



## CONFESSION

*Jeff Peabody  
New Day Church  
Federal Way, WA  
November 8, 2009*

We are now in our seventh week of study in the book of Nehemiah. That's a lot of time with a lot of themes. But really, there's just one overarching message. I think Mr. Miyagi put it best in the Karate Kid when he told Daniel-san, "Not everything is as seem."

You may recall in the movie when Daniel LaRuso went and asked Mr. Miyagi to teach him karate, and instead Mr. Miyagi gave him a huge list of chores to do. He was sanding the deck, waxing cars, painting fences. There were all these really labor-intensive projects, and after four days, Daniel was fed up. He didn't understand why he was being asked to do all this work that felt completely unrelated to what he wanted to learn.

That's when Mr. Miyagi told him, "Not everything is as seem." He then gave a quick demonstration of how all the different arm movements he had been asking Daniel to use in the chores were the basis for the karate moves he wanted to learn. And Daniel had this moment of revelation where he finally realized all those house projects weren't about the house projects at all – they were about giving him new skills.

God often does that with the projects he gives us. I remember back when we had just started this church. I went to a seminar for church planters, and the speaker said to the group, "God's main agenda for you in church planting is you." At the time, I thought that was kind of a strange thing to say. Obviously, God wanted me in church planting because of all the great work I could do ministering to other people. Now that we're this far into it, I can tell you the speaker was exactly right. God gave me this work to do because he had work he wanted to do in me. Giving me a task to do was God's way of shaping me and teaching me, more than anything I was accomplishing. He wanted to stretch my heart for people and my ability to trust and get me out of myself more.

Maybe you can relate to that in your own life – projects you decided to undertake – a mission trip or a job change or some new ministry where you discovered that the biggest impact was how the work changed you. God works that way all the time. When God gave Nehemiah and the Israelites the job of rebuilding a wall, he really wasn't all that interested in the wall. He wanted the people's hearts back. And through building the wall, the people began to see themselves as God's people once again.

Last week, we looked at how they all gathered together to hear God's Word read again for the first time in a long time. Then Nehemiah told them to go home and celebrate, because God's joy would be their strength, their protection. And we said it was important for them to remember that their salvation wasn't going to come because of how well they repented – it was because God wanted the relationship with them and took joy in saving them.

This morning we're going to look at the next gathering that's recorded for us, which was about three weeks later. As we'll see, the tone of this event was very different.

### **Nehemiah 9**

*On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and having dust on their heads. Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the wickedness of their fathers. They stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshiping the LORD their God.*

Have you ever dropped a spoon or something down the garbage disposal? One of my least favorite things to do is reach down in that dark slimy, smelly cave to feel around and retrieve whatever fell in. It's disgusting.

Some of you have the same feeling when we mention the topic of confession. Who wants to reach down into the dark, slimy, smelly cave of our heart and dredge out stuff that's been stuck down inside us for a long time? Where's the fun in that? Can't we go back to the joy we talked about last Sunday?

I read a story in the news this week about 56 year old Evelyn Border of Bedford, Pennsylvania. She and her daughter stole a gift card that a 9 year old had just purchased and set down on a store shelf temporarily. They were caught and arrested for it. But in lieu of a jail sentence, the judge ordered the two women to stand outside the courthouse for 4-1/2 hours with a large sign telling people what they had done.

I think many of us see that as the ultimate picture of confession – that it is some public shaming to punish us for what we have done wrong. It's a humiliating act that only serves to make us miserable and embarrassed.

This morning I'd like to reclaim the word confession from the dark side, because I believe there is so much positive and beneficial that can come from it. Confession is one of God's good gifts to us that we rarely learn to appreciate.

Nehemiah records this beautiful prayer that the Levites led the people in as they stood before God and made their confession. It's quite a long prayer – longer than I would normally try to read in one big chunk. But to get the flow of the prayer, I think it is important to hear it in its entirety.

But since it's longer and I don't want you losing interest listening to my voice, we're going to do a bit of a re-enactment this morning. Nehemiah tells us that several Levites stood on the stairs and led this prayer, so I have recruited our own group of "Levites" and they're going to come up and read from the stairs for you as well. As you listen, ask God to let you hear his word in a fresh way.

*"Blessed be your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise. You alone are the LORD. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you.*

*"You are the LORD God, who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and named him Abraham. You found his heart faithful to you, and you made a covenant with him to give to his descendants the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Jebusites and Girgashites. You have kept your promise because you are righteous.*

*"You saw the suffering of our forefathers in Egypt; you heard their cry at the Red Sea. You sent miraculous signs and wonders against Pharaoh, against all his officials and all the people of his land, for you knew how arrogantly the Egyptians treated them. You made a name for yourself, which remains to this day. You divided the sea before them, so that they passed through it on dry ground, but you hurled their pursuers into the depths, like a stone into mighty waters. By day you led them with a pillar of cloud, and by night with a pillar of fire to give them light on the way they were to take.*

*"You came down on Mount Sinai; you spoke to them from heaven. You gave them regulations and laws that are just and right, and decrees and commands that are good. You made known to them your holy Sabbath and gave them commands, decrees and laws through your servant Moses. In their hunger you gave them bread from heaven and in their thirst you brought them water from the rock; you told them to go in and take possession of the land you had sworn with uplifted hand to give them.*

*"But they, our forefathers, became arrogant and stiff-necked, and did not obey your commands. They refused to listen and failed to remember the miracles you performed among them. They became stiff-necked and in their rebellion appointed a leader in order to return to their slavery. But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them, even when they cast for themselves an image of a calf and said, 'This is your god, who brought you up out of Egypt,' or when they committed awful blasphemies.*

*"Because of your great compassion you did not abandon them in the desert. By day the pillar of cloud did not cease to guide them on their path, nor the pillar of fire by night to shine on the way they were to take. You gave your good Spirit to instruct them. You did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and you gave them water for their thirst. For forty years you sustained them in the desert; they lacked nothing, their clothes did not wear out nor did their feet become swollen.*

*"You gave them kingdoms and nations, allotting to them even the remotest frontiers. They took over the country of Sihon king of Heshbon and the country of Og king of Bashan. You made their sons as numerous as the stars in the sky, and you brought them into the land that you told their fathers to enter and possess.*

*Their sons went in and took possession of the land. You subdued before them the Canaanites, who lived in the land; you handed the Canaanites over to them, along with their kings and the peoples of the land, to deal with them as they pleased. They captured fortified cities and fertile land; they took possession of houses filled with all kinds of good things, wells already dug, vineyards, olive groves and fruit trees in abundance. They ate to the full and were well-nourished; they reveled in your great goodness.*

*"But they were disobedient and rebelled against you; they put your law behind their backs. They killed your prophets, who had admonished them in order to turn them back to you; they committed awful blasphemies. So you handed them over to their enemies, who oppressed them. But when they were oppressed they cried out to you. From heaven you heard them, and in your great compassion you gave them deliverers, who rescued them from the hand of their enemies.*

*"But as soon as they were at rest, they again did what was evil in your sight. Then you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies so that they ruled over them. And when they cried out to you again, you heard from heaven, and in your compassion you delivered them time after time.*

*"You warned them to return to your law, but they became arrogant and disobeyed your commands. They sinned against your ordinances, by which a man will live if he obeys them. Stubbornly they turned their backs on you, became stiff-necked and refused to listen. For many years you were patient with them. By your Spirit you admonished them through your prophets. Yet they paid no attention, so you handed them over to the neighboring peoples. But in your great mercy you did not put an end to them or abandon them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.*

*"Now therefore, O our God, the great, mighty and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love, do not let all this hardship seem trifling in your eyes-the hardship that has come upon us, upon our kings and leaders, upon our priests and prophets, upon our fathers and all your people, from the days of the kings of Assyria until today.*

*In all that has happened to us, you have been just; you have acted faithfully, while we did wrong. Our kings, our leaders, our priests and our fathers did not follow your law; they did not pay attention to your commands or the warnings you gave them. Even while they were in their kingdom, enjoying your great goodness to them in the spacious and fertile land you gave them, they did not serve you or turn from their evil ways.*

*"But see, we are slaves today, slaves in the land you gave our forefathers so they could eat its fruit and the other good things it produces. Because of our sins, its abundant*

*harvest goes to the kings you have placed over us. They rule over our bodies and our cattle as they please. We are in great distress.*

*"In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it."*

Thank you, readers. As you listened to that prayer, what stood out about the content?

We already said last week that what makes us right with God, what leads to our forgiveness is God himself. He doesn't wait to decide to forgive until we confess – the forgiveness is already there waiting for us. So what do we need confession for? What role does it play?

As I see it, confession is a vehicle for four things. First, **it makes forgiveness personal.**

Let's say I'm homeless and starving for a meal, and everyday I walk past this all you can eat buffet that smells fantastic. I can see through the window that they have the best food ever. Then let's say I see somebody coming out of there one day and I say, "How is it?" "Oh...it's the best." "I thought so. What do they have?" "Everything you could imagine. It's all so good." "Must be expensive." "Are you kidding? It's FREE." "Get out of here." "No. The owner is paying for all of it. All you have to do is go in there and ask for the free buffet, and it's yours."

I might not believe it. I might feel too self conscious to go in and ask for it. But if I starve, it won't be for lack of food – it will be for lack of taking advantage of what could be mine.

Confession is asking for the buffet. It is seeing what God has done for you and making it your own. Because as you admit your sins, you are saying you want and need God's forgiveness. You're not creating the forgiveness – it's already there. But you're accepting it on a personal level.

Back Richard Nixon was impeached for all his Water Gate crimes, President Ford made the unpopular decision to give him a presidential pardon. People thought Ford shouldn't have forgiven what Nixon had done. But President Ford believed that the act of accepting a pardon meant admitting guilt. Nixon could have refused to accept the pardon, but he couldn't take it without acknowledging his wrongdoing. You can't pardon something that never happened.

Confession is our way of living in the reality of God's pardon. We admit what we've done, not to earn forgiveness – but to acknowledge our need for it and make it personal.

The second thing confession does is **it makes healing possible.** If I do something that hurts you, and I refuse to acknowledge it, I'm creating a rift between us. You might be gracious enough to go ahead and forgive me, but there won't be any trust anymore in our

relationship. And we won't be able to maintain any real closeness, because that depends on honesty and integrity.

### **Numbers 5:5-7**

*The LORD said to Moses, "Say to the Israelites: 'When a man or woman wrongs another in any way and so is unfaithful to the LORD, that person is guilty and must confess the sin he has committed.'*

You can't commit the wrong, move on and expect things to go back to normal. They just can't until the truth is acknowledged and dealt with. A relationship is only as healthy as it is truthful.

Now confession doesn't guarantee healing. You may still stay mad at me and keep up your guard. That's a different issue. But confession at least makes the dialogue possible that can lead to healing down the road.

The third thing confession does is **it makes freedom a reality**. One of the key passages for me in the prayer the Israelites prayed was right near the end:

*"But see, we are slaves today, slaves in the land you gave our forefathers so they could eat its fruit and the other good things it produces. Because of our sins, its abundant harvest goes to the kings you have placed over us. They rule over our bodies and our cattle as they please. We are in great distress.*

Here they were, living in the Promised Land, occupying the place God had given them, but in such a different capacity. It was their inheritance, but they were living like slaves to other kings. They had no freedom. All their resources were tied up supporting someone else who had control over them.

To me, this is what life is like without confession. We become slaves in the land God has given us. Just like they were living in the Promised Land with no freedom, we are forgiven, but we can't live like it. Just like they were pouring all their energy out for foreign rulers, we pour all our energy trying to defend and cover our sin. Just like they had given control over their lives to other people, our lives are controlled by sin and efforts to protect it.

Without confession, we find ourselves tied in knots. It affects us physically with anxiety and fatigue. It prevents us from being able to enjoy life, because we're afraid of being found out.

That's why so many people end up saying, "You know what? I'm tired of pretending. I can't live like this anymore. I have to get this off my chest." When we do that, we find an incredible amount of freedom. We lose our fear. We feel a weight is lifted. We are able to once again enjoy life.

God doesn't want us living like slaves in the land of our fathers. He wants us to know the freedom that confession can bring.

One final purpose for confession is that **it makes change a priority.**

The point of confession is not just to rattle off this week's list of sins, like taking out the trash on Fridays. The goal is not just to have it become a regular part of the routine. Hopefully, the more we spend time reflecting on what we've done and admitting it, the more committed we become to changing.

The people of Jerusalem knew by the end of their prayer that it was time to rethink how they were living. So they drew up a contract.

*In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it.*

As they reviewed their history, they realized they wanted a fresh start. This means that confession isn't something that only deals with our past – it also shapes our future. We tend to make different choices when we've given serious consideration to previous mistakes. So confession has the potential to motivate real change.

Those are some of the main reasons I see for Christians to engage in confession. It's not to earn God's forgiveness – it's to make it personal, to make room for healing, to free us up to enjoy what God has already given us and to help us make different choices down the road.

So what are the elements of a good confession? How do we do it? God hasn't laid out a set formula for us, but there are certain truths that emerge from the example of the people in this story. One of the main things that stands out about their experience is that

### **A good confession leans on Scripture.**

As you listened to our readers this morning, you may have noticed how similar this passage feels to other sections of the Bible. As they told the story of Abraham, as they described the character of God, as they recounted the sins of the people, the Levites were infusing their prayer with the language of Scripture. It was completely saturated with the ideas and rhythms of the Psalms. Sentences like this:

*But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.*

are lifted straight out of other books of the Bible (Like Exodus 34 and Psalm 86). But they have brought the text into the current situation and used it to give voice to exactly where the people were at in that moment.

We think of Scripture as being God's word to us, but it also can become our words back to him. Praying the Bible is a great strategy in confession, particularly when we don't know how to start on our own. It informs and guides our prayer.

What does that look like? One way is to start with the Psalms. I always think Psalm 51 is a great launch pad. It's David's confession prayer after he slept with Bathsheba and killed her husband. That's some pretty heavy duty guilt to unload, and so it feels like that Psalm is big enough to handle about anything.

**Psalm 51:1-4**

*Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your unfailing love;  
according to your great compassion  
blot out my transgressions.  
Wash away all my iniquity  
and cleanse me from my sin.*

You can read those first verses as a prayer, then stop and include the sins you want to confess. You can pray line by line and add your own commentary to it as you go. Then come the next two verses:

*For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is always before me.  
Against you, you only, have I sinned  
and done what is evil in your sight,  
so that you are proved right when you speak  
and justified when you judge.*

Of course David had sinned against Bathsheba and Uriah, but being the king, he could tell anybody to do whatever he wanted. What he couldn't escape was the fact that he was always accountable to God. We may be able to hide our sins from everybody else, but we can't hide it from him. All sin begins by turning our back on God. And as you pray through a Psalm like that, it keeps bringing you deeper into more truths that shape and strengthen your confession as you pray it.

You don't have to stick to the Psalms – try using the Lord's prayer. Don't just recite it: stop after each line and add your own words in between. When it gets to "Forgive us our sins," take the time to talk about your personal sins. Adopt Scripture as your own and let it give voice to your confession.

Another thing you can see from how the people in Jerusalem prayed is that **A good confession gets specific**. If you go through this prayer, depending on how you count, you'll find they list off 15-20 specific ways they've sinned. Take a look at what they admitted they were:

- *Arrogant*

- *Stiff Necked*

- *Disobedient*

- *Non-listening*

- Forgetful of God
- Preferring slavery
- Blasphemous
- Idol chasing
- Disbelieving
- Rebellious
- Lawless
- Prophet-killers
- Stubborn
- Non-servants
- Unrepentant
- Evildoers

They give examples along the way that show in detail how they were all those things. Here's a fact: talking about sin in general doesn't count as confession. That's not really looking it in the face. That's not taking the whole process very seriously.

It is only as we name the names of our sins that we begin to recognize how ugly they are and how much Jesus took on for us. Getting specific will make us more grateful in the end, because we will realize the extent of what God has forgiven in us.

This prayer of the people also demonstrates how **A good confession takes ownership.**

It is remarkable to me how far this confession reaches back. The Israelites had such a strong sense of national identity that they looked at their entire history and accepted responsibility for things that had happened long before they were even born. We would tend to say today, "You can't be blamed for something your great, great-grandparents did." But they weren't trying to avoid responsibility for anything in this confession.

When you admit you did something, do you follow it up with an explanation? "Yeah, I lost my temper. I've been under a lot of stress lately." "Yes, I lashed out at my kids and I know I shouldn't have. I just haven't been feeling well lately." "I'm sorry I said something that hurt you. It's just that you have been pushing my buttons."

An old drama coach of mine used to say all the time, "The world is not interested in excuses." The next time you hear yourself starting to give an explanation after you say you're sorry, stop right there. Either admit what you did or don't, but don't try to rationalize it away as having a good reason, because that's not accepting full responsibility. A good confession takes as much ownership as possible instead of trying to avoid it.

A final truth I see in Nehemiah is one we don't normally stop to consider, and that is this: **A good confession includes God.**

If you re-read our text from this morning, you'll discover something rather surprising. Although it's called a confession, just as much time is spent talking about God as is spent listing what the people have done. Here are just a couple example statements:

*You alone are the LORD.*

*You have kept your promise because you are righteous.*

*But in your great mercy you did not put an end to them or abandon them, for you are a gracious and merciful God*

Those are just a few. The whole chapter is filled with references to God's goodness and mercy. And then toward the end of the prayer, we find these words:

*In all that has happened to us, you have been just; you have acted faithfully, while we did wrong.*

In other words, as they were retracing their wrongdoing, the Israelites recognized that much of their present suffering was the natural consequence of sin – not the cruelty of God. As they recounted history, they remembered his hand of intervention on their behalf over and over again. And that was key to them keeping perspective and having hope. They could see his faithfulness even as they looked at their own failures.

Did you know that if you were to look up the word “confess” or “confession” in the New Testament, the majority of the references aren't about sin? They talk about confessing Jesus – acknowledging who he is and what you believe about him. There are only really two references that emphasize confessing our sin – the rest are all about him.

I think it is significant that the same word is used in those two very different ways, because it brings home the point that confession is about more than sin – it's about remembering God's faithfulness beyond our own unfaithfulness.

### **1 John 1:9-10**

*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*

Tomorrow, Andre Agassi's book, “Open” goes on sale. It is being hailed as one of the most candid, transparent sports autobiographies of all time. He does a lot of confessing in his book, including the fact that the famous hair he used to wear was actually a toupee. But there were many other more painful revelations that he didn't have to share with the world. And when he talks about why he wrote it, he calls it his atonement, his way of coming clean and making peace for things in his past.

It's a noble idea, and I respect his effort at honesty, but I can tell you this: Sharing your sins with the world is not what gives you atonement. The only thing that makes up for our wrongness is God's rightness, which he made available to us through what Jesus did on the cross.

So the deeper we go into our own hearts to root out more darkness and confess it, the more tightly we need to hold onto the hand of Jesus. Because he's the one who does something with our confession. Without Christ, confession is only a way to get stuff in the open, but not a door to hope.

A good confession brings it back to Jesus. We confess our sins and we confess the one who is faithful and just and who forgives all those sins.