



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Confession: Good for the Soul

James 5:16

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Introduction

1. In 2012, Texas Rangers outfielder Josh Hamilton called a press conference to announce a relapse with alcohol. Hamilton, then 30, had battled drug addiction for years; as a minor leaguer in the Tampa Bay organization, he missed the entire 2004 and 2005 seasons, suspended for drug and alcohol use. Given another chance with the Cincinnati Reds, he proved himself as both a really good player and decent person. The Reds traded him to Texas where he won the American League MVP award in 2010.
2. The events that prompted his press conference began with some tensions with a family member after which he had gone to a restaurant where he had three or four drinks. After calling a teammate to take him to where he was staying, he returned and had several more drinks. There was no bar fight, auto accident, pedestrian run over and killed, etc.
3. So, why go public? Because Josh Hamilton knows that his addiction is nothing to trifle with. It must be acknowledged, in a way that makes accountability as public as possible. If he is to ever remain consistently clean, he has to be as open about his problem as possible.¹
4. Josh Hamilton is not alone in that understanding. All who are serious about battling designated addictions know it all too well. Their cases remind all of us of the larger reality, that *all* sin is addictive (cf. Rom. 6:12-16). The more open we are about that, the better.
5. That's why the Bible speaks often about confession. Today, we will consider James 5:16 in light of that general expectation in anticipation of looking more closely at what we need to learn from his command to mutual confession and prayer.

Body

- I. Confession as Acknowledgment.
 - A. For most Bible students, confession is such a familiar idea that we can limit it to rote words that miss its real significance.
 - B. The word does call for vocalization of whatever is being confessed, but the idea is bigger than that: we are to vocalize because we have acknowledged.

¹ This summary was adapted from Rubel Shelly's "FAX of Life" email column, "What Recovery Requires," for the week of February 6, 2012.

1. In John 1:20, John the Baptist refused to acknowledge he was the Christ; in Acts 23:8, the Pharisees acknowledged beliefs the Sadducees rejected.
2. Key references to confession of Jesus also illustrate the point.
 - a) In Philippians 2:11, the point is that those who will not now admit that Jesus Christ is Lord will one day do so (cf. Rom. 14:11).
 - b) In Romans 10:9-10, the context (vv. 1-12) involves Jews who refused to accept Jesus as Christ; only those who acknowledged him would be saved.
 - c) In Matthew 10:32 (translated “acknowledge” in the ESV), the context is the willingness to admit belief in Jesus despite persecution (vv. 23-35).
- C. So, the issue in confession is not just the repetition of certain words, but the willingness to humbly acknowledge that which is being confessed.

II. Confession in Jewish Understanding.

- A. Old Testament texts show the Jews understood this emphasis on acknowledgment.
 1. In the case of individuals:
 - a) They confessed sin when they “realize[d] guilt” (Lev. 5:5; Num. 5:6-7).
 - b) The psalmist acknowledged his sin, did not cover his iniquity, and thus said he would confess his transgressions to the Lord (Psa. 32:5).
 - c) Proverbs 28:13 declared the failure of refusing to acknowledge sin (other references include Psalms 38:3-4; 40:12; 51:3-5; Job 33:26-28).
 2. The same principle is true of the community of Israel.
 - a) The scapegoat took on itself the acknowledged sins of Israel (Lev. 16:21).
 - b) Speaking for all Israelites, Daniel spelled out specific sins they had committed (Dan. 9:4-10).
- B. When sin is the subject of confession in NT texts, we see the same pattern.
 1. Matthew 3:6 (= Mark 1:5) says that those who accepted John the Baptist’s preaching “were baptized . . . confessing their sins,” in contrast to the Pharisees and Sadducees who saw no need to acknowledge theirs (vv. 7-9).
 2. Acts 19:18, in the setting of the havoc wreaked by the evil spirit who knew Jesus and Paul but not the sons of Sceva (19:13-17), tells how many in Ephesus who had become “believers came, confessing and divulging their practices” (vv. 19-20).
 3. 1 John 1:9 is part of a passage (vv. 7-10) where John reminds believers of the reality of ongoing transgressions; the thing to do is admit our sins.

III. Looking at James 5:16.

- A. James 5:16 stands in and continues the biblical tradition on confession of sin.
- B. We need to recall all James says in the context surrounding verse 16.
 1. The statement about confession is put forth as a conclusion (“therefore,” οὖν, *oun*) to the preceding statements about sickness and prayer (vv. 14-15).
 - a) The sick person is to call for the elders whose prayer will result in “saving” the one who is sick so that “the Lord will raise him up” (v. 15).
 - b) If sin has been involved in the sickness, the same prayer will result in forgiveness (v. 15).

2. In light of that, James commands the community – he changes to plural verbs and pronouns in v. 16 – to “[all] confess your sins to one another and [all] pray for one another, that you [all] may be healed.”
 3. He then reminds them that “the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working” (v. 16), reinforcing that with the example of Elijah (vv. 17-18).
- C. James thus sounds much like a key OT confession text.
1. Psalm 38:3-5 declares the acknowledgment [confession - see v. 18] of one who sees a direct connection between his sickness and his sin.
 2. That theme continues throughout the psalm; also of interest is that the psalmist’s prayer has what we would call a spiritual or salvation component to it (vv. 1-2, 15, 18-22).
 3. When we recall that the key words for healing, salvation, and being raised up in James 5 also have a spiritual focus, we see that Psalm 38 is more like James than we might have thought at first: he understood the connection between sin and its fruits.
 4. He also knew that the sin problem can be resolved only when we come clean.

Conclusion

1. Exactly how we are to apply James’s command to mutual confession and prayer raises several questions, to be addressed at another time. Postponing them may frustrate some, but I submit it is a good thing if it means we will focus on what we most need to see from James and Scripture generally.
2. That is this: sin continues to be a real threat for the church, causes many serious problems, is an offense against God, and so must be acknowledged.
3. Faithful Christians for two millennia have understood that. Indeed, the counsel presented by some of the earliest Christians after the New Testament should be prominent in our practice of the faith: “In church you shall confess your transgressions, and you shall not approach your prayer with an evil conscience. This is the way of life” (*Didache* 4:14).²

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² Michael W. Holmes, ed. and trans., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 353.