

## **“The Cure for a Cluttered Soul”**

I John 1:5-2:6

*Sermon Series: The Forgiveness Formula Week 2. You – The Core of Forgiveness*

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Erma Bombeck once wrote a book about the trials and tribulations of motherhood called, Motherhood: The Second Oldest Profession. One chapter is on confession: “Primer for Guilt – ‘Bless Me, Everybody, for I Have Sinned.’” It contains twenty-six maternal confessions, one for every letter of the alphabet. Parents, if you’ve ever felt guilty, perhaps you’ll appreciate these:

- A – Abandoning children and responsibility, leaving them helpless and alone with a \$200 babysitter, a \$3,700 entertainment center, a freezer full of food, and \$600 worth of toys while you and your husband have a fun time attending a funeral in Ames, Iowa.
- B – Buying a store bought cake for your son’s first birthday.
- E – Explaining to the “baby” of the family why the only things in his baby book are his footprint, a poem by Rod McKuen, and a recipe for carrot cake.
- F – Flushing a pet lizard down the toilet and telling your child it got a phone call saying there was trouble at home.
- H – Hiding out in the bathroom when the kids are calling for you all over the house.
- N – Never loaning your car to anyone you’ve given birth to.
- Q – Quarreling with son about homework only to do it for him and getting a C on it.
- W – Writing a postdated check from the tooth fairy for a buck and a half.
- Z – Zipping last year’s boots on your son when you know they will never come off without surgery.<sup>1</sup>

Confession, they say, is good for the soul. I say confession is good for the closet. In fact, most people’s souls probably bear a close resemblance to their closets. Maybe your closet is spacious and uncluttered. Each article of clothing has its own personal space and each pair of shoes is spit-shined and standing in perfect military formation. My side of the closet is a jungle. Who knows what lurks in its dark recesses. Mile-wide ties from the 70s. Ten black rock concert T-shirts next to twenty VBS T-shirts. Long lost Christmas presents.

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<sup>1</sup> Erma Bombeck, Motherhood, The Second Oldest Profession, McGraw-Hill, co. 1983, p. 148-150.

Your soul and your closet may have a lot in common. Both are dark and filled with long forgotten clutter. We only visit them for a brief moment. Things grow in there. Erma Bombeck said hangers mate and reproduce in your closet when the door is closed. The same may be true of problems and sins in your soul. And if they are not cleaned and aired out occasionally, all the accumulated junk might one day fall on us.

Confession is like cleaning out a cluttered soul. The soul gathers hurt feelings and impure thoughts, painful memories and insults, bitterness and resentment, unresolved grief and anger, unhealthy desires. It stores all these in the dark. There, out of sight, they can grow, multiply, and even fester. That dark closet in the soul infects the whole person with sin. What is sin? It's anything that comes between you and God, that separates you and God. Confession is the process of opening the door and cleaning out the clutter.

In this message series The Forgiveness Formula we learned that God is the Catalyst of forgiveness. He is the One who forgives first, who gets the process started. Last week we walked across a bridge which symbolizes Jesus' Cross. God provides a way for us and the whole world to be forgiven and reconciled to Him through what Jesus accomplished on the Cross. God's forgiveness works in each person who receives it. That's why the second part of The Forgiveness Formula is You. An atomic power plant has a reactor core where the reaction takes place. You are the core where the Forgiveness formula takes place. Confession helps us receive God's forgiving power into our cluttered souls.

Yet why do we resist confession? In his first letter, the Apostle John gives two reasons why most Christians avoid it. First, **We Like Sin**.

God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. (I John 1:5-6)

In that little congregation, there were some who believed it was all right to be a Christian and continue to engage in sinful acts. They were continuing to walk in darkness, they were stashing away stuff in the closets of their souls. Claiming to follow Christ, at the same time they were tasting sin, indulging sin, entertaining sin, enjoying sin. Some call this hypocrisy. John calls it living a lie. He describes it as a clear stark contrast. God is Light, sin is darkness. Light and darkness cannot dwell together. In order to let in the Light, we must cast out the darkness. If we prefer the darkness, we must shun the Light.

When we indulge sin soon it manipulates us. Richard Hoefler tells this story.

While visiting his grandparents, Johnny received his first slingshot. He practiced in the woods, but he could never hit his target. As he came back he spied Grandma's pet duck. On an impulse he took aim and let fly. The stone hit, and the duck fell dead. The boy panicked and hid the dead duck in the woodpile, only to look up and see his sister watching. Sally had seen it all, but she said nothing.

After lunch that day, Grandma said, "Sally, let's wash the dishes." But Sally said, "Johnny told me he wanted to help you. Didn't you Johnny?" And she whispered to him, "Remember the duck!" So Johnny did the dishes. This went on for some time After several days of Johnny doing both his chores and Sally's, finally he couldn't stand it. He confessed to Grandma that he killed the duck. "I know Johnny," she said, giving him a

hug. “I was standing at the window and saw the whole thing. Because I love you, I forgave you. I wondered how long you would let Sally make a slave of you.”<sup>2</sup>

Don’t indulge sin. Bring it into the Light and be done with it.

Not only do we like sin, John also says **We Deny We Sin.** “

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we claim we have not sinned, we make God out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives (I John 1:8, 10).

Nowadays we don’t want to be told that we sin. Call it something else: It’s my genes or my upbringing. It’s because I’m young, I’m middle aged, I’m older. It’s just a bad habit or a minor character flaw. These things are more acceptable today. All that may be true. But if it comes between you and God, it’s still sin.

Someone may ask, “Doesn’t God forgive us and love us enough to overlook these mistakes?” Yes, God does love us and forgive us. And that’s why He takes sin very seriously. No parent would be considered loving and forgiving if he or she allowed a child to play with poison. To God, sin is poison. It poisons our relationships and lives. And the only antidote for poison is to remove it from us. Since you and I could not do this ourselves, He took the poison of sin out of our souls and poured it into the One person who could overcome it – His only Son.

The blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (I John 1: 7, 9).

Don’t deny, don’t indulge sin. Confess it. Clean out your cluttered soul and you will be clean.

Now I’m going to suggest something that sounds unorthodox, for a Protestant minister to say. When you confess a sin, I strongly encourage you to speak to God and at least one other human being. Yes, I believe that we can pray directly to God and receive forgiveness. No, I’m not trying to get all of you to line up at my door for weekly confession. But when you keep confession just between you and God, you miss out on a powerful, healing gift. The Apostle James says,

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective” (James 5:16).

Often, when you find that you keep committing and confessing and committing the same sin, it’s due to the fact that you have not truly let go of it. The same may be said of the person who believes in having a clean closet but will not make the effort to empty it out.

I strongly encourage you to confess your sins to God and one other human being. But be careful whom you choose. When four preachers went out on a fishing trip together, one of them said, "Our people come to us and pour out their hearts, confess certain sins and needs. Let's do the

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Hoefler, *Will Daylight Come?*

same." In due time all agreed. Three of them confessed some things they would be embarrassed to tell their congregations. When it came to the fourth one, he wouldn't confess. The others pressed him saying, "Come now, we confessed ours. What is your secret or vice?" Finally he answered, "I'm a terrible gossip and I can't wait to get out of here."

When you need to share a confession with another person, choose wisely. Select someone you trust, who is farther ahead than you in their walk with Christ, a person who prays. The person should be a good listener who gives very little advice and is able to keep what you share confidential. It is usually best to pick someone who is outside your family and who will hold you accountable. Call this person your coach, your mentor, your sponsor, your spiritual guide. His or her goal is to help you stop stumbling in the darkness and start walking in the Light.

Now perhaps you've tried to confess and clean out your soul and it keeps filling back up again. You and I cannot do this on our own. And we don't have to. John writes,

If anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (2:1-2).

Do you see the picture? When you go before the Judgment seat of God the Father in confession, the lawyer who represents you, the attorney who defends you is none other than Jesus, His Righteous Son. In other words, you can't lose. The only thing you need is to be honest with God. If you ask the Lord, He will gladly clean out your cluttered soul. But that's not a single event. If your closet is like mine, it keeps filling up. There is a constant need for cleansing. Thank God that Jesus is always ready, willing and able to do the job. The very One we sinned against, the One who took the penalty for our sin, the One who died in our place is the One who stands by our side, wins our forgiveness and sets us free.

In the classic movie *The Mission*, Robert DeNiro plays a soldier and slave trader named Rodrigo Mendoza. It is 1750 and the tribal peoples of South America are being captured and sold into slavery by the Spanish and Portuguese. Mendoza gets wealthy off the misery of these native peoples. Yet in a fight of jealous rage, he kills his brother in a duel. Wracked with grief and guilt, he is convinced there is no forgiveness for him.

A Jesuit, played by Jeremy Irons, challenges Mendoza to an unusual form of penance. He must drag all his heavy battle armor and armaments through the jungle and up steep slopes and waterfalls to the mission among the natives. It is an excruciating journey which goes on for days. Yet even when the Jesuits feel he's suffered enough and cut the heavy burden free, Mendoza ties it back on and continues his torturous climb.

Finally, when he drags the weight of his past sins into the gathering of natives they instantly put a knife to his throat. At last, here is the man who captured and sold their family and friends into slavery. Here is the soldier who killed their loved ones. Now is their chance to get justice and end his life.

Yet when the order is given, they don't slit his throat. They slice the rope and send his burden tumbling into the river. Mendoza weeps at this gift of grace, forgiveness and freedom. He joins the mission.

The One we killed with our sin is the One who sets us free from the heavy burdens of our past and the sin, guilt and pain that clutters our souls.

Come forward and lay your burden down on the Cross.