Proverbs 28:13 *Sorry! Confessing Sin*

***Like You Mean It***It’s a familiar scenario to most parents: Your kids are out in the backyard playing in the sandbox. The older one has a toy the younger one wants. A dispute breaks out. There’s a tug of war with the desired toy. The older one wins, and turns back to play. The younger one, in a fit of anger, takes a handful of sand and throws it at the other.

Now there is crying. The older one runs to you for help. You saw most of it, so you know who is at fault. You pull the younger child aside and deliver a stern lecture. Then you march the youngster over to the older sibling and you say: “Apologize.”

You know what comes next. Defiance flashes in those little eyes. The lower lip sticks out in a pout. Little fingers curl into tiny fists. And the little one says nothing.

So you say again, “Say you’re sorry.” Little feet stomping on the ground. The little body squirms to get away. A defiant shake of the head.

“In this family we do NOT throw sand at one another. Apologize.” Finally, as you increase your grip on the shoulder, the little one mumbles: “I’m sorry.”

And you all know this part…then you say: “That isn’t good enough. Say it…” How? “Like you mean it.” Say it like you mean it.

***The Fork in the Road***Last week we started a new series called *Sorry!* It’s a series about what we do when we do something wrong. A series about apologizing. Ultimately, hopefully, it’s a series about forgiveness. And our key verse is **Proverbs 28:13:**

**13**Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper,
    but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy.

I described this Proverb as a fork in the road. When we mess up, we find ourselves confronted with a choice. We can take the path of concealment: like when we fall on the ice and check to see if anybody noticed; we think we can brush ourselves off and cover it up and just move on. That’s what we talked about last week. Or, we can take the path of confession: we can own up to our mistakes, we can admit that we were wrong, and we can commit to doing better. That’s what we going to talk about this week.

And these two paths lead to two very different destinations. The path of concealing sin does not prosper. That means it leads to trouble, to disaster, to ruin. But the path of confession leads to mercy. That is, forgiveness. That’s what we’ll talk about next week.

Today, then, we are going to talk about apologizing well. Saying “sorry;” and saying it like you mean it. The word the Proverb uses is “confess.”

Let’s talk, briefly, about that word “confess.” I want to make sure we’re all on the same page as far as what we’re talking about when we talk about confession. It’s a scary word, and it can be really hard to do.

On the one hand, that’s the word we use when we talk about **confessing our sins to God**. That’s really hard to do. When we get really honest with ourselves, and then really honest with God, and confess that we are struggling with lust, or pride, or issues of anger, and so on. Support groups talk about taking a fearless moral inventory, and it can be really gut-wrenching to lay ourselves open before God like that.

On the other hand, a lot of us think of the **practice of confession**. Throughout the history of the church—especially the Roman Catholic Church—there has been a practice of going into the confessional booth and sharing your sins with the priest. Some of you have been a part of the Catholic Church, and have done this. I know that as a kid, growing up with some classmates who were Catholic, I was always glad this wasn’t something I had to do! It can be scary.

But what we are going to talk about today is probably even more difficult than those two things. When we confess to God, it’s between us and God. When we confess to a priest, he has to keep it to himself. But what we’re going to talk about today is **confessing to one another**. We’re going to talk about going to somebody else, looking them in the eye, and saying: “I’m sorry, I was wrong, I messed up.”

I’m not sure there are many things in the world more scary than that.

***The Lost Son***The scripture story I want to use for our main text today is a familiar one. It’s one of the most famous passages in the Bible. It’s a fictional story Jesus told about a son, and his father. We know it as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. It’s found in **Luke 15.**

The story goes that a man has two sons. Apparently, he’s a man of some means, and the two boys stand to inherit quite a bit after he dies. But the younger son is impatient, and he decides he doesn’t want to wait any longer. He insults his father by requesting his share of the inheritance right now. He could just as well as said to his father: “I wish that you were dead.”

More than that, once his father gives him what he wants, the boy doesn’t even try to maintain the relationship. He takes his newly acquired resources and uses them to finance a life of hedonism and debauchery as far away from home as he can manage. He becomes the life of the party, with all kinds of new friends who are more than happy to keep him company as long as he keeps spreading the wealth around.

But, eventually, his prodigal lifestyle catches up with him. It’s hard to budget when you are partying all the time, and inevitably the money runs out. Then things get even worse. A severe famine hits the area and everybody is left scrambling to get by. His so-called friends disappear and he finds himself slopping hogs and trying to survive on pig feed.

This is where I want to pick up the story in scripture. **Luke 15:17-19:**

**17**“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! **18**I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. **19**I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’

This is a confession. An apology. In fact, I would go so far as to say this is Jesus telling us what a good apology looks like. Remember, this is a parable. As far as we know, Jesus created this story entirely, so when he tells us what the young man said, Jesus is giving him the words to speak. So this is Jesus modeling a good confession of wrongdoing.

Last week I mentioned the book “When Sorry Isn’t Enough” by Gary Chapman and Jennifer Thomas. They are counselors best known for their Marriage and Family Life Conferences and the book “The 5 Love Languages.” In their Sorry book, they talk about 5 elements of a good apology. I see most of them in this speech by the Prodigal Son.

***“I Was Wrong”***First is **Taking Responsibility.** Owning up to our mistakes. This is saying, **“I was wrong.”** This is where we ended last week’s sermon, so I won’t say much about it this week. But I see “taking responsibility” in the phrase at the beginning of **verse 17:**

When he came to his senses…

He woke up. He got a good look at himself. He hit himself in the forehead and realized what a fool he had been.

Again, this is what we talked about last week, so I won’t belabor the point. But when we are concealing our sin the only person we are really fooling is ourselves. We minimize and justify our sin, we blame it on our circumstances or other people, we act like nobody (including God) can see it.

But when we come to our senses, when we can see our mistakes for what they really are, when we get a good look at the damage that our sin is causing; then we can own up to our mistakes and take responsibility for them. That’s the first step for the prodigal. He had to admit that he was wrong.

Chapman and Thomas quote the advice a father once gave to his daughter: “We all make mistakes, but the only mistake that will destroy you is the one you are unwilling to admit.” (42)

The first part of confession is taking responsibility.

***“I am sorry.”***The second element of a good apology is **expressing remorse.** This is recognizing the damage our actions have done. It’s saying the phrase: **“I’m sorry.”** Not just “I’m sorry I got caught” but “I’m sorry for the hurt I’ve caused.” I see an expression of remorse **when the Prodigal says:**

Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.

It’s good that he says his Father’s name. “Dad, I’ve messed up.” But he’s doing more than just saying he made a mistake. He’s doing more than just showing regret for bad choices. He’s saying; “Dad, I’ve hurt you. My choices have caused you pain. I’ve sinned, and my sin was against God and it was against you. I’ve insulted you. I’ve wasted your money. I’ve created a barrier between us. It is for those things that I am sorry.”

Expressing remorse is the emotional part of an apology. It’s showing the other person that we empathize with the way our actions have made them to feel. More than just acknowledging that something we did was wrong, it is expressing to the offended person that we recognize the pain our choices have caused. It’s sharing the shame, guilt, and pain that we feel because of the damage we have done to the relationship.

This is the essential meaning for the word “sorry”. It comes from the words “sore” and “sorrow.” To be sorry is to be in pain about the hurt we have caused. It makes us sad, sorrowful, that we have injured someone else.

The problem is that the way we use the word “sorry” anymore we often lose this sense of empathy. Too often when we express our sorrow, it is more about being sorry that we got caught. Our distress is more about the pickle we find ourselves in over having our wrongdoing exposed than it is actual remorse over the pain we have caused.

Too often we see carefully crafted public apologies by politicians and the like that boil down to “I’m sorry that you caught me.” Gregory Jones, dean of Duke University's Divinity School calls this “spin sorrow”. "It's a public relations spin to construct a carefully worded apology that often says something like `I'm sorry people's feelings were hurt.'" He notes that the nature of political apologies is now different than what God calls for in the Bible. "In both Christian and Jewish traditions, an apology or a request for forgiveness is supposed to be linked to repentance. It's never `I'm sorry for your reaction,' but `Please forgive me, what can I do to make things right?'"

According to a BBC article from Britain on Jan 8, 2007, the word “sorry” used to be one of the hardest words to say. Now it has become quite easy to say as people use it quite flippantly and even as a cheap and convenient way of excusing anti-social or inappropriate behaviour. They reported on a study which claims the average Brit will say ***sorry*** a staggering 1.9 million times in his or her lifetime. In fact, the word ***sorry*** is uttered 368 million times per day in the UK. While the word is now used often, the average person admits they don't mean it more than a third of the time. <http://www.befcvt.org/are-you-really-sorry>

In order to truly express remorse, our apologies should be specific about what is we are sorry for. Chapman and Thomas write: “When we’re specific, we communicate to the offended person that we truly understand how much we have hurt him or her. Specificity places the focus on our action and how it affected the other person.” (25)

Instead of just saying “I’m sorry” try saying “I’m sorry for hurting your feelings…” Or “I’m sorry for raising my voice…” Or “I’m sorry for making you wait…” The more specific we can be about acknowledging how our actions have caused problems, the more meaningful our use of the word “sorry” will be.

Expressing remorse is an important part of confession.

***“I Want to Change”***The third element of a good apology is **genuine repentance**. This isn’t just being sorry about what we have done, but a sincere desire to not do it again. We express genuine repentance with the phrase **“I want to change.”** In the story of the Prodigal, I see repentance **in this phrase**:

I am no longer worthy to be called your son.

What I hear him saying in this phrase is that if things go back to the way they were, the old patterns of behavior are likely to repeat themselves. If he goes back to living in his father’s house and enjoying all the benefits of being his father’s son the way he used to, then he’ll likely continue to be the same entitled trust-fund kid he was when the whole story started. He has to change. He has to stop expecting everything to be handed to him on a silver platter. He has to honor his father instead of expecting his father to honor him.

Too often good apologies are undercut because the person apologizing shows no inclination to act differently in the future. “I know I was wrong... I’m very sorry about the hurt that I have caused you… but this is my personality... This is how I am… I’ll keep saying I’m sorry, but I’m not going to change.”

After a while, a person’s remorse is cancelled out by the ongoing repetition of the same behaviors. When we are bad at repentance, people start to say to us: “I don’t want to hear ‘I’m sorry,’ from you anymore; I just want you to stop doing this thing that bothers me!”

“Repent” is a good Biblical word. John the Baptist made repentance a core part of his message. When Jesus started His public preaching career he said “Repent! The kingdom of God is near!” (Mark 1:15)

The Hebrew word for repentance carries the idea of a change of direction, turning around. The Greek word carries the idea of changing one’s mind. I find it helpful to think of repentance as a 180-degree turn. We are going one way, moving towards one thing, when we change our minds and decide to move in a completely different direction. That is, we turn away from sin and toward righteousness. We turn away from the destructive thing and toward the helpful thing. In the context of an apology it means acknowledging that our current pattern of behavior is bad and committing to trying to act differently.

I use the word “try” because we all need to recognize that changing behavior is hard. Regrettably, some of our worst acts are the result of long-ingrained patterns and habits that do not change easily. Oftentimes we’ll say “I’ll never, ever do that again” and we have instantly set ourselves up for failure.

The key to repentance is a sincere desire to change. Repentance begins in the heart. It begins with a commitment to get to the heart of our behavior and figuring out what we need to do to handle similar situations better in the future.

One of the best ways we can signal our genuine repentance is to invite the person we have offended to help us come up with a plan to change. Chapman and Thomas suggest the following statements that we might include as a part of an apology:

* I know that my behavior was very painful for you. I don’t want to do that again. I’m open to any ideas you have on how I might change my behavior.
* I really do want to change. I know I’m not going to be perfect, but I really want to try to change this behavior. Would you be willing to remind me if I revert to my old patterns? Just say “relapse.” I think that will help me to stop and change my direction.
* I let you down by making the same mistake again. What would it take for you to begin to rebuild your trust in me?

A good confession includes expressions of genuine repentance.

***“How Can I Make it Right?”***The fourth element of a good apology is **making restitution**. This is a good-faith effort to repair the damage. We can say something like: “**How can I make it right?”** In the story of the Prodigal, I see an attempt to make restitution **in the line:**

Make me like one of your hired servants

I believe this man knows that there is no way he can make up for the economic damage he has done to his father. But he is expressing here his willingness to try. He’s squandered half his father’s estate, the least he can do is get to work trying to build some of it back.

Chapman and Thomas write:

The idea of “making things right” to make up for a wrong is embodied within the human psyche, from our judicial system to the arena of family relationships. If Sophia’s little brother Jacob steals her favorite toy, Mom or Dad make him give it back. If a criminal steals from someone, a judge orders him to repay his victim in some way.

They quote Andy Stanley:

A willingness to do something to try to make up for the pain I have caused you is evidence of a true apology. A voice inside us says, “I ought to do something to make amends for what I have done.” (46)

For some people, an apology does not feel genuine without an effort to undo the damage. “I’m sorry, I’m wrong, I’ll change” must also be accompanied by “I want to fix it.”

If money has been lost, a sincere apology means repaying it. If false information has been spread, a sincere apology means calling up each person who heard the lie and setting the story straight. If tasks have been left undone, a sincere apology means finishing them and then doing extra.

The harder we work to make restitution and repair any damage we have caused, the easier it will be for others to believe we are truly sorry and be reconciled to us.

One of the most famous examples of restitution is the story of Zacchaeus in the Bible. We remember him for being a wee little man who climbed up in a sycamore tree in order to see Jesus. But the really amazing thing about Zacchaeus is that, after Jesus showed incredible grace by dining at the house of a tax collector, he committed to paying back all those he had cheated, four times the amount. (Luke 19:8) For Zacchaeus, saying he was sorry was not enough. He wanted to make it right.

Making restitution is a core part of confession.

***“Will You Forgive Me?”***The fifth element of a good apology is **requesting forgiveness**. We end a good apology with the recognition that the last part is out of our control. Once we have sincerely expressed our mistake and acknowledge the hurt we have done; once we have shared our desire to change and sought out ways to undo the damage, we have to acknowledge that the other person’s response is up to them. All we can do is sincerely and humbly say: **“Will you forgive me?”**

I don’t actually see a request for forgiveness in the Prodigal’s speech. He never says the words. I’d like to believe that it is implied, that his whole speech is in fact a cry for mercy. But he does not beg his father’s forgiveness and—if I may be so bold as to criticize Jesus—I think his apology lacks because he never says the words.

Or, at the very least, I want to encourage us to remember that just because we have said we are sorry, that’s not the same as asking for forgiveness.

Actually saying the words “Will you forgive me?” just might be the hardest part of making an apology. Especially if you like to be in control, like me. I like to know how things will work out. I like to line things up in a predictable fashion. But once I say the words “Will you forgive me?” I have relinquished control and put the future of the relationship in the other person’s hands.

Chapman and Thomas write this:

Forgiveness is essentially a choice to lift the penalty and to let the person back into our lives. It is to pardon the offense so that we might redevelop trust. Forgiveness says, “I care about our relationship. Therefore, I choose to accept your apology and no longer demand justice.” It is essentially a gift. (79)

Forgiveness is a gift. It is the other person’s choice to grant that gift or not.

So why is asking forgiveness such an important part of apologizing? I think it is because we honor the other person by giving them that control. We demonstrate that we value the relationship enough to ask for forgiveness. And we acknowledge that we know we have done something wrong, and the other person has the right to be offended.

I can’t demand that I be forgiven. I can’t even expect that forgiveness will automatically be granted, just because I’ve said the words. If you’ve ever said the phrase “you have to forgive me now”—and, I’m embarrassed to admit that I have said that—you are doing it wrong. Forgiveness is ours only to request. We cannot force another person to forgive us.

All we can do is humbly and contritely acknowledge that we are asking for something precious. The other person has been hurt, and has a right to feel badly about it. If they choose to forgive, they are choosing to let that hurt go.

Once we have asked for forgiveness, and while we wait patiently for a response, all we can do is carry on with our commitments to change and make things right.

Forgiveness is not ours do demand, only to request. But it is an important part of confession that we do.

***The Father’s Answer***Finally, I want to take you back to the parable of the Prodigal Son. Remember, the speech Jesus shares with us is just a practice speech. The son is talking to himself. He’s preparing what he wants to say. (Which, by the way, is not a bad idea if you have an apology to make. There’s nothing wrong with writing your apology out in advance, or rehearsing it in your mind. Make sure you include all the elements of a good apology, and make sure you are not putting in a bunch of excuses. Nothing wrong with that at all.)

The speech we just looked at was the young man’s practice speech, but when it came down to it, he wasn’t even able to get all the words out. **Luke 15, verses 20-22:**

**20**So he got up and went to his father.

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

**21**The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

**22**But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.’

The kid only got about halfway through his apology before the father cut him off. And you kind of get the impression that his father wasn’t even listening to the first part. For the father, his son coming home told him everything he needed to know. He couldn’t forgive fast enough.

More often than not, that’s the way this works. Our willingness to apologize, our willingness to take that step of repairing the relationship, is often all it takes for the mercy to flow.

But I still think it is important that the young man knew he needed to apologize. I think it was important for him to recognize the changes he needed to make.

And I think his apology provides a good model for us.