

Rebuilding our Lives Through Confession

Rich Nathan
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Let's Rebuild
Nehemiah 9

Many years ago when my children were small, our family was camping in Maine and we decided to take a ferry trip to Nova Scotia. We had to buy ferry tickets one day and get on the ferry the next day. There was a sign right by the ticket counter that said,

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Children under 5 ride free

So, I said to the woman, "We'll take three tickets." My wife, Marlene, immediately said, "Richie, we'll need four because Sharon is five years old." I said, "Shhh. Be quiet." I looked at the ticket agent and said, "We'll take three tickets." Marlene said again, "No, no. Sharon is five." I said, "Be quiet!" I bought three tickets and walked away from the counter and Marlene spoke to me: "You know that sign says children under five are free. Sharon is five." I said, "Oh, no. They mean children five and under."

She kept correcting me as I walked back to the car and I felt worse and worse about what I had done. We all got in the car. I put the key in the ignition, turned on the engine and immediately steam began pouring out of the radiator. As I sat there watching the radiator blow, I felt like God was talking to me. He was saying, "I'm not going to allow you to be a liar." I felt horrible. I was so angry that I didn't talk to Marlene the rest of the day because every time I looked at her it reminded me of what I had done.

I had to spend the rest of the day going around this little town in Maine to locate a new thermostat for my car because the old one got stuck. I think it cost me \$150 back then to repair the car rather than \$6 to buy a ticket for my daughter. I was angry about having to spend so much money. I was upset with Marlene for no reason. I was upset with God for blowing up my radiator. Most of all, I was upset with myself for being so stupid – trying to save a little bit of money by lying.

What do you do when you've screwed up? What do you do when you've messed up? What do you do when you've fallen down and done something really stupid? How do you get back up and find more joy and more freedom than you presently have in your life?

We've been doing a series from the Old Testament book of Nehemiah and we find from the book of Nehemiah that even though Nehemiah and his countrymen were back in the Promised Land, even though they had finally built the protective wall around the city

of Jerusalem and the Temple was rebuilt, the Jewish community living in the Promised Land was still in crisis. Here's what we read at the end of Nehemiah 9.

Slide Nehemiah 9:36-37

³⁶ "But see, we are slaves today, slaves in the land you gave our ancestors so they could eat its fruit and the other good things it produces. ³⁷ 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.

They had faced a terrible drought and famine. There were constant threats from foreign powers. Many of the Jewish people were in debt and mortgaged up to their eyeballs. They were heavily taxed by the Persian overlords who ruled the Promised Land at the time. And it was all because of their sins!

At this moment in our history, we are like the Jewish people back at the time of Nehemiah. Even though the country is now reopening and we're starting to take off our masks, even though many of us have gotten vaccinated, we continue to have the ripple effects of the last 14 months of this pandemic – grieving losses, recovering financially, restoring relationships, rebuilding the church.

How do we rebuild our lives after such a terrible season? We're going to take a page from the book of Nehemiah. I've called today's talk, "Rebuilding our Lives Through Confession". Let's pray.

Is there anybody who is listening to me right now, whether you are here in person or listening online, is there anyone who doesn't want the world to be a better place than it is? Are there any dads or grandads or stepdads who doesn't want their families to be better than they are? Is there any dad who doesn't want a better relationship with your children than you have? Any teens or young adults who don't want better friends? Anyone who would not like a better, more intimate, closer relationship with God?

All of us want people to be more honest than they are and to not be like I did when I tried to cheat the ferry company out of \$6. We all want to live in a better world. We want to live in a world where our kids are safe from being bullied at school or worse – getting shot at school. We want to live in a city where there are no gangs or people dealing drugs or so much violence. We all want to live in a world where we aren't watching our backs constantly. Where we don't have to live in fear. Where we don't need an army of lawyers to deal with every single interaction that we have. We'd love to live in a world where people's word is their bond.

We want justice to prevail in the court system. We want honest politicians and honest judges and honest cops and honest building contractors and honest car mechanics and honest pastors. We want everyone to be safe, regardless of their race, when they walk

down the street. We want to live in a world where people are faithful to their marriage vows. We want to build – or rebuild – a safe, healthy world.

But how do we do that? How can we repair things after we inevitably screw up? What do we do when we mess up? What do we do when we screw up? How do we get up and find joy and freedom again after we've done something really stupid?

Let's read together Nehemiah 9:

Slide Nehemiah 9:1-3

On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads. ² Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the sins of their ancestors. ³ 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.

The Jewish people living in Nehemiah's day knew that one of the keys to rebuilding their lives and their worlds and finding joy and freedom after they messed up was confession. The author says they spent a quarter of the day, which at that time they would have broken the day up into four three-hour segments. They spent three hours confessing their sins and the sins of their ancestors.

I want to talk about confession today. We'll consider three questions we might have about confession. The first one is this:

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Why don't we confess?

There are three types of people in the world. Those who think they are too bad to confess and receive forgiveness. Those who think they are too good to confess and receive forgiveness. Finally, there are those who confess, receive forgiveness and discover the joy and freedom that we gain through confession and forgiveness.

For those who think they are too bad to confess and be forgiven, there are so many people who have over the years said to me that there is no way that I could be entirely forgiven after what I've done. I cheated on my marriage. I lost the best thing I could have ever had. I lost my virginity. That can never be recovered! I hurt my child. If you hurt your own child, surely you can never be forgiven. I had an abortion – I killed my own baby. I had one man tell me there's no way that he could be forgiven because he murdered another man.

Let me ask you a personal question: Is there anything in your life that you did that you don't think God will forgive if you confess it to him? Here's what King David, an ancient King of Israel and an adulterer and murderer, said:

Slide Psalm 32:1-2a

¹ Blessed is the one

whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered.

² Blessed is the one

whose sin the LORD does not count against them

I want you to imagine that you've taken a test in a college class. When your test is returned you see that you've done so badly that there is no way that you're going to pass the class. If the test is averaged in with your other grades there is no way you are going to pass. You're staring at that F on the paper when the teacher gets up and says, "Many of you did really badly on this test. You did so badly that there's no way that you can pass this class. But here's the good news. I'm not going to count this grade against you for your final grade! It's not going to be figured into your final grade!" This is the good news of the gospel, friends. God says to us if you put your trust in my Son, Jesus Christ, and confess your sins to me – I'm not going to count your sins against you when you stand before me for your final grade at judgment.

It doesn't matter how terribly you've done on the test, I'm not going to count your grade against you! Do you believe that, friend? Do you trust that when Jesus died on the cross that God cancelled all of your sins? Even the ones that make us ashamed? Even the things that terribly hurt others? Even the sins that we knew at the time we were doing them that they were wrong and we did them anyway? Let me ask you a personal question. Have you experienced the joy and freedom of having God not count your sins against you?

Why don't we confess? Some people think they're too bad to confess. Some people think they're too good to confess and receive forgiveness. I want you to look at verse 1 again with me.

Slide Nehemiah 9:1

On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads.

The Israelites accompanied their confession by throwing dirt on themselves. The word confession in Hebrew actually comes from a root word which means "to wring the hands". These Jewish people are wringing their hands. They are afflicting themselves by fasting and throwing dirt on their heads.

The point is that the Israelites lived in a world that knew that it was ok, in fact, they knew that it was spiritually helpful, emotionally helpful, relationally helpful, to sometimes not feel ok. They believed that it was helpful at times to feel uncomfortable, to not always be upbeat, to feel uneasy about themselves.

Scott Peck was a psychiatrist and best-selling author. He wrote a powerful book back in the 1990s called *People of the Lie* in which he analyzed evil people – not just psychologically sick people, but evil people. Dr. Peck said that evil people are people who cannot or will not tolerate the pain of self-reproach. Evil people are people who constantly have to deceive themselves into believing that they are really good people. They can never admit that they are wrong about anything. Evil people always have to maintain the pretense of being perfect, of doing everything right. Peck said that evil people at one and the same time have an internal sense of sin, but they are unwilling to tolerate that sense. They know that they are bad within, but they are desperate to avoid feeling bad about it. In other words, it's not that an evil person has no conscience, it's just that they keep suppressing the conscience that they have.

You understand that if you want to become a better person you have to allow yourself to feel bad for a little while! I hear people say all the time, “I shouldn't feel guilty about stuff.” Why not? Who says that it's always wrong to feel guilty? Who says we always have to treat every single thing that we've done not as wrong or bad or sin, but as something we needed to do in order to grow?

Freudian psychology teaches us that the worst possible thing is to ever feel guilty. But modern psychology after Freud and this ancient book that we call the Bible say that you've got to give yourself permission to feel guilty sometimes about stuff you did wrong, that you knew was wrong. Lies you've told and people you've hurt and things you neglected to do. Feeling bad or feeling guilty about the difference between the self you project to the world and the self you know you are, might be the healthiest thing you do this week.

If you want to become the kind of person you know you should be, stop dulling your conscience. Stop pretending that you are better than you are. Allow yourself to feel the stabbing pain of a guilty conscience.

Why don't we confess?

Some people believe that they are too bad to confess and receive forgiveness. There are some people who believe they are too good to confess and receive forgiveness. But there are some of you who have received the joy and freedom that only comes by confessing our sins and receiving full and complete forgiveness.

Here's the second question:

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What is not confession?

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Rationalizing our sin is not confession

There are so many ways to chloroform our consciences and put them to sleep.

- After all, I'm just human. That doesn't mean that we're free to sin.
- I can't help it. Yes, we can help it. We just don't want to change.
- The situation just happened. No situation forces us to sin. We choose to sin.
- I just fell into this affair. Having an affair is not like walking along a dark road and falling into a hole. We don't fall into an affair. We choose to cheat on our marriages.
- I've got a right to be happy. Yes, but we don't have a right to disobey God in our pursuit of happiness. We don't have a right to lie or to hurt other people or to break our marriage vows or to hurt our kids.
- But Pastor Rich, I'm a nice person! I work hard! I try! You have no idea how much I sacrificed as a dad or a mom. I'm a good friend. I'm a good daughter or son. Receiving God's forgiveness is not a balancing act. Sin is sin and it's not canceled out or balanced out by all the good things we do. A lie is still a lie even if you did give to charity.
- But this thing is so small in the whole scheme of things! You understand that your little sin, my little sin caused Jesus Christ, the Son of God, to be stripped and beaten and mocked and nailed to a cross? Your little sin and my little sin drove nails into the hands and into the feet of the sinless Son of God!

What is not confession? Rationalizing our sin is not confession.

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Relativizing our sin is not confession

People justify their sin all the time by relativizing their behaviors. They say, "Well, you've never been in my situation." "I tried harder than most people to make my marriage work." "I'm not nearly as bad as so-and-so." "I did this, but I've never done this other thing!"

Notice what it said that these ancient Jews did before they confessed their sins:

Slide Nehemiah 9:3

³ 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.

God's Word derelativizes our behavior. God offers us a straight edge to place next to our crooked lives. We don't measure how crooked we are by comparing ourselves to the crooked lives of others. We measure how crooked we are by comparing ourselves to the straight edge of God's Word. Don't compare your behavior to your own standards – what you think is right and wrong. To wake up your conscience and become a spiritually healthy person you need to compare your behavior to God's Word. Go through the 10 Commandments and compare your life to that. Go through the fruit of the Spirit or the definition of love in 1 Corinthians 13 and compare your life to that. God's Word is the standard, not other people or what we personally feel ok about.

What is not confession?

- Rationalizing our sin is not confession.
- Relativizing our sin is not confession.

And

Slide

Advertising our sin is not confession

We live in a time when many people no longer hide the awful things they've done or the awful things they think. Millions of us instead advertise the terrible things we've done. We live in a time in history when millions of us learn the messiest details of people's lives in tell-all books, reality TV programs and Facebook posts.

You know the easiest way in the 21st century to get an online following? Just share all the garbage of your life and people will applaud you and say, "Bravo! You are so vulnerable! You are so real! You are so authentic!" We live in a time when it's not enough to be kind or helpful or modest. We also have to be real! We have to be raw.

You've shared all the messy details of your drug addiction online. Bravo! You are so real! You had your heart broken in a terrible break-up with your boyfriend or girlfriend? Tell us all about it! You've just had your breasts reduced or your face lifted or you're going through menopause? Share the details! Go for it! You'll have 10,000 followers. You're having sexual problems with your spouse. We want to hear all about it. Advertising our junk to get a following online is not confession.

Just as an aside, it is easy to be authentic with people we care nothing about and be inauthentic with the person who is near us who we regularly hurt. It's not courageous to share your mess online with a bunch of strangers! It is courageous to humble ourselves and confess to someone whose respect we really want.

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What is confession?

The word confession comes from the Greek word:

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Homologeo = to say the same thing as

What does it mean “to say the same thing as”? Let’s say you’ve hurt someone. To confess to them means that you come alongside them and see things from their perspective. Confession means you put yourself in the shoes of this person that you’ve wronged. Confession is not, “If I’ve offended you, I’m sorry.” “If you interpreted what I did as hurtful, I’m really sorry.” That’s not putting yourself in the shoes of someone else. Putting yourself in someone else’s shoes is saying: “I can’t even begin to imagine how betrayed you must have felt when you heard that I gossiped about you or when you learned that I lied to you. I’m so sorry. I can’t imagine what you must have felt when you reached out to me as a friend and I was too busy to help you, too preoccupied with my own stuff. I’m so sorry for being such a bad friend!”

In confession we imagine ourselves in the shoes of this other person and from their perspective we speak to their hurt.

How does this apply, then, to confessing our sins to God? We do the same thing. We put ourselves, in a sense, in God’s shoes and we imagine how things feel from his perspective. I’m not going to read to you the entire text from verse 6 on, but essentially what the people do in confession is they talk about all that God had given them. Gift after gift. Blessing after blessing.

Slide Nehemiah 9:13-15

[Dear God] ¹³ “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. ¹⁴ You made known to them your holy Sabbath and gave them commands, decrees and laws through your servant Moses. ¹⁵ 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.

You gave and gave and gave:

Slide Nehemiah 9:16

¹⁶ “But they, our ancestors, became arrogant and stiff-necked, and they did not obey your commands.

What are we doing when we confess our sins to God? We say the same thing as God. We say, “Lord, I can hardly imagine how terrible it would be to keep giving and giving and then to be continually met with my ingratitude, my rebellion. I can’t imagine what it would feel like to give and give and give and still be constantly ignored and never be thanked.”

Friend, have you ever been really generous to someone? Maybe a child? You just gave and gave and gave. But you receive no thanks. Instead you're met with rebellion, rejection. When we confess to God, we're saying "I can't imagine what it would be like to be you. To always be kind. To always be generous. To always want the best for me. And yet to be continually met with my stubbornness, my resistance, my coldness, my hardness of heart. I am so sorry, Lord."

Friend, do you know the freedom and joy of confessing your sins and being fully and completely forgiven by God? Do you regularly confess your sins to God? Do you need to confess anything today? Do you need to have the great weight of guilt taken off of you?

Gospel call. Text Believe to 98977. We have materials.
Ministry call – up front, take communion!

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- I. Why don't we confess?
- II. What is not confession?
 - A. Rationalizing our sin is not confession
 - B. Relativizing our sin is not confession
 - C. Advertising our sin is not confession
- III. What is confession?