

Nehemiah's Prayer (4)

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- [0 : 00] No one likes to admit to another person that they've done something wrong. We like to portray ourselves, of course, in the best possible light. We like to hide what is bad about us and show what's good about us.
- Perhaps that's one reason why confession of sin, especially in our public prayers, comprise such a small fraction of our prayers. Well, never mind others.
- Perhaps we don't even confess our sins to ourselves. We don't confess them at all to God. We don't like to even admit wrongdoing to him.
- In principle, the more mature we are as Christians, the more serious sin should become to us. However, in practice, it's not always this way. No one likes to say sorry, even or especially perhaps an older, more mature Christian.
- Now, as I said in my prayer, confession of sin can become unhealthy when it's entirely focused on introspection. It can be a cause and a symptom of an unhealthy mind when we fixate on nothing else apart from our sins and our failures.
- [1 : 15] When we engage it in a morbid, worm-type theology. By the same token, confession of sin becomes healthy when it drives us to Jesus and to the gospel.
- When we take our sins and our failures to the Jesus who made an end of them all at the cross. Well, what then is confession of sin and what part should it play in our prayers?
- There are few bitter places to find a healthy confession of sin than in the prayer of Nehemiah, in the second part of verse 6 and in verse 7, where he writes, or he prays, And I want us very briefly this evening to draw out four principles of confession from Nehemiah's prayer.
- Principles which must drive us to the gospel in prayer. First of all, confession is personal. Confession is personal.
- Nehemiah prays, Even I and my father's house. If confession of sin is to be anything, it is to be personal.
- [2 : 44] It isn't the sin of another person we are confessing. It never is. It's always my sin. It's always how I have fallen short of the glory of God.
- It's always how I have failed to love him as I should have done or loved my neighbor as I loved myself. There are some Christians who I've never, ever heard say sorry.
- Who have never, in my hearing anyway, admitted personal regret or guilt about something they said or something they did. And I wonder sometimes whether their unwillingness to admit their fault in their relationship to others reflects an unwillingness to ever admit their fault in their relationship to God.
- In other words, whether they have a healthy life of confessional prayer. Now, the apostle Paul was, by any standard, a remarkable human being.
- By the time he wrote 1 Timothy, he had been a Christian for over 30 years. He had planted churches beyond number and had single-handedly set the trajectory of the church of mission to the nations, which is still ongoing today.

[4 : 00] And yet an aged apostle Paul could write in 1 Timothy 1 verse 15. He wrote these words. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

Of whom I am the foremost. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

Just open admission of fault before God. Do you have a healthy life of confessional prayer? Where either by yourself or in the company of someone that you trust, you confess your own sins to God?

Perhaps you've been taught to be wholly unselfish in prayer. To pray only ever for others. But, you know, without personal confession of sin, our prayers on behalf of others will fall on deaf ears.

Remember the warning of Psalm 66 verse 18, which was driven into me as a young Christian. If I had cherished iniquity in my heart. If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.

[5 : 32] So the most selfless thing you can do in prayer, the most selfless thing you can do in prayer is to confess your own sins first. Confession is personal. Confession is personal.

Second, confession is corporate. Confession is corporate. The corporate confession of Nehemiah is perhaps the most remarkable element of his prayer.

He prays, we have sinned against you. We have sinned against you. Nehemiah has already identified with the people of Jerusalem in his grief and mourning over the destruction of the city.

But now he identifies with them at an even more fundamental level in the confession of their sin. Now remember, he is hundreds of miles away.

And yet he is one with them as together they confess their sins to God. Well, it may be, in fact, that the people of Jerusalem weren't confessing any of their sins to God.

[6 : 33] It may be that Nehemiah was the only one confessing them as one of them for them. Never is Nehemiah more like Jesus in the way he identified with his people.

He does not stand apart from them. He rather becomes part with them and one of them. Nehemiah had an easy life in the court of the king, but he chose to give it up to identify with God's suffering people.

Moses had an easy life in the court of Pharaoh. He chose to give it all up and identify with God's suffering people.

The pre-incarnate Christ had a life of glorious blessedness in the presence of his father. But he chose to give it all up to identify with us, his suffering people.

He refused to stand apart from us. Is that not what the name Emmanuel means, God with us? Never is Nehemiah more like Jesus than in the way he identifies with his people.

[7 : 46] And never are we more like Jesus than when we are identifying with his people and confessing corporate sin. When we confess sin like this, we aren't confessing the sin of others.

We're confessing our sins. So the most Nehemiah thing you can do in prayer is to corporately confess sin and in so doing, identify with the guilty and the ruined.

The most Nehemiah thing we can do in prayer this evening isn't to point despairingly to the world around us with pointed fingers and blame them for the weakness of the church in Scotland.

But to look within and confess our corporate sin as the church and as Christians. Confession is corporate.

Third, confession is relational. Relational. One of the hazards of confession, one of the ways it can become unhealthy is when it's focused first on our failure to meet a set of abstract standards.

- [8 : 59] And secondly, when it's focused on how we have disappointed ourselves. This kind of confession leads to a morbid introspection because it's entirely focused on the self.
- It's like an athlete. He doesn't perform well on the day of the race. He is annoyed with himself and he gives himself a hard time. By contrast, healthy confession of sin is focused on the failure of our relationship with God and how we have sinned against him.
- Confession. Confession isn't about giving ourselves a hard time. The devotional equivalent of a naughty step for Christians where we hear the words, you just sit there and think about how bad you've been.
- Rather, confession of sin is wholly relational. It's all about our relationship with God. That's why Nehemiah prays to God, we have sinned against you.
- Against you. When we sin as Christians, we're sinning against our heavenly father who loves us. Against the Jesus who died for us.
- [10 : 15] Against the Holy Spirit who gave us new life. We sin against you. Our sin is wholly relational. It's between me and God.
- It's not so much that we've disappointed ourselves and that's why we're upset. It's that we have grieved God. You know, when you love someone, you'll do everything in your power not to hurt them.
- Having committed adultery with Bathsheba and then killed her husband, you might have expected David in Psalm 51 to express his remorse and regret that he hurt them.
- But first and foremost, he addresses himself to God and he says, against you, you only have I sinned. When we lie, we're not lying against the truth.
- We're sinning against God. When we're selfish, it's not as if we're sinning against others. We're grieving the Holy Spirit of God.
- [11 : 22] And because sin is primarily relational, confession, therefore, must also be primarily relational. As we confess our sin in prayer, it's the breach in our relationship with our Heavenly Father we're mourning over.
- The loss of his intimacy and the experience of his presence in our lives. When I became a Christian, it was very popular to describe Christianity, not as a religion, but as a relationship.
- Not as a set of regulations to be followed, but as a relationship to be fostered. Looking back, I am more convinced than ever that though it may have been twee, it is right to describe Christianity in this way.
- A growing relationship with the living God through Jesus Christ, not a religion filled with ceremonies, laws and regulations.
- All the more reason then to pause for thought before we give in to that temptation to sin. That sin we're being tempted to indulge in grieves my Heavenly Father.
- [12 : 29] And nothing is worth that. No matter how temporarily gratifying it might be. Confession is relational. Confession is individual, personal, corporate.
- Confession is relational. And then lastly, confession is biblical. It's biblical. Nehemiah is deeply grieved by the sins that he and his people have committed.
- He's not trying to hide anything. He's pouring his heart out before God and he says, we have acted very corruptly against you. We have not kept the commandments, the statutes and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses.
- So here's a man who's not afraid to say sorry. He's not hiding behind a mask of false piety. Having said that our sins, our confessions must be relational in that they are committed against the personhood of God.

We have acted very corruptly against you. We need just to nail that down just a little further. Because the question is this, who says what is wrong and who says what is right?

[13 : 44] If our standards of right and wrong are taken from the world around us or even from our own consciences, then chances are we're not going to be confessing sins which are really sins.

And we're going to be confessing sins which really aren't sins at all. When I was younger, I was forever saying sorry for things that just weren't my fault.

Perhaps there are things which we're confessing as sins to God, which really and truly aren't sins against God.

Perhaps being straight with another Christian about his or her bad attitude. Or someone who takes offense at us for our stance on abortion or Christian marriage.

The world around us might say it's moral to take the life of an unborn child. If we feel righteous anger at that position, our consciences might feel guilty.

[14 : 44] But does that mean that we have to confess this sin to God? Alternatively, in our staff meetings, we've been reading Jerry Bridges' book, Respectable Sins.

Today's world says to us, look after number one. And if you've got it, flaunt it. Well, supposing we are selfish in our relationships, using people for our own purposes, either in the world or in the church.

Supposing we exaggerate, massage our qualifications and our abilities in order to get ahead in our careers. And that's no big sin in the world's eyes.

In fact, these things are virtues. We might not feel guilty about them, especially if we don't get caught. So we don't see the need for confession. You see, there has to be a standard by which we measure right and wrong.

It's not to be our consciences because they can be blunted and affected by the world around us. It's not to be the prevailing worldview of the day because it can quickly change.

[15 : 57] Nehemiah points to the standard of right and wrong in his prayer. He refers to the ways in which he and his people have not kept the laws of Moses. He refers to God's standards.

Now, Nehemiah lived in Old Testament times. We live in the New. The commands of God as interpreted by Jesus are our perfect standard. The laws of love. Love God.

Love one's neighbor as one loves oneself. These are the standards by which we need to judge whether we confess sin or not. Confession of sin is to be biblical in that it conforms to biblical standards of judgment.

Not one of us likes to say sorry. But saying sorry in the confession of our sin to God really is one of the features of a healthy and growing Christian life.

Nehemiah's prayer, as I hope you can see, was personal, corporate, relational, and biblical. Confession of sin played a large part in the Lord's prayer.

[17 : 15] The prayer he taught his disciples. Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. So as we close, let me ask you this question.

What part does healthy confession play in your prayers?