

REPENTANCE FOR THE REST OF US

Series: Repentance for the Rest of Us - Week 3

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Key Scripture: Isaiah 6; 1 John 1

Key Scriptures

*"In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim... calling to one another: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.' At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. 'Woe to me!' I cried. 'I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.'" — **Isaiah 6:1–5***

*"This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all... If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin." — **1 John 1:5–7***

FULL TRANSCRIPT

Welcome to everyone in Menlo Park and those joining us online! We are in a series on Repentance. If you missed the last couple of weeks, catch up online—they're worth watching.

Ever notice what many superheroes have in common? Yes, that they have a superpower or supertechnology... But on a simpler level... they almost always have a secret identity. Somebody they are when the mask, the costume, is off. Most of them wear a mask: Batman, Spiderman, Black Panther, the Flash.

They are these heroic figures, but who are they behind the mask? Which is the real one? Half of every superhero's journey is the loneliness they feel behind the mask, behind the double life.

We'd all like to be superheroes, but we're not. We can put on the mask and pretend that we have it all together, and are self-sufficient, our families and careers are great, and we have everything we need...

But the pressure to be a superhero, to only show our strength and hide our weakness, display our successes and cover our failures... It's an impossible task and a burden we were never intended to carry. Even superheroes crumble under that weight.

That's why we're in this series on Repentance for the Rest of Us. We're reclaiming a word that's kind of gotten a bad rap. The truth is that Repentance is a journey that followers of Jesus are always on. It's not beating yourself up; it's not a way to earn God's grace.

Repentance is really an opportunity to reorient our lives toward a life of greater healing, wholeness, joy and purpose and hope, in a relationship with the God who loves us. It's a way to find freedom from destructive habits and ways of thinking and being, and discover a path toward a more life-giving way, toward abundant life.

But what does it look like to put repentance into action? We're going to look at a key step in that process today. The road to repentance, where we learn to become more real with God, with ourselves, and with others, starts with a simple practice. It's called confession.

Just like repentance, I'd like to reclaim confession as a good thing. The point of confession isn't to make you feel bad about yourself. At its heart, confession is simply choosing to stop hiding. Choosing to drop the mask, get real with God, with others, and with ourselves. If repentance is a road that leads us to a more abundant life, that journey starts with a practice of daily confession.

Will you pray with me?

God, we confess that we don't always like dwelling on topics like repentance and confession. But thank you that while you love us as we are, you love us too much to leave us as we are. You call us to a life where we don't need to hide behind masks, but where we can be known, loved, and made whole by your grace. Help us to trust you today. In Jesus' name, Amen.

A Lifetime of Repentance is Sustained by Daily Confession

I realize that words like Repentance and Confession aren't part of our everyday vocabulary. Even in churches, we like to talk about prayer, and worship, and fellowship, and spiritual growth. For some reason we don't get quite so enthusiastic about confession and repentance.

Even for church leaders, I've been to conferences with names like Exponential and Drive and Catalyst, but never have heard of one called Repent and Confess. Who wants to pay money to go to that?

Sometimes, the resistance we might feel internally has good reason. These are terms that can be misused, even abused, to create an oppressive burden of shame, or diminish someone's worth. If that's happened, I am so sorry and I hope this can be a step in a journey of healing for you.

For me, my resistance comes down to pride. I can think of ways other people need to repent and confess. That comes a lot easier to many of us. In fact, turn to the person you came with today, and tell them they need to repent (no, don't).

Precisely because of the sin in our own lives, we are more likely to see someone else's faults than our own. My ego does not like admitting when I'm wrong, falling short, or if I've hurt someone—intentionally or not. I want to be the superhero in my story, not the villain.

This can show up in really petty ways. My pride doesn't even like asking for directions. There's a truism about men not wanting to ask for directions! You know the short video we saw before the message, with the person driving? Thanks to GPS, I never need to ask for directions. And if I make a wrong turn, I don't have to admit to anyone (besides Google Maps) that I'm lost.

So now where this shows up for me is the supermarket—It turns out Google Maps doesn't locate items on the shelf. If there's anything I want AI to do, it's that. It would save so much time.

So, a friend of mine—we'll call him "Mark"—recently spent 10 minutes wandering Whole Foods looking for pepperoncinis. He refused to ask for help because he didn't want to admit he didn't even know what a pepperoncini was. I was honestly thinking a pepperoncini was one of those tiny pepperonis.

Suddenly, I overheard another shopper ask an employee where the pepperoncinis were. I (I mean "Mark") followed them straight to where the pepperoncinis were. Top shelf, above the olives.

Here's the point: If my pride, my ego, doesn't even want help finding the pepperoncinis, then repentance—true repentance—where I acknowledge that I am lost and broken and a sinner and cannot solve my predicament on my own—comes much harder.

It's why someone trapped in addiction sometimes needs to hit rock bottom before they can admit they need help. But confession that leads to repentance is actually good news. It isn't a burden to carry; it's the key that unlocks the prison door.

Confession is the path to freedom, healing, and wholeness. This has real life implications for our relationship with God, our relationships with others, and how we understand ourselves. We're going to take a look at all three of those.

Daily Confession with God

Getting real starts with the most important relationship in our lives: our relationship with God.

We're going to go way back and look at the prophet Isaiah, who lived about 2,700 years ago. In the Bible, prophets were truth-tellers who spoke what people needed to hear, even when it was uncomfortable.

Isaiah's ministry began during a crisis. King Uzziah of Judah had just died after a 50-year reign. Almost no one could remember a time when Uzziah wasn't king. While it had been a prosperous era, internal corruption and spiritual complacency were rampant, and the threatening Assyrian Empire was expanding. This was a time of deep uncertainty. This is what happened:

"In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim... calling to one another: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.' At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. 'Woe to me!' I cried. 'I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.'" - Isaiah 6:1-5

At a time when the worldly kingdom around him seemed like it was on the verge of collapse, and the world seemed completely unsteady, Isaiah is given this vision of a heavenly throne, far above every earthly power.

Right off the bat, there's a reminder here that no matter how uncertain things might seem in the world, the first truth in this passage is that the Lord God of the universe is still on the throne. There's a throne in heaven and it is occupied, and that will never change.

And there are these amazing heavenly creatures singing praises and crying out, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty." We can get caught up in what these multi-winged creatures looked like, but the point of the passage isn't to teach us about seraphim, but to make really clear that this is no earthly throne room, no earthly kingdom, this is something sooooo much bigger.

This is a vision of God's surpassing glory and holiness and power. It's a tiny bit like looking at a picture of the Grand Canyon. And you think, hey, that's a pretty big canyon. You cannot grasp the immensity of it until you are personally standing at the rim and you realize it's wayyyy bigger than you thought. Isaiah knew in his head that God was powerful and holy and righteous and just... but suddenly he's standing at the rim of the throne room.

Standing before God's overwhelming holiness, Isaiah realized how small and flawed he was. In the Old Testament, it was assumed that a mortal could not stand, or even survive, in the presence of God's overwhelming power and holiness and glory. It's not like staring into the sun, it's like flying into the sun.

Does Isaiah try to look presentable or say, "Lord, it's good I am here?" No. He thinks he's about to die. He blurts out, "Woe to me! I am ruined!" He doesn't pretend or justify himself, there's nowhere to hide. Even Isaiah—the prophet—knows that in the presence of an absolutely perfect, holy, all-powerful Creator, he had no chance of standing on his own merits. This isn't putting himself down; it's a recognition of reality.

So Isaiah does the only thing he can do in this vision: He confesses. "I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty." There is no defense, no mask he can possibly hide behind.

But look at what happens next:

"Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, 'See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.'" - Isaiah 6:6-7

If you're thinking this is kind of strange, you're not wrong. But fire in the Bible is often referred to as a purifying agent. A refining fire. Like after I BBQ on the grill, I'll turn up the heat, close the lid, and burn the impurities off the grill.

What did Isaiah do to atone for his sin, to make himself worthy in the face of God? Nothing. What work did Isaiah accomplish to scrub away his own guilt? Zero.

He simply confessed his real condition in the presence of a holy and good God—and God did the rest. Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for. Atonement isn't for us to do; it's the work of God. We can't remove our guilt. God can.

Confession isn't how we earn forgiveness; it's how we open our hands and our hearts to receive the forgiveness God is so eager to give. As Dallas Willard wrote: "Confession is not a way of beating ourselves up. It is the simple recognition of reality. It is taking off the armor we never should have put on in the first place." (Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*)

Our daily confession to God in prayer is where we step into God's presence, take off our heavy, exhausting armor, drop our masks. And when we do, we don't encounter a harsh judge waiting to destroy us—we encounter a loving God whose kindness and mercy heals us and sets us free.

Daily Confession with Others (1 John 1:5-7)

Getting real with God through confession is essential to encountering his grace. But it's not the only part. Centuries after Isaiah, the apostle John gives us another image of God's light and glory—and how it transforms not only our relationship with God, but our relationships with each other.

In 1 John 1:5, he writes: *"This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all."* (1 John 1:5). Just like in Isaiah, the brilliance of God's glory drives away every shadow. The same light that made Isaiah cry, "Woe to me," is the very light that gives us life.

As John writes in his gospel, *"In him was life, and that life was the light of all people"* (John 1:4). Jesus himself said, *"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life"* (John 8:12).

What can't coexist with light? Darkness. It's not the opposite of light. By definition, darkness is the absence of light.

So John lays out two very different paths in verses 6-7: *"If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin."* (1 John 1:6-7).

When we deny, hide, or turn from God, we run straight into the shadows. But when we step into the light—letting God's grace shine into the dark corners of our lives—something incredible happens: we experience fellowship not only with God, but with one another. Sin infects our relationships; grace heals them.

A few years back we were on a family vacation and we went on a cave tour up in the Sierra foothills. We went with the guide down a steep staircase, and then further down, and ended up in a big underground chamber. And the guide prepared us, but then turned out the lights.

You could not see your own hand in front of your face, much less anyone else. After a minute, the guide turned his flashlight back on, and we could see our surroundings, and we could see each other again.

Living in the light means dropping the masks. We start to see each other as we are. Living in the light means finding trusted believers with whom we can get real, confess where we're struggling, and extend and receive grace.

That's why we say that circles are better than rows. Authentic community rarely happens sitting in a big room on Sunday mornings. It happens in smaller groups with people we've learned to trust.

We are all sinners saved by grace, standing on level ground at the foot of the cross. When we open up, we experience God's healing on a much deeper level. In the darkness, we hide; in the light, we are seen, known, forgiven, and loved.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it this way: "A man who confesses his sins in the presence of a brother knows that he is no longer alone with himself; he experiences the presence of God in the reality of the other person." - (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*)

Sometimes that means confessing directly to someone we've hurt. Vince Vitale, two weeks ago in the first message of this series, encouraged us to acknowledge when we've wronged another person—not to defend, or justify, but simply to say, "This is what I did. Will you forgive me?"

Other times, it means inviting a trusted friend behind the mask to share our doubts and struggles. Like Batman letting someone into the batcave and letting them see that he's really Bruce Wayne. Or Spiderman letting his friends know that he's really Peter Parker. We need those people.

And in that smaller community, we discover God's own forgiveness and grace in a deeper way. *"...if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin."*

But I want to give a word of caution here. We don't confess everything to everyone. It's not helpful or healthy. We also don't hold everything in, and stay hidden behind the mask. That's also not helpful or healthy.

So here's a helpful framework to think about confessing with others... who we let in, and how deep:

1. **Everybody can know something about you.** (your name, your job, your hobbies, your background. The public knowledge).
2. **Some people can know more about you.** (your circle of friends, your immediate family, but people you can trust with more of who you really are).
3. **Someone should know just about everything.** Someone to whom you are able to disclose the good, the bad, the ugly. Another pastor referred to this as a fully disclosing friend. Doesn't matter if you're single or married, we all need someone.

This one is hard. Some of us protect ourselves for very good reasons. We've disclosed something and been hurt, or it's been used against us. I get it. I've been there. If you're not sure where to start, talk to a pastor here at the church, one of our staff, or connect with a good Christian therapist. We have a referral guide.

Counseling is a safe, confidential environment to practice walking in the light and stepping into God's grace. It can be a great place to start to let the light in.

Confession with Ourselves (1 John 1:8-10)

But there's one more area of confession I want to talk about today. We confess to God. We confess to others. And though it might sound obvious—we also need to confess to ourselves. John goes on to say:

"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." (1 John 1:8)

Notice who gets deceived. If we claim we haven't sinned, do we deceive God? No—God already knows. Do we deceive others? Maybe for a while; we can get pretty good at wearing masks. But eventually, we get so good at hiding that we deceive ourselves.

That's why Jesus warned about pointing out the speck in someone else's eye while ignoring the plank in our own. It is always easier to audit someone else's life than to examine our own.

But remember: confession is not a burden; it is a doorway. It isn't meant to shame you; it's the key that unlocks your prison cell. Confession is the path to freedom, healing, and wholeness. It means no longer cowering in the shadows or hiding behind a mask—even to ourselves—but boldly stepping into the light as a forgiven child of God.

John continues:

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us." (1 John 1:9-10)

What did Isaiah do to earn God's cleansing? Nothing. He simply admitted he needed it. What do we do to earn God's forgiveness? Nothing. We can't earn it. We simply tell the truth: we need grace. God does the forgiving, God does the purifying, and God does the saving.

Admitting that truth to ourselves isn't always easy. Author Paul David Tripp explains why:

"We tend to have a hard time admitting when we are wrong... We deny our wrongs and argue for our righteousness, seemingly afraid of where humble confession will lead us... But the fact is, we do not need to fear facing our sin and spiritual need. There really is nothing we will ever need to admit to... that hasn't been fully addressed by the grace that is ours because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus." (Paul David Tripp, *New Morning Mercies*)

Listen to that: there is nothing you can admit to yourself that God doesn't already know. Every failure, every struggle, every ounce of guilt and shame was nailed to the cross. We can sing with the hymn writer:

My sin—oh, the bliss of this glorious thought!—

My sin, not in part, but the whole,

Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,

Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

Because Jesus is faithful and just to forgive us, you don't have to be afraid to look in the mirror.

Conclusion

Let's look back at Isaiah one last time. After the seraph touched Isaiah's lips with the coal—declaring his guilt taken away and his sin forgiven—listen to what happens next:

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, *"Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?"* And I said, *"Here am I. Send me!"* (Isaiah 6:8)

That moment of confession and forgiveness also marked the beginning of Isaiah's calling—one of the most significant prophetic voices in scripture. Through conviction, confession, and cleansing, Isaiah discovered his purpose. Because we cannot share grace until we have received it.

As Tim Keller wrote, "God does not clean us up so we can sit on a shelf and admire our own purity. He purifies us so he can deploy us into a broken world." (Tim Keller, *Every Good Endeavor*)

In confession, we find our calling. In confession, we receive God's grace and find new hope—and that very grace equips us to bring hope to a hurting world.

If you are tired of wearing the mask, if you are weary of carrying a burden God never intended you to bear, the invitation today is simple: come to God and get real. Don't try to fix everything at once. This is a lifelong journey. But this week, pick one step:

Maybe your step is with God: Get into nature, look at the mountains, the ocean, the stars, and remember that God is greater than our sin. Name the burden you've been carrying—a habit you feel powerless to break, or a weight of shame. Tell him. He already knows, but he wants you to name it so he can show you his healing grace.

Maybe your step is with someone else: Make that overdue apology to someone you've hurt. Or maybe it's finding that friend, or a pastor or counselor because God is nudging you: "You don't have to carry this alone anymore."

Maybe your step is with yourself: Ask God to reveal the deeper patterns—the pride, the need to be liked, the drive to always be right, the desire to always have the last word, or the fear that keeps you guarded. Peel those layers back and don't be afraid of what you'll discover; Let God shine his light into those hidden places so healing can begin.

Finally, give yourself grace in the process. A lifetime of walking in the light begins with a single step of daily confession. And when you step into the light, you will find a God who is eager to meet you with his power, his presence, and his peace.

God, you are good. You are gracious. You know us completely and you desire good for us. We confess we often try to hide in the shadows when you call us to step into the light... not with fear, but with faith in your steadfast love that never ceases, and your mercies that never come to an end. Thank you that in confession and repentance we find not shame, but strength; not despair, but hope; not death, but new life. And thank you, Jesus, that you gave your life for ours, so that we might be forgiven, and walk not in darkness, but in your light, step by step, day by day, until we stand in your presence in glory. Amen.