

## Confession and Repentance

Luke Abbott Thorne | March 10, 2024

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Let's begin with a passage from C.S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*.

*OBVIOUSLY, YOU ARE MAKING EXCELLENT PROGRESS. MY ONLY FEAR IS LEST IN ATTEMPTING TO HURRY THE PATIENT YOU AWAKEN HIM TO A SENSE OF HIS REAL POSITION. FOR YOU AND I, WHO SEE THAT POSITION AS IT REALLY IS, MUST NEVER FORGET HOW TOTALLY DIFFERENT IT OUGHT TO APPEAR TO HIM. WE KNOW THAT WE HAVE INTRODUCED A CHANGE OF DIRECTION IN HIS COURSE WHICH IS ALREADY CARRYING HIM OUT OF HIS ORBIT AROUND THE ENEMY; BUT HE MUST BE MADE TO IMAGINE THAT ALL THE CHOICES WHICH HAVE EFFECTED THIS CHANGE OF COURSE ARE TRIVIAL AND REVOCABLE. HE MUST NOT BE ALLOWED TO SUSPECT THAT HE IS NOW, HOWEVER SLOWLY, HEADING RIGHT AWAY FROM THE SUN ON A LINE WHICH WILL CARRY HIM INTO THE COLD AND DARK OF UTMOST SPACE.*

*FOR THIS REASON, I AM ALMOST GLAD TO HEAR THAT HE IS STILL A CHURCHGOER AND A COMMUNICANT. I KNOW THERE ARE DANGERS IN THIS; BUT ANYTHING IS BETTER THAN THAT HE SHOULD REALIZE THE BREAK HE HAS MADE WITH THE FIRST MONTHS OF HIS CHRISTIAN LIFE. AS LONG AS HE RETAINS EXTERNALLY THE HABITS OF A CHRISTIAN HE CAN STILL BE MADE TO THINK OF HIMSELF AS ONE WHO HAS ADOPTED A FEW NEW FRIENDS AND AMUSEMENTS BUT WHOSE SPIRITUAL STATE IS MUCH THE SAME AS IT WAS SIX WEEKS AGO. AND WHILE HE THINKS THAT, WE DO NOT HAVE TO CONTENT WITH THE EXPLICIT REPENTANCE OF A DEFINITE, FULLY RECOGNIZED, SIN, BUT ONLY WITH HIS VAGUE, UNEASY FEELING THAT HE HASN'T BEEN DOING VERY WELL LATELY...IF SUCH A FEELING IS ALLOWED TO LIVE, BUT NOT ALLOWED TO BECOME IRRESISTIBLE AND FLOWER INTO REAL REPENTANCE, IT HAS ONE INVALUABLE TENDENCY. IT INCREASES THE PATIENT'S RELUCTANCE TO THINK ABOUT THE ENEMY.*

*CS LEWIS, THE SCREWTAPE LETTERS, LETTER XII*

Our goal, this morning, is to take stock of where we truly are in relation to God.

- Do you have a “vague, uneasy feeling” about your Christian walk.
- Have your morning devotion times become briefer?
- Do you find yourself praying less?
- Reading the Bible less?
- Do you find yourself reluctant to press into God further?

### The Jargon We Use

Words have an unfortunate quality; the more you use them, the more meaningless they become in our minds. Would you believe me if I told you that Christianity is full of words that we have used so much, they have lost most of their meaning?

- **Grace, Sanctification/Sanctified, Confession, Repentance, Faith, Mercy, Praise AND Worship, Holy, Righteousness**

These terms no longer have any meaning for us; they have become jargon—easily thrown around; rarely digested.

### What is Confession?

It literally means “to admit to a punishable deed or sin.” We often get images of sitting in a confessional box and telling our darkest secrets anonymously to a priest behind a screen. As such, many of us have changed the meaning of the word to point to a private, general admission of sin guilt to God.

“FATHER, I DIDN'T DO SO WELL TODAY.” OR “DEAR JESUS, TODAY WAS A STRUGGLE.” OR “GOD, HELP ME TO BE MORE PATIENT.”

But this isn't really what confession means, and it is exactly the sort of “externally Christian” thing that Screwtape says leads to a “vague, uneasy” feeling.

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*Numbers 5:6–7 NET*

<sup>6</sup> *“Tell the Israelites, ‘When a man or a woman commits any sin that people commit, thereby breaking faith with the LORD, and that person is found guilty,’ then he must confess his sin that he has committed and must make full reparation, add one fifth to it, and give it to whomever he wronged.*

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This just isn’t the same thing as “God, help me to be more \_\_\_\_\_.” Confession includes naming and owning the *specific sin and* making restitution. But, you might be thinking, “that is the Torah, surely things are different now that we are under a covenant of Grace?”

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*James 5:15–16 (NET)*

<sup>15</sup> *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.* <sup>16</sup> *So **confess your sins to one another** and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great effectiveness.*

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So let us examine the Biblical principle of Confession and break it down into it’s three main parts:

1. I must confess to Myself
2. I must confess to God
3. I must confess to Man

**Confession to Myself**

We have to be able to face what is easier to ignore in ourselves. In fact, we cannot enter into God’s presence—we cannot see his face—without examining and repenting from our selves.

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*Matthew 5:8 (BibleProject Translation)*

<sup>8</sup> *“How good is life for the pure in heart, because they will see God.*

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I am a child of the most high king, recovering as a foolish alcoholic, and attending Celebrate Recovery. One of the things we frequently do in CR — and something I can’t believe I didn’t do as Christian before — is take spiritual inventories.

**Spiritual Inventory**

Your first large inventory takes a long time because you have to go back and dust off the fruits of your life. I can assure you, it is not initially a pleasant experience. You will doubtless find a list of people whom you wronged and ignored. Guess what? The next part is even more uncomfortable. You reach out to them to ask forgiveness and make amends. More on the amends later; let us first examine the confession part.

Whether you are doing a daily inventory of your spiritual walk, or examining years of backlog, the first step is simple: It’s time to be honest with yourself, with God, and someone else.

PRINCIPLE 8: OPENLY EXAMINE AND CONFESS MY FAULTS TO MYSELF, TO GOD, AND TO SOMEONE I TRUST.

CELEBRATE RECOVERY, THE EIGHT PRINCIPALS, BY RICK WARREN

Being honest means calling sin what it really is: sin.

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*Matthew 5:21–22 (BibleProject Translation)*

<sup>21</sup> *“You have heard that it was said to the ancients, ‘You shall not commit murder,’ and ‘whoever commits murder will be guilty by the courts.’ <sup>22</sup> But I say to you that everyone who is angry at his brother will be guilty by*

*the courts, and whoever says to his brother, 'You good for nothing!' will be guilty by the Sanhedrin, and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be guilty of the Gehenna of fire.*

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Note the escalation of judgement mismatch with the severity of the crime. Jesus is saying “So you haven’t committed murder? Good for you. But have you thought of or treated another person with contempt? Have you called someone an idiot? God’s law weighs the disregard of another human’s value and dignity as the same as if you murdered them.” After all, isn’t that what murder really is? A pronouncement that the victim’s life is valueless? If our heart’s posture towards others is a disregard to their value or dignity, we are murderers.

### Confession to God

We are called to confess our sins to God; to *admit* our wrongs, rebellions, and shortcomings in prayer. There’s nothing more fundamental to coming to the cross of Christ.

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*1 John 1:9 NET*  
*9 But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous, forgiving us our sins and cleansing us from all unrighteousness.*

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This is sometimes the easiest confession—and sometimes it’s not; however, no real confession can occur if we first haven’t considered our hearts and actions. If we allow the enemy to cloud our ability to consider our attitudes and deeds, we will continually be distant from our savior, floating away into the darkness of space.

And so, we must,

1. Take an honest inventory of our actions and thoughts, forgive ourselves,
2. and confess them to our Father in heaven, so that we can be cleansed.

Many of us might be tempted to stop here, but there one more step—perhaps the hardest of them all. We must confess our shortcomings to another person.

### Confession to Man

While forgiveness and restoration come only through God, healing comes through confession to our brothers and sisters.

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*James 5:16 NET*  
*<sup>16</sup> So confess your sins to one another and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great effectiveness.*

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Anyone who has set aside the weight of a secret sin and come clean to someone can testify to the cathartic, healing power of bringing what is hidden in the darkness into the light.

But confession to another human is important for another reason: it makes it more difficult to continue in our sinful behaviors. Consider for a moment how many sins we *habitually* commit in a week. How many of those easy sins would be eliminated if you knew that you had to confess them to a close friend every Saturday? The cost of those indiscretions goes up because each one now comes with a difficult conversation.

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*Acts 19:18–19 NET*  
*<sup>18</sup> Many of those who had believed came forward, confessing and making their deeds known. <sup>19</sup> Large numbers of those who had practiced magic collected their books and burned them up in the presence of everyone. When the value of the books was added up, it was found to total fifty thousand silver coins.*

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Notice, they publicly confessed their sin. They “made it known.” Brothers and sisters, if you have not experienced the healing that comes through this kind of bold, all-out faith confession, I pray you will. What is kept in secret has power over you. As long as it is in the darkness, it can tempt you to return. Kill it. Bring it into the light and you will finally be able to *repent*.

## What is Repentance?

It's clearly important to Jesus. From the moment that John the Baptizer was sent to prison, Jesus began his ministry, and the gospel of Matthew makes it abundantly clear that this ministry was a ministry calling for repentance.

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*Matthew 4:17 NET*

*17 From that time Jesus began to preach this message: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."*

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So, what is *repentance*? Let's consider an analogy:

**IF YOU WERE TO LOOK UP AT THE MOON, YOU MIGHT BE FOOLED INTO THINKING IT IS STATIONARY. THAT IS, IT'S ALWAYS THERE, ORBITING AROUND THE EARTH. BUT THAT ORBIT IS DUE TO A GRAVITATIONAL ATTRACTION BETWEEN THE MOON AND THE EARTH. IN OTHER WORDS, THE MOON IS CONSTANTLY FALLING TOWARDS THE EARTH, BUT IT'S MOVING SO FAST TO THE SIDE, IT KEEPS MISSING.**

**IF THE MOON WAS NO LONGER ATTRACTED TO THE EARTH, IT WOULD NOT JUST STAY THERE. IT WOULD INSTANTLY START MOVING AWAY FROM THE EARTH IN A STRAIGHT LINE AT 2,237 MI/HR. IF YOU WERE STANDING ON THE MOON, IT WOULD TAKE AROUND A WEEK BEFORE YOU NOTICED THAT THE EARTH WAS GETTING SMALLER AND MORE DISTANT.**

We often think that if we do nothing, things will stay the same. But as Screwtape had said, the longer we go without a course-correction, the further we move from our savior. Staying in orbit requires *constant course corrections*, and we call this "repentance."

NO HEBREW WORD IS AN EXACT EQUIVALENT FOR THE ENGLISH TERM "REPENTANCE." REPENTANCE WAS EXPRESSED BY A NUMBER OF DIFFERENT ACTIONS THAT SHOW A CHANGE IN THINKING AND ATTITUDE TOWARD SIN AND GOD. REPENTANCE MAY BE DEMONSTRATED BY:

- A PUBLIC DISPLAY OF MOURNING OVER SIN, SUCH AS WEEPING (EZRA 10:1), TEARING GARMENTS AND/OR HAIR (EZRA 9:3), AND WEARING SACKCLOTH (JOEL 1:13)
- MAKING RESTITUTION FOR WRONGS COMMITTED (1 CHR 21:22–26)
- ABASING ONESELF BEFORE THE WRONGED PARTY (GEN 33:3)

REPENTANCE IN GREEK MEANS "...TO RADICALLY CHANGE ONE'S THINKING. "REPENTANCE" REFERS TO AN EVENT IN WHICH AN INDIVIDUAL ATTAINS A DIVINELY PROVIDED NEW UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR BEHAVIOR AND FEELS COMPELLED TO CHANGE THAT BEHAVIOR AND BEGIN A NEW RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD (HEB 6:1; ACTS 20:21)."

KENNEDY, BRENDAN. "REPENTANCE." THE LEXHAM BIBLE DICTIONARY, EDITED BY JOHN D. BARRY ET AL., LEXHAM PRESS, 2016.

I appreciate both the Hebrew and Greek nuances of repentance. It's both:

1. Change your direction, abase yourself to the Father
2. Change Your heart and mind.

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*Romans 12:1–2 (NET)*

*<sup>1</sup> Therefore I exhort you, brothers, through the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, which is your reasonable service. <sup>2</sup> And do not [allow yourself to] be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, so that you may approve what is the good and well-pleasing and perfect will of God.*

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I had never considered this, one of my favorite verses, to be about *repentance*, but it is. In fact, I cannot think of a more concise statement on the necessity of both "repentance of deeds" and "repentance of thoughts."

Suddenly, this verse feels a lot less like an unattainable goal that God will one day do in my life, and more like something I can participate with God to accomplish. And it's not just that I "can participate," I am *called to participate* through repentance.

"WHEN OUR LORD AND MASTER JESUS CHRIST SAID, "REPENT," HE WILLED THE ENTIRE LIFE OF BELIEVERS TO BE ONE OF REPENTANCE." - MARTIN LUTHER, NINETY-FIVE THESES

## And Now, it Gets Interesting

So, if repentance means a *daily* realignment of my body and my mind towards God—a *rejection* of the flesh, the world, and the devil and a *trust* in the Son, the Father, and the Holy Spirit, I have a question for you: **What is faith?**

As I was preparing for this sermon, I found a passage in a commentary of [James 2:14-26](#) and it shook my understanding of the relationship between repentance and faith.

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*James 2:17–20 LEB*

*Thus also faith, if it does not have works, is dead by itself. But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe, and shudder! But do you want to know, O foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?*

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This text is a classic hyperlink in the discussion between works-based and faith-based salvation. We know, from [Ephesians 2:8-9](#) that our salvation is a freely offered gift that can be accepted not through works of service, but faith alone. And this has led us to often believe that mere belief is what is necessary—indeed any attempt towards working out our salvation feels untrustworthy to us good non-denominational Christians.

And I am not here to add or remove from *that* discussion. But as we’ve already seen, the lack of clarity we have from using Christian jargon like *Faith*, *Works*, and *Repentance* can confuse what is actually quite simple. Let us read what Walter Bauer had to say in his commentary of this passage:

JAMES 2:14–26 OFFERS THE MOST EXPLICIT COMMENTS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT REGARDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN REPENTANCE AND APPROPRIATE ACTIONS. JAMES ARGUES THAT SUITABLE ACTIONS WILL INEVITABLY FOLLOW A SINCERE EXPERIENCE OF REPENTANCE. THE RHETORICAL QUESTION “WHAT GOOD IS IT ...?” (2:14) CALLS INTO QUESTION NOT THE EFFECTIVENESS OF FAITH IN CHRIST WITHOUT ACCOMPANYING GOOD DEEDS TO SAVE THE SINNER, BUT THE VERY PRESENCE OF THAT FAITH IF THE DEEDS DO NOT FOLLOW. HE ARGUES THAT JUST AS THE EVIDENCE OF BIOLOGICAL LIFE IN THE HUMAN BODY IS THE BASIC PROCESSES OF RESPIRATION AND CIRCULATION, THE EVIDENCE OF SAVING FAITH IS ACTS OF JUSTICE AND MERCY THAT ARISE SPONTANEOUSLY FROM A CHANGED LIFE (2:18).

And so we’ve come to it. For all intents and purposes, *repentance* is faith. To be more clear, and use less jargon, Having confidence and trust in God means realigning your life to him. And realigning your life to God means you have confidence and trust in him. That is why Paul, when he addresses the Elders at Ephesus declares so simply:

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*Acts 20:20–21 NET*

*You know that I did not hold back from proclaiming to you anything that would be helpful, and from teaching you publicly and from house to house, testifying to both Jews and Greeks about repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus.*

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Repentance has two parts: the identification and rejection of sin (Confession), and the turning around to return to the LORD (Faith). These are things that we should not shy away from in our lives or in our sermons. What greater joy is there than when a man finally crawls out of the darkness and into the light of God, finding love and forgiveness. It is such a shame that we so often, by not taking inventory of our lives and repenting of our sins, exchange this joy for a **vague, uneasy feeling** that he hasn’t been doing very well lately.

Brothers and sisters, find someone you can talk to. Take stock of your day—every day. If you feel distant from the love of the Father, run to him! He is waiting on the hill as he has done every day till now.