

Sermon – Faith Alignment
Sunday June 23, 2024

How many of you have ever made a mistake?

Maybe it was something small like losing your keys, missing an appointment or forgetting an important date.

Maybe it was something bigger like lying to a friend, lashing out at a family member or not honouring a commitment.

What do you do after you've made a mistake?

Do you pretend it didn't happen and move on? Or do you take full responsibility? You do some self-reflection and you approach the person you've mistreated and say, "I was wrong. I know my actions hurt you and I'm sorry and I want to make things right. Will you forgive me?"

How many of you can admit when you're wrong?

How many of you don't have to because you're never wrong?

Confession isn't easy. According to one study, 70 percent of people hate admitting they're wrong. Why is that? What is it about confession that makes it so hard to do?

- Maybe we're too concerned with our image.
- Maybe our egos are too fragile.
- Maybe we don't like the feeling of guilt and shame.
- Maybe we don't want to face the consequences.
- Maybe we're afraid people will take advantage of our vulnerability.

Confession isn't easy. So let's practice it together. Turn to your neighbour and say, "I was wrong." Now turn to your other neighbour and say, "I was wrong not to tell you first."

Confession isn't easy. Yet every psychologist knows that confession is the doorway to personal growth.

- Confession frees you from your guilt and shame.
- Confession heals your wounds and emotions.
- Confession restores trust in your relationships.
- Confession sets you on a journey of personal growth.

Christian philosopher Isidore of Seville says, **Confession heals, confession justifies, confession grants pardon of sin, all hope consists in confession; in confession there is a chance for mercy. (Isidore of Seville)**

So how can we come clean and experience God's mercy? How can we overcome our pride and confess our sins?

We're in a series called *Re-Visioning: Pursuing God's Purpose Through Fresh Eyes*. Cornerstone is in a new season of discerning God's long-term vision and we're studying the book of Nehemiah to learn how.

What's the book of Nehemiah about? Most people think it's about the people rebuilding the walls. At the beginning of the book, the Jews are living as exiles in Persia. They've been permitted to return to Jerusalem but some of these Jews have come back with a report that the walls are in ruins.

So Nehemiah prays. After a few months, he approaches the King of Persia and asks for permission to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls.

Nehemiah is great example of prayerful and inspiring leadership. He prays to God, mobilizes the people and perseveres through adversity. And finally in Nehemiah 6, they finish the job! They complete the walls and it only takes them 52 days!

The story's over right? But if that's the case, why does the book of Nehemiah continue on for 7 more chapters?

Here's why. It's because **The real story in Nehemiah isn't about the people rebuilding the walls, it's about God rebuilding the people.**

Yes, the walls needed to be rebuilt. Yes, the walls were a sign that God was restoring the nation. But to restore the nation, God doesn't just need his people to rebuild the walls. God needs to rebuild his people. Because after years of living in fear, disobedience and hopelessness, he needs to rebuild their lives. He needs to renew their hearts, reestablish their identity and reinstate them for his mission.

How does God do that?

Last week, we looked at how the people gathered to study God's Word. Ezra and the other leaders teach the people God's law. Because returning to God's word is crucial to re-aligning our faith - especially when we're in a new season or transition.

Why? Because according to the Bible, God's Word is like a mirror.

- It shows us what's wrong with our hearts.
- It exposes our true motivations.
- It shows us the way home.

The apostle James says that if we hear God's Word but walk away without realizing we have a problem, then we're only deceiving ourselves.

In Nehemiah 8, the people hear God's Word and they rejoice. But in Nehemiah 9, after hearing God's Word – their hearts are unsettled. They're convicted of their sin and they feel remorse for their actions.

But instead of minimizing their sin, instead of blaming their circumstances, instead of avoiding responsibility – what do they do? The people humble themselves, come to God and confess their sins.

This is the posture we need for God to rebuild our lives. This is the posture we need to receive God's healing and forgiveness. Because **Deep renewal requires honest confession.**

Please turn with me in your Bibles to our passage today - Nehemiah 9:1-3.

On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads. ²Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the sins of their ancestors. ³They

stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter in confession and in worshipping the LORD their God. (Nehemiah 9:1-3)

The people are holding a worship service. Verse 3 says that this service lasts for 6 hours! For the first 3 hours, the people are reading from the Book of the Law. Then for the next 3 hours, they're worshipping God and confessing their sins.

Their confession takes up most of Nehemiah 9 – it's actually the longest recorded prayer in the whole Bible. So what can we learn from this prayer? How can we overcome our pride? How can we experience God's freedom? Today, we're going to look at three truths that can help us come to God and confess our sins. The people of God remember three things.

First, **The people of God remember their identity and calling.**

How many of you love comics and superhero movies? If you do, you probably know that all superheroes have an origin story. These stories tell us important things about them. Like who is the hero and where do they come from?

For example, who's Spiderman? Spiderman is a high school student named Peter Parker who's raised by his Aunt May and Uncle Ben in Queens, New York. On a school trip, he gets bitten by a radioactive spider and it gives him spider-like superpowers.

How about Batman? Who was he before he became the Caped Crusader? He's Bruce Wayne, a boy who lived a privileged life in Gotham City with his wealthy parents. One night after watching a movie, his parents are killed in a dark alley and he becomes traumatized at a young age by this loss.

Now, these are the origin stories of Spiderman and Batman. But what's the origin story of the people of God?

You are the LORD God, who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur... and named him Abraham. ⁸You found his heart faithful to you, and you made a covenant with him to give to his descendants the land of the Canaanites... (v. 7-8)

Now just to be clear, God is the hero in the story who defeats evil and restores his kingdom. But throughout the Bible, God chooses ordinary people like you and me to join him in this mission. And it begins with Abram. God calls him to leave his home and go to a place he would later show him. Even though Abram (who would later become Abraham) didn't have any more to go on than this, he trusts God and obeys him.

Later in Genesis 12, God promises Abraham that he'll bless him and his descendants and through them, he would bless the world.

They would be his chosen people. Chosen not because of anything they did, but chosen to serve God and his purposes. They would be set apart and distinct. They would live differently from the world. They would be blessed, not so they could keep the blessings for themselves, but so that they could be a blessing to others.

This is their identity and their mission. This is their origin story.

But origin stories also have a defining moment that solidifies this identity and mission.

- For Peter Parker, it was his failure to stop a thief who would later kill his Uncle Ben. He remembers the famous line “with great power comes great responsibility” and he’s motivated to use his powers for good.
- For Bruce Wayne, it was falling into a cave and being terrified of the bats. He resolves to turn his tragedy into a mission to fight crime and injustice.

What was the defining moment for the people of God?

You saw the suffering of our ancestors in Egypt; you heard their cry at the Red Sea.^[b] ¹⁰ You sent signs and wonders against Pharaoh... You divided the sea before them... By day you led them with a pillar of cloud, and by night with a pillar of fire to give them light on the way they were to take. (vv. 9-12)

The Exodus is the foundational event for God’s people. It marks the formation of the nation of Israel. God delivers them from slavery in Egypt and solidifies their identity as his distinct and chosen people. And he doesn’t just deliver them, he guides them, provides for them and leads them into the Promise Land.

The historian Paul Johnson says, “[God’s people] knew they were a special people who hadn’t simply evolved from an unrecorded past but had been brought into existence, for certain definite purposes, by a specific series of divine acts...” (Paul Johnson)

So what does all this have to do with us? Is the story of Israel just ancient history? No, because their story is your story and mine as well.

- Like Abraham, God has given you an identity. He’s given you a new name. He loves you, he’s called you and he invites you to become who you were meant to be. And he wants you to trust him to lead you into the Promise Land.
- Like the people of Israel, God has given you a mission. He calls you to join his people in fighting justice, serving those in need and healing the broken.

This is who you are. This is what you’ve been put on earth to do. God’s people remember their identity and calling.

Second, **God’s people remember their failure.**

What setbacks have you experienced in your life? Maybe you’ve had failures in school, at your work or in your relationships. Are there any patterns you see?

In their prayer of confession, as the people of God consider their failures, they become all too aware of a recurring pattern and obstacle that prevents them from living out their identity and calling. And surprisingly, the obstacle isn’t the external problems they faced. The people of God would encounter many problems when they leave Egypt, when they wander in the wilderness and even when they take possession of the Promise Land.

But these external problems were never the real obstacle - why? Because God continually shows them that he’s bigger than any obstacle.

- He sends plagues that caused Pharaoh to let his people go.

- He parts the Red Sea that allows the people to escape the Egyptian army.
- He leads his people when they're lost in the wilderness.
- He provides bread and water when they have nothing to eat or drink.

When you're living out your identity and calling, your biggest obstacle isn't the external challenges you'll face. Because God is bigger than any obstacle.

- He'll part the seas in your life
- He'll lead you when you're lost
- He'll provide for you for all that you need.

Your biggest obstacle isn't the external challenges; your biggest obstacle is the internal ones, the problems with your heart.

But they, our ancestors, became *arrogant and stiff-necked*, and they did not obey your commands. ¹⁷ They *refused to listen and failed to remember* the miracles you performed among them. They became stiff-necked and in their *rebellion* appointed a leader in order to return to their slavery... they cast for themselves an image of a calf and said, 'This is your god, who brought you up out of Egypt...' (vv. 16-18)

Your biggest obstacle isn't the external challenges, it's the internal ones. The Bible calls this sin.

The Apostle Paul tells us, **for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23)**

What is sin? Augustine, the great church father says that sin is humanity curved in on itself. You see, you and I were made in the image of God. We were created to curve outward - to love God and to love others.

But sin distorts this. Sin makes us curve inward. Instead of loving God and loving others for their sake, we use God and we use others for our sake.

Just think, when you spell the word SIN, what's in the middle. Instead of making Jesus the centre, sin is making ME the centre. Sin is making it all about me.

There are five terms in this passage that describe how we do this.

1. **We're rebellious.** We refuse to obey God and trust that he has our best interests in mind.
2. **We're arrogant.** We think we know better than God and that we can find life on our own.
3. **We're stubborn** – we're stiff-necked and refuse to listen. We resist God's guidance and correction and believe we know what's best.
4. **We're forgetful** – we fail to remember. Instead of being grateful for what we have, we complain about what we don't have.
5. **We're idolatrous.** We cast for ourselves an image of a god – it could be a god of money, status, possessions, even our relationships – an idol is anything we place above God and worship with all our heart.

God's people look at their stories and recognize that their failures aren't primarily because of the external problems. Our failures are primarily because of the internal ones – because of our sin.

It's not popular to talk about sin. But the truth is, it's the condition of our human heart. And it will steal your joy, rob your faith and destroy your relationships. It will keep you from living your identity and fulfilling your purpose.

So how do you break free from the power of sin? This brings us to our third point, **God's people remember God's faithfulness.**

If the people never remembered their failures, they'd be blind to sin's power in their lives. If the people only remembered their failures, they would spiral into hopeless despair. So what do the people do? They remember their failures *and* they also remember God's faithfulness.

But you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Therefore you did not desert them... In all that has happened to us, you have remained righteous; you have acted faithfully, while we acted wickedly. (vv. 17, 33)

God's love is different than anything we know.

- Even when we complain against him, he provides for us.
- Even when we walk away, he's guides us home.
- Even when we reject him, he pursues us with his love.
- Even when we are faithless, he is faithful - why? Because his love is unstoppable, unrelenting and unconditional.

There's a beautiful picture of this love in the book of Hosea. God gives his prophet Hosea an assignment that none of us would want. He tells him:

I want you to go and marry this prostitute. She'll be unfaithful to you, she'll dishonour you and she'll break your heart. And when that happens, you'll want to turn your back on her, you'll want to give up on her, you'll want to walk away. But instead, here's what I want you to do. Even though she's been unfaithful to you, I want you to be faithful to her. I want you to pursue her, I want you to redeem her, I want you forgive her.

This won't be natural and people won't understand it, but I want you to do this because I want others to know what my love looks like.

This story isn't just the story of Hosea. It's your story and mine as well. It's a story of how we've been unfaithful to God, how we've broken his heart and how we've walked away from him. And even though it broke his heart, yet because of his love, God has pursued us, God has forgiven us and God has redeemed us.

The Apostle Paul says it like this, **But where sin increased, grace increased all the more... (Romans 5:20)**

What can change a human heart? What can turn it around? What can lift it up and give it hope? Only God's love. Only God's love. Because only God's kindness leads to repentance.

And so as God's people remember their identity and mission, as they remember their failures and most importantly, as they remember God's faithfulness – it's at this point that the failures of the people meet the faithfulness of God. And what happens? Their hearts are convicted and they confess their sins.

They show genuine remorse. Verse 1 says that the people were fasting, wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads.

- Fasting was a way of expressing sorrow and repentance.
- Wearing coarse sackcloth was a way of expressing grief and remorse.
- Putting dust on their heads was a way of expressing their weakness and desire for forgiveness.

They acknowledge their sins. They don't just say, Sorry if I made a mistake. Sorry if I hurt your feelings. They take full responsibility for their actions – We did it. We messed up. And then they list the specific ways their sin has hurt God.

They commit to change their behaviour. At the end of this prayer, they make a covenant. They commit to turn away from their sin and live for God. They make a fresh start so that they can love God and live the life he's called them to live. A life of joy and flourishing. A life of hope and healing. Because this is their identity. This is their mission.

The story of Nehemiah isn't about God's people rebuilding a wall, it's about God rebuilding his people. But deep renewal requires honest confession. You need to remember your identity and calling, you need to remember your failures, you need to remember God's faithfulness. And it's at this point that your failures will meet God's faithfulness and God will change your heart.

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)

...as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. (Psalm 103:12)

In the first season of the series *Ted Lasso*, Rebecca, the owner of the AFC Richmond football club sabotages the team out of bitterness and revenge. However, as the season unfolds, she begins to feel guilt and regret over her actions. In the powerful season finale, she walks into Ted's office and with tears in her eyes, confesses everything.

What she's not ready for though is Ted's response – he forgives her. This breakthrough moment begins not only begins a close friendship between the two of them but also a powerful journey of healing, redemption and personal growth for Rebecca.

- God has given you an identity. You are a beloved child of God and this is the most important thing about you.
- God has given you a calling. He has great plans for your life and he wants you to make a difference in the world for Jesus.

But here's the problem. Many of you have hit a roadblock.

- Maybe it's an anger issue or an addiction.
- Maybe it's an unresolved relationship or a secret sin.
- Maybe it's a negative thought pattern or a lack of faith.

God doesn't just want you to rebuild the wall, God wants to rebuild your life. He wants to revive your faith, he wants to renew your hope, he wants to restore your relationships. But deep renewal requires honest confession.

So will you come to God and confess your sins?

Will you come to him to receive his forgiveness and new life?

Let's pray.

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

You are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. With you, we can always find forgiveness, with you, we can always find hope.

So we come before you now humbly and fully aware of our deep need for your grace.

We confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed.

We have not loved you with all whole heart.

We have not loved our neighbor as ourselves.

Forgive us God for our sins.

Forgive us for our selfishness, indifference, and lack of faith.

Forgive us for our dishonesty, negligence, and greed.

Forgive us for the secret sins we name in our hearts to you now.

Deepen Lord within us a godly sorrow for the wrong we have done, and for the good we have left undone.

Thank you for Jesus. Thank you for the cross. Thank you for his sacrifice that cleanses us, renews us and restores us.

Help us to stay close to Jesus so that we learn how to love God and love others well.

In Jesus name

Amen