

James 5:16 "Confess Your Sins to One Another"

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Amen. That was one of the great, great joys of this week was seeing kids see a God that big. It's in their story, the hero of their story.

It's a real joy. We're talking this summer about one-anothering, the beauty, the challenge of true gospel community, the relationships that are shaped by Jesus that He's brought us into.

We started with love one another. Last week we saw how hard it can be to rejoice and weep with one another. And now today we move from hard to downright uncomfortable.

We're going to talk for the next two Sundays about confess and forgive. Turn to James chapter 5. I'm going to read a few verses that talk about our life together in community.

[1 : 17] And the last one highlights our focus for today. Confess your sins to one another. James 5 at verse 13.

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is anyone among you sick?

Let him call for the elders of the church and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick and the Lord will raise him up.

And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed.

The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. The word of God for the people of God to shape our hearts and our lives together.

[2 : 21] Thanks be to God. Let's pray. Father, we do give you thanks. In particular now for your word. And we ask for your spirit to work in particular through it to conform us to your likeness.

And in this passage particularly to make us like what you would have us to be as individuals. And especially together as your people.

Help us, Holy Spirit. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Perhaps more than many other issues.

When you hear James say, confess your sins to each other. You may have all sorts of objections pop into your head. But do you mean, how could I possibly?

Yeah, but what about? And there are a lot of those ways to finish those sentences. So I want to start by briefly mentioning three things that this does not mean.

[3 : 30] What's three things not being said here in this passage. This is going to put the command in the context of the whole of God's word.

And help us see what God is after in our community in this area. First, this confessing our sins to one another is not a substitute for confessing to God.

All of our sin is first and foremost against God, right? Psalm 51. Hearts turned away from relationship with Him that He created us to have and enjoy.

And so the Bible speaks much more often about the importance of confessing sins to God than to anyone else. You can go to Him anytime and we should.

This is not that. And this doesn't replace that. Second, confessing our sins to one another is not self-promoting.

[4 : 39] Here's what I mean. Sometimes in a church that is so committed to grace as we are, confessing sins can be thought of as a badge of honor.

This shows how wonderful and spiritual I am. And you might get the idea that the goal is merely to earn points for transparency. The most vulnerable person is the most spiritual person.

And that's all that really matters. We'll see that certainly transparency and vulnerability can be and should be fruits of the gospel working in our hearts and in our community.

But we confess together, James says, that we would experience what? The healing of God. It's not primarily about us being proved wonderful.

It's so that our hearts would be turned to find hope in Him. And therefore, this is not promoting self. It's promoting Jesus and His grace. Not us and our excellent confessing skills.

[5 : 48] It's not about that. Third, confessing our sins to one another is not every sin confessed to everybody, for which you're probably thankful.

Confess your sins to one another is stated in the context of meaningful relationships in the family of God. Ask the elders to pray, James says, and we love to do that with you, by the way.

And yes, when he gets to confess your sins, it's broader than just to the elders. It's beyond that. But the clear idea is that the people who hear the confession will actually pray with and for you.

That they know you and love you. They don't condemn you, on the one hand, and they don't let you off the hook, on the other hand.

So wisdom must be exercised in the audience of the confession, right? And no, Facebook is not what I mean by wisdom.

[6 : 54] You can take that to the bank pretty much every time. And for many of us, that's really good, right? I mean, that's quite enough on confession. We can stop right there.

Because honestly, I'm not really sure who someone is like that that I could confess to. So I just play it safe, right? Wisdom. I heard him say wisdom.

That's what I'm going to do. I'm going to be wise and just keep it to myself, right? Listen, if you feel that, it's not just you. Y'all, most of us are more comfortable there.

I don't have time to list all of the things that we in this room would rather do than confess our sins to one another. But the list includes rooting for your rival's football team.

Eating a plate full of broccoli. Disgusting. And singing a solo in front of a large audience. All of those, for many of us, are more appealing and safer than this.

[8 : 00] We don't like sharing our real heart-level idols and struggles, do we? And yet, God says, confess your sins to one another.

He directs us towards this. What does confessing to one another look like? Well, think of it this morning in terms of picking a fight.

Now, we usually don't condone fighting. It's not something that we recommend a lot. But, please understand, the Bible talks a lot about spiritual warfare.

And says we must understand that we're in it. And we must engage in it. That's what I mean here.

Our passage in James 5 indicates that the implications of this warfare in which we're engaged are both physical and spiritual.

But, regardless, sin is the real enemy. We talked about that with the kids at VBS this week.

[9 : 06] That sin is what has messed everything up, right? The world. You. Me. Our relationship with God. Our relationship with each other.

And so, when we identify a villain. When we see who the bad guy is. We must engage him or it. It's not enough merely to go around cleaning up the messes that the villain creates.

We must actually confront our sin itself. Wherever we see it. Confessing our sins to one another begins with being willing to see sin in ourselves.

And really to hate sin enough to pick the fight. Hate it enough. To see that we're in spiritual warfare.

And I'm not going to call a truce on sin. Just so that I can get on with living the way that I want to and not be bothered for a while. No. There's no such thing in God's word.

[10 : 14] Sin is an enemy to be fought against. Confess. The word for confess. Actually there in verse 16. Means speaking the truth.

Speaking the truth about our sins. Confess. Are you willing to do that? Are you willing to admit even to yourself that that's what's going on in your heart?

Confession begins with identifying the villain. Picking a fight with your sin. If you're willing to do that secondly.

It means inviting a friend to the fight. James says confess your sins to one another. This is really the crux of what we're talking about this morning.

Actually verbalizing to a friend or brother or sister. The darkness you're beginning to see in your own heart and life. It's a way of acknowledging I can't fight this on my own.

[11 : 21] And I was never meant to. I mean think about it. You would not go alone to a fist fight with a dangerous enemy. Right? You'd bring someone with you. You wouldn't fight a serious medical condition without getting help from a doctor.

You wouldn't respond to a call where gunshots had been fired without dialing in for backup. Right? So why would we approach sin more casually than that?

We all need a sidekick as it were. In our fight against sin. Because see sin always wants the fight to be in secret.

That's where sin gets stronger. In the darkness. When you're alone. Pastor John MacArthur on this verse writes about how important it is to confess sins to one another.

He says sin is most dangerous to the isolated believer. Sin seeks to remain private and secret. But God wants it exposed and dealt with in the loving fellowship of other believers.

[12 : 28] Dragging our sin into the light as God tells us to over and over. Doing that weakens sin. It weakens sin and it also removes our aloneness.

I had lunch with a friend this week who asked me how things were going in my life. Just wanted to know. I said pretty good. It's a great week. VBS is super.

But since you're actually really asking deeper. I'm actually really frustrated with how I've seen my selfishness showing up lately.

Especially in ways I've been unthoughtful and unloving toward my wife. A few minutes later I confess to him. I've seen my idol of control negatively impacting my parenting.

Both of those times he was able to say two things really. First, oh man, me too. And he was able to say, hey, let me share with you some things God's been showing me about that in my life.

[13 : 37] And all of a sudden, a struggle that I hadn't shared with anyone yet particularly. That had just been in my heart kind of being ignored a bit honestly.

It can go there and be alone and fester. All of a sudden it was dragged out into the open. And guess what else? I wasn't alone in it anymore. I was there and had someone with me.

You remember the loneliness we talked about a couple weeks ago? That can be so devastating to us? Confessing our sins to one another may remove that loneliness better than anything else we can do.

Because all of us are wracked with sin. We know in many different ways what that feels like. And so in this instance, confessing removed my loneliness.

And at the same time, it opened the door for him to confess. And for him to have his loneliness removed as well as we shared and prayed in that together.

[14 : 43] Maybe you've been in a small group where you've seen that happen. One person is finally willing to share an honest struggle. And it enables others to be able to start coming out of hiding, as it were.

To share their own struggles. And you leave the evening with multiple people drawn out of their loneliness and into community. I love that.

I love when that happens. But there's one more really important thing that happens in this verse.

When God tells us to confess our sins to one another, he continues and pray for one another.

You see, as any kid in VBS this week could tell you, there is one superhero. Kids, you awake?

Superhero. It's on your list. One superhero who can deal with the problem of sin. We can't handle it on our own.

[15 : 50] Jesus didn't merely deal with sin once for all on the cross. He continues fighting sin in us. Fighting with us, in fact.

And he's the one who gives us the power to defeat sin. And so we pray. That's why. That's the context, actually, of this whole section in James, isn't it?

It's about prayer. Pray about the physical difficulties you're facing. Pray about the spiritual struggles. Because that is where your hope for healing truly lies.

See, confessing your sin to someone else does drag the sin out of the darkness into the light where it gets weaker. It does remove aloneness and give you someone to fight with you.

And what a blessing that is. But most importantly, it gives you both the chance to call out to Jesus together.

[16 : 51] To live practically dependent upon his help and deliverance. And to go there together. It's not just you praying to God. Not just a pastor praying for you.

But brothers and sisters praying with you to the one who rules over sin. And that's gospel community, isn't it? Isn't that what we long to see happen? That we would together run to Jesus and find our hope in him? That's what it means. Boiled down to the basics, right? And our sin is perhaps the best occasion, if you can call it best. To remember that. To remember how much we need him. And to drive us together to run to him. That's what this family, these relationships we're talking about are all about. Us going to Jesus together. Prayer is the primary way we fight against sin. It has real power, James says.

[17 : 52] How does prayer have power? Well, because King Jesus, the one to whom we pray, is the one who has conquered sin. And so we ask for his help.

To believe the truth of his word rather than the lies of Satan. We ask for his help to stand firm against the temptations of the devil. We ask for his help to value the eternal riches of God over the fleeting pleasures of sin that are so appealing to us.

And so together with brothers or sisters as we plead with God over and over, we see our hearts reoriented. Our attitudes adjusted. Our longings actually fulfilled by him, not something else. Now God's word doesn't spell out all the ways this must look as we confess to one another. But for most of us, it's pretty hard to imagine what this could look like.

Because we haven't ventured into it very often. What could it look like for a whole community, a whole church to be marked by confession?

[19 : 08] One morning, Kathy, I guessed her age at 35, joined us for the first time. One look at her face caused me to conclude that she must have been Hollywood beautiful at 21.

Now her face was swollen, her eyes red, her teeth rotting. Her hair looked unwashed, uncombed for who knows how long. I've been in five states in the past month, she said.

I've slept under bridges on several nights, been arrested, raped, robbed. Now she's weeping. I don't know what to do. I don't want to be homeless anymore.

But I can't stop drinking. I can't stop. I can't. Next to Kathy was a rather large woman, Marilyn, who had been sober for more than a dozen years.

She reached out to Kathy with both arms and pulled her close so her head was on her chest. I was close enough to hear Marilyn speak quietly into Kathy's ear. Honey, you're going to be okay.

[20 : 22] You're with us now. We can deal with this together. And then others began sharing their struggles, asking for help as Marilyn kissed the top of Kathy's head.

It's an account from an AA group. I wonder, could it happen here at Southwood? Marilyn's response, the beautiful picture of aloneness being removed.

We can deal with this together. As Kathy confesses, I can't stop. I can't stop. And we actually have resources in the gospel, and we're talking about it in a second, to go even further than they did.

We can do even more. And I think as God shapes Southwood increasingly with these gospel realities, we'll see things like this.

You'll have more small group times where you say, does anybody have anything we can pray for? And it sounds like this. Yeah, I just can't stop lying all the time.

[21 : 38] Can we pray about that? I've got some big health issues coming up, but the bigger issue, honestly, is that I can't stop worrying. Will you all pray for me?

I think we'll have groups of guys sit around a table, and one will say, I can't stop looking. I need help.

And another one will respond, hey, I know what you mean. We need to be praying. By the way, I'm so glad you came tonight. You're with us now. We can deal with this together.

I think there will be conversations after a worship service in the prayer room, in the hallways, in the pews, perhaps, where rather than just, hey, how you doing?

Well, one person will say, the Spirit is just convicting me about my selfishness. I wanted to tell you that. Or I'm just so tired of the way pride is harming my relationships.

[22 : 42] And as we confess this morning, God just put that on my heart, and I wanted to share that with you. Will you pray with me? I've just seen how my desire for control is keeping me from trusting God.

I needed to share that with someone. Can we pray? And a brother or sister will actually stop right there and say, why don't we pray about that together? Why don't we pray now?

See, it will be picking a fight with sin and then inviting a friend into that fight and calling out to Jesus together.

I think it will happen over and over and over. It actually becomes normal and a way of life and the thing we most need.

Kids confessing your sin to your parents may look like coming to them and saying, hey, I'm being really mean to my brother or sister.

[23 : 42] And I know you didn't see it, but I just hate how my selfishness is messing up my relationship with them and making me so mean. Can we pray and ask Jesus to help me with that?

Parents, if you were like me and you want to hear those words just once, they'll usually come sometime after the time when you say, hey, sweet girl, daddy's so sorry for losing his temper. I should never yell at you like that. Can we pray for Jesus to help daddy? I'll be honest, it's a bit scary to me too.

I don't run towards this the way I wish I would, but it's a beautiful thing to experience when this happens. You can confess to God in this service, as we did earlier this morning, but to confess to one another, we all need those smaller group relationships where people know us and really listen to us and actually pray for us.

And y'all, if you don't have any of those relationships, places where you could confess your sins to someone else and be honest about your real sins, not just the ones you want to sound good sharing about, I want you to know, if you've never had a relationship like that, those relationships are precious.

[25 : 15] You'll love them. You'll want to be around them all the time. You'll want to pour into those kind of relationships. They're precious and also they're possible. They are.

Because the gospel makes relationships like that possible. See, the reason why we back away from confessing to others is that we know it might cost us something, don't we?

I don't know what it is that slows you down. Maybe it's you know it'll cost you your reputation, your credibility with them, some position you feel like you have.

It might cost you feeling the shame of your sin that already is frustrating you. It may cost you feeling like a failure to yourself and we hate that, don't we?

One of our previous pastors, Bill Nash, used to say all the time, because of Jesus, we have nothing to lose, nothing to hide, nothing to protect, nothing to fear.

[26 : 30] That's really true. Jesus is the source of our safety to confess sin because he has the solution for sin. It's why heaven rejoices when a sinner repents.

See, the good news of the gospel is that you and I have the righteousness of Christ, the best reputation possible. security.

Security. It can never be lost because it's his and it's kept in heaven for us, right? Nothing.

Not even your sin or confessing it to someone else could take that away. And so my value is not in what you think of me. It's not in how impressive I am to someone else.

My value is that I'm completely righteous before God in Jesus. Do you let that sink in sometimes?

[27 : 31] Because we live with ourselves and we don't feel completely righteous, valued, precious, treasured, and no one can remove it from me.

Do you let that sink in? That that's true? It's the only thing that sometimes will open me up to confess some things.

You know where I sometimes find my value? My worth? I like to find myself valuable as a caring pastor.

someone who cares for people, who loves everybody. Not long ago, I found myself wrestling with the fact that I had sinned against someone and really hurt them.

But the root of it was, as I reflected, honestly, I just didn't care about them in that moment. There were a lot of other things I was more interested in and I really just didn't care about them.

[28 : 35] I did not want to confess that and didn't feel like I needed to, honestly. I thought I really needed that person to think of me as a caring pastor.

I can't give them evidence to the contrary. Maybe what I could do is I could pass it off as an oversight, you know, as an accident. I'm so sorry you got hurt. You know, it's one of those terrible things that happens sometimes.

Cyberspace, things get lost. Terrible phone, technology, you know, that's what happened. God and I had to talk about whether the righteousness of Jesus was enough for me.

The approval of my heavenly Father, was that enough for me? Or whether I needed to have some caring pastor righteousness to feel better.

Whether I needed the approval of this person as well for me to be able to be okay. See, Jesus had to be really big.

[29 : 39] And his righteousness had to be actually enough for me before I would confess the real sin. And only once I saw him clearly could I confess to her honestly what really was going on.

And have her pray for me in my real sin. Do you begin to see how the gospel produces community like this? If we'll really believe it?

If we'll really let it impact the way we relate to each other? See, I didn't lose my value. I didn't lose my righteousness when I confessed that awful reality to her.

Why? Because my righteousness is in heaven. It wasn't touched by that. I have nothing to hide, nothing to protect, nothing to lose.

I can see my sin as big and awful. The gospel says Jesus had to go to the cross for it. Because it breaks my relationship with God and with others.

[30 : 40] It's that big. And I can see Jesus as big and amazing because his righteousness clothes me perfectly and I don't need anything else.

so I can confess to you and actually expect that this is a family not of judgment but of grace because Jesus makes it one like that.

If we're willing to confess our sins, it's because Jesus has become big in our eyes. Y'all, if we're not confessing our sins to each other, I'm more concerned not about our view of sin specifically but about our view of Jesus.

Is he not big enough? Is his righteousness not enough to cover us? Are we not rejoicing in him deeply enough? Is he not enough for us?

Several years ago, I got a note from a former Southwood member who had decided Jesus was enough and she could confess the ugly reality of her sin and addiction.

[31 : 55] With some of her brothers and sisters here, she decided she had to no matter how they responded and they surprised her. She writes, I thought guilt and shame would absolutely kill me but not one person looked on me with judgment, only love and grace.

She ran into some Maryland's here who pointed her to rehab but especially to Jesus. They prayed a lot.

They cried with her into the early hours of the morning. They prayed. They watched her kids for her while she was getting help and they prayed.

I found there are many Maryland's here. I'd love for you to find one if you don't have one. People who know the righteousness of Jesus is enough for all of us.

The help of Jesus is what we all need in all of our sin struggles. Dear friends, let's confess our sins to one another so that we can run to Jesus together.

[33 : 20] Pray with me. Jesus, we want to be with you. We want to be together with you with these people we love. Sometimes we just want to feel safe more than we want that.

We just want to feel good about ourselves. We just want others to think highly of us. Would you forgive us for that?

For our tendency to isolate, to hide with the truth of your gospel, of the love of a father for us, of perfect robes of righteousness that no one can take away.

Would it overwhelm the lies we believe? Would you remind us of the glories of Jesus that you might move us towards each other and that we might run to him together.

Give us great joy in that. We ask for his sake. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.