

# Prayer Tool: How to Confess Sin

## What?

Confessing sin is a core part of the Lord's prayer, "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us". This prayer tool will explore how we can do this practically.

## Why?

"When we confess our virtues, we are competitors. When we confess our sins, we are brothers and sisters." Karl Barth

"To confess your sins to God is not to tell him anything he doesn't already know. Until you confess them, however, they are the abyss between you. When you confess them, they become the bridge." Frederick Buechner

## Bible references:

"He who conceals his sin will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes it finds mercy." Proverbs 28:13

"If we confess our sins he is faithful to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." 1 John 1:9

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## A quick introduction to Confessing Sin

The part of the Lord's prayer that contains "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us" contains an inner dynamic that has both **horizontal** and **vertical** dimensions of confession.

Like the shape of the cross of Jesus itself, our prayerful engagement with God implies a natural overflow of the forgiveness that Jesus has unleashed into our hearts into the relationships that are around us.

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## **Do it: How to Confess Sin**

The horizontal and vertical dimensions can help us understand and outwork confession fully:

### **Horizontal**

**The flow of forgiveness coming from God, through the life and work of Jesus into an individual's heart.**

The private discipline of confession is key to our spiritual growth. God wants to forgive us, but it is our acknowledgment of the sin that unlocks the forgiveness that is waiting for us.

“If we confess our sins he is faithful to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” – 1 John 1:9

In other words, we don't just glibly or generally admit our sins, but rather, in the light of God's presence, we allow the inner dynamics of the damaging behaviours or sinful patterns that produce the sin itself to be exposed.

*Some of the other Prayer Tools are extremely helpful in aiding this practice, such as “The Examen,” “The Jesus Prayer” and “Journaling”.*

The Bible is also clear however that the forgiveness that flows from God can be received through another brother or sister in the Lord.

Jesus said to the disciples, “If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.” John 20:23

Confessing our sins to one another is a key to walking into the freedom of the forgiveness of God. The Bible teaches two things, summed up in two scriptures below, which we must not see as mutually exclusive:

1. Forgiveness is in Christ alone: “There is one mediator between God and man the Man Christ Jesus.” 1 Timothy 2:5
2. We live into our freedom through confessing our sins to one another: “Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another.” James 5:16

### **Confessing sin with a fellow Christian**

Here are some helpful pointers when it comes to practicing confession with a fellow Christian:

### **Soul-Friend**

Find someone you love and trust deeply (you might also choose your pastor or a trusted leader until someone at a peer level emerges). If you are not sure, pray and ask God to show you who this could be. You will want to make sure they are discreet and you can feel comfortable in their presence. You don't want there to be any power-games or manipulation in this type of relationship.

### **Frame the Conversation**

Have an intentional chat about how you want your relationship to become a place where you can 'bare your souls' to one another. The central ingredients for this time of relationship and ongoing conversation are accountability, wisdom and encouragement.

### **Vulnerability**

This type of practice takes an obvious healthy dose of vulnerability for it to work. As you have now established the boundaries for your relationship, then become comfortable opening up your heart to your trusted friend. Step out of your shell of invulnerability, connect with the common human brokenness of your brother or sister, share with them and pray together.

### **Wisdom**

While vulnerability and openness are wonderful and endearing gifts, it is important to be wise with the practice of confession. Sometimes with the best of intentions and earnest desire to be 'pure of heart' we can naïvely share things that it might have been better not to.

1. Firstly, we need to be sure we are confessing to the right person. Will they maintain confidentiality? Are they mature enough to be able to hear what I need to tell them? It is also vitally important, as a general rule of thumb, that men are confessing with men and women with women. We don't want to kid ourselves into thinking we won't get drawn into emotional ties or worse, particularly when we are connecting over issues of the heart.
2. Secondly, we need to ask ourselves if our confession is going to cause more distress or embarrassment to the person? If are in doubt about this, we should talk to someone who we know is wise and get their advice.
3. Thirdly, we may need to grow to realise that there are some things we can just take to God in confession. Sometimes those of us who have a tender conscience feel the need to spill our heart out every day to others even if we are not sure whether it is sin we are confessing or not. Don't allow this kind of therapy to become a substitute for receiving forgiveness from Jesus, the source of all forgiveness and cleansing.

## **Vertical**

**The act of reconciling love between two individuals where a schism has taken place.**

This vertical dimension of this part of the Lord's prayer is where we begin to live out the very heart of the gospel message: reconciliation.

This dynamic of enemy-love is an echo of the astonishing words Jesus prayed on the cross: "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." Maybe even more astonishingly though, Jesus has entrusted us with this same message of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18). We are to be marked out by enemy-love:

**"I'm sorry, I was wrong."**

Obviously, we are not Jesus. More often than not we may even be the perpetrator, the one who has offended, the one who has caused the pain – intentionally or unintentionally.

When this is the case as followers of Jesus we must learn how to say sorry, crucify our entitlement mentality, humble ourselves to admit we were wrong, posturing ourselves to ask and receive forgiveness.

**"I forgive you."**

On the other hand, when we have been wronged, Jesus calls us to follow Him into the death of our own self-justification, and in exchange receive His new-life giving grace granting us the power to truly forgive.

Our pain should never be disqualified, nor minimised. In the Prayer Tool "How to Lament", it explores the permission we have to grieve; and to express pain and disappointment. But in the end, the Bible teaches us we can only be fully free, when we fully forgive.

## **Daily practice**

Stories of people like Gordon Wilson, Ruby Bridges and the life of Desmond Tutu (all mentioned in Pete Greig's book, How to Pray) inspire us due to the sheer magnitude and implications of the contexts they lived in and through.

But it is important that we don't simply 'spectate' on the stories of others. If we believe our vocation as followers of Jesus is to be 'ministers of reconciliation' then we must strive to walk this out in our daily lives, incarnating the reconciling love of God in all of our relationships.

A helpful way to emphasise the importance of 'vertical confession' in times of unforgiveness and frayed relationships, is the provocative statement: "worship God second".

This principle is built on one of the places in scripture where we find the instruction that we should worship God, only after we do something else first.

“If you take your gift to the altar and remember your brother has something against you, leave your gift on the altar. Go and make right what is wrong between you and him. Then come back and give your gift.” Matthew 5:23-24

This only reinforces the inseparable nature of the vertical and horizontal dimensions of the gospel. Jesus would go on to make this connection explicit when He reinterpreted the Torah and reordered the world itself around the axis of the Great Commandment: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart soul, mind and strength” and “love your neighbour as yourself.” (Matthew 22:36-40)

Therefore, if there is something festering or harbouring between you and your brother/sister – we need to practice reconciliation, and make it right.

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## **Books on Confessing Sin**

- Confess your sins: The Way of Reconciliation – John Stott
- The Lost Art of Forgiving – Johann Christoph Arnold