

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
March 11, 2012
Lee Hanssen
Spiritual Disciplines: Confession
I John 1:7-10**

My name is Lee Hanssen and I'm on staff here with Student Ministries. I'm not exactly sure what the calendar says about when spring is or isn't here, but the days are getting longer, the temperatures are rising, and I am wearing purple, all signs that spring has officially come. I am choosing to believe, and I hope you will with me, that we will see no more cold weather.

I have often said that one of the reasons I love to preach so much is that every time I do, God seems to do something significant in my life. In an effort to be both honest and vulnerable with you and to help you see that your pastoral staff is as human as you are, I want to share a story that didn't happen a month ago or a few weeks ago, but happened just this past Tuesday.

I was having a conversation with John Mitchell. It was supposed to be a great conversation. John is our executive pastor here. We were probably both excited about getting together. I didn't see any conflict coming with this conversation, and I think we both walked into it feeling that way. Well, that's not how the conversation went. As we started to converse about different things, something started to happen. I started to get a little worked up and say some things out of anger, and John started to get defensive. We started this circle of unhealthy communication, so much so that when John was going to drive me back to church, I said, "You know, John, I think I'm just going to walk." John doesn't live very far away, and so I walked back to church.

As I left, I was thinking, "How did this happen? What just happened?" I was praying and asking the Lord to forgive my anger and my frustration and my harsh words. I can imagine John was having a similar conversation with the Lord. Praise the Lord for John's humility and his leadership because not long after I left, I got an email from him saying, "Lee, we really need to meet again. I'd love to see you on Thursday. Hopefully we can clear our calendars a bit and spend some significant time just praying for each other and figuring out how we got to where we did." So on Thursday, John and I met again. We spent a half an hour just looking each other in the eye, sitting across the table, both of us confessing sin, extending grace, and praying for each other. God does always does a significant work whenever I get to preach, and this week He did a significant work in my life about this idea of confession.

There was a time in my life for about five years when I took summer assignments with Campus Ministry. The assignments were called summer projects. I was sent to different locations often packed with lots of tourists and foreigners, and student leaders would come from across the country to spend the summer learning how to share their faith, lead discipleship groups and outreaches and small groups, and work on different practical ministry skills. I would be given a set of five or six guys, and it was my job for the summer to develop them. Along with me getting these guys, at the same time I was given an older, Godly man to teach me the same thing in my

life that I was teaching the younger men. I would like for you to meet Jake, Jared, Andy, Ben, and Austin. (*Slide shown*).

I spent the summer of 2009 on the beach of Ocean City, New Jersey with these five men. Not long after I arrived, I met Chip, the man who was going to be discipling me, and he quickly recognized that I have a lot of issues. Chip said to me, "Lee, I'd really like for you to consider something." I said, "Sure, whatever. Let me know. What is it?" He said, "This summer I'd really like for you to consider leading out of a place of humility and vulnerability because I think you have a tendency to lead from your competence and your strength."

I let that simmer because I really did want to lead out of a place of humility and vulnerability, but that's a difficult thing for me to do. I think it is a difficult thing for anybody to do. But I took it into consideration and thought about how I could do this. It didn't take me long to recognize that nothing is more humbling for me, nothing causes me to be more vulnerable, than to let people see my sin, the dark areas of my life, my dirty laundry, and just put it out there. So before I met these guys, I made a laundry list of areas where I continuously fall short. Then I took it a step further and also made a list of things I had never spoken out loud, things I had had conversations with the Lord about but had never brought into the light of fellowship with other believers. These were things that I literally thought if anyone found out about, I would be mortified. If people knew these things about me, they would never follow me. But I decided I was going to share these things and that that was how we would start our summer.

Then I thought it would be a great idea to invite these men to participate in the same process. I sat down with them at lunch and told the guys, "I want you to think about the things about yourselves that you would be terrified if anyone would find out about." I could see that they all had them. I said, "Great! Now we are going to share them with each other tonight." I thought their eyes were going to pop out of their heads. Needless to say, that night came and it took a lot of courage, but we sat around in a circle, and I led and started to share these things. One by one I watched these men follow suit. They looked each other in the eye and shared the things that kept them enslaved and caused them great guilt and shame and fear. Literally, I could hear the Lord hammering off the chains as we sat around, confessed our sin, and prayed for each other. We experienced the radical grace of God that comes only when we come honestly before Him and confess our sin.

It didn't just change our group, it changed the entire summer project. People saw what we had, and they wanted it too, and it affected my own relationship with the Lord. I've never spent a summer in more freedom than the summer of 2009, walking the beaches of Ocean City, New Jersey. The thought occurred to me after this incident that if these men of college age in their flesh as sinful as they were could know those things about me, my flaws, my faults, the areas where I continually fall short, if they could know those things and look at me with love and extend forgiveness and believe that Jesus' blood has covered my sin, I thought how much more must the Lord really mean it when He says that He will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. How much more must the Lord feel that way about us? Richard Foster writes this in his book *Celebration of Discipline*.

Confession is a difficult discipline for us because we all too often view the believing community as a fellowship of saints before we view 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 shortcomings and failures to others. We imagine that we are the only ones who have not stepped onto the high road of heaven. Therefore, we hide ourselves from one another and live in veiled lies and hypocrisy.

Looking back at the very first accounts of sin in the Scriptures in Genesis, we see Adam and Eve usher sin into the world. We see their response to their sin.

⁸ ...they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden.

They hid and covered up and were ashamed. The text says that God's amazing first question to Adam was

⁹ ..."Where are you?"

In that simple question, God reveals his position toward us even in our sin. God desires not that we would move away from His presence when we sin but that we would come back to His presence, and He is in relentless pursuit to make sure that that happens. We see it in Genesis and we see it in the New Testament as Jesus sat around the table, not with the Pharisees, not with the religious folks who thought they had it all together, but with the tax collectors and the harlots. It lands on me how much like Adam and Eve we really are. When we are confronted, whether it is with our greed, our lust, anger, jealousy, rage, materialism - instead of moving back into the presence of the Lord, we cover it up. We minimize it. We justify it. We hide from it instead of standing before the Lord confessing and receiving His radical grace that will transform our lives.

I don't know how it happened but somehow, somewhere, we have come up with the idea that we can sin our way right out of God's love. I just don't believe that is what the Scriptures teach, but we are afraid sometimes that someone might know or find out, even that the Lord might find out. It is hard to say the things we have done back to the Lord, but I love the text in 1st Kings 17:1 where Elijah says,

¹ "...As the LORD God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand...." I love that picture and have actually drawn it in my journal many times. I've drawn myself with a suitcase labeled *sin* standing before the presence of the Lord. "As the Lord, the God of Israel, liveth, before whom I stand...." Ever since the beginning of time, this is what the Lord has required. This is what He has asked, not to minimize the effects or the weight of our sin or slough off His call for us to pursue a holy and righteous lifestyle but that we would simply come and stand before Him, as a body, as a community of believers, and enter together into the scary, uncomfortable, perhaps terrifying practice of confession that is ultimately a healing and transformative process.

The text I want us to look at today is found in 1st John 1:8-10.

⁸ If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.

Some of you know that I lived quite a bit of my life away from the presence of Christ. I didn't become a believer until I was 21. Lots of things happened in my life before I came to Christ that I am not thrilled about and perhaps I would change some of them. People ask me all the time if I regret my story, if I look at those 21 years and regret my life before Jesus. That is a hard question for me to answer because as I said, there are things I am not proud of or maybe wish would have been a little different, but I don't think that I regret my story because I know without a doubt what it feels like to be lost and live in darkness. I know that I have a great need for a great Savior. This month *CPC Life* is filled with redemption stories. How appropriate that John Crosby in his redemption story shares similar sentiments. He says,

...I spent more time in darkness than a lot of people would have known. You don't automatically undo the drinking, sex, and language. It took time to move away from the "destroy and conquer" relationships I had with women, those things that not only leave scars, but you can't just flick off like a switch. I lived in tension all the way through college and even when I joined the staff of Campus Life after college.

John goes on to say he shared that because when he brought his sinful, ragged life before God's throne and confessed his sin before the Lord, he received the radical grace that transformed his life. I've always been really big on the *why* of things. I don't really like doing things I don't understand. The more I am in church, the more I recognize that when we as believers, and I see it happen all the time, engage in activities without understanding in our hearts why we are doing them, then we are involved, not in a lifestyle of faith but a lifestyle of behavior modification. When it comes to confession, I think it is important that we understand why we are called to confess. The simple answer to why we are called to confess is because we are full of sin. As the text says, if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. We have all fallen short of the glory of God.

It is interesting to me that if we know everyone has sin, why we so desperately try to make sure nobody ever sees it. In college a friend of mine said to me that the best thing that could happen to believers would be that they would have their sin broadcast across the 5 o'clock news. That thought is mortifying and yet somehow at the same time incredibly refreshing. A few years ago in seminary I had the privilege of studying the Book of Hebrews. It talks a lot about the Law and the priesthood, but I didn't really understand it so I spent a lot of time in the Old Testament studying Levitical Law and the Ten Commandments. I wish I had more time to share all those thoughts with you, but the conclusion of my study was this - the Law's intention was never to be a cold, hard and fast set of rules for us to dot our i's and cross our t's at every rule. Its intent was to establish a standard of living that reflects God's perfect and holy character that is uniquely different from the rest of His creation. In Romans 7:7 Paul says at the end of the day, God's Law points us to His perfect character.

⁷Nevertheless, I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law.

Then in Galatians 3:24 Paul goes on to say,

²⁴ So the law was put in charge of us until Christ came that we might be justified by faith.

The Law helps us see our sin and understand our great need for a great Savior. 1st John 1:8-10 goes on to say,

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

I love it when I see as I so often do in the Scriptures, that He will forgive us our sins. If you think of the laundry list of the things and ways you have fallen short, as if it wouldn't be good enough for God to just simply say "I forgive you" as is fitting with His character, He takes it an extra step and says, "Not only am I going to forgive you, but I want to cleanse you from *all* unrighteousness. I don't want you to feel the weight of that. I don't want you to feel like you have to carry that around like a bag tied around your leg, limping along through your life. I want to cleanse you from all of it." Just like Jody's picture, erased, forgotten, forgiven, and cleansed.

But I wonder what happens when we don't confess our sin. What happens to our souls? What happens to us? What happens to the believers in the Body of Christ when we choose to live in darkness? When we choose not to confess and bring our sin into the light? I have experienced and felt and watched and seen unconfessed sin bring shame and guilt and imprisonment. Ultimately, it affects and comes in between our relationship with God.

I want to make a key distinction here between our relationship with God and our standing and position in Christ because following Jesus is a lifetime thing that we have to do and choose to engage in, but saying yes to Christ, accepting Jesus as our Savior, is a one-time thing. The Scriptures promise us that when we accept Christ as our Lord and Savior we are sealed with the Spirit. It is a done deal. I don't believe the Scriptures teach that you can somehow sin your way out of it or fall out of it.

Let me put it this way, I have a brother named Chris, and I'm not incredibly proud of this story, but when I was about 20 years old, Chris and I were at a wedding, and I flew off the handle. We got into big argument, and I ended up punching Chris in the face. Praise the Lord that my brother had a little bit more self-control than I did and did not choose to punch me back. But whether I punched Chris one time or 50 times, no matter how many times I punched Chris, it would never have made him less my brother. I could punch him all day long, and it wouldn't make Chris not my brother, but what it will do and what it did do was affect our relationship. Chris and I have reconciled, and he is one of my best friends, but for a while there, we had a lot of tension. We weren't communicating well. I was not intimately connected with the details of Chris' life nor was he intimately connected with the details of mine, and that relationship bled over into family dynamics at holidays and gatherings. But it never made him less my brother.

That is how I believe it is with sin. Sin does not change your standing before God. If you are *in Christ*, if you are in the New Covenant where His blood covers your sin; sin does not affect your standing before God but it will certainly affect your relationship. Think of it this way. If you put a loaf of bread on the counter and you put a loaf of bread in a dark place, where is the mold going to grow faster? Mold grows in the dark. When we choose to hold our sin back and not confess it to the Lord and to others, just like the moldy bread, it runs rampant in the dark places of our lives.

All over the Scriptures we see this idea of walking in the light. It is another way of God inviting us to live as confessors. It is a way of God inviting us to bring our sin into the light, to speak these things out loud, both to the Lord and to others. Notice the order I say that in. I want to make something very clear. **God calls us to confess to Him first.** When you sin, yes, your sin

will affect other people and affect the relationships with your spouses, your children, your friends, and your family, but it affects nobody more than God. It breaks no one's heart more than His heart when you sin. In a famous psalm, Psalm 51, David says,

⁴ Against you, you only, have I sinned....

David understood the perspective that first and foremost he was to address the Lord with his sin. Well, relationships are wonderful and good. I've even heard it said by Dr. Henry Cloud that people were God's Plan A. We live in a highly relational world, and that is a good thing, but God has to come first. Lately I have felt convicted how so many times when I have an argument or come across a situation that doesn't land right on me, how quickly I want to run to other people and tell them about it. Well, that is not confessing. That is gossip. It is slander and it is sin.

In my heart, my true heart, I know I must first go to the Lord and stand before Him and confess my sin that He might lavish true grace that no person, no relationship, no spouse, no child, no friend can give me. We need to regularly create space in our lives to be in private confession with God. **Then I believe it is our natural response to go and confess to other people**, but not before we confess to the Lord. Walking in the light cannot be done in solitary confinement. God uses people to heal and bring grace and truth to our lives. I think when we combine these two ideas of confessing to the Lord and confessing to our brothers and sisters in Christ, then we come to a Biblical view and understanding of what confession was meant to be.

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

There is a picture I have always loved out of a Book in the Bible that is often left untouched, the Book of Revelation. In chapter 19 John writes of Jesus coming back for us. John says,

¹¹ I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse....

He is speaking of Jesus. Then of all the words that John could have used to describe Him, of all the things that he could have said, John simply says,

...whose rider is called Faithful and True.

John says this Jesus guy, He really is who He says He is, and He really is going to do everything He says He is going to do. He says in His Word that He is faithful, and He says in His Word that He is just, and He promises us in His Word that He will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from *all* unrighteousness.

So, yes, this is a message about confession, but ultimately it is a message about the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. From 2nd Corinthians 5, it is a message that

²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

We don't have to run from, hide, minimize, or justify our sin. Because of Jesus' perfect, complete work on the cross, we can boldly approach the throne of grace to receive exactly what

we need - God's mercy and His grace in our deepest and darkest hour. So often today I find myself running from thing to thing, barely catching my breath. I find myself eating lunch in my car because I didn't have time to sit down at whatever restaurant where I picked up my food. I call it the noise of life. Your cell phone starts ringing in the morning. Your emails start popping off, and before you know it, it's 11:00 o'clock at night and you're in bed, wondering what has happened to your day. In that process my best intentions so often fall short.

The things I set out to do so often don't get done, and so this morning, right here and right now, we want to take just a few minutes to stand before the Lord together to confess, to have a conversation, and begin this process. I don't know everyone in this room and so I don't want to assume that everyone knows what it means, what it actually looks like to confess our sin. I want to both lead you through a time that I hope is intimate between you and the Lord and show you what it looks like to confess your sin before a Holy God. I am going to read, and I would invite you to close your eyes or whatever you need to do to feel comfortable. Take this time to process these words with the Lord and confess your sin that you might experience His faithful forgiveness and His mercy and His blessing.

God of Mercy whose Son Jesus Christ longs to gather us in the wide embrace of His love, together we confess that we have disobeyed Your commands. Our ears have been deaf to Your call, and our hearts have been cold to Your love.

(Pause.)

God of Compassion, in Jesus Christ You did not disdain the company of sinners but welcomed them with love. Our sins are more than we can bear. Our pasts enslave us, and our misdeeds are beyond correcting. Forgive the wrongs we cannot undo. Free us from pasts we cannot change and heal what we can no longer fix.

(Pause.)

Merciful and Holy God, grace our lives with Your love and turn the tears of our pasts into the joys of new life with You. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.