

Chapter 5

Parts of Prayer No. 2 October 13, 1996

We are considering, as part of our study of the Bible's doctrine and practice of prayer, the parts of prayer, the purposes for which prayer is offered to God, or the primary business or subject of prayer as it is taught in the Bible. Last week we considered the first of these parts, adoration/thanksgiving. Tonight we move on to consider the confession of sin.

That confession of sin, that is, acknowledgement of our wrongs — both general and particular — the expression of sorrow for them and the seeking of forgiveness, is to be a part of the life of true prayer cannot be questioned.

I. The Bible furnishes us with many examples of such confession in prayer.

The Psalms provide us with prayers that are virtually nothing but confession (Ps. 51) and with many more prayers that include confession among their parts (19, 25, 38, etc.). But, besides those prayers in the Psalter we have many others, from Isaiah's "Woe is me," to Ezra, Nehemiah, and Daniel's elaborate prayers of confession for Israel to Peter's simple, impassioned, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man."

II. What is more, we are commanded to confess our sins to God, which is to say, to pray prayers of confession.

It is interesting and noteworthy how this part of prayer was made so central to the levitical worship of God's people in the old epoch. Lev. 5:5: "When

anyone is guilty in any of these ways, he must confess in what way he has sinned. . . .” Specifically, the law of sacrificial worship required confession of sin at the beginning of the liturgy, when the worshipper was laying his hands upon the lamb or goat. That is not said in so many words in Lev. 1, but is made more explicit in Lev. 16, in the law of the sacrifice of the day of atonement. There the high priest is explicitly commanded “to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites — all their sins — and put them on the goat’s head.”

And lest we think that that part of our worship of God, the acknowledgement of our sins, does not continue to be our duty as Christians today, the Lord, in his model prayer, the Lord’s Prayer, by which he taught his disciples to pray, includes confession as one of prayer’s essential elements: “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”

III. Further, the Lord makes promises to his people that are suspended upon the confession of their sins.

Lev. 26:40-42: “If they will confess their sins. . . I will remember my covenant with Jacob. . . .”

1 John 1:9: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

To suspend God’s remembering of his covenant with us and the forgiveness of our sins upon our confessing of them to God is a powerful demonstration of how important this part of prayer is to God and so to us.

But why should confession of sin loom so large in the prayers of God’s people; why should they have repeatedly to acknowledge their wrongs, go over again in their conversation with God all that they have done or failed to do that violated his will? Especially, given what we believe regarding justification!

Well, the Bible furnishes various answers to that question.

I. First, Christians should confess their sins to God because honesty requires it.

We are sinners, inveterate sinners, comprehensively sinful. We breathe iniquity like air and drink it like water. We offend against God’s law and God’s nature every moment we live in this world. And, the more sharp-sighted and

clear-thinking among us know very well that we hardly know the hundredth part of our sin. Which is why David pleads with God to forgive his "secret sins." In Psalm 19:12 he says, "Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden faults." What are secret sins or hidden faults? Not sins that are secret from God or from others, but sins that are not known to or recognized by ourselves! 1) Things which we are mistaken about and which we regard as either indifferent or as positively good that are, in fact, sins. (Think of how many of these we see all the time: sanctimoniousness in Christian people; pride of all kinds that is taken to be entirely proper; a controversial spirit that presents itself as passion for the truth; bigotry that parades as high standards; self-love that calls itself passion for the truth or whatever; business practices that are justified as simply the laws of competition; the desire to succeed that is nothing else but worldliness; faithfulness at certain works that is used to mask unfaithfulness at others — e.g. a parent who dresses a child well but does not rear them in the Lord, etc.) 2) Secret sins are also sins that escape our notice or recognize. Many here too, but especially the sins of omission, a lack of proper passion for God, zeal for his name and cause, the actual practice of love of the brethren and the love of neighbor.

I don't have always to develop this fact of our sinfulness or prove it. Believers know it is so and those who do not cannot be made to know it by anything that I say; the Spirit alone can convince them of this and when he does, they are convinced indeed. But, even Christians can be dulled to this reality. Confession of sin, each day, especially particular confession, makes honest men and women of us. And, given that we are speaking of our relationship with the living God, who looks upon the heart, it is essential that we not come to him dishonestly, as if we had some natural right to expect his favor.

Listen to Lancelot Andrewes from his celebrated Private Devotions:

"Merciful and pitiful Lord, longsuffering and full of compassion, I have sinned, Lord, I have sinned against Thee; O wretched man that I am, I have sinned, Lord, against Thee much and grievously, in observing lying vanities. I conceal nothing: I make no excuses. I give Thee glory, O Lord, this day. I denounce against myself my sins. Indeed I have sinned against the Lord, and thus and thus have I done [here he would fill in the particulars]. I have sinned and perverted that which was right and it profited me not. And what shall I now say? or with what shall I open my

mouth? What shall I answer, seeing I have done it? Without plea, without excuse, self-condemned am I. I have destroyed myself. O Lord, righteousness belongeth unto Thee, but unto me confusion of face. And Thou art just in all that is brought upon me for Thou has done right, but I have done wickedly. And now, Lord, what is my hope? Art not Thou, my Lord?" [Whyte ed. pp. 67-68]

That is the spirit of true confession and true prayer [Bud Harrell's case: couldn't see it at all; now sees it and more! Honest men are few and far between in this world touching themselves.] By the way, this is why popular psychology with its therapies is so little able to demonstrate real power over human problems. It proceeds on the assumption that man is basically good, has within himself the seeds of the solution to his problem. But man is not. Guilt is real and cannot be talked away, papered over, or got round. Only forgiveness can relieve guilt and only God can forgive all the sins we have committed!

II. But confession is also necessary as a means of keeping sound, healthy, and happy our relationship with God. Peace with Him requires our confession to him of the sins that we have committed against him.

This is why, by the way, that the Bible requires us to confess our sins to one another. It is not enough that we know we have done wrong, not enough even that we restore, as able, the loss we have caused someone else. We must as well confess to them our wrong.

Why? Because it is the real embodiment of a true humility and love. Confession of sin to another places us in a position of distinct disadvantage, we place ourselves below another person. But that is humility and that is love. And humility and love are the prerequisites of any genuinely happy, holy, and fruitful relationship. In the Scripture, one cannot really repent without confession, because confession is the full demonstration of the spirit of real repentance. Without confession — heartfelt and unqualified — penitence is almost always simply a sorrow for having been caught and for the consequences of one's deed, not a genuine sorrow for the wrong that was done, the offense that was given, for having had a part in evil and so hurting others or offending God.

This is a very important point, because it lays bare a great danger. Listen to Bonhoeffer discuss why it is that we find it so much easier to confess our sins to God than to one another.

“Why is it that it is often easier for us to confess our sins to God than to a brother? God is holy and sinless, He is a just judge of evil and the enemy of all disobedience. But a brother is as sinful as we are. He knows from his own experience the dark night of secret sin. Why should we not find it easier to go to a brother than to the holy God? But if we do, we must ask ourselves whether we have not often been deceiving ourselves with our confession of sin to God, whether we have not rather been confessing our sins to ourselves and also granting ourselves absolution. And is not the reason perhaps for our countless relapses and the feebleness of our Christian obedience to be found precisely in the fact that we are living on self-forgiveness and not a real forgiveness?

Who can give us the certainty that, in the confession and the forgiveness of our sins, we are not dealing with ourselves but with the living God? God gives us this certainty through our brother. Our brother breaks the circle of self-deception. A man who confesses his sins in the presence of a brother knows that he is no longer alone with himself. . . It is a mercy that we can confess our sins to a brother. Such grace spares us the terrors of the last judgment.” [Life Together, pp. 115-116]

Now there is a great deal in that statement, but I want to emphasize just this. Confession of sin, when it is sincere, is the essential prerequisite of a living relationship when sinners are involved. It is the supreme test of honesty and genuineness. God has taught us so. And if that is so with one another, how much more with God, who looks upon the heart and knows the full measure of our sin. And that is why you and I need to make our confessions to God supremely sincere and honest. And the best way to do that is to make them particular!

We confess generally here in church, as we must, and as the Scripture teaches us to do. But, when we are alone in prayer with God, our confessions should be particular, specific, and all the aggravations left in! This is the best way to make them genuine and to be sure we are not simply confessing to ourselves.

Suppose, you know that you spoke unkindly to someone. Do we say, “Lord, I should have been more kind, I guess.” Or do we say, rather, “I spoke harshly, it was inexcusable, it was a lack of love on my part, arrogance and selfish, it was a total failure to reflect Christ’s love to me and an offense committed against his name. I neither loved my neighbor as myself nor treated him/her as I would want to be treated and as I condemn others for not treating me. I have condemned myself and have been made to see myself as unworthy, as hypocritical, and as a very poor excuse for a Christian. Lord, forgive me. Much as I hurt her with my words, I know full well, O father, that it is against you and you only that I sinned and did this evil. You know my heart and how full it is of myself and how little of the true love that Christ has shown me do I keep there.” If you are a Christian this telling the truth will work humility and love within you and it will bring God’s blessing and his forgiveness. He promises that.

Far better that you confess some sins particularly than all sins generally, if you would have your confessions to God be sincere.

III. Third, confession is necessary for our own peace and joy. It is the divinely appointed means to remove guilt and receive forgiveness and peace and so the saints have found it through the ages.

Peace in the heart and love and joy require humility and confession is both the practice and the producer of humility! Pride produces none of that and cannot. More than that, real confession brings God’s smile, because his children are being honest and humble before him and he loves honesty and humility. We make our children apologize — not primarily to heal their relationships with others, but to eliminate the poison, to heal them!

This is what the Puritan, Thomas Manton, meant when he referred to confession of sin as the “vomit of the soul.” [James, p. 457] It gets out of you what spoils, upsets, irritates, degrades, endangers, and purifies your inner life again.

But for this one reason more, confession is a way to great blessing, to peace and to love and to joy for ourselves. For it is the way in which Christ becomes great in our heart over and over again, and his salvation a wonder to us, and his love an amazement, and his sacrifice for our sins the glorious mystery that it is.

The Scripture says that the Lord laid on Christ the iniquity of us all. And, in confession, we, in effect, repeat that great act ourselves, laying our sins, one by one, upon the head of the Lamb of God. As Aaron stood over the scape-goat and confessed the sins of Israel, so we stand over the lamb and confess our sins, one by one with our hands upon his head, that he might carry them away from us forever.

You generously gave me, last year, as an anniversary gift, a handmade volume of sermons of Alexander Whyte, preached in 1881-1882 and taken down by hand by some member of the congregation of Free St. George's. There are wonderful sermons in that book, I am deeply grateful to have it. And I have looked forward to my first opportunity to give you back some of the wealth that is in that volume.

The image of confession as our laying our hands on the Lord Jesus, laying our sins on the Lamb of God, is taken from one of those sermons. And Dr. Whyte went on:

“Adam laid on him his fall; Abraham his mistrust; Noah his drunkenness; Jacob his worldliness; Moses his impatience; Aaron and Miriam their envy for their brother; David his corrupt nature with his many trespasses; Isaiah the uncleanness of his lips, and Manasseh the uncleanness of his life. And. . . in the NT the twelve laid on him particular sins. Matthew laid on him his cruelty and extortion; James and John their mother's ambition; Magdalene her stained life; the thief that died beside him on the cross his life; the chief of sinners his blasphemies and persecution. No wonder then that though he came from God, out of heaven with strength from his Godhead, no wonder that he trembled in manhood at the load laid on him, and prayed that if possible the cup might pass from him. No wonder that he said, ‘My soul is exceeding sorrowful even unto death,’ for the Lord laid on him the iniquities of us all. Have you laid yours on him? My brethren, have your feet stood on that spot beside your scape-goat beneath the cross of Christ? Have you laid on him your iniquity? Have you laid on him your sins, one by one? Does he bear in his body any marks of yours? Have you made it impossible for him to say, I never knew thee? Are there not stripes on his flesh that no sins but yours have put there?”

No, brothers, God does not call us to confess our sins because he wants to see us squirm. He wants us to be honest, of course, and honesty requires confession of us. He wants our relationship with him to be sincere and close and tender and that requires dealing with the sins by which we have offended him. But, more than that, he wants us to love and honor his Son, he wants us to live in the joy of his Son's great salvation, and there is no other way to that but through the particular confession of our sins, always and repeatedly, confessing them to God in order that in Christ they may be cast behind his back, trampled under the Almighty's foot, buried in the deepest sea, separated from us as far as the east is from the west, and remembered no more.

There is no joy like the joy of sins forgiven and of one more welcome home in our father's house, once more putting on the robe, once more sitting down to feast. God wants that joy for his children every day they live, and he has told us that confession of our sins to him that in Christ they may be taken away is the way to that joy.

Or, as Alexander Whyte said in another sermon in another book [Thomas Shepard, pp. 161-162]:

“... we are always returning home from the far country, and we are always saying, ‘Father, I have again sinned.’ And our Father is always saying over us, ‘Bring forth the best robe and put it on him.’ Every morning you rise put on again the best robe. And every returning night lie down again in it. Go out to your day's work always wearing it. Make it your morning coat and your evening dress. Be married in it, if you would be married in the Lord. Die in it and awake in it and go up to Judgment in it. Stand at the right hand of the great white throne in it, and enter heaven shining like the sun in it.”

And here we put on that robe, or can, every day, by confessing our sins to God — really, particularly, sincerely, without qualification or extenuation of any kind — and seeking from our merciful God, through the blood of his Son, the forgiveness of all of those sins we confess and the world of sins in our lives that we still know nothing of.