

SEE SIN

GENESIS 3:8-13;
2 SAMUEL 11-12

Before we can make a confession, we have to realize there is something to confess! We must see sin in order to admit to it. Though we are often able to see the wrongs of others, we can be surprisingly blind to our own failings. We may have an “Aha!” moment all on our own, but it may take someone else to show us the error of our ways. Either way, our first emotion is usually embarrassment or shame to realize we’ve done something harmful. It threatens our self-image of being a good person. A common first reaction is to shut this bad feeling down and deny what we did. It takes courage and maturity to fight that urge, for who knows where admitting wrong might lead? But if we can trust in God’s love for us, it can help us overcome our fear of being in the wrong, of missing the mark.

Individual sin is hard to admit, but it is something each of us can decide whether or not to manage. Corporate sin is sometimes more difficult to see and know how to handle. We are all part of systems in society that harm others. Institutional and environmental racism, fossil fuel dependency, hunger, poverty, and unjust laws are corporate sins that envelop all of us in visible and invisible ways. Realizing that the ease of our lives may come at the expense of others is disturbing. We may wish to shut our eyes tightly to avoid seeing the ways we cause pain without even knowing it, but that just keeps us wandering in the wilderness.

Opening our eyes to see sin is the first step on our confessional journey.



INTRODUCING THE PRACTICE

- *Sin* can be a scary word.
- Think of sin as missing the mark and breaking relationships with God and others.
- Sin includes individual failings and systemic dimensions.
- Sin separates us from one another and makes us feel separated from God.
- Wouldn't it be great to see sin—to see the reasons for our separation—and try to fix them?

Seeing sin is not about pointing fingers. It is not about engendering shame, but it is about recognizing where we have gone wrong or caused harm. We must see the ways we have strayed from God's path and take responsibility for them so that we can begin the journey toward restoration.

Consider the following scenarios. Which one is most likely to result in a mended relationship?

Dwayne is frustrated with Shondra and chooses to share something she told him confidentially. When she finds out, she confronts him. He decides to block her calls and soothe himself by focusing on the way she made him angry in the first place.

Avery's parents cannot get used to using *they* pronouns with their child. Each continues to refer to Avery as *she* and *her* until the two of them hear Avery crying in the bathroom one day. Although it is hard, both Mom and Dad recognize the pain they are causing, though neither is sure whether it will be possible to fix it.

Before we continue, read or sing aloud this first verse from Clara H. Scott's hymn "Open My Eyes, That I May See" (*Glory to God*, #451).

Open my eyes, that I may see
glimpses of truth thou hast for me.
Place in my hands the wonderful key
That shall unclasp and set me free.
Silently now I wait for thee,
Ready, my God, thy will to see.
Open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit divine!



FINDING THE PRACTICE IN THE BIBLE

The Bible is filled with stories of faithful people, loved by God, who still mess up a lot. From the very first book, Genesis, we encounter a God who wants to relate to humans and guide them. There are few rules, yet some are broken right away. As God continues to walk with our ancestors, the guidance they receive expands. People are told to love God and love their neighbor and instructed on how to do that. Covenants are made, commandments are given, boundaries are set, and—one by one (by three, by six)—they all get crossed.

In hindsight, their errors seem clear to us, but their sin wasn't always as clear to the ones making the mistakes. Often, like us, they didn't want to see and opted for denial instead. We see two versions of that denial in our biblical stories today: one has finger pointing and the other willful ignorance.

ADAM AND EVE EAT THE FORBIDDEN FRUIT

In the second story of creation (Genesis 2:4a–24), God creates a person, Adam, and then God creates a garden with many trees. God places Adam in the garden, and the only rule is to not eat of one of the trees. Eve is then created. In Genesis 3:1–13, an encounter occurs between a talking serpent and Eve. The serpent convinces her to eat from the forbidden tree. She then gives some of that forbidden fruit to Adam. In verses 8–13, we read about their encounter with God after eating that fruit. Their first reaction is to try and hide from God, who, of course, finds them. A sadly funny dialogue then occurs between God and the humans, showing how communication often breaks down when we hide our sin.



They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, “Where are you?” He said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.” He said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” The man said, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.” Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent tricked me, and I ate.”

—Genesis 3:8–13

Did you notice how the conversation breaks down as a result of their sin? Afraid to tell the truth, they just dig a deeper hole.

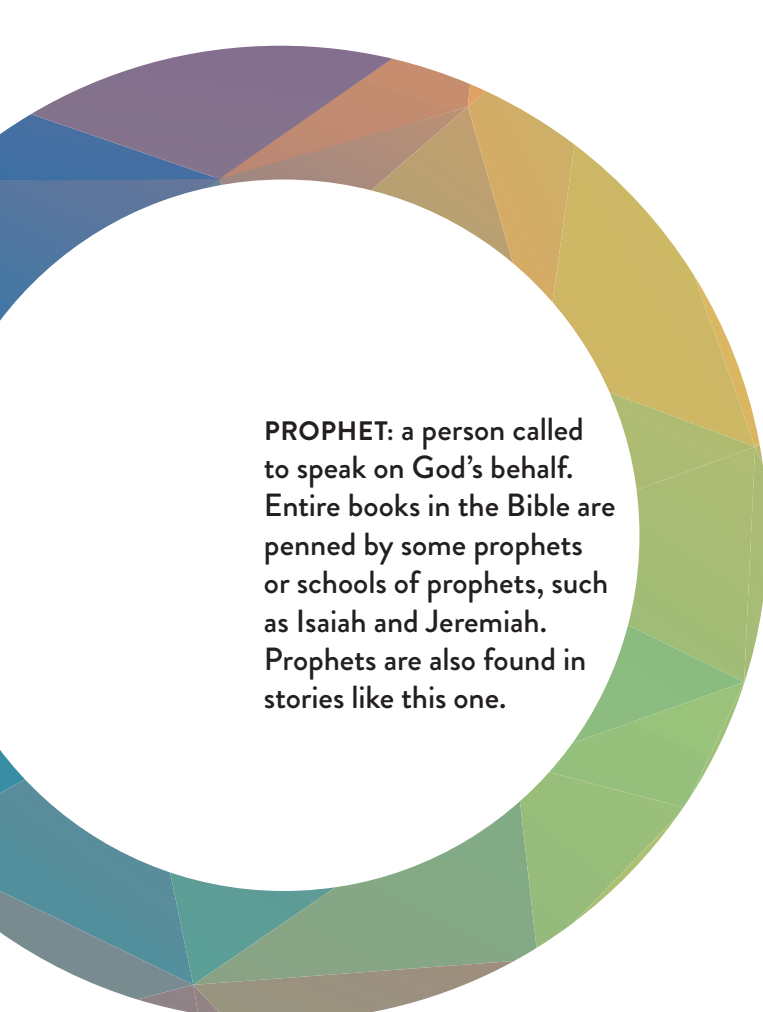


God Asks	True Answer	Adam and Eve's Response
Where are you?	Here we are.	I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.
Who told you that you were naked?	No one.	No answer given.
Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?	Yes.	The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree and I ate. [Way to throw Eve under the bus, Adam.]
What is this that you have done?	I broke your rule and ate from the tree you said to leave alone.	The serpent tricked me.

When we sin, our first response is often to hide and disguise the truth by placing the blame somewhere else.

- When have you sinned and tried to hide or point the finger rather than see your role in the problem, take responsibility, and admit guilt?

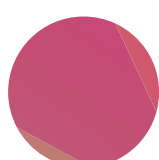
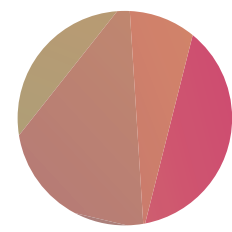
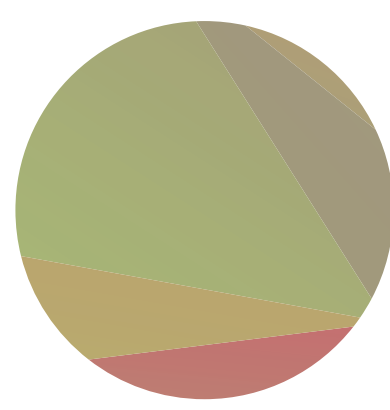




PROPHET: a person called to speak on God’s behalf. Entire books in the Bible are penned by some prophets or schools of prophets, such as Isaiah and Jeremiah. Prophets are also found in stories like this one.



**NATHAN
CONFRONTS
DAVID**
2 Samuel 11–12



King David is one of the most illustrious ancestors in the Hebrew Bible, but he was far from a perfect man. The whole story is worth reading, but the clincher comes as chapter 12 begins. David has displeased God (to put it lightly). He has slept with another man’s wife—though since she was unlikely to have much choice in the matter, many consider him to have raped her—and then he has her husband killed to cover up the fact that David has gotten her pregnant. It seems pretty obvious to us that David has strayed from God’s path, that he has sinned; but evidently David, blinded by his power and wealth, doesn’t see it.

Nathan, one of David’s good friends and a prophet (because he speaks on God’s behalf), tells him a story about a rich man and a poor man that makes David very angry. Little does he realize that the story is Nathan’s way of revealing to him the sin David has committed on Bathsheba and her husband. It’s a *gotcha* story, but it works. David cannot claim ignorance anymore and must see the sin he has committed. Admitting to the truth is his first step.

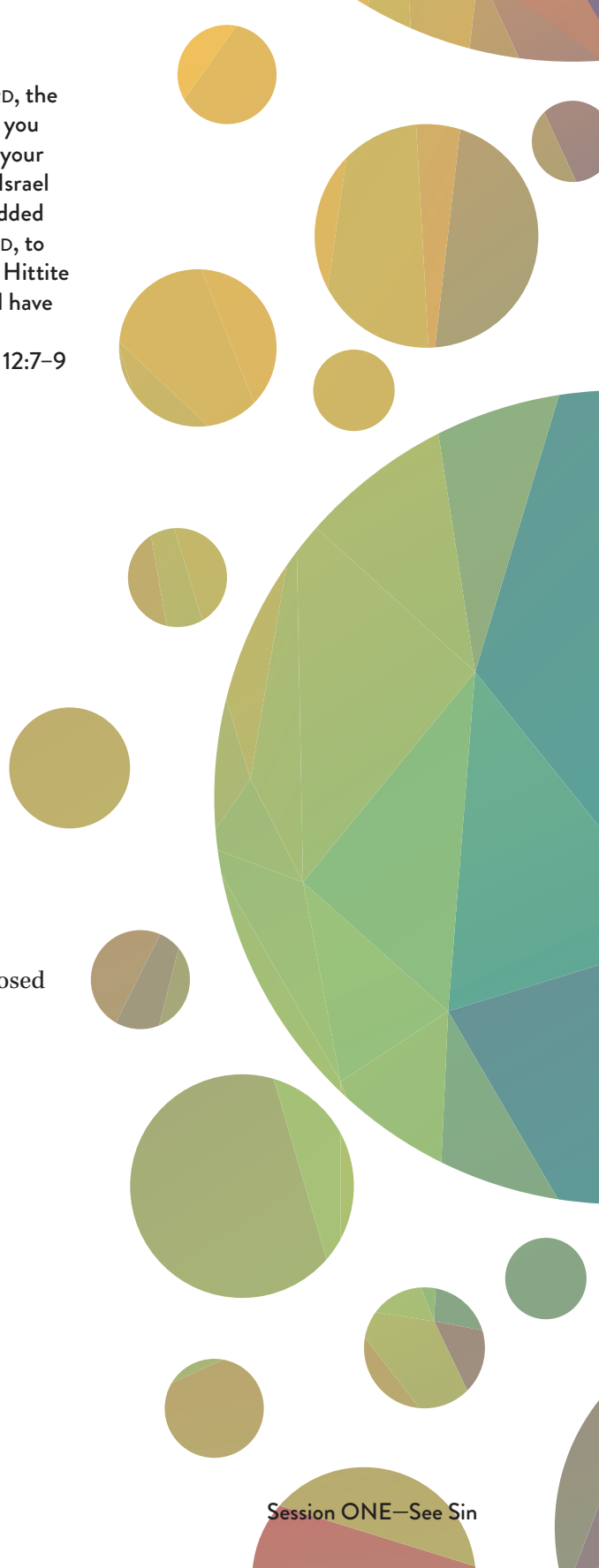
Read the entire story in 2 Samuel 11–12.

Nathan said to David, “You are the man! Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul; I gave you your master’s house, and your master’s wives into your bosom, and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added as much more. Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites.

—2 Samuel 12:7–9

- How do you think Bathsheba would tell this story?

- How do you think David felt after Nathan exposed his horrible sin?



FINDING THE PRACTICE THEN AND NOW



Opening our eyes to the flaws in ourselves and in our world is something most people are intimately familiar with. We have all made mistakes and come to realize those errors ourselves or had someone else point them out to us.

SEEING THE NEED TO CONFESS IN WORSHIP

Christians usually include a time of confession as part of every worship service. We recognize the need for it, and it is important to remember frequently that we do things we shouldn't and we don't do things we should. Two well-known Scripture verses for this are:

*For I do not do
what I want, but I do
the very thing I hate.
—Romans 7:15*

*If we say that we
have no sin, we
deceive ourselves,
and the truth is
not in us.
—1 John 1:8*

In addition to confessing sins we are conscious of, we also confess sinful actions we are unaware of and for not doing things we should have done. We ask God to make us aware of these sins so that we can make amends and change.

SEEING SIN CAUSED BY ADDICTION

Members of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and other recovery groups have recognized that, at a certain point, in recovery they need to look at and address how their addiction has harmed others. Most would argue that the addiction is not necessarily the sin. Persons become addicted to alcohol and other substances due to a number of factors, sometimes out of their control. But the addiction usually causes

Photo credit: Bryan Regan / Shutterstock.com

harm to others around the person, and they, of course, are affected themselves. As their very first step, people have to see and acknowledge their addiction before anything else can be undertaken. Persons in recovery recognize they are powerless over their addiction and their lives have become unmanageable.

Step 4 of twelve-step programs involves making a fearless and searching moral inventory of one's life. This requires opening one's eyes and seeing the damage one has done to oneself and others. Other steps that follow track our journey in this practice as well: the need to confess (step 5), to repent (step 6), and to repair (step 9). Step 10 acknowledges that this is a practice that never really ends; we should continue to take personal inventory, and, when we are wrong, promptly admit it.

Addiction is a personal struggle, but the factors that lead to addiction often have systemic underpinnings. When we fail to see the circumstances that exacerbate the challenges people face and help shape the decisions they make, we ignore the ways we are complicit in the larger problem. Often those challenges are easier for some of us to see than others.

SEEING SIN CAUSED BY RACISM

In recent years, more and more white persons are seeing the sin of racism and how they are immersed in a system where much harm continues to be done. There has been increased national focus on the message Confederate memorials communicate, for example. As with Nathan, Black Americans have felt and seen the damage done by such statues for decades, while most white Americans have walked blindly and blithely past, much like David. Only recently has our country begun to stop hiding from the damage done by venerating those who fought to maintain slavery and betrayed the union. As conversations continue and statues come down across the country, many white eyes are opening. Many people in the United States are beginning to see the way the sin of slavery and its racist reminders persist in shaping outcomes for Black people that result in wealth gaps, educational disparities, and significantly different incarceration rates (to name a few). The work to change all of that begins with seeing the sin.

SEEING HUMAN PARTICIPATION IN CLIMATE CHANGE

Scientists have clearly shown that much of global warming is caused by the human use of fossil fuels—principally, oil and natural gas. The US is a bigger user of fossil fuels than any country on earth. We watch other species disappear, increased asthma and related illnesses among children, melting ice and resulting ocean levels rising—all proven to be caused by an addiction to and dependence on fossil fuels. Perhaps the scientists are like Nathan. The sin has been pointed out. Instead of continuing to deny facts, more people are seeing the sin of our way of living.

- What are other examples in which people have seen sin and turned to face it?

PRACTICING THE PRACTICE

Another person may give us the gift of pointing out our sin, but we can choose to take time each day to reflect on the ways we have succeeded and the ways we have failed to live our life as God desires. There is a long-standing practice called the examen of conscience that you might use to both delight in God's presence and be more aware of the ways you stray from it.

EXAMEN

1

BEGIN WITH A PAUSE AND A SLOW, DEEP BREATH OR TWO

Become aware of God's presence. Look back on the events of the day in the company of the Holy Spirit.

2

REVIEW THE DAY WITH GRATITUDE

- Walk through your day in the presence of God and note its joys and delights.
- Look at the work you did, the people you interacted with. What did you receive from these people? What did you give them?
- Where did you receive love and support? Where did you show courage? Pay attention to small things.

3

PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR EMOTIONS

We detect the presence of the Spirit of God in the movements of our emotions. Reflect on the feelings you experienced during the day. Where did you feel joy? Where were you troubled? What challenged you today or gave you pause? What is God saying through these feelings? You will most likely become aware of ways that you fell short. Do not shy away from these sins/separations but see and acknowledge them.

4

CHOOSE ONE FEATURE OF THE DAY AND PRAY ABOUT IT.

Ask the Holy Spirit to direct you to something during the day that God thinks is particularly important. Pray about it.

5

LOOK TOWARD TOMORROW

Ask God to give you light for tomorrow's challenges. Seek God's guidance. Ask for help and understanding.

DEAL WITH THE SIN OF RACISM

If you are directly affected by the sin of racism, you probably can't help but see that sin. Acknowledging that this is not the way God desires us to live, take some time to care for yourself or do something that brings you joy when faced again and again by the frustrating fact that some are only starting this journey of awareness.

There are many resources available on the historical and ongoing sin of racism in the United States. Many church denominations have documents and lists of readings available as do other organizations combating racism. We are all harmed by this sin, though in significantly different ways. Here are some examples:

National Museum of African American History and Culture Self-Care resources:
bit.ly/FMNMSelfCare

Racial Stress and Self-care: Parent Tip Tool from the American Psychological Association: bit.ly/FMSCParentTipTool

Black Emotional and Mental Health Collective: bit.ly/FMBEAM

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) resource page: bit.ly/FMFacingRacism

The United Methodist Church resources on responding to systemic racism:
bit.ly/FMSystemicRacismUMC

Racial Justice from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America resources on racial justice: bit.ly/FMRacialJusticeELCA

United Church of Christ resources: bit.ly/FMRacialJusticeUCC

NAME SIN

- What are sins that you see and are facing for yourself? Include something in your personal life, your church/community life, and in our wider society. Remember to consider ways we participate, even unwittingly, in structural sin.

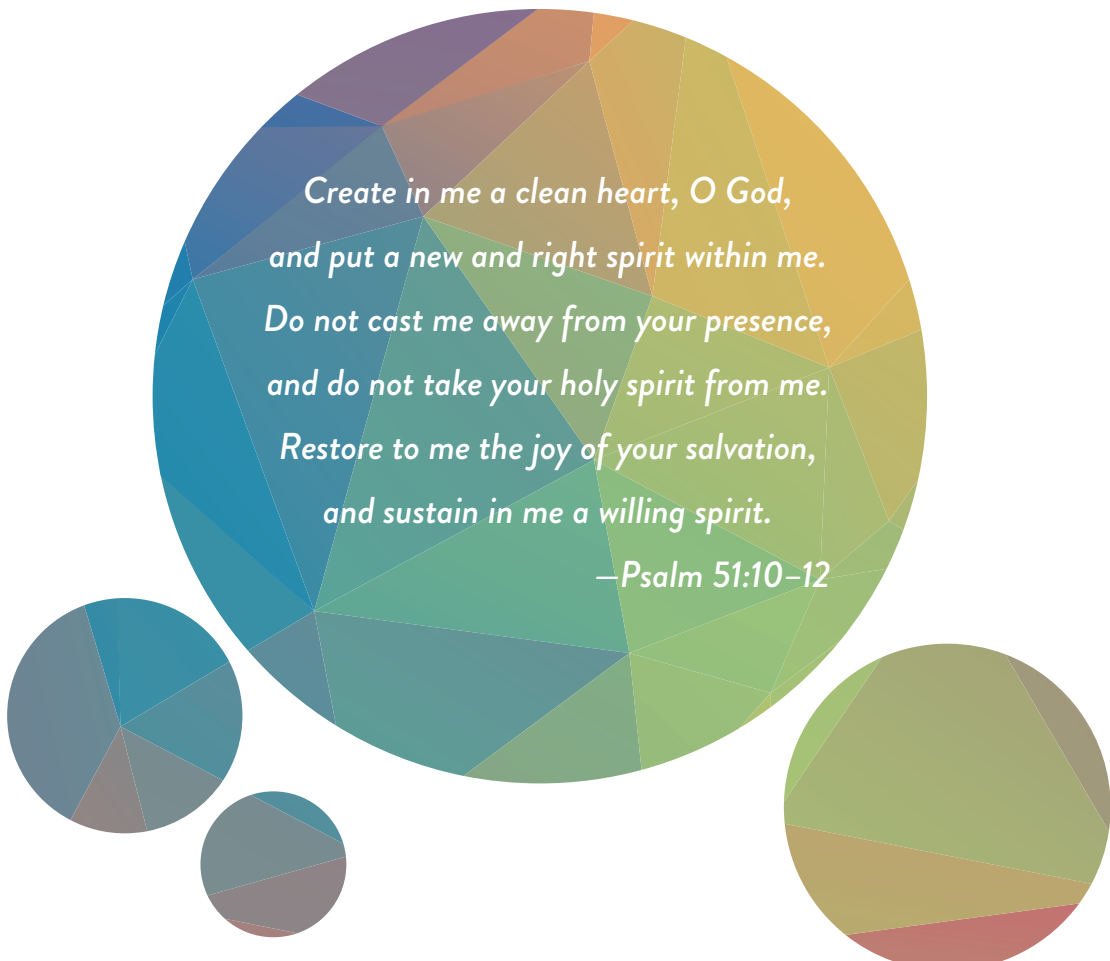
Use the first column on page 17 to list as many of these as you wish. The chart there is a worksheet to use throughout this *Confess* unit. In future sessions, we will consider the other columns.

FOLLOWING JESUS

As we follow Jesus to draw nearer to God, we see that Jesus focused on sin as that which separates us from God and one another—big things like greed, selfishness, hatred, and pride. He wasn't so much focused on insignificant rules that religious leaders preached. In fact, he used them often as bad examples because they missed the deeper structural and personal issues that hurt people.

It is certainly easier to find and name sin outside of ourselves. That is important, but we also need to be constantly open to addressing our own sins. In our next session, we will talk about ways to confess sin.

We close with these verses from Psalm 51 to be read aloud or silently as a prayer:



*Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.*

—Psalm 51:10–12

