or remorse no matter what they do. The dynamic present in these verses from *Numbers* describes what happens in a person with at least a bit of a conscience, who is open to the conviction of the Holy Spirit. First, *Numbers* says when we wrong another person, we not only wrong them, we wrong God, we “break faith with the Lord.” As a result, we **are** guilty before God and we may **feel** guilty ourselves. The solution involves two steps. **First, confess the sin that has been committed.** I always liked the comic *Calvin and Hobbes* about a boy named Calvin and his stuffed tiger friend. In *The Essential Calvin & Hobbes* by Bill Watterson, Calvin says to Hobbes, “I feel bad that I called Susie names and hurt her feelings. I’m sorry I did it.” “Maybe you should apologize to her,” Hobbes suggests. Calvin ponders this for a moment and replies, **“I keep hoping there’s a less obvious solution.”** When we need to restore a relationship that we have harmed, with God or another person, the obvious solution is confessing our wrong or failure.

Secondly, as far as possible, we make restitution to the person we’ve wronged. A shoplifter wrote to a department store, “I just became a Christian and I can’t sleep at night because I feel guilty. So here’s the \$100 I owe you.” He signed his name and then added a PS: “If I still can’t sleep, I’ll send you the rest of the money.”

Guilt isn’t good if we all do is wallow in it or try half-heartedly to make amends. **Guilt is good if it leads us to whole-hearted confession, repentance and restitution. That’s why our tool for today is a paint scraper.** Sometimes people can look fine on the outside at first appearance, but things inside are not good at all. This is the point Jesus in making in *Matthew 23:37* when he says, “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full

of the bones of the dead and everything unclean.” Just like we can take a paint scraper and scrape away old paint and reveal the condition of the wood underneath, confession, repentance, and restitution help reveal what’s underneath, and by exposing it, enable us to address it.

Several of the steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and other recovery groups and programs are built upon this process. In fact, Steps 5 through 10 are all based on the same principles. Step 5 is we “**Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.**” Step 8 is we “Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.” These are good steps for anyone to take when we have wronged someone else and need to confess our sin. One person going through Step 5 wrote, “Because God and I have an understanding, I am free to bring my shortcomings to my Spiritual Friend. When I admit my imperfections to myself, I give myself a chance to make room for new attitudes and directions. My willingness to look beyond my defensive view, or my real or imagined hurts, **gives me release from the job of carrying them around.** If I can search them out and look at them, **I can put them down.** Learning to trust and confide in another person means ridding myself of the prejudices I’d acquired. My sponsor listened, just listened. **What a relief it gave me to unburden myself and what a sense of freedom I felt.**”

Many of the songs we sing speak of the cross and Jesus’ sacrificial death. We can’t run away from the cost of the sins we need to confess, repent and turn from. Some people don’t like to think about the terrible death Jesus endured and for good reason; it was awful, excruciatingly painful and humiliating. Yet that death on the cross makes forgiveness possible. God takes our sin and wrongdoing that seriously. God is faithful and just. God doesn’t sit idly by while humanity damages and destroys itself. The Creator provided an alternative conceived in the heart of God. *1 John* tells us it is the blood of Jesus that cleanses us from all sin. Jesus’ blood, shed on our behalf, can free us from the burden of sin, relieving the crushing weight of guilt, and restoring our relationship with God and other people.

Proverbs 28:13 declares, “**No one who conceals transgressions will prosper, but one who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.**” No matter how strong we are, eventually we grow tired and weary from carrying the weight of unforgiven sin. We all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (*Romans 3:23*) and our own expectations. We all have failures and shortcomings, and this should make us both humble toward ourselves and understanding, empathetic and gracious towards others. We’re to remember the church is a fellowship of sinners who are seeking to be forgiven and to grow in living Christ-centered lives. I pray that we all will confess to God the secret and hidden sin we’re carrying today. May we be free from our sins including the delusion that our sins aren’t hurting anybody else when they’re hurting ourselves, God and others.

If you’re feeling led to speak with someone as a result of this message and to confess and repent, how should you do it? In four ways:

1. “**I was wrong.**” Accept responsibility with no evasion.

2. **“I’m sorry.”** Remorse, realizing the damage done.
3. **“It won’t happen again.”** We begin the process of rebuilding trust for the future.
4. **“Is there anything I can do to make it up to you?”** Perform deeds in keeping with repentance (*Acts 26:20; Matthew 3:8*).

We who follow Jesus have the ministry of bringing God’s forgiveness to one another (*John 20:23*). May we be the kind of people who listen to the burdens of another person’s heart and soul with love, merc, and uttermost trust and confidentiality, and I pray we can find a person like that for ourselves to talk to as well.

Let’s go to God in prayer.

Call to Confession 1 John 1:8–10: “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.”

Silent Individual Confession

Unison Prayer of Confession: Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry, and we humbly repent. For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us; that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways, to the glory of your Name. Amen.

Assurance of Forgiveness 1 John 4:9–11: “God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.”

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. Have you ever felt weighed down by guilt after having wronged someone else? How did confession help you in moving forward from that experience?
2. What harm can come from not confessing our sins?
3. What blessing can come from confessing them and letting them go?
4. How would you describe the relationship between confession, repentance, and forgiveness?
5. Why do you think some people find it easier to “confess their neighbor’s sins” rather than their own? Why don’t we focus on what we need to confess and repent of rather than talking about or obsessing about the sins of other people; sins that we are less likely to commit?

6. Read Luke 18:9-14. How can we cultivate a humble and penitent spirit like that of the tax collector who recognizes his own sinfulness, rather than a self-righteous, condescending spirit such as the Pharisee?
7. Read Jeremiah 31:34, “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” Share or reflect on how it makes you feel to know that the Lord says he will not remember your sins any more.