

Confessing Sins and Repenting

Hearing inconvenient truth is hard, especially when that truth concerns ourselves and we would then need to change. Generally, we would rather look for the problems in other people's lives and talk about what they should change; but if we honestly look at our lives, we can daily find thoughts, words or actions that are not good.

Rather than confronting the truth, we act in one of three ways. Commonly we react by ignoring the problem. We sweep everything under the rug and try to hide the sin. We act as if nothing had happened either because we're too proud to ask for forgiveness or because we're ashamed. Or we react by comparing ourselves with others and we conclude that they're no better than us: "It's not that bad. We're all human." Finally, we justify ourselves by blaming circumstances or the past and say we didn't have another option.

These strategies are an expression of our complacency and our attempts to save face. But in reality they lead us further down paths of injustice and we create a web of lies to prevent things from being found out. We live in fear of the truth coming to light. At the same time, we allow our conscience to become dull and therefore, we see less and less how much we're actually harming ourselves and others.

Anyone who hides his sins doesn't succeed. But anyone who admits his sins and gives them up finds mercy. (Proverbs 28:13)

What is sin?

Firstly, the word "sin" is used in a general meaning to refer to a power that is ruling over the world and over people. Because of sin we're separated from God, but He is offering us a way to get free from this power of sin. If we choose that way, He will give us a new life – we become "born again".

Secondly, the word "sin" can refer to specific, individual violations of God's orders. He alone has the right to define what is good and what is bad. He has set up rules that also serve for our own protection. Sin is not only about behavior though. Our actions actually come from our thoughts and our desires. Jesus explains this in Matthew 5:27-28:

If you're not born again or you're unsure: Go through the worksheets "God's Story" and "Baptism" which explain the process of new birth in detail.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

God wants us to be perfect (Matthew 5:48). That means it's not only about avoiding the wrong, but also about taking responsibility to do the right: *"So when you know the good things you should do and don't do them, you sin."* (James 4:17).

In summary, sin is all thoughts, words, and actions that are against God's standard.

The consequences of sin

We can sin against ourselves, against others, and against God. Every sin against ourselves and against others is breaking God's rules on how we should deal with His people. It is therefore automatically a sin against God as well. The consequences of sin can be more or less serious, depending on who was affected: Was it only in my thoughts? Did I act and others have to suffer from the consequences? Or did I even actively involve others into the sin?

When we don't do what God wants, we do what the devil wants. He always wants the opposite of what God wants. When we sin, we open a door for the devil and give him influence in our lives. To put it differently: Sin always brings a curse (examples: someone who lies becomes suspicious; greed leads to constant dissatisfaction; feelings of guilt paralyze us). The only way to get free from that curse and close the door again is to confess sin and completely turn away from it.

Repenting step by step

1. Recognizing the sin

I stop whitewashing the issue and become completely honest: What I did was wrong. My sin is also no little thing that can be neglected, but it has negative consequences for me and others. I now take responsibility for that.

2. Confessing the sin

I admit my offense to God and say that I'm sorry. If I sinned against other people, I confess my sins to them as well. I ask for forgiveness.

3. Making amends

If others were harmed by my sin, I need to do everything I can to make up for the damage. If I try to escape from making amends that means that I don't actually regret what I did and don't deserve forgiveness as well.

4. Thinking and acting renewed

After turning away from the sin I turn to what God wants instead. I check my mind and my habits and start to think and live according to His ideas. I ask Him to support me in doing so.

Ask at the end: *Am I sure that God has forgiven me for this sin?*

If your answer is no, then look for the support of a helper.

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)

More hints

In what context should I confess sin? Sin should always be confessed to the people who are affected by it and its consequences. If many people are affected or my sin is disqualifying me from my role (e.g. as a leader), I need to confess it in front of everyone or publicly. In case I sinned against someone only in my thoughts, I should confess it to God and not take it to that person.

If you're unsure what context is appropriate, ask the person helping you through this process.

Using the support of a helper: On our own it's often very difficult for us to go through all the necessary steps of repentance. When sin is no longer a secret, it loses its strength. That's why James 5:16 encourages us to not go through these steps alone: *"Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed."*

Our conscience: Like an inner voice our conscience can warn us when we're about to break a rule. It is shaped by the environment we grew up in and what was considered "right" and "wrong". But these aren't necessarily in accordance with God's standards. That means we can't rely only on our conscience. Sometimes our conscience may give us false alarms, in other areas it may be dull and doesn't warn us even if something is a sin in God's eyes. We need to check with God if He sees something as sin and let our thoughts and emotions be changed by Him accordingly.

Examining myself

Read Galatians 5:19-21. Take two minutes to ask God the following question and make notes:

God, where have I sinned against You or against others?

Application

Which things do I want to deal with first? Who should support me in this?

Clarify specifically how you will continue!