

Four Words and His Signature

Luke 11:4a

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Stephen Davey

There is an innate feeling of wrongdoing and guilt in all human beings. We all intrinsically know when we have fallen short, and we look to be freed from the guilt and shame we feel inside us. Many people will go to extreme lengths to confess their sins and make themselves feel right again. But Jesus gave His disciples a very simple task to do when they have sinned; in fact, it is only four words long.

I typed into the search bar the words, “how to confess sin,” and I got 6 billion possible sites to visit. Most of what I saw as I surfed around for a few minutes had to do with penance, priests, religion, self-improvement, and rituals.

I also found a large number of online systems for gathering confessions from people who log on. You can now confess your sins online—words like “anonymous” and “convenient.”

There are sites where you can visit an online confessional portal and after confessing your sin, you can use your credit card to make a charitable contribution.

It seems that how to confess your sin and get rid of guilt is a universal dilemma. Evidently sin and feelings of guilt are not

Victorian hangovers from the past that we all need to just get over.

But again, in case you missed it earlier, when I typed in “how to confess” I didn’t get 6,000 possible sites to visit, or 6 million: but 6 billion.

Jesus is going to handle this issue with just four words—just four. Take your copy of the Disciple’s Prayer, found in the Gospel by Luke, chapter 11, now arriving at verse 4.

As Phillip Keller wrote in his book on this prayer, these four words might be the most important words you will ever learn how to pray.

Adapted from W. Phillip Keller, *A Layman Looks at the Lord's Prayer* (Moody Press, 1976), p. 116

Now, to get a running start today, the Lord has just taught His disciples how to

pray for daily bread. Praying for daily bread battled their sense—and ours as well—of arrogance and independence.

Praying for bread leads us to gratitude and a sense of awe that God has created heaven and earth to produce even the piece of bread we need to survive.

And that same sense of humility is required here in the next request; verse 4 simply states:

And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us.

Luke 11:4a

Now we're going to explore that last phrase next time because it's most often misunderstood. But for now, let me at least say that Jesus isn't teaching His disciples that they must earn their forgiveness by forgiving other people.



Based on your interactions with nonbelievers, what are some things they do to try to confess their sins and feel right again?

No, He's teaching them that *forgiven* people should be *forgiving* people. More on that in our next study.

For today, here are four life changing words: **Forgive us our sins.**

Your translation might read, *forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors—or—forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*

One 4-year-old girl said it wrong but got the idea right when she was being taught to quote this prayer; **trespasses** wasn't in her vocabulary, so this little girl said, "And forgive us our trash baskets as we forgive those who put trash in our baskets."

She got it right.

Now to understand these four words correctly, we need to recognize to whom Jesus is teaching this model prayer.

If you've been with us through this series, you know that Jesus is teaching His disciples to pray this prayer. And the prayer began with "Our Father ..."

The Lord isn't teaching unbelievers to pray this prayer. In this context, this isn't a prayer to be born again into the family of God, this is a prayer for those who already belong to the family of God.

Although these words could be part of an unbeliever's prayer in coming to faith in Christ, here in this context, this isn't a prayer for *spiritual salvation*, this is a prayer for *spiritual communion*.

This is not being written to people who want to become children of God. This is being written to those who are children of God; remember, they are praying to their **Father who is in heaven.**

So, this prayer request is for daily cleansing, daily forgiveness.

Warren Wiersbe points out in his commentary on this text that forgiveness in the Bible has a couple of different aspects to it: first of all, you have ultimate, complete forgiveness—and that is what an unbeliever receives when they accept Jesus Christ as their Savior. He forgives all their sins comprehensively: past, present and future.

Adapted from Warren W. Wiersbe, *On Earth as It Is in Heaven* (Baker Books, 2010), p. 107

The Bible says in Colossians 2:13-14:

God, ... having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

Colossians 2:13b-14

All of it: every one of your sins, beloved, past, present, and still future, has already been nailed to the cross. He's already seen it all!

That list of debts, that long list of sins, every single sin was cancelled out on the cross of Christ.

This is the atoning work of Christ as our substitute on the cross; He became saturated with our sins and the sins of all of humanity over the course of human history, and for the believer, the forgiveness we experience by virtue of His sacrifice is experienced once and for all. The entirety of our sins is canceled out at the cross.

How many sins was it? More than we could ever even begin to recognize, or even remember to individually confess.

J.I. Packer points out in his commentary on this text that the Anglican church rightly defines sin in two categories: sins of commission and sins of omission. Sins of commission are willful acts and thoughts that violate the word and character of God; sins of omission are leaving undone those things which we ought to have done.

J.I. Packer, *Praying the Lord's Prayer* (Crossway Books, 2007), p. 78

Which is right out of James 4:17:

So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

James 4:17

So, sin is doing something you *shouldn't* do, and *not* doing something you *should* do.

Well, suppose I commit 10 sins a day, by omission and commission:

- I don't act kindly.
- I respond self-centeredly.
- I speed on the highway.
- I don't tip graciously.
- I want something someone else has.
- I fail to be grateful.
- I put off something I should do.

And all that can happen *before lunch*. 10 sins of commission and omission per day. But think about it: I would commit 3,650 sins a year.

And we have 3,000 adults who worship here at the Shepherd's church, so if your day is like mine, together, this congregation will be responsible for committing 10.9 million sins this year.

Our church—10.9 million sins—*our* church! And we're not nearly as bad as some of those other churches out there! I think I just committed one more sin.

But, you say, we're not *that* sinful; so how about five sins a day? No, what if it were only three sins a day. Well, that would be amazing, but that would still be 3.2 million sins a year committed by us—just us.

And those are only the sins we realize we are committing.

That's what David meant when he wrote in **Psalm 19 and verse 12: "Who can discern all his errors?"** The expected answer is "Nobody; nobody, except God!"

That's why when we come to Christ for salvation, we are offered ultimate and final and categorical forgiveness—because we can't even remember or begin to confess every sin.

That was the conundrum of Martin Luther, the Reformer.

When Luther entered the monastery, he was determined to pay any price necessary to arrive at a right standing with God.

In fact, he nearly drove his religious mentors crazy by his long confessions. One day he confessed for nearly 6 hours until his confessor became too exhausted to hear anymore as Luther tried to rid his conscience of guilt.

Finally, after 7 years, his confessor put an end to the torment and ordered Luther to leave the monastery and begin teaching at the University of Wittenberg.

Michelle DeRusha, [Katharina and Martin Luther: The Radical Marriage of a Runaway Nun and a Renegade Monk](#) (Baker, 2017), p. 80

He moved into a monastery near the University and began to teach.

And by the providence of God, Martin Luther decided to teach the Books of Romans and Galatians. And as he taught and preached in the cathedral through these books of the Bible, the doctrine of justification by faith alone eventually chased him down.

He was shaken by the truth of Paul's letter to the Romans, in chapter 1:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

Romans 1:16-17

Luther would later write, "Although I was an impeccable monk, I stood before God

as a sinner—without any confidence that my merit would satisfy God.”

R.C. Sproul, Faith Alone, Baker Books, p. 56

Through his study in the Scriptures, Luther came to realize that a person was made righteous—which doesn’t mean perfect, it means “right with God”—not by self-denial or self-sacrifice or self-earning-merit, but by faith alone in Christ alone.

DeRusha, p. 91

The church wasn’t teaching this, but the Bible was.

Martin Luther’s life and world would be changed by that discovery; he risked his life and his future to preach what he referred to as “sola scriptura”—the Scriptures alone.

His prayer life changed; he wrote to his friend Peter the Barber that you cannot even remember every sin you commit, so trust in the forgiveness of Christ.



Why does Jesus ask us to confess our sins if God has already forgiven all our past, present, and future sins? What is the significance of verbally confessing them?

Luther was freed from guilt by trusting Christ’s work on his behalf to finally—and ultimately, and completely—forgive his sins, past, present, and future.

And maybe you’re thinking, “Well, if God has already forgiven my past, present, and future sins, why not just sin and not worry about it?”

In fact, when the apostle Paul taught this theological truth of ultimate and comprehensive forgiveness, that’s exactly what the Jewish leaders criticized. They effectively said, “Paul, you’re giving people a free pass to sin. If there’s a mountain of grace, then people will commit a mountain of sin.”

To which Paul responded in Romans chapter 6; ***“Are we going to continue sinning just because grace will continue increasing? God forbid!”***

A believer doesn’t want to abuse the grace of God, he wants to apply the grace of God to his heart and life.

But again, if we are forgiven completely and finally and comprehensively at our salvation, why is Jesus teaching us to pray, “Forgive us our sins”?

Because there’s another aspect to forgiveness that impacts the believer’s life. Forgiveness isn’t just final, it’s *daily*.

You see these four words here aren’t related to sonship, they are related to fellowship. This is a prayer for believers.

When you sin, Christian, and this prayer assumes you will; you don’t have to become saved all over again. You can’t lose your sonship, but you can lose your fellowship.

When you sin, your *status* in life doesn’t change; but your *satisfaction* in life does.

Think about it this way. I've been married now for 41 years. Obviously, Marsha and I were married in Middle School! Let's suppose that I do something that is unkind to her. And let me tell you, in 41 years I have done that a couple of times—in one day.

Let's suppose I tell her I'm sorry. And she forgives me. Now we don't have to get married again. And that's good because it would get expensive. We don't have to get married again because the *status* of our relationship didn't change. The *spirit* of our relationship changed.

To use a stronger analogy, consider your child disobeying you over and over again; you finally say, "That does it!" They don't stop being your child—although that thought crosses your mind—no, no matter what they do, they are still your child.

They need to apologize not so they can *rejoin* your family, but so they can *enjoy* your family once again.

These four words constitute the prayer of a prodigal child—a prodigal disciple—and frankly, we are prodigals every day and throughout the day and we return again and again to these wonderful words:
"Forgive us our sins."

Now these four words are based on two conditions.

First, that you're willing to agree that God is right.

You did something He says not to do in His Word, and His Word is always right. It

doesn't matter how you feel, it doesn't matter what you think, it doesn't matter what everybody else says, true confession begins with an agreement in your heart that God is right.

And the second condition is being willing to admit you were wrong.

Forgive us our sins, not our reasons. God has never once forgiven an excuse; He forgives sin. He doesn't forgive innocent people either; He forgives sinners. Are you a sinner? Then you qualify to pray this prayer!

The Bible says in 1 John 1:9:

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

I John 1:9

This text happens to be written to Christians! And the word John the apostle uses for **confess** is a word that means to "to say the same thing."

In other words, you're saying the same thing about what you're doing or thinking that God says about it; you're agreeing with God. You're confessing that He was right, you were wrong.

And you stop putting words in His mouth that justify your sin. Can a believer do that? Evidently John thought so, and Jesus teaches us because He knows so.

We attempt to get God on our side for the smallest of sins and the greatest offenses as well.

And we learn how to do that early in life.

Like the little girl I read about recently; her parents gave her a golden retriever for her 5th birthday. It wasn't long before she was telling all her neighbors and friends that she had been given her very own pet lion. "I mean, you can't tell the difference, she insisted, "It's my pet lion."

Well, her mother found out and brought her inside and said, "I've told you plenty of times not to lie. Now I want you to go upstairs to your bedroom, and I want you to tell God you're sorry." The little girl just moped her way upstairs.

A little while later she came hopping and skipping back downstairs, and her mother asked her, "Did you confess to God that what you said was wrong?" She replied, "Yes ma'am I did, and **God told me that sometimes He can't tell the difference either.**"

Not exactly a genuine confession.

Now quickly, let me reinforce our study by pointing out three opportunities that this prayer offers us:

- This is a daily opportunity to remind ourselves that our sin didn't bring us fulfillment after all.
- This is a daily opportunity to rejoice that Christ paid our debt of sin and loves us in spite of it all.
- This is a daily opportunity to return to Him in fellowship, not because we are worthy, but because we are welcomed after all.

Adapted from Wiersbe, On Earth as it is in Heaven, p. 110

Dr. Harry Ironside, a beloved Bible teacher of a generation ago and a former pastor of Moody Church repeated an account from history that illustrates the payment of debt by another.

Many years ago, Czar Nicholas I of Russia had a good friend whose son was in the army. Out of kindness, the Czar had him assigned to a border fortress of the Russian army and appointed over the payroll for that entire army.

The young man started well. But he began gambling and eventually gambled away not only his own paycheck, but money from government funds to be used for the upcoming payroll of the garrison of soldiers.

He unexpectedly received notice that an official from the palace would be coming to perform an audit of the books. The young man knew he was in serious trouble. The night before the official was to arrive, he took out the ledger to find out how much money had been given from the government to cover the payroll. He totaled the amount.

Then he went to the safe, took out the money that was on hand and counted it carefully. The difference was large—too large to ever explain away.

As he sat there looking at the final figures, this young officer picked up his pen and wrote in large letters at the bottom page of the ledger, "A great debt; who can pay?"

Then, because he did not see how he could face his father, or the terrible shame and dishonor the next day held for him, he decided to take his life with his own revolver at the stroke of midnight.

That night the air was warm, and he became drowsy at his accounting desk. As he waited for the midnight hour, despite himself, the young man's head dropped lower and lower until he fell asleep, his head resting next to the ledger on one side: his pistol, still in his hand on the other side.

Nicholas was often in the habit of putting on the uniform of a common soldier and visiting the troops to see how they were getting along. He did that this very night. Eventually, coming around to the payroll office, he saw the young man whom he recognized, fast asleep. He walked over to the desk and saw the books and the money stacked in rows on the desk. He read the total amount in the ledger and the pistol in the young man's hand; immediately the issue became clear.

His first thought was to awaken the young man and place him under arrest and then have him court martialed. But then he happened to notice the personal note written at the bottom of the ledger, "A great debt, who can pay?"

He was strangely overwhelmed with mercy and grace; Nicholas quietly leaned over, picked up the pen that had fallen from the hand of the sleeping officer, wrote one word, and then tiptoed out.

At the break of dawn, this young man suddenly awoke and, realizing he had

fallen asleep and there was not much time to lose, he reached for his revolver. But as he did so, something caught his eye, something underneath his note that he had written in despair: "A great debt, who can pay?" Underneath that was written one word: "Nicholas."

Dropping his gun, he raced to the files where the signature of the Czar was available. They were from the same hand. He thought to himself, "The Czar has been here tonight and knows all my guilt; but he has chosen to pay my debt for me."

Just then a messenger arrived from the palace carrying a purse that contained the exact amount of money needed to satisfy the debt.

Have you ever thought about the fact that Jesus was teaching his disciples—and us—to pray these four words, all the while knowing that the basis for our ability to pray it would be His death, His sacrifice, His suffering, His payment on our behalf?

He has written on the ledger of our sinful lives, not just finally, but daily, underneath our daily recognition of this fact: we have a debt too high—who can pay?

And He writes His name.



Who is someone in your life who needs to hear the gospel today, who needs to hear that their sins can be eternally forgiven?

If that is you, will you accept Jesus as your Savior today and accept His work on the cross as the payment for your sin?

So, do you need to confess your sins, to be forgiven and cleansed? There are 6 billion sites to tell you something to do.

Ah, but let me tell you, all you really need are these four words and a signature. Four words—and *His* signature.

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