

THE GOSPEL IN STEP 5

Let's recap the Gospel in the Twelve Steps to this point. We're now at step 5 in our teaching cycle (we teach through the twelve steps on a 12-month cycle) and we've identified Gospel principles in each step. Here is what they are:

Step 1: Victory in Christ starts with surrender to Christ. We enter the process of recovery, even as Christians, as rebels who have refused to submit to God's call on our lives, only to find ourselves enslaved to another power. We thought we were masters of our domain, only to find that we are slaves to another master. So we leave the enemy camp, lay down our arms, and surrender to the ultimate victor, King Jesus.

Step 2: Healing in Christ starts with hope in Christ. Our lives and circumstances appear hopeless, but as we surrender to Christ, begin to focus on him, begin to walk in obedience, no matter how much we stumble, a hope is stirred in us – the hope of Christ, that he cannot only save us from hell when we die, but he can in fact save us from the hell we find ourselves in now.

Step 3: Trust in Christ's work, Do your work. Our growing belief that Christ can heal us, rescue us, free us now shows in our actions. We commit to putting our faith in action. We are in the rowboat of salvation, in Christ literally, and we row two oars, the oar of faith (we are saved by grace, through faith alone) and the oar of action (saved to do the works God prepared in advance for us to do). This is an action step. It is a commitment. We are serious about healing, which brings God much joy.

Step 4: God keeps no record of sin. Psalm 130: If you, O Lord, kept a record of sin, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, and therefore you are feared. This is good news! And yet a record of sin exists. We make a searching a fearless moral inventory, a record of sin, so that as we see our sin for what is, we can truly experience God's grace as he makes the record disappear.

Tonight we come to step 5, which reads: "We admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs."

The word "admit" is a synonym for "confess," which is what step 5 is all about. We know the **exact nature** of our wrongs if we have really been faithful with our fourth step. We now see much more clearly how we had something to do with the wreckage of our lives (or we free ourselves by finally realizing we had no part in the wreckage). We are admitting, or confessing to ourselves that we have had a part in causing wreckage. But of course, forgiving ourselves doesn't do much if God does not forgive us, and so we confess to God the exact nature of our wrongs, and we confess these to a trusted brother or sister as well to be sure we truly understand that we are forgiven, that God indeed keeps no record of sin.

So this step is about confession. Here is the Gospel in step 5: **God blesses your confession.** God blesses your confession. And I don't know any better place to see this in God's word than Psalm 32. Now **I** confess that I just did a sermon on this psalm, and so some of what I say tonight may sound familiar. Plus, I've used Psalm 32 many times before in this setting. But it really is a go-to psalm for those of you still struggling with the honesty required in steps 4 and 5. There is

indeed joy and blessing when we confess – when we admit the exact nature of our wrongs. Let’s read it:

- 1 Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.
- 2 Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.
- 3 For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
- 4 For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. *Selah*
- 5 I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not cover my iniquity;
I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,”
and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. *Selah*
- 6 Therefore let everyone who is godly
offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found;
surely in the rush of great waters,
they shall not reach him.
- 7 You are a hiding place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with shouts of deliverance. *Selah*
- 8 I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.
- 9 Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding,
which must be curbed with bit and bridle,
or it will not stay near you.
- 10 Many are the sorrows of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the LORD.
- 11 Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, O righteous,
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!

I see this psalm as having a “chiastic structure.” What that means is that the climax of the psalm is in the middle, and the beginning and end point to the middle. So David starts with, “**Blessed** is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered, and against whom the Lord counts no iniquity.” And he ends

with, “Shout for joy, all you upright in heart!” We are blessed because we stand forgiven, we rejoice because the steadfast love of the Lord has made us upright in heart. And why? Because of what happens in verse 5: “I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover up my iniquity. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord, ***and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.***” God has blessed David’s confession, just as He blessed ours. David feels blessed, and is moved to shout with joy, as we should be when we really understand God’s forgiveness and mercy. This is the climax, but there is a process to get there. Maybe more accurately, God is always moving us to this place of joy, even in our despair and pain. Let’s look at how he uses our circumstances and pain to draw us to Himself.

Un-confessed = Pain

We are as sick as our secrets. This is a well-used saying in recovery, and really fits David’s experience in this psalm; “For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.”

Physical anguish and misery as a result of his silent sin – physically spent, unable to function. Can you relate? Of course you can. We have tried to deal with this pain by medication – the exact form of the medication is less important than recognizing the futility of that cure. We’ve not dealt with the secrets and so we remain very sick – we have an infection that is becoming systemic.

This is the entire point of steps 4 & 5 – to make a record of those secret sins, and then confess them. Of course, the word “confess,” as used in the New Testament, literally means, “agree with.” When we confess, we are literally agreeing with God about our sin, and the sins of others (remember we start with what others

have done to us in step 4 – the people, places and events that have caused us great pain and resentment – and then move to our part of the problem, which brings release and freedom).

So David not only finds that when he tries to keep his sin hidden it makes him sick – he is also aware of the righteousness and glory of God really weighing on him: “For day and night your hand was heavy upon me, and my strength was dried up as by the heat of the summer.” I find it interesting that the word “heavy” used here is used in other places for God’s glory. For example, when Isaiah has his vision of the glory of the LORD in chapter 6, and he hears the angels sing, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his **glory**,” it is the same word used here. It is as if the weight of God’s glory is weighing on us. Have you had that experience?

Understand that this is not God punishing us. It is God reaching out to us; it is God getting our attention; it is God disciplining us a father disciplines the children he loves. We are as sick as our secrets, and God is applying pressure right at the point of pain. He says, “Does it hurt? Does it hurt?” And we clench our teeth through the pain and say, “No, I’m fine. God is good. I’m working on a few things.” Confess your sin! Agree with God that it hurts **a lot!** When you do, the pressure eases.

Confessed = Blessed

Most of you here have done this. You’ve admitted that you’re sick because of secrets, and that it hurts a lot. We are no longer pretending that we are just fine – that the infection of our sin is nothing more than a “flesh wound.” It’s a

big reason why you're here, and it's an important first step in your recovery. But step 5 says that we are to admit "the exact nature of our wrongs." We know we're sick, we agree that it is most likely because of secrets we've kept for far too long, but we don't know the exact nature of those wrongs. That's the process of recovery, and a large portion of that work is done in step 4.

Paul often refers to the layers of the onion that need to get peeled to get to the sweet part – layers he never knew were there before. It is a Biblical and God-honoring work to peel those onions – evidence is seen in this psalm.

The totality of sin that David confesses is demonstrated by his use of three different words for sin, all with different nuances: sin, iniquity and transgression.

Our transgression indicates our rebellion against God – how we raise our fist in defiance: "I will do things my way." "I'm entitled to be in control of my life, the functional center of my universe.

Our sin is a measure of just how far we fall short of obeying God's law. It's a word that describes shooting an arrow and totally missing the target. We don't have to go too far down the list of the Ten Commandments to see how we've missed the mark. Our actions have let people down and they've let God down. Even when we try our hardest we keep screwing it up.

And our iniquity is an indication what our sin has done to us – we are guilty, unclean and twisted. What used to give pleasure or relief now just causes us to feel worse about ourselves. We know we have incurred a debt we can never repay.

It's a complete picture of sin – our pride makes us rebels; the weight of our sin burdens us with shame and fear, and our guilt confirms our verdict before the judge.

Hold nothing back. If you are as sick as your secrets, you are as healthy as your honesty. And the grace of our Lord is so evident in verse 5: “And you forgave the iniquity of my sin.”

We have a complete picture of sin, and we have a complete picture of forgiveness:

- Covered – David stops trying to cover his sin, and relies on God to do it. Verse 2: Blessed is the man whose sin is covered. David says in v. 5: I acknowledged my sin; I did not cover up my iniquity. It is the blood of the Lamb that covers our sin. It is an effective covering – God sees our sin when we try to cover it, he does not see our sin when Christ covers it with his blood.
- Forgiven – this is a sense of a great weight being lifted, the weight of our sin. I love the picture of a great weight lifted off given by John Bunyan in the Christian allegory, *Pilgrim's Progress*: “Christian ran up the way of salvation, but not without great difficulty because of the load on his back. So he ran until he came to a place somewhat elevated. Upon that place stood a Cross-, and below at the bottom there was a Tomb. I saw in my dream that just as Christian came up to the Cross, his burden came loose from his shoulders and fell off his back. It began to tumble and continued to do so until it came to the mouth of the Tomb.

It then fell into the Tomb, and I saw it no more. Then Christian was glad and relieved.”

- Count – Remember that I said “iniquity” has the sense of guilt, of incurring a debt that we can never repay. God does not count our iniquity against us. This is the definition of “justification.” We are declared not guilty because of the work of Christ on the Cross. We are guilty, but God has chosen to not count our iniquity against us. Our debt has been paid, and we walk out of court a free man or woman.

Our forgiveness is complete – a great weight has been lifted off; our sin is covered; our guilty verdict reversed by Christ. Confessed indeed equals blessed. This is the reality for the Christian, and it happens immediately upon confession. There’s no hesitation on David’s part: “I did not cover up my iniquity. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord, **and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.**” Boom! Done! There is joy even as David says this – it is the joy of confession, knowing that you are forgiven, pardoned and covered.

Community = Confidence

Nothing replaces spending time with the Lord, in prayer, meditation and Bible reading. Jesus loves you, and like anyone who loves you, he wants to spend some time with you. And it is during this time that you admit, you confess to him the exact nature of your wrongs. Now the psalmist tells us that there is joy and blessing when we do this. Is that your experience? For many, it is not. For many, the blessing and joy associated with confession happens in community.

The psalmist writes about his own sin, but he is sharing his experience with a whole congregation: “Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O You righteous (plural). Shout for joy, all you upright in heart (plural)!”

Who is it that surrounds us with shouts of deliverance (v.7)? It is God, speaking through his people, by the connecting power of his Spirit. In the same way, it is God’s people who surround us with his steadfast love (v.10). Who is it that counsels us, with his eye upon us (v.8)? It is God, and it is the people God has put in our place (sponsors and accountability partners).

Why do I so often say that we were created for relationship? I say it because it is often in the context of relationship that we experience the joy of God’s forgiveness.

I’ve already confessed about preaching Psalm 32 before. I’ve also referenced *Life Together*, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer several times before. But I love his chapter on confession, so I’m going to quote him again (and make this chapter available). Listen:

“He who is alone with his sin is utterly alone. It may be that Christians, notwithstanding corporate worship, common prayer, and all their fellowship in service, may still be left to their loneliness. The final breakthrough to fellowship **(community)** does not occur, because though they have fellowship with one another as believers and devout people, they do not have fellowship as the undevout, as sinners **(we have that at CR!)**” “You do not have to go on lying to yourself and your brothers (and sisters), as if you were without sin; you can dare to be a sinner. Thank God for that; He loves the sinner but He hates the sin.”

“In confession the break-through to community takes place. Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous is his isolation. Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light. In the darkness of the unexpressed it poisons the whole being of a person **(the infection of v. 3-4).**”

“Since the confession of sin is made in the presence of a Christian brother (or sister), the last stronghold of self-justification is abandoned. The sinner surrenders; he gives up all his evil. He gives his heart to God, and he finds the forgiveness of **all** his sin in the fellowship of Jesus Christ and his brother. The expressed, acknowledged sin has lost all its power.”

Now hear closely the connection of confession to the Cross of Jesus Christ:

“In confession occurs the breakthrough to the Cross. The root of all sin is pride. I want to be my own law, I have a right to myself, my hatred and my desires, my life and my death ... Confession in the presence of a brother is the profoundest kind of humiliation. It hurts, it cuts a man down, it is a dreadful blow to pride ... To stand there before a brother (or sister) as a sinner is an ignominy that is almost unbearable. In the confession of concrete sins the old man dies a painful, shameful death before the eyes of a brother (or sister).”

(Where’s the joy of confession in this? But consider Christ, as the writer of Hebrews says: “Look to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith,

who for the joy set before him endured the Cross, despising its shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Bonhoeffer: “It was none other than Jesus Christ himself who suffered the scandalous, public death of a sinner in our stead. He was not ashamed to be crucified for us as an evildoer. It is nothing else but our fellowship with Jesus Christ that leads us to the ignominious dying that comes in confession, in order that we may in truth share in the Cross. The Cross of Jesus Christ destroys all pride.”

Community = confidence: God gives us a brother or sister to hear our fourth step just so that we know we are forgiven; that God’s grace trumps any sin we may have committed; they remind us that our debt has been paid, that our sin is covered by his blood, and we have been declared not guilty.

Bonhoeffer: “Do we not deceive ourselves with our confession of sin to God, whether we have not rather been confessing our sins to ourselves and also granting absolution? And is not the reason perhaps for our countless relapses and the feebleness of our Christian obedience to be found precisely in the fact that we are living on self-forgiveness and not a real forgiveness?”

It is confession to a sponsor or accountability partner that gives us the confidence that **God** has “forgiven the iniquity of my sin.” And when we’re confident, then the joy that the psalmist talks about is ours.

As James says, we pray for one another, and confess our sins to one another, **so that we may be healed**. We find that God is now our hiding place (v.6). He delivers us from trouble; the rushing waters threatening to drown us don’t reach us. He surrounds us with shouts of deliverance. Healing now happens. In step 5,

the sponsor reinforces these truths. It is the reason we can be blessed and joyful, no matter how hard and painful the work of confession. Consider Christ, who for the joy set before him, endured the Cross, despising its shame.

And as you listen to all of this, remember you don't have to wait to step 5 to practice the discipline of confession. It is Christian to confess. It's how we connect to Christ, connect to his work on the Cross and receive the blessing that comes with knowing he has paid the price for our sins. Remember, confessed equals blessed, and community equals confidence, at all times. "Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, all you CR people. Shout for joy, all you forgiven ones in Christ!"