

I Confess

Last week we looked at the book of Leviticus – a book unfamiliar to many people. We wondered what the list of rules and regulations might say to us. This week is quite the opposite. The story of the prodigal is one that is familiar to all of us and even to many people who have hardly any knowledge of the Bible. Last week I preached my first sermon on Leviticus, while this is my fifth sermon based on the son who returns home and the loving father who welcomes him.

In previous sermons, I've talked about the shame of the younger son rejecting his family and squandering his inheritance; the disgrace of the older son's complaints and jealousy; and the scandal of the father running out to greet one son and leaving his party to talk with the other. I've encouraged you to consider whether you identify with the younger or older son, or to imagine receiving the father's loving embrace.

But today I want to spend time with the younger son's words to his father. He plans them out ahead of time and then delivers them as soon as his father runs out to greet him. "Father, I have sinned against God and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son."¹

We usually read this story to illustrate the power of love and forgiveness. Today, I want to consider the act of confession. Or maybe it's about apology. I have trouble knowing if these are interchangeable. Perhaps you can help me with this.

I'll begin with a confession, or maybe it's an admission. Again, I could use your help in deciphering the difference. All of my sermons are works in progress. As I deliver them, I think of what I could have added or deleted or changed. This one seems even more in flux. I've experienced a lot of nervousness and stress as I've thought about and prepared this sermon. Perhaps it's because I'm feeling guilty about something – or many things – and feel the need to confess. Perhaps it's because of other circumstances in my life right now. I pray that God will break through my inadequate words and speak to your heart

Prayer: God, you are grace and mercy overflowing. We do not always do what is right and good, yet you invite us to return to you in confession and receive your abundant forgiveness. Help us to take ownership for our actions, particularly those that cause harm, as we seek to live in right relationship with self and others. Amen.²

It's not unusual for public figures to offer apologies through their social media posts. On Wednesday my news feed included two examples. Texas Deputy Attorney General Aaron Reitz offered a mea culpa for his comments blasting Simone Biles as a national embarrassment after she withdrew from the team gymnastics competition in the Olympics. "In a moment of frustration and disappointment, I opined on subjects for which I am not adequately versed," Reitz wrote. "That was an error. I can't imagine what Simone Biles has gone through. Simone Biles is a true patriot and one of the greatest gymnasts of our time. I apologize to her, and wish her well."³

Candace Cameron Bure apologized after fans criticized her "seductive" and "sexy" TikTok video about the Holy Spirit. "I just came home and read a lot of messages that were not happy with my latest Instagram post that was a TikTok video," Bure said on Wednesday. "And I usually don't apologize for these things, but a lot of you thought it was weird, and I'm sorry – that was not my intention. I was using a very specific clip from TikTok and applying it to the power of the Holy Spirit, which is incredible."⁴

¹ Luke 15:21

² The prayer and parts of the sermon are adapted from Week 9 of "Seeking Justice Together" from *Current*, a curriculum from MennoMedia, [Current - Menno Media](#).

³ [Texas official: Sorry for calling Simone Biles a 'national embarrassment' she's actually a 'patriot' \(msn.com\)](#)

⁴ [Candace Cameron Bure apologizes for sexy TikTok about Bible \(yahoo.com\)](#)

Public apologies like these are difficult to evaluate. They may be heartfelt; we certainly hope they are sincere. They may also be hollow acts of manipulation to appease fans and maintain the large numbers of followers or supporters that public figures desire.

Personal confessions, like that of the son in our Bible story, might be easier to assess. According to the story, the son came to his senses and decided to return home. It's apparent he discovered that wild living isn't all it's cracked up to be. It seems likely he realized the importance of the relationships with his family and community. He saw how hurtful his words and actions were. And he sincerely wanted to restore those relationships and resume his responsibilities at home. It's also possible that his confession was a manipulative act of self-preservation. We do know that his confession is a turning point that leads him home.

An opinion piece in a recent edition of *Anabaptist World* addresses the importance of confession, apology, and humility. Dick Barrett, conference minister of Ohio Conference of Mennonite Church USA, wrote this opinion titled, "The rest of Micah 6:8: What has happened to our humility?"⁵ This is what he wrote.

I have been a part of the Mennonite church for almost 25 years. Many things attracted me to it: the emphasis on Scripture and following Jesus in every area of life, the potluck meals, the peace position (though I was a police officer at the time). And the humility of church leaders.

A lot has changed in our culture and church in 25 years. One change for the worse is that we have become more polarized. I see this in the media, which always seems to present the news from one side or another.

I also see it in the church. And I'll share the blame: I like to experience commonality with those I agree with and dismiss those I disagree with. Each of us thinks we know what is right.

What has happened to our humility?

Recently I felt the need to apologize to my 4-year-old granddaughter and to some fellow church leaders. I am not sure which was more humbling. But here's what is interesting: Both responded a similar way: "You don't have to be sorry. You don't have to apologize."

But I wanted to apologize. I needed to.

When we minimize someone's apology, what does that say about us?

Perhaps it is a result of our need to be right. We don't intend to apologize to anyone; why would we expect anyone to apologize to us?

When was the last time you heard a sincere apology from a politician?

When was the last time you heard a sincere apology from someone in church?

When was the last time you apologized to someone without making excuses or deflecting blame?

The most common Bible verse I hear quoted lately, especially from those who emphasize the peace-and-justice response to the gospel, is Micah 6:8: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness ["mercy," in some translations], and to walk humbly with your God?"

"To do justice" is the part that seems to get most of the attention. What about to love kindness or mercy and to walk humbly with God?

While God can say, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion"⁶, we don't have that choice. We are called to have mercy and compassion on all, including those we disagree with and even our enemies.

"Walk humbly with God" means we need to accept that our knowledge is limited. As the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "now we see in a mirror, dimly" and "now I know only in part."⁷

Mennonites have a reputation as the "quiet in the land." But quietness is not evidence of humility.

True humility is acknowledging that we might be wrong about almost anything. True humility means accepting that it is not our knowledge that saves us but our faith in Jesus Christ — the all-knowing, just, merciful One who "humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross."⁸

⁵ [The rest of Micah 6:8 | Anabaptist World](#)

⁶ Exodus 33:19; Romans 9:15

⁷ 1 Corinthians 13:12

⁸ Philippians 2:8

Humble Christians understand the need to apologize. We accept apologies when offered and know the next one that's needed might be ours.

Apologizing is uncomfortable. Self-preservation, guilt, and embarrassment are powerful motivators to keep silent. As I stand here this morning, I could – and maybe should – apologize to each of you for some action or inaction of which I am guilty.

I have sinned against God and against you. I made a joke at your expense and basked in the laughs I received.

I have sinned against God and against you. I didn't give you my full attention when you were trying to share something important with me.

I have sinned against God and against you. I spoke ill of you to someone else.

I have sinned against God and against you. I didn't offer you support and presence in your time of need.

Confession isn't easy. Confronting the reality of one's actions, particularly actions that have caused harm to self and others, is humbling, maybe even humiliating. However, when such actions are drawn into the light, healing and return to right relationship with God, self, and others can begin.

Depending on the circumstances, this restoration may not happen right away. In some cases, it may never happen. When confessing actions that caused deep hurt or harm, we must avoid placing someone in a situation of forced forgiveness, a circumstance that can cause further harm.

Of course, it's also possible to feel too guilty and confess too much. An over-active conscience leads to scrupulosity – a compulsive need to confess every possible violation of religious or moral doctrine, no matter how small or inconsequential. We need to give ourselves grace and find ways to address and release this kind of guilt.

As Dick Barrett mentioned in his essay, we also need to resist the urge to dismiss someone when they apologize to us. This too, is a difficult thing. Soon after I joined FaceBook more than a decade ago, I received a friend request and then this message from a former classmate. *You may wonder why I am sending you a message! I have thought about you for years and am so glad I have this opportunity. I am apologizing for the many times I was unkind to you in school, around jr high I think it was. Please forgive me. It is curious how one thinks of themselves, I always remembered myself as "nice to others", I suppose it was the Lord who pricked my conscience and reminded me I was not! I look back with shame that I did that and hope you will forgive me.*

I was quite surprised to read this. After some thought, I sent this reply. *I accept your apology and forgive you without hesitation. I don't recall the many times you were unkind to me. I think I tend to remember my actions that I regret more than the actions that were done against me. Anyway, I hope that now your conscience is clear with regard to me.*

It may be tempting to dismiss an apology in order to protect someone's feelings, especially in cases when we don't remember the incident or it truly didn't affect us. But sometimes the kind response is to accept the apology, offer forgiveness, and move on.

Naming our own wrongdoing, first to ourselves and then to God and the ones we have harmed, requires vulnerability and humility. Listening to a confession or apology and then offering forgiveness requires vulnerability and humility as well.

There can be no reconciliation without confession. Unless words and actions that have caused harm are honestly named, there is no way to move forward. However, forgiveness cannot be expected or demanded. God's forgiveness, as demonstrated in the actions of the father in Luke 15, is abundant and immediate, but human forgiveness is a more complicated process. Wounding can run deep and is not easily healed.

May we always remember that God's grace and mercy are overflowing. When we fail to do what is right and good, God invites us to confess our sins and receive abundant forgiveness. May God help us to take ownership for our actions, particularly those that cause harm, as we seek to live in right relationship with self and others. Amen.