“Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy.” Proverbs 28:13

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” 1 John 1:9

CONFESSION: Sharing our deepest weaknesses and failures with God and trusted others, so that we may enter into God’s grace and mercy and experience his ready forgiveness and healing. - A Year With God; Living out the Spiritual Disciplines by Foster and Roller

We are entering the last three weeks of observing Lent, that time of preparation set aside each year to ready our hearts and minds for the death and resurrection of Christ. It was intentional that confession was chosen for our emphasis this month as we work through the spiritual disciplines. Confession has to do not merely with our actions that are against God’s will, but also with our hearts. To confess is to acknowledge before God, and sometimes others, the wrong we have done. It is to agree with God about the state of our soul. Our sin is not news to God...so in saying it to Him, we are acknowledging that what we did was wrong by His standards. “To confess your sins to God is not to tell God anything God doesn’t already know. Until you confess them, however, they are the abyss between you. When you confess them, they become the Golden Gate Bridge.” Frederick Buechner, Beyond Worlds

We teach our children that when they do wrong, they must apologize. This not merely for our benefit, but for theirs. In addition, we want to teach them that confession
for confession’s sake does no good unless the heart is engaged. And, there may be
times when restitution is in order. So it is with God the Father who is attempting to
teach us on our journey what it means to confess our sins to Him. Like children, we
need to say it and then to hear that He still loves us, no matter what we have done. His
forgiveness is always available to us, accomplished through His son, Jesus. Like a
good parent, He will prod us through his Spirit when we are slow to see, bringing
conviction to our souls.

Confession is also to profess or declare what you know to be true about God. In
Matthew 10:32, Jesus says that “everyone who confesses Me before others, I will also
confess to the Father in heaven.” When you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord,
you acknowledge publicly He is your Savior. Thus, confession of sin and faith go hand
in hand--in fact are necessary to one another in the process of becoming spiritually
mature.

This guide is broken down into four parts, so that each week you can focus on a
different aspect of confession as we lead up to Easter. Week one will be about sin--its
seriousness, what it does to us, and how our relationships are affected. Week two will
be focused on what it means to repent. We will examine private and public confession.
We will do a case study of two Biblical characters. In week three, we will do an exercise
that will help us to look at how sin may be impeding us currently. During week four, we
will focus on what confession teaches us, what it allows in our lives and what we learn
about God in the process.
Our hope is that you will take extra time this month with God in prayer, silence and confession. Confession is a grace and a discipline. It is about what God has done for us, what we need to do in order to receive it, and how we acknowledge Him in the process. May you be blessed this month as you thoughtfully engage this discipline.

WEEK ONE: How Sin Affects Our Lives

Day One

Consider the passage in 1 John on which Denny preached. In verse 10, John states, “If we claim we have not sinned, we make him (Jesus) out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.” In Romans 3:23, Paul reminds us that “. . . for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Take time today with God to consider your own thoughts on sin.

- Take time today with God to consider your own thoughts on sin. What do you really believe about sin? How has it affected your life? What do you think about sin in your own life? Consider your responses to your own sin and how your responses draw you closer to Christ or lead you away from him.
- Ask God to reveal to you those sins you need to bring to him.
- As you finish your time reviewing the sin in your life, return to Romans 8:23 and be affirmed by the rest of the verse: . . . for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”

While we are all sinners, we are all also offered the forgiveness that comes through Jesus. Thank God for the sins he has revealed to you today and for the forgiveness offered to you from Christ.

Day Two

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’”

The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”

“You will not surely die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

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. 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.

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. Genesis 3: 1-8

- Review the fall of humanity.
- Reflect upon the desire to “be like God.” Ask yourself how often your sin has to do with wanting to be your own god or wanting your own way.
- Also consider how once sin had entered the garden, Adam and Eve hid from God. Sin breaks our relationship with God and others. How do you see this in your own life? Think about the times you have hidden from the Lord, allowing the burden of your guilt to separate you.
- Take time to pray for someone you may know who is isolating in their sin today.

**Day Three**

"The White Witch?" said Edmund; "who's she?"

"She is a perfectly terrible person," said Lucy. "She calls herself the Queen of Narnia though she has no right to be queen at all, and all the Fauns and Dryands and Naiads and Dwarfs and Animals—at least all the good ones—simply hate her. And she can turn people into stone and do all kinds of horrible things. And she has made a magic so that it is always winter in Narnia—always winter, but it never gets to Christmas. And she drives about on a sledge, drawn by reindeer, with her wand in her hand and a crown on her head."

Edmund was already feeling uncomfortable from having eaten too many sweets, and when he heard that the Lady he had made friends with was a dangerous witch he felt even more uncomfortable. But he still wanted to taste that Turkish Delight more than he wanted anything else.” The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, C.S. Lewis

- Have you made friends with your sin before realizing that it had the power to turn your heart to stone? Is there sin in your life, that even while you know it is “perfectly terrible” you want it more than you want anything else?
- Spend time with Jesus. Ask him to give you the strength and courage to recognize these sins in your life, to confess them and be set free of their hold over you.
Day Four

Consider the following two quotes and think about how they have been true in your life. Sit with the Lord in contemplation and allow Him to talk to you about it.

“Confession is a difficult Discipline for us because we all too often view the believing community as a fellowship of saints before we see it as a fellowship of sinners. We feel that everyone else has advanced so far into holiness that we are isolated and alone in our sin. We cannot bear to reveal our failures and shortcomings to others. We imagine that we are the only ones who have not stepped onto the high road to heaven. Therefore, we hide ourselves from one another and live in veiled lies and hypocrisy.” - Richard J. Foster, Celebration of Discipline

“A man who confesses his sins in the presence of a brother knows he is no longer alone with himself; he experiences the presence of God in the reality of the other person. As long as I am by myself in the confessions of my sins everything remains in the dark, but in the presence of a brother the sin has to be brought into the light.” - Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together

Day Five

“Misunderstanding, then, on this point of known or conscious sin, opens the way for great dangers in the higher Christian life. When a believer, who has as he trusts entered upon the highway of holiness, finds himself surprised into sin, he is tempted either to be utterly discouraged, and to give everything up as lost; or else, in order to preserve the doctrine untouched, he feels it necessary to cover his sin up, calling it infirmity, and refusing to be honest and aboveboard about it. Either of these courses is equally fatal to any real growth and progress in the life of holiness. The only way is to face the sad fact at once, call the thing by its right name, and discover, if possible, the reason and the remedy. This life of union with God requires the utmost honesty with Him and with ourselves. The blessing which the sin itself would only momentarily disturb, is sure to be lost by any dishonest dealing with it. A sudden failure is no reason for being discouraged and giving up all as lost. Neither is the integrity of our doctrine touched by it. We are not preaching a state, but a walk. The highway of holiness is not a place, but a way.” - from The Christian’s Secret of a Happy Life by Hannah Whitall Smith
Day Six

Allow the truth found within this hymn to speak to you about confession of sin and faith:

**Wonderful Grace of Jesus**
text and music by Haldor Lillenas (1918)

Wonderful grace of Jesus, Greater than all my sin;
How shall my tongue describe it, Where shall its praise begin?
Taking away my burden, Setting my spirit free,
For the wonderful grace of Jesus reaches me.

Chorus

Wonderful the matchless grace of Jesus,
Deeper than the mighty rolling sea;
Higher than the mountain, sparkling like a fountain,
All sufficient grace for even me, for even me;
Broader than the scope of my transgressions,
Greater far than all my sin and shame;
O magnify the precious name of Jesus,
Praise His name!

Wonderful grace of Jesus, Reading to all the lost,
By it I have been pardoned, Saved to the uttermost;
Chains have been torn asunder, Giving me liberty,
For the wonderful grace of Jesus reaches me.

Chorus

Wonderful grace of Jesus, Reaching the most defiled,
By its transforming power Making him God's dear child,
Purchasing peace and heaven For all eternity;
For the wonderful grace of Jesus reaches me.
WEEK TWO: Repentance

*Repent! The Kingdom of heaven is at hand!* --John the Baptist

*To be humbly ashamed is to be plunged in the cleansing bath of truth.* -- George MacDonald

Day One

Hosea 14:1-2, “Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity. Take words with you and return to the Lord; say to him, ‘Take away all guilt.’” Repentance means to “change one’s mind” about something and turn to God. Take a few minutes to meditate on this scripture. Think about what it teaches us about repentance and what Hosea is emphasizing.

Day Two

“If penance is viewed as a way of earning forgiveness, it is dangerous indeed. But if it is seen as an opportunity to pause a moment to consider the seriousness of our sin, then it has genuine merit. Today we take our offenses to the love of God far too lightly. If we had only a tinge of the sense of revulsion that God feels toward sin, we would be moved to holier living.” Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*

Take some time to think about Scripture passages where God’s heart was grieved by the sin of His people. What does His grief teach us about sin? Why does He grieve? Take some time in some of the gospel passages leading up to Jesus’ death. What lengths does God go to so that we might be free from sin? Talk to Him about some of these things today.

Day Three

David was a man ‘after God’s own heart.’ Yet there was an incident in his life where he allowed his passion to rule his judgment. In 2 Samuel 11 and 12, we read of David’s affair with Bathsheba, his cover up that led to the death of her husband and the ensuing consequence. Take some time to read this story. Then turn to Psalm 51. Write down your observations of David’s words, knowing his story. What strikes you about David’s confession? Does anything surprise you? What questions does it raise for you? What themes do you see?

Day Four

Read 1 Samuel 15:1-31. This is the story of how the Lord directed Saul to specifically do something and Saul disobeys. Review the story. Take time with it, focusing in on what Saul was doing when Samuel found him, Saul’s reaction to Samuel, and the language Saul uses when talking about God. What are your thoughts about this story?
Day Five

Compare and contrast the confession of David and Saul. Both were kings when this happened. What new things do you see about confession by studying these stories?

*Evangelical repentance is repentance of sin as sin: not of this sin nor of that, but of the whole mass. We repent of the sin of our nature as well as the sin of our practice. We bemoan sin within us and without us. We repent of sin itself as being an insult to God. Anything short of this is a mere surface repentance, and not a repentance which reaches to the bottom of the mischief. Repentance of the evil act, and not of the evil heart, is like men pumping water out of a leaky vessel, but forgetting to stop the leak. Some would dam up the stream, but leave the fountain still flowing; they would remove the eruption from the skin, but leave the disease in the flesh. --Charles Haddon Spurgeon*

Day Six

Hebrews 4:14-16

“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. 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. 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.”

Write down what you have learned about repentance this week. Take some time to acknowledge God’s loving, grace-filled presence in our lives that makes repentance possible.
“Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,” and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayers to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them. You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.” (Psalm 32:1-5)

This week, we want to give opportunity for you to explore things from your past that might be blocking your life in God. Holy Week is a good time to open ourselves up to God’s Spirit in a new way, inviting Him to speak words of life to us and allowing His action on the cross to cover our sins.

When Richard Foster was beginning his first pastorate, he had a growing conviction that something in his past was impeding his relationship with God. Here is what he writes about that time:

“I devised a plan. I divided my life into three periods; childhood, adolescence, adulthood. On the first day I came before God in prayer and meditation, pencil and paper in hand. Inviting him to reveal to me anything during my childhood that needed either forgiveness or healing or both. I waited in absolute silence for about ten minutes. Anything about my childhood that surfaced to my conscious mind, I wrote down. I made no attempts to analyze the items or put any value judgment on them. My assurance was that God would reveal anything that needed his healing touch. Having finished, I put the pencil and paper down for the day. The next day I went through the same exercise for my adolescent years, and the third day for my adult years.” (Celebration of Discipline, Confession)

Foster then took his paper to a friend who had agreed to read it with him. The friend then prayed a prayer over him, one he says remains with him to this day. The friend then tore up the pieces of paper, signifying that those sins are forgiven.

Consider taking some time this week to do a similar exercise. Maybe you might want to use different categories that make more sense for your life. Begin with a prayer of protection, asking God’s spirit to show you what things in your life are unconfessed or burdens you have not let go of yet. Take as much time as you need with it. If you are not ready to read it to someone else, read it aloud to the Lord. Feel free to rip up the paper as a sign that it is finished through Jesus’ work on the cross. If spiritual issues come up for you that you need to talk to a trusted friend or pastor about, don’t hesitate to ask for some time with them.
“Romantic love is blind to everything except what is lovable and lovely, but Christ’s love sees us with terrible clarity and sees us whole. Christ’s love so wishes our joy that it is ruthless against everything in us that diminishes our joy. The worst sentence Love can pass is that we behold the suffering which Love has endured for our sake, and that is also our acquittal. The justice and mercy of the judge are ultimately one.”- Frederick Buechner

WEEK FOUR: What Confession Brings in Our Lives

Day One

“Hold not our sins up against us, but hold us up against our sins, so that the thought of thee when it wakens in our soul. . .should not remind us of what we have committed, but of what Thou didst forgive, not of how we went astray, but of how Thou didst save us.”

-Soren Kierkegaard, The Living Thoughts of Kierkegaard

Day Two

Today take some time to read through Luke 15, where Jesus tells three parables about lost things.

Write down your thoughts on what we learn about sin, repentance, relationships and most of all about God.

The shepherd searches diligently for one that was lost. The woman upturns her house to find one coin. The father runs to embrace his prodigal son. He dances and rejoices over him. Zephaniah 3:17 says “The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quite you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.” Take time to experience God searching for you, running toward you with open arms, saving you from your sin, delighting in your return to him, and rejoicing over you with the songs of a father who loves you.

Day Three

“I see how the story of the father and his lost sons powerfully affirm that it was not I who chose God, but God who first chose me. This is the great mystery of our faith. We do not choose God, God chooses us. From all eternity we are hidden “in the shadow of God’s hand” and “engraved on his palm.” Before any human being touches us, God ‘forms us in secret’ and ‘textures us’ in the depth of the earth, and before a human decides about us, God ‘knits us together in our mother’s womb.’ God loves us before any human person can show love to us. He loves us with a first love, an unlimited,
unconditional love, wants us to be his beloved children, and tells us to become as loving as himself.

For most of my life I have struggled to find God, to know God, to love God. I have tried hard to follow the guidelines of the spiritual life—the guidelines of the spiritual life—to pray always, work for others, read the Scriptures—and to avoid the many temptations to dissipate myself. I have failed many times but always tried again, even when I was close to despair.

Now I wonder whether I have sufficiently realized that during all this time God has been trying to find me, to know me, and to love me. The question is not “How am I to find God?” But “How am I to let myself be found by Him?” The question is not, “How am I to Know God?” but “How am I to let myself be known by God?” And finally the question is not “How am I to love God” but “How am I to let myself be loved by God?”

God is looking into the distance for me, trying to find me, and longing to bring me home. In all three parables which Jesus tells in response to the question of why he eats with sinners, he puts the emphasis on God’s initiative. God is the shepherd who goes looking for the lost sheep. God is the woman who lights a lamp, sweeps out the house, and searches everywhere for her lost coin until she has found it. God is the father who watches and waits for his children, runs out to meet them, embraces them, pleads with them, begs and urges them to come home.

Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Chapter 8

Day Four

Colossians 3:13, “Bear with one another, and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must forgive.”

“Even when sin and misunderstanding burden the common life, is not the one who sins still a person with whom I too stand under the word of Christ? Will not another Christian’s sin be an occasion for me ever anew to give thanks that both of us may live in the forgiving love of God in Jesus Christ? Therefore, will not the very moment of great disillusionment with my brother or sister be incomparably wholesome for me because it so thoroughly teaches me that both of us can never live by our own words and deeds, but only by that one Word and deed that really binds us together, the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ? The bright day of Christian community dawns wherever the early morning mists of dreamy visions are lifting.”

Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 36-37

Consider your responses to other people’s sins. Think of the freedom found in forgiving one another and rejoicing in the forgiveness God extends to us all. Ask God to give you peace in your relationships and to help you forgive those whom you have not yet forgiven and encourage those who need to seek God’s forgiveness and the forgiveness of others.
Day Five

Having spent a month looking at confession, having gone through the celebration of Jesus’ death and resurrection, take some time to write out what God’s forgiveness means to you. Express to him how his forgiveness has changed and continues to change your life. Thank him for the ways he has set you free through his forgiveness of you and his help in your forgiveness of others. Consider why God chose to offer us forgiveness and write about how his motivation makes you feel about who you are in his eyes. Offer your praise and gratitude for Jesus’ sacrifice that allows us to be truly forgiven.

Day Six

*A prayer by St. Gemma Galgani*

My Jesus, I place all my sins before you.
In my estimation
They do not deserve pardon,
But I ask you
To close your eyes
To my want of merit
And open them
To your infinite merit.

Since you willed
To die for my sins,
Grant me forgiveness
For all of them.
Thus, I may no longer feel
The burden of my sins,
A burden that oppresses me
Beyond measure.

Assist me, dear Jesus,
For I desire to become good
No matter what the cost
Take away, destroy,
And utterly root out
Whatever you find in me
That is contrary
To your holy will.
At the same time, dear Jesus, illumine me
So that I may walk in your holy light.