

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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SERMON: *The Only Alternative is Perfection*

SERIES: *Practicing Virtue*

SCRIPTURES: *Genesis 3; James 5:13-16*

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**Credit to Richard Foster, John Ortberg,*

Well good morning and welcome to Five Forks Church. It is so good to worship with you today, everybody here in the room and also to those of you tuning into the livestream.

We've been working our way through a sermon series called "**Practicing Virtue.**" (**Series Graphic**) Many of us begin the year, thinking about the kinds of changes we'd like to see in our lives. Financially, relationally, with our physical health. But we've been saying what if we made it our primary focus to pursue character formation? What if we spent 2024 pursuing humility over wealth or courage over physical beauty, love over personal achievement. The kinds of character qualities that we see in the life of Jesus.

So, this series is exploring five virtues that we can practice that will help us to live more like Jesus. So far we have talked about practicing **surrender**, **prudence** and last week **courage**.

Today I want to talk a little bit about this question.

What do you when you mess up? Screwed up, hurt others, hurt yourself? When you've done something you know you shouldn't do?

It's important to consider this, because no matter how hard you try, in life, you are going to mess up. You will get better, hopefully as you mature, you mess up less often...but you will not be perfect. What do you do when you have messed up? The answer in Scripture is a virtue called...

I. Confession

You fess up. You acknowledge your disobedience. You take responsibility for your failure. The only alternative is perfection, right? If you never mess up, then you don't need to practice confession in your life. But for the rest of us. The road to healing, and wholeness and a life of virtue is confession.

So let's go to kind of

A. The Foundational Story of Disobedience

(messing up) in Scripture. If you have your Bible, turn to **Genesis 2**.

And, while you're turning there, perhaps a qualification is needed regarding confession as a virtue. You will not find confession on most lists of virtues. It's not typically what we would think of as a virtue. And this happens to be the one virtue in this series, that Jesus himself did not actually practice.

When we talk about confession we are talking about fessing up to our failures, mistakes, disobedience. Though Jesus was tempted in all of these ways, we believe he never failed or disobeyed...hence nothing to confess.

And so in a sense here is where we differ from Jesus. In our desire, to be the people God created us to be...we fail, we disobey in a way Jesus never did.

But, while this virtue is not a virtue we see Jesus practicing, he did teach us that confession should be an important part of our lives. For example, when he is teaching his disciples to pray, he uses this phrase **“and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.”**

Acknowledge your failure. Practice confession. Jesus knew that it is something we desperately need to include in our lives as we seek to practice virtue.

Great theologian Augustine once remarked, **“The confession of evil works is the first beginning of good works.”**

If you desire a virtuous life, one of the key elements is confessing those moments when you are less than virtuous.

So let’s take a look at this Genesis 2.

This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created...

⁵ Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth^[a] and no plant had yet sprung up...⁷ Then the LORD God formed a man^[c] from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.

By the way, just as a matter of prudence and thoughtfulness related to theology. This passage in Genesis 2, is one of the reasons, many Bible scholars believe Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 are two separate accounts of creation. Similar to how we have 4 accounts of the life of Jesus, called the Gospels. Many scholars believe two different creation account. Have you ever noticed this before? In Genesis 1, on what day are plants created? Day 3. On what day are humans created? Day 6.

But in Genesis 2 we are told that... “no shrub or plant had yet sprung up” when God created humans. Interesting, isn’t it? This is one of the reasons, we talk about learning to take the Bible seriously, but not always literally. Let’s continue...

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. ¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; ¹⁷ but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”

You're probably familiar with some of this. God creates human beings, puts them in a garden and instructs them that they are not to eat from this one tree at the center of the garden. All is good, right? Turn the page. Genesis 3.

Genesis 3 - When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.

This is what we call deliberate disobedience. It's a little bit like the scenario of a parent telling their toddler. Don't throw your food on the floor. And for a moment parent and toddler have a stare down, and eventually the toddler thinks, I just want to see what happens when I do this. Deliberate disobedience. What do you do when you mess up?

Now, it's easy, to be hard on these first human beings. Like, come on you had one rule to follow, how could you mess this up? But let me just remind you, all too often, we are no different with God's instructions given to us. We may not realize it, because we don't practice confession. But we are no different.

God says, **“Do not get angry...”** Anybody in here lost their temper recently?

God says, **“Do not lust...”** Anybody in here lusted recently?

God says, **“Do not store up treasure on earth...”** Anybody in here storing up earthly treasures?

God says, **“Do not worry...”** Any worriers in the room today?

God says, **“Treat others the way Jesus treats you.”** Anybody in here treated someone else recently in a way that Jesus probably wouldn't have?

See this is why we're talking about confession. Sounds like an ancient churchy kind of word, and we wonder the relevance...but it's relevant to us, on a daily basis isn't it? What do you do when you mess up? Well most of do exactly what Adam and Eve did?

7 Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

8 Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. 9 But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?"

10 He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."

11 And he said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?"

12 The man said, "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it."

So there you have it, Biblical consent...for men to blame women for their sin, failure and disobedience. If you don't like it, it's right there in the Bible.

13 Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."

This is an important teachable moment. Usually, when we go to the Bible we go looking for instruction about what to do, how we should live, act, speak. But many times, Scripture, gives us just the opposite. Stories teaching us how not to live, act,

speaking. And that's what we get here. Two things that I think most of us can relate to, that we tend to do when we mess up rather than confession. One,

1. We hide it.

⁸ Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden...and they hid...

Our first and perhaps natural response to sin, failure and disobedience is to hide it.

It starts from the time we are little.

Dallas Willard tells a story about a little two year old girl name Larissa, who was in her backyard with grandmother, and discovered the secret to making mud (which she called "warm chocolate"). Her grandmother had been reading and was facing away from the action, but after cleaning up what was to her a mess, she told Larissa not to make any more warm chocolate and turned her chair around so as to be facing her granddaughter.

The little girl soon resumed her "warm chocolate" routine, but with one request posed as sweetly as a 2 year old can make it: "Don't look at me, Nana. Okay?" Nana (being a softie) of course agreed.

Larissa continued to manufacture warm chocolate. Three times she said, as she continued her work, "Don't look at me, Nana. Okay?"

Willard goes on to say: "**Thus the tender soul of a little child shows us how necessary it is to us that we be unobserved in our wrong.**"

Any time we choose to do wrong or to withhold doing right, we choose hiddenness as well. It may be that out of all the prayers that are ever spoken, the most common

one—the quietest one; the one that we least acknowledge making—is simply this:
Don't look at me, God.

The reality is that many of us replace confession with hiding.

And then second, when hiddenness doesn't cut it...when we are discovered, caught in our sin, our next mode of operation is...

2. We make excuses.

“This woman you gave me. It's her fault I ate the fruit.”

“Well it wasn't me, it was the serpent. He made me do it.”

Isn't this what we do so often with our failures?

We're late, not because we didn't leave early enough, but because of the slow car in front of us.

The capacity of human beings to make excuses and justify our behavior is staggering. It's not my fault.

“One of the greatest obstacles to effective spiritual formation in Christ today is simple failure to understand and acknowledge the reality of the human situation...” (Willard 45) Rather than confess, we make excuses, we justify and we never change.

And of course ultimately, where hiding and excuses lead us, is a life of shame.

3. We feel ashamed.

Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

This is why so many people walk around with a sense of shame about their lives. I know, I'm not the person I should be. I know I don't always treat people way I should. I don't always speak the way I should. But I don't want to admit. So, I hide, I justify it to myself, I make excuses and leaves me feeling ashamed.

So what is the alternative to hiding, ignoring, justifying our sin. What is the alternative to a life of shame. The answer is...

II. Practicing confession.

The courage to fess up to the mistakes, failures we have made. And I know this is not easy, it takes a lot of courage to practice confession. So let me just suggest a few ways that we can practice the virtue of confession. First,

A. Start with confession to God.

Why? Well you start with confession to God because God already knows.

Hebrews 4 - ¹³ Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Whatever it is you have done, whatever it is you have said or thought or that you are hiding deep within your soul, God already knows.

Sometimes, we go back to the adage I mentioned two weeks ago...ignorance is bliss. *"Maybe God won't notice. Maybe God is too busy taking care of the universe. I've done this before and he didn't strike me with lightning, so maybe it's not actually that big of a deal to God."* But deep down we know...God knows.

But more importantly, you start with confession to God because with God there is grace and forgiveness and abounding love about your sin, your failures and mistakes.

The writer of Hebrews goes on to tell us...

¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

The writers is saying, bring your weakness to God so that you may receive mercy and grace.

Richard Foster talks about the importance of a correct view of God in relation to confessing our sin. He writes...

“At the heart of God is the desire to forgive...”

Now pause for a moment. You need to think about this. God wants to forgive you. Foster goes onto write...

The usual notion of what Jesus did on the cross runs something like this: people were so bad and so mean and God was so angry with them that he could not forgive them unless somebody big enough took the rap for the whole lot of them...Nothing could be further from the truth. Love, not anger brought Jesus to the cross. Golgotha came as a result of God’s great desire to forgive, not his reluctance.” (Foster 143).

John tells us this very plainly in his Gospel... **“¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.**

You just need to know, when it comes to the sin in your life, God is not eager to condemn, rebuke and punish you.

The reason we begin with confession to God is because **even though he knows the worst about us, he loves us more than we could possibly imagine.** And when you internalize the reality of that statement it changes the way live. It frees you from your guilt and shame.

So that’s where confession starts. Raw, authentic, vulnerable...*“God I’m harboring bitterness and resentment in my heart towards that person. God I’ve been dishonest about this area of my life. God you know about this habit that I need to change.”*

Confession to God, eliminates the hiding and excuses and frees us from shame.

Ok, then second...there is...

B. Confession to others.

And this is where things get a little tougher. But we are actually encouraged to do this in Scripture. James 5 says,

¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.

Our fear, and it can be legitimate, is that if others find out about my sin, my failures, my disobedience, my weaknesses, they will stop loving me. They will judge me, condemn me, humiliate me. Sadly this is the reality in our world.

Remember the story that John tells in **John 8** – about the woman caught in adultery.

³ The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group ⁴ and said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. ⁵ The Law of Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?”

This is often, what happens in our world when someone’s sin is revealed. People respond with shock and horror, ready to throw stones. We become judgmental and harsh and condemning.

It’s really fascinating how Jesus chooses to resolve this scenario isn’t it? He says one sentence...

“Let anyone who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”

The crowds, the religious leaders...they had forgotten something so incredibly important...that they were sinners also.

Folks this is just so important for us to remember. Whenever you find out about someone else’s sin, failure, disobedience, weakness...it’s not a license to go share the news. That’s not what confession to others is about. It’s always good to remember that you also have sin, failure, disobedience, weakness in your own life.

⁹ At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. ¹⁰ Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” ¹¹ “No one, sir,” she said. “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”

Jesus always shows most clearly what God is like doesn't he? The heart of God is the desire to forgive...

So, just on a practical level when we talk about what it looks like to confess to another person. We don't mean you need to broadcast all of your sins and failures to the world or the entire congregation. I think that at least part of the answer is *"finding a trusted friend."*

Someone who you know, has your best interest at heart. Someone who can do for you what Jesus did for this woman. Someone who will challenge you and call you out...Jesus said, "Go now and leave your life of sin." This habit, this lifestyle, that attitude, that behavior...you need to leave that behind. Sometimes we call this **accountability**, right? That's really, I think what James is trying to encourage here. That confession to others, leads to accountability. Someone has said that "watched behavior" changes.

You know this is true, because when you pull out on the highway it is driving chaos. People are driving badly, they are speeding, they are weaving, cutting each other off. They are texting, they are talking on cell phones, they are getting distracted, they are getting angry, they are making non-faith based gestures at one another...and then a black and white car with a big flashing red light pulls onto the highway...and what happens? It's like a miracle, people slow down, people hit their brakes...although Jenny usually says to me, don't hit your brakes they'll know you were speeding, just take your foot off the accelerator. Cell phones get put away, fingers get retracted. What changes everything is accountability.

So confession with a trusted friends is about accountability.

But also notice Jesus said, **"neither do I condemn you."** In other words, the practice of confession with a trusted friend, must also be filled with extravagant, love and grace and forgiveness.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, ***“Our brother...has been given to us to help us. He hears the confession of our sins in Christ’s stead and he forgives us our sins in Christ’s name. He keeps the secret of our confession as God keeps it. When I go to my brother to confess, I am going to God.”*** (Foster 146)

So confession to God. Confession with a trusted friend.

And third when it comes to confession, just on a real practical level it’s helpful to...

C. Be as specific as possible.

Richard Foster writes, that when we practice confession... **“we must be prepared to deal with definite sins. A generalized confession may save us from humiliation, but it will not ignite inner healing. The people who came to Jesus came with obvious, specific sins, and they were forgiven for each one. It is far too easy to avoid our real guilt in a general confession.”** (Foster 151)

Think about the woman caught in the act of adultery. Her sin was laid completely bare before Jesus. It was about as specific and obvious as you could get. Think about Zacchaeus and his greedy heart, the rich younger ruler who came asking Jesus for eternal life, Peter and his deliberate denial of being a follower of Jesus. The specific act of disobedience was made known to Jesus.

If we don’t specific in our confession, then we allow our sin hide in obscurity and excuses...we get fuzzy with our sin. *“Well, did I really sin? Was it really that wrong?”* When we aren’t specific we are able to avoid dealing with our sin.

Remember last week, we said courage is the ability to face danger and fear and uncertainty head on. We said that when you are facing a difficult situation, if you

avoid it, if you don't look it square in the eye...even if things turn out well, you're sense of well-being or esteem goes down.

But if you are willing to **approach** it, to face it head on...even if the situation turns out badly, there's this surge of life inside of you.

This same principle seems to apply with confession. **Being specific in our confession, forces us to face the reality about our life condition head on. Excuses and the walls of obscurity start to crumble. And when we do, it opens the door to change and transformation.**

Ok, so let me close with this thought...why do all of this? Let me just mention...

D. The gift of confession.

As I said, this is not easy. It takes courage and discipline to practice confession in our lives. Is it worth it?

Remember what James tells us...

¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to each other ...so that you may be healed.

Or think about the passage from Hebrews...

¹⁶ Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

The purpose of confession is not so that you walk around feeling guilty and discouraged about your sin and failure. Just the opposite. The purpose of confession is so that you experience healing and forgiveness from your sin.

“Confession begins in sorrow, but it ends in joy. There is celebration in forgiveness of sins because it results in a genuinely changed life.” (Foster 153)

One of the most tiring efforts as a human being is the effort we put into pretending to be something we are not. Trying to hide and justify our faults and failures and weaknesses and shortcomings. Right? This is Adam and Eve, they knew they had done wrong, and so they were trying to hiding...avoiding God. Living in guilt and shame.

Perhaps you have felt that. You been walking around with an un-easy sense about something in your life? Maybe you can't sleep at night because of it. Maybe you have trouble relaxing. You can't place your finger on it. It's gnawing away at your sense of peace and contentment.

Scripture teaches us that the healing process and the pathway to a virtuous life, when we mess up, is confession.

“God is calling into being a church that can openly confess it's frail humanity and know the forgiving and empowering graces of Christ. Honesty leads to confession, and confession leads to change. May God give grace to the church once again to recover the virtue of confession.” (Foster 157)