

session 3 study guide

confession

starter

TRUE CONFESSIONS: Some things are easier than others to confess. Start easy:

Something very few people know about me is

If I could go anywhere in the world, I would go to

If I could do or be anything, I would

If I could choose a gift, I would get

My most embarrassing moment was

message

The stuff that is usually hardest to confess is our sin. If we feel embarrassed to admit when we've made simple mistakes, it's not surprising that we feel guilty and ashamed to admit when we've sinned. Below is a story from Jesus' life told in John 8:1-11 that offers a surprising twist on who should be ashamed and who needn't be. As you read these verses, consider the following questions: (1) What did the woman in the story do? (2) How did Jesus respond to the Pharisees? (3) Why did Jesus offer her forgiveness?

But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

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. Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

"No one, sir," she said.

"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

1. Put yourself in the adulterous woman's place. How would it feel to have your sin exposed to a crowd?

2. Now imagine that you are one of the woman's accusers. Even though Jesus did not get specific or recommend that they be stoned to death, He "exposed" their sin, too. How do you think that felt?

3. When the woman's accusers "admitted" their sin, they walked away. The woman, on the other hand, stayed with Jesus—and He forgave her. What do you think might have happened if the accusers had stayed, too?

4. What the woman did—commit adultery—was a terrible sin, possibly worse than the sins committed by her accusers. Yet Jesus forgave her. Why were her sins forgiven while the accusers' sins were not?

5. Are you holding on to a sin, instead of confessing and receiving forgiveness, because you are afraid of exposure? What do you find reassuring about the woman's story?

6. It's easy to focus on how disgusting other people's sins are in comparison to our own. List three celebrities and their sins that have recently been exposed in the media.

Celebrity #1: _____

His/her sin: _____

Celebrity #2: _____

His/her sin: _____

Celebrity #3: _____

His/her sin: _____

7. When you talk with your friends about celebrities' sins (or about other friends' sins!), how are you like the adulterous woman's accusers?

8. What is one thing you can do to remind yourself that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23)? (“All” includes you!)

9. The word “confess” actually means *to agree*. Confessing your sins to God is agreeing with Him that you, like everyone else, fall short of perfection. Read these verses on confession and forgiveness and discuss what they mean with your group or with a friend.

1 John 1:9:

Psalm 86:5:

Isaiah 1:18:

Hebrews 10:17:

dig

God provided a way for the ancient Israelites to confess their sins and receive forgiveness. Some of the Old Testament (especially the book of Leviticus) contains instructions for these rituals, which emphasized animal sacrifice. Although the slaughter of animals may be sickening to contemplate in our day, the message is still clear: *Sin leads to death.*

Because the Jewish people were intimately familiar with the idea that pardon from sin requires a sacrifice, Jesus' death on the cross was a powerful symbol of God's once-and-for-all gift of forgiveness. The author of the book of Hebrews explains it like this:

But when the Messiah arrived, high priest of the superior things of this new covenant, he . . . bypassed the sacrifices consisting of goat and calf blood, instead using his own blood as the price to set us free once and for all. If that animal blood and the other rituals of purification were effective in cleaning up certain matters of our religion and behavior, think how much more the blood of Christ cleans up our whole lives, inside and out. Through the Spirit, Christ offered himself as an unblemished sacrifice, freeing us from all those dead-end efforts to make ourselves respectable, so that we can live all out for God.

Like a will that takes effect when someone dies, the new covenant was put into action at Jesus' death. His death marked the transition from the old plan to the new one, canceling the old obligations and accompanying sins, and summoning the heirs to receive the eternal inheritance that was promised them. He brought together God and his people in this new way.

Even the first plan required a death to set it in motion. After Moses had read out all the terms of the plan of the law—God's "will"—he took the blood of sacrificed animals and, in a solemn ritual, sprinkled the document and the people who were its beneficiaries. And then he attested its validity with the words, "This is the blood of the covenant commanded by God." He did the same thing with the place of worship and its furniture. Moses said to the people, "This is the blood of the covenant God has established with you." Practically everything in a will hinges on a death. That's why blood, the evidence of death, is used so much in our tradition, especially regarding forgiveness of sins (Hebrews 9:11-22, THE MESSAGE).

1. Why is the blood of Christ different from the blood of sacrificed animals?

2. Leviticus 17:11 states, "For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life." According to this verse, why is blood important?

3. Hebrews 9:22 says, “That’s why blood, the evidence of death, is used so much in our tradition, especially regarding forgiveness of sins.” Summarize, in your own words, how blood and forgiveness of sins are related.

Bestselling Christian author Max Lucado tells an unforgettable story of a mother and her four-year-old daughter. Susanna (the mom) and her daughter, Gayaney, were trying on clothes at her sister-in-law’s home when the worst earthquake in the history of Armenia hit. There were 55,000 victims in this one quake.

They were on the fifth floor of an apartment building; the next thing they knew they had tumbled into the basement. Susanna and Gayaney were still alive but they were totally stuck and could not get up. “Mommy, I need a drink. Please give me something,” was the cry of little Gayaney. Susanna found a 24-ounce jar of blackberry jam that had fallen into the basement. She gave the entire jar to her daughter to eat. It was gone by the second day.

“Mommy, I’m so thirsty.” Susanna didn’t know what to do. Truthfully, there was nothing she could do to help her daughter. They were trapped for eight days. Susanna lost track of time. She was cold and numb, and she lost hope. Periodically Susanna would sleep but usually awakened from the whining and whimpering of her precious daughter. “Mommy, I’m thirsty. Please give me something to drink.” She then remembered that it was possible to drink blood! So she cut her left index finger and gave it to her daughter to suck. The drops of blood were not enough. “Please, Mommy, some more. Cut another finger.” Susanna had no idea how many times she cut herself but if she hadn’t, Gayaney would have died. Susanna’s blood was her daughter’s only hope.¹

Max Lucado writes about this episode this way:

Beneath the rubble of a fallen world, he pierced his hands. In the wreckage of a collapsed humanity, he ripped open his side. His children were trapped, so he gave his blood.

It was all he had. His friends were gone. His strength was waning. His possessions had been gambled away at his feet. Even his Father had turned his head. His blood was all he had. But his blood was all it took.

“If anyone is thirsty,” Jesus once said, “Let him come to me and drink. . . .”
And the hand was pierced.
And the blood was poured.
And the children are saved.²

4. What is your response to this story?

5. What does Jesus’ sacrifice mean to you?

apply

Saint Peter’s Square, May 1981, was the scene of a terrible event that shocked the world: an assassination attempt on Pope John Paul II. But the scene was quite different nearly three years later when Pope John Paul sat in Rome’s Rebibbia Prison holding the hand of his would-be assassin, Mehmet Ali Agca. The Pope forgave the man for the attempt on his life. What a tremendous story of forgiveness and reconciliation! As the Pope whispered quietly in that cell, he preached a message loud and clear to the entire world.

1. How would you feel about a person who tried to kill you?

2. How do you think the assassin felt after the Pope's message of forgiveness?

3. Can you imagine forgiving such an enormous offence? Why or why not?

4. It is uncommon in our world to forgive and forget—most of us are fond of holding grudges. Do you think it is possible to truly release someone from their debt to you? Why or why not?

5. Jesus said, “For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Matthew 6:14-15). Why do you think our forgiveness from the heavenly Father is dependent on our forgiveness of others?

6. Is there someone who has sinned against you whom you have not yet forgiven? What is keeping you from extending forgiveness to that person?

reflect

God has made a way, because of His love for us, to forgive our sins. He is ready, willing and able to forgive us the moment we confess. But He does not want us to stop with private confession, “just between You and me.” Keep the story of the woman caught in adultery in mind as you read James 5:16: “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.”

1. According to this verse, to whom are we supposed to confess our sins? Why?

2. Why do you think healing comes when we confess our sins to each other?

3. Have you ever confessed your sin to another person? If so, what was that experience like? If not, what has kept you from doing so?

4. How do you think confessing your sins to another believer could help you resist temptation in the future?

5. Do you ever have a hard time forgiving yourself for your sins? Do you think forgiving yourself might be easier if you confessed to another person? Why or why not?

6. Take a few minutes right now to write a prayer of confession. When you are ready, share it with a trustworthy Christian friend or pastor. Let the healing begin!

meditation



For I will forgive their wickedness and will
remember their sins no more.

JEREMIAH 31:34

Notes

1. Max Lucado, *The Applause of Heaven* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1996), pp. 94-95.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 96,98.