In one experiment participants faced a choice between two headphone brands. Participants saw one of two reviews, identical except that in one, the reviewer noted dissatisfaction with a previous headphone purchase. When participants saw the review that did *not* mention previous dissatisfaction, 79 percent followed the reviewer’s recommendation. But when they saw the review describing a previous mistake, the figure rose to 93 percent. Honesty about imperfection seemingly made the reviewer more trustworthy.

Three other experiments with different designs and products (mints, florist services, speaker systems) yielded similar results. It appears that people who are honest about their mistakes are considered more credible. In a surprising twist, confession builds trust. Professor Reich suggests that since the reviewers learned from their mistakes they are perceived as having better judgment. “Beyond the bottom line,” she says, “we would probably have a better world if we could take the shame out of admitting and learning from our mistakes.”

Jesus would agree. After offering his warnings about anger and insults, Jesus says, “if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23-24). Confess your sin, admit your mistake, and then give your gift to God. Your gift will be more honest, more meaningful, more acceptable to God if you have already done the hard work of reconciliation.

For Jesus, nothing is more important than reconciliation: the resolution of disputes and the repair of broken relationships. When you make a mistake, Jesus says, admit it! Confession builds trust and brings people together. This kind of honesty is the key to avoiding the other problems that Jesus lists: adultery, lust, divorce, making and breaking an oath. Be honest and clear, says Jesus at the end of this passage: “Simply let your ‘Yes’ be ‘Yes,’ and your ‘No,’ ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one” (v. 37).

**A Path to Reconciliation.** Jesus knows that building a better life requires honesty about sin, which leads to reconciliation with the people around us. As hard as it is to admit our failures, the truth is that confession builds trust. Think of the story in Genesis in which Jacob had an all-night wrestling match with God, before he met up with his brother Esau. He struggled with guilt over his cheating of Esau, so after his night of anguish he approached his brother with humility and vulnerability. As a result, Esau showed grace to Jacob, and the two reconciled. The best human connections are made at the point of vulnerability, not strength.

This is true not only in the ancient world, but today. Reconciliation Parish in Berlin, Germany, is a congregation once divided by the Berlin Wall, and then reunited when the wall came down. But the removal of that enormous physical barrier did not heal the wounds and divisions that afflicted the community. To work on reconciliation, the parish hosted conversations between former members of the East German Secret Police and their victims, and pastor Manfred Fischer found that “victims are keen to forgive, and willing.” But first there needs to be an honest and open word, such as “I am sorry. I acted in a wrong way.”

Fischer knows that admitting sin is very difficult for those who did wrong. He saw this same problem with the World War II generation who did not want to discuss their history under Hitler. But there can be no reconciliation, with God or with other people, without an honest and open word. Overcoming alienation and establishing new and peaceful relationships is best done through conversation, confession, and forgiveness in a safe and hospitable Christian community; one that is grounded in the reconciling work of God.

Reconciliation always begins with God. The apostle Paul wrote that God “reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18). God reconciled us to himself through the life and death of Jesus Christ, and then Jesus challenged us to do the work of reconciliation in our own relationships. “First go and be reconciled to your brother,” he says in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:24). “Settle matters quickly with your adversary” (v. 25).

New Testament scholar Richard Hays points out that the word “reconciliation” in ordinary Greek usage is not typically a religious term. “Rather, it is a word drawn from the sphere of politics; it refers to dispute resolution. So, one could speak of the diplomatic reconciliation of warring nations or, in the sphere of personal relationships, the reconciliation of an estranged husband and wife.”

This work of reconciliation is started by God in Christ, and Hays says that Christians are now challenged to make it visible in “practices that show unity, love, mercy, forgiveness, and a self-giving grace that the world could not even dream of apart from Christ.” This is a message that the highly polarized and fractured Christian community in Corinth needed to hear, that former enemies in Germany need to hear, and that we in our politically and theologically antagonistic world need to hear today.

John Newton, the 18th century Anglican cleric and abolitionist, had a three-part exercise he practiced every Saturday at 6PM to help him get ready for Sunday. The first part was to make two lists: one list was all the mercies, blessings and good things for which he was thankful, and the second list was all the sins (purposeful and accidental) he committed against others and God.

The second part was to reflect on the discrepancy between God’s goodness to him and his behavior. This helped Newton get refreshed joy in God’s free, undeserved grace. Of course, this depended on his grasp of the gospel that we are saved by Jesus’ works, not ours. Without that, this discrepancy would drive you into the ground. The third part was a rededication of life, a refreshing and deepening of his commitment to God and God’s promises.

We are all imperfect people, but we can move forward by owning our mistakes, confessing our sins, and working to repair broken relationships. We can trust God and the path of reconciliation will reveal itself. We can seize the opportunity to speak honestly and say we are sorry. We can unleash the power within, the power we are given by God to turn the other cheek, love our enemies, and pray for those who persecute us.

There is no easy path to mastering everything that Jesus asks of us, especially in the Sermon on the Mount. But we move closer to Jesus and his way when we speak with honesty about our sins and our shortcomings, and when we take steps to repair relationships with the people around us. None of us is perfect. Far from it. But we should admit our failures because confession builds trust and leads to reconciliation.

Prayer: Bless us, dear God, that we may have hearts full of your peace. May we strive to be reconciled to You and to one another. Help us to always remember and live by the words that Jesus shared with his disciples when he taught them to pray: “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Amen.

**Sources:**

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**The First Step Toward Reconciliation**

Sunday, February 12, 2023 [Matthew 5:21-37](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+5%3a21-37&language=en&version=NRSVUE)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

“American culture has popular theories about how to build a perfect life.” Kate Bowler, a professor of the history of Christianity at Duke University, makes this observation in the preface of her book, “No Cure for Being Human.” She sees many guides to human progress for sale in airport kiosks, including:

* Books written by spiritual guides who say, “Trust God and the path will reveal itself.”
* Journals full of visionary wisdom from industry leaders and management gurus.
* Guidebooks that dare us to cross oceans, climb mountains, and jump out of airplanes.
* Business manuals that challenge us to eliminate distractions to escape the daily grind and enjoy a four-hour workweek!
* Titles urging you to “unleash the power within!”

“These are the formulas for a meaningful life,” Bowler writes. “But the truth is somewhere inside of me: *there is no formula. We live and we are loved and we are gone.”* She is right, of course. There is no formula. At least not one that can be found in books, journals, guidebooks, and business manuals. A perfect life cannot be built by our own efforts, even if we follow a perfect set of guidelines, perfectly.

Jesus knew this, which is why he included so many examples of human imperfection in his Sermon on the Mount: murder, being angry with a brother, insulting a sister, committing adultery, looking at a person with lust, getting a divorce, making and breaking an oath. Jesus is not down on us as human beings, but along with Kate Bowler, he knows that there is *no cure for being human.* We are imperfect people, doing the best we can. Jesus wants us to be honest with ourselves and each other, as we learn how to turn the other cheek, love our enemies, and even pray for the people who persecute us.

**Embracing Imperfection.** Any progress we make in life begins with being honest about our imperfections. Recent research reveals that there is an upside to admitting our mistakes. Taly Reich (Yale School of Management) and Sam Maglio (University of Toronto Scarborough) collaborated on a series of lab studies. They knew that people tend to be afraid of making and admitting mistakes, but wondered: why? Why should we be afraid to admit our mistakes?