

Week 7: Have A Little Talk With Jesus: Learning the Language of Prayer

A journey through the spiritual disciplines that have sustained our faith across generations, teaching us to commune with God in honesty, hope, and holy expectation.



Confessional Prayer (with Lament)

Telling the Truth to God

Today we explore two sacred practices that have carried our ancestors through the darkest valleys and brightest mountaintops: confession and lament. Both require us to speak honestly before God, to name what weighs on our hearts, both personal failings and communal suffering. We'll walk through Psalm 51, where David pours out his heart in repentance, and Psalm 13, where the psalmist cries out in anguish, "How long, O Lord?" These ancient prayers echo in our own souls and in the prayers of our foremothers and forefathers who knew that God could handle the truth, all of it.

In this session, we will discover that confession isn't about shame, but about freedom. Lament isn't about losing faith, but about keeping it honest. Together, these prayer forms cleanse our souls and create space for God's transforming grace.

Opening Hymn

🎵 *"I Must Tell Jesus"*

or

🎵 *"Precious Lord, Take My Hand"*

These beloved hymns from our tradition remind us that in every burden, every sorrow, every moment of weakness, we have One to whom we can bring our whole selves. Elisha Hoffman's "I Must Tell Jesus" captures the urgency and relief of unburdening our hearts. Thomas Dorsey's "Precious Lord," born from profound grief, shows us how to cry out to God when the way seems dark.

Opening Prayer

🙏 *"Lord, give us courage to be honest, about ourselves and about our pain."*

Before we can receive healing, we must acknowledge our need. Before we can experience God's comfort, we must voice our hurt. This prayer invites the Holy Spirit to create within us a sacred space where pretense falls away and authenticity rises. We ask for courage because honesty before God requires vulnerability, and vulnerability requires trust that God's love is bigger than our worst confession and deeper than our deepest pain.

Opening Scriptures

Psalm 51:1

"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions."

David's cry after the prophet Nathan confronted him about his sins with Bathsheba. This psalm doesn't minimize wrongdoing or make excuses. Instead, it appeals directly to God's character, to divine love and mercy that exceed human failure. David understood that confession begins by acknowledging God's nature as gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Psalm 13:1

"How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?"

The raw honesty of lament. The psalmist doesn't hide frustration, doesn't polish up the prayer to sound more spiritual. This is the cry of someone who feels abandoned, who wonders if God has turned away. Yet even in this anguish, the prayer is directed *to* God, not away from God. Lament keeps us in relationship even when we can't understand God's ways.

These two scriptures form the foundation of today's session. One speaks to our need to confess our own shortcomings; the other gives voice to our suffering in an unjust world. Together, they teach us that God invites our complete honesty, both about what we've done and what's been done to us.

Richard Foster on Confession

The Discipline That Brings Healing Through Truth

Confession Brings Healing

Foster teaches that confession isn't just about acknowledging wrongdoing, it's about experiencing the healing that comes from bringing our hidden selves into the light. When we confess, we stop carrying the weight alone. We place our burdens into God's capable hands and find that divine love is more powerful than human shame.

Freedom to Unburden

"We are free to unburden ourselves because we know God's love is greater than our sin."

This is the heart of Foster's teaching on confession. We can be honest about our failures, our struggles, our secret sins, because God's love isn't conditional on our perfection. In fact, confession demonstrates faith in God's grace. We wouldn't confess if we didn't believe in forgiveness.

Grace, Not Guilt

Foster emphasizes that confession isn't about wallowing in guilt or self-hatred. It's about grace. The purpose isn't to make us feel terrible about ourselves, but to free us from the prison of pretense and self-deception. Confession says, "I did wrong, and I trust God's love is big enough to handle it." That's grace.

For African American believers, Foster's insights resonate with our spiritual heritage. Our ancestors knew about bringing everything to God, about being real in prayer. They didn't come to God with polished prayers, they came as they were, trusting that God's grace was sufficient for every need and every failing.

Howard Thurman on Inner Honesty



Facing Our Inner Contradictions

"The contradictions within us must be faced in prayer."

Howard Thurman, mystic and minister, understood that we are complex beings. We love and hate, we hope and despair, we believe and doubt, sometimes all at once. These contradictions create inner turmoil, a kind of spiritual static that interferes with our communion with God. Confession, in Thurman's understanding, is the practice of naming these contradictions honestly before God.

Naming Sin and Sorrow

Prayer helps us name both sin and sorrow, the inner clutter that blocks communion with God. Sin is what we've done wrong; sorrow is what's been done to us or the pain we carry. Both need to be named. Both need to be brought to God. Thurman knew that you can't heal what you won't acknowledge.

Clearing Space for Peace

Confession clears the space for peace. When we release our sins and sorrows to God, we make room in our souls for divine presence. The clutter is gone, the static silenced. In that cleared space, we can hear God's still, small voice speaking words of forgiveness, comfort, and direction.

James Cone on Lament and Justice

The Voice of the Oppressed Crying to a Just God

James Cone, father of Black Liberation Theology, understood that lament isn't just personal, it's political and prophetic. When we lament, we refuse to accept injustice as normal. We cry out against evil, calling on God to intervene, to make things right, to bring justice where there has been oppression.



Lament as Resistance

"To lament is to refuse to be silent in the face of evil."

Silence in the face of injustice is complicity. Lament breaks that silence. It names evil for what it is and demands that God see it, hear it, address it. Our ancestors knew this. Their laments during slavery, their cries during Jim Crow, their protests during the Civil Rights era, all were forms of prayer that refused to accept oppression as God's will.



Naming Societal Sin

True confession includes naming societal sin as well as personal sin. We confess not only "I have sinned," but "we have sinned." We acknowledge the ways our communities and our nation have fallen short of God's justice. We confess racism, economic exploitation, violence, and all the ways we have failed to love our neighbors as ourselves.



Faith That Demands Justice

Cone's theology reminds us that faith in a just God requires us to cry out against injustice. Lament isn't despair, it's hope expressed through anguish. It says, "This isn't right, and I believe God cares enough to do something about it." That's faith in action.

Scripture Witness

Biblical Foundations for Confession and Lament

1 John 1:9

"If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

This New Testament promise assures us that confession leads to forgiveness and cleansing. God's faithfulness and justice guarantee it. We don't have to wonder if God will forgive, we can trust that God will, because that's who God is. The word "cleanse" suggests not just forgiveness, but restoration, making us clean again, whole again.

Nehemiah 1:6

"Let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Both I and my family have sinned."

Nehemiah confesses for himself and his people. He recognizes that sin has both personal and communal dimensions. His prayer reminds us that we are part of a larger body, and sometimes we must confess not only our own sins but also the sins of our communities and our ancestors.

Lamentations 3:19–23

"The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me. But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, God's mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."

This passage shows the movement from lament to hope. The writer doesn't deny the pain ("wormwood and gall"), but moves through it by remembering God's character. Sorrow leads to hope when we remember that God's love and mercy are constant, renewed every morning. Great is God's faithfulness, even when we can't see the way forward.

The Movement of Confession and Lament

A Four-Stage Journey Toward Healing and Renewal



Recognition

The journey begins with seeing, truly seeing our sin or our pain. This requires spiritual honesty and often the help of the Holy Spirit. We must stop making excuses, stop minimizing, stop pretending everything is fine. Recognition says, "This is real. This matters. This needs to be addressed." Without recognition, there can be no healing.



Restoration

After we've confessed or lamented, we trust God's mercy. We wait for the word of forgiveness, the comfort of divine presence, the assurance that we are not abandoned. Restoration may be immediate or gradual, but it comes because God is faithful. We are forgiven, comforted, renewed. The relationship with God is restored, and we begin to feel whole again.



Release

Once we've recognized the truth, we must name it before God. We give voice to what we've been holding inside. "I have sinned." "I am hurting." "This is unjust." Naming brings release. The secret loses its power when we speak it aloud to God. The burden becomes lighter when we no longer carry it alone. Release is the act of confession or lament itself, the pouring out of what we've been holding in.



Recommitment

Restoration leads to recommitment. Having experienced God's grace, we turn toward renewal. We commit to living differently, to trusting more deeply, to walking in the light. We may still struggle, but we know where to turn. We've learned that honesty with God leads to healing, and we commit to that ongoing practice. This is the fruit of confession and lament: transformed lives and renewed dedication to God's ways.

This four-fold movement isn't always linear. We may move back and forth between stages, but the direction is always toward healing, always toward wholeness, always toward deeper communion with God.

African American Witness

Our Tradition of Honest Prayer



Slave Prayers

"Lord, forgive me for my doubt, but how long?"

Enslaved Africans in America prayed with brutal honesty. They confessed their moments of doubt, their weariness, their anger at injustice. But even in their most anguished prayers, they turned to God, not away from God. They asked "How long?" because they believed God heard them and would eventually answer. Their prayers combined confession of personal weakness with lament over systemic evil, creating a powerful testimony of faith under fire.



Civil Rights Laments

"We are tired, Lord, tired of being sick and tired."

The Civil Rights movement was saturated with prayer, prayers of lament that cried out against injustice while calling on God for strength and deliverance. These weren't polite prayers. They were passionate, honest, sometimes angry prayers that demanded God see the suffering and respond. Yet they were also prayers of faith, believing that God sides with the oppressed and will ultimately bring justice.



Gospel Songs

"Take My Hand, Precious Lord"

Our gospel music tradition is filled with songs of confession and lament. "Precious Lord" was written by Thomas Dorsey after the death of his wife and infant son. It's a cry for help, a confession of weakness, a plea for God's guidance when the way seems dark. These songs gave voice to our ancestors' sorrows and became communal prayers that helped whole congregations release their burdens to God.

This rich heritage teaches us that confession and lament aren't signs of weak faith, they're expressions of deep faith. Our ancestors knew that God could handle their honesty, their pain, their questions. They taught us to bring our whole selves to God, nothing hidden, nothing polished for appearance's sake. That's the legacy we inherit and continue today.

Pitfalls and Growth

Pitfalls to Avoid

Wallowing Instead of Healing

Confession can become a trap if we use it to wallow in guilt rather than to receive grace. Some people confess the same sins repeatedly, not because they're seeking forgiveness, but because they're stuck in shame. True confession leads to healing and freedom, not endless guilt cycles. We must confess, receive God's forgiveness, and move forward.

Ignoring Social Sin

Another pitfall is focusing only on personal sin while ignoring social sin. We confess individual failings (lying, pride, anger) but stay silent about systemic injustice (racism, poverty, violence). Biblical confession includes both. We must examine not only our personal behavior but also our complicity in unjust systems and our failure to work for justice.

Path to Growth



Confession Plus Lament Equals Cleansing

When we combine confession and lament, we experience cleansing of both soul and community. We acknowledge our personal failings and receive forgiveness. We cry out against injustice and trust God to bring justice. Both are necessary for spiritual health. Both require honesty before God. Together, they create a prayer life that is authentic, powerful, and transformative, leading us toward personal holiness and communal justice.

"Confession is a difficult discipline because we are so prone to self-deception. Yet it is the key to a liberated heart."

— Richard Foster

Foster captures the essential challenge and reward of confession. We resist it because we're experts at deceiving ourselves, at making excuses, at minimizing our failures. But when we break through that self-deception and confess honestly, we discover liberation. The heart that has been bound by secrets and shame is set free. This is the promise of confession: not condemnation, but liberation. Not guilt, but grace. Not imprisonment, but freedom.

Our ancestors understood this deeply. When they sang, "Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, I'm free at last," they weren't just talking about physical freedom. They were celebrating spiritual freedom, the liberation that comes when we tell the truth to God and receive divine mercy in return.

Discussion Questions

For Personal Reflection or Small Group Conversation

01

Why is it hard to tell the truth to God about ourselves?

Consider the role of shame, fear of judgment, pride, or self-deception. What makes confession feel risky, even though we're talking to a God who already knows everything about us? How does our culture's emphasis on appearing strong and successful make it harder to admit weakness or failure? What would it mean to trust that God's love is truly unconditional?

02

What's the difference between guilt and conviction?

Explore how guilt can become destructive, keeping us trapped in shame, while conviction is the Holy Spirit's work leading us toward repentance and change. How can we tell the difference? What does healthy conviction look like? How do we move from guilt to grace? Consider the role of confession in transforming guilt into conviction and conviction into transformation.

03

How does lament keep our faith honest in hard times?

Discuss the importance of bringing our pain, frustration, and questions to God rather than pretending everything is fine. How does lament prevent us from abandoning our faith when life is difficult? What role has lament played in African American spirituality? How can we practice lament without losing hope? What's the relationship between lament and trust?

Take time with these questions. They're designed to go deep, to help you examine your own prayer life and your relationship with honesty before God. Whether you're reflecting alone or discussing in a group, listen for the Holy Spirit's guidance and be willing to be vulnerable with yourself and others.

Practice Exercise

Engaging in Confession and Lament

Quiet Reflection

Begin with silence. Take several deep breaths and invite the Holy Spirit to search your heart. Pray, *"Lord, show me what needs to be confessed or released."* Don't rush this. Wait for God to bring something to mind. It might be a specific sin, a pattern of behavior, a grudge you're holding, or a pain you've been suppressing. It might be something personal or something communal. Whatever comes to mind, receive it without judgment. This is God's gentle invitation to healing.

Communal Prayer (Optional)

If you're in a group, consider reading Psalm 51 aloud together as a communal prayer of confession. Let different voices read different verses. Allow the ancient words to become your words. Notice how the psalm moves from recognition of sin to appeal for mercy to trust in God's cleansing power. Let this movement shape your own prayers. You might also share your written prayers with the group if you feel comfortable doing so.

1

2

Write Your Prayer

Take a few minutes to write a short prayer of confession or lament. Be honest. Use your own words. You might write, "God, I confess that I..." or "God, I'm hurting because..." or "God, how long will you allow..." Don't worry about making it sound eloquent or spiritual. Just be real. Remember, God desires truth in the inward being. Your honest, unpolished prayer is more precious to God than the most beautiful words that don't come from your heart.

3

This exercise is meant to be practical, not theoretical. The goal is to actually practice confession and lament, not just to learn about them. Take your time. Be gentle with yourself. Trust that God receives your honest prayers with love and compassion.

Memory Verse and Key Takeaway

Memory Verse

Psalm 51:10

"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me."

This verse captures the heart of confessional prayer. David doesn't ask God to overlook his sin or pretend it didn't happen. He asks for something much deeper: transformation. "Create" suggests God doing something entirely new, making what wasn't there before. A "clean heart" represents moral and spiritual purity, freedom from the stain of sin. A "right spirit" speaks to proper alignment with God's will, a spirit that desires what God desires.

This prayer acknowledges that we cannot change ourselves through willpower alone. We need God to do a creative work within us, to make us new from the inside out. It's a prayer of surrender and trust, admitting our need and believing in God's power to transform us completely.

Memorize this verse. Let it become your prayer in moments when you recognize your need for God's cleansing and renewal. Speak it over your life, over your community, trusting that the God who created the universe can create a clean heart within you.

Key Takeaway

Confession and lament free us from pretending. We tell the truth to God and find both forgiveness and strength.

Throughout this session, we've discovered that honesty before God is the pathway to freedom. When we confess our sins, we stop carrying the burden of guilt and shame alone. When we lament our pain and the injustices around us, we refuse to pretend everything is fine. Both practices require courage, vulnerability, and trust in God's character.

The beautiful paradox of confession and lament is that they strengthen rather than weaken our faith. When we bring our whole selves to God, nothing hidden, nothing polished for appearance, we discover that God's love is bigger than our worst failure and deeper than our deepest pain. We find forgiveness for what we've done wrong and comfort for what's been done to us. We experience the liberation that comes from living in truth rather than in pretense.

This is the heritage our ancestors left us: a faith that can handle reality, a God who invites honesty, a prayer life that transforms us from the inside out. As you continue your prayer journey, remember that you never have to pretend with God. Bring your sins, bring your sorrows, bring your questions and your anger and your doubts. God can handle all of it, and in return, God offers the grace that transforms everything.

Up Next: Week 8

Protective and Intercessory Prayer

Having learned to tell the truth to God through confession and lament, we now turn to another powerful form of prayer: intercession. Next week, we'll explore how to pray for others, how to stand in the gap, how to call on God's protection and provision for our loved ones and our communities.

Intercessory prayer has deep roots in African American spirituality. Our ancestors prayed for their children and grandchildren, for their communities, for freedom and justice. They understood that prayer wasn't just personal, it was communal. When we intercede, we participate in God's work in the world, partnering with the Holy Spirit to bring about God's will on earth as it is in heaven.

We'll examine biblical models of intercession, from Abraham's prayer for Sodom to Moses standing between God and the people of Israel. We'll learn practical ways to pray for protection, guidance, healing, and breakthrough. We'll discover how intercession deepens our compassion and strengthens our connection to the body of Christ.

Come prepared to expand your prayer life beyond yourself, to learn the sacred practice of standing in the gap for others, to become a prayer warrior who calls down heaven's blessings on earth.



Closing Reflection: As we conclude this session on confession and lament, take a moment to thank God for the gift of honest prayer. Thank God for ancestors who showed us how to bring our whole selves to the throne of grace. Thank God for the promise that when we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. And thank God for hearing our cries, our laments, our "how long?" prayers, never turning away but always drawing near with comfort and strength.

May the grace of confession and the comfort of lament continue to transform your prayer life, bringing you deeper into communion with the God who knows you completely and loves you unconditionally. Amen.