

True Stories: A Tale of Two Confessions

A breach of public trust

Investigative reporters discovered that a state official had misused his authority to secure a job for a woman he was dating. At first he denied any wrongdoing. The governor's office looked into the matter, however, and soon the evidence against him was overwhelming. In a last-ditch effort to save his job, the man made the following public statement:

It's possible that I sent a wrong signal. If I did and I made a mistake, then I'm sorry.

Neither the public nor the governor was impressed by this feeble admission. As a result, this man lost a position that he might have held for years.

Stolen candy

A second-grade teacher suspected that one of her students had stolen a piece of candy from her desk. When she asked him about the candy, he denied that he had taken it. Over the weekend, however, his guilty conscience became hard to live with. On Monday he came up to his teacher's desk and asked, "Can we talk about the candy?"

"Of course," she replied.

"I admit I took the candy from your desk," he said, "and I'm sorry for lying to you. I'm going to ask you to forgive me—will you forgive me?"

"Yes, I will forgive you," she assured him with a smile.

Remembering what his teacher had taught him about making a thorough confession, the boy continued, "I'm prepared to accept the consequences."

"What do you think the consequence should be?" she responded.

"Well," he said, "I could have bought the candy for a dime, so how about if I give you fifteen cents?"

"That would be fine," she said.

He then recalled the "double-trouble principle" (when you make a bad choice and then lie about it or blame others, you deserve two consequences). So he added, "I think I should give you another fifteen cents because I lied to you. And next time I won't fall into temptation." (These were his actual words!)

The next morning the second-grader handed his teacher thirty cents and told her that he had gotten it from his own piggy bank. As she accepted the coins, she praised him for the way he had taken responsibility for what he did. Needless to say, he walked away with a clear conscience, a valuable lesson, and the comforting knowledge that nothing stood between him and his teacher.

A natural confession

When confronted with wrongdoing, our natural tendency is to respond much like the public official did. We typically say, "I'm sorry if I did something that upset you." The word "if" robs a confession of any value. It shows that what we really mean is:

Obviously you're upset about something. I don't know that I have done anything wrong, but just to get you off my back I'll give you this token apology.

And by the way, since I don't know whether I have done anything wrong, I certainly don't know what I should do differently in the future. Therefore, I hope you don't expect me to change. It's only a matter of time before I do the same thing again.

This message hardly inspires forgiveness! The same is true when we use words like perhaps, maybe, possibly, or I guess. These words tell others that we have not yet taken responsibility for or accepted the consequences of our actions. Nor are we likely to change our behavior in the future. The dispute may be swept under the rug temporarily, but it's only a matter of time before we do the same thing again.

The Seven A's of confession

As the second-grade boy demonstrated, there is a better way to resolve conflict. If we admit our wrongs in a thorough, biblical manner, we open the door for forgiveness and meaningful change. This requires that we pay attention to the Seven A's of Confession (adapted from The Peacemaker).

Address everyone involved. Confess to each person who has been affected by your wrongdoing (Ps. 41:4; Luke 19:8).

Avoid ifs, buts, and maybes. Consciously delete words that dilute your confession, excuse your conduct, or shift blame to others (1 John 1:8-9). As Dr. Tony Evans says, "If it contains an excuse, it isn't a confession."

Admit specifically what you did wrong. Don't hide behind vague generalities. Specifically identify your sinful attitudes (pride, selfishness, greed, envy, bitterness, ingratitude, stubbornness, etc.) and actions. Then admit that what you did was wrong because it violated God's will (Ps. 51).

Apologize. Acknowledge and express sorrow for the fact that your actions hurt the other person. Ask the person to explain how he or she was affected by your actions.

Accept the consequences. Explicitly accept full responsibility for what you have done. This may require fulfilling a promise, making restitution, or losing benefits or privileges (Luke 15:19; 19:8).

Alter your behavior. Commit to changing your behavior in specific ways in the future with God's help (Prov. 28:13).

Ask for forgiveness. Finally, ask the person you wronged to forgive you, and, if necessary, allow time for that person to work through his or her feelings (Gen. 50:17).

Change your world

Think for a moment. What would have happened if the state official had had the humility and wisdom to make this type of confession? Might he still have his job?

More importantly, what would your family, church, and workplace be like if you followed the second-grader's example and confessed your wrongs thoroughly and biblically?