



Prayer Before Studying Theology:

Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, as you are the king of majesty; and forgive all my sins that I have committed, both great and small, and bring me, if it is your will, to heaven to live always with you.

--Richard Rolle

Week #5a: Confession and Penance (I)

The purpose of confession and penance is to

- (a) identify and repudiate the things that separate one from God and
- (b) be reconciled to God and other people who have been harmed by one's sin.

Confession

When a member of God's people sins, they are commanded to confess their sins and openly admit their fault/guilt in having rebelled against God and broken God's Law:

- Ezek. 10:11: "Now make your confession to the Lord, the God of your fathers, and do his will."
- Jer. 3:13: "'Only acknowledge your guilt--you have rebelled against the Lord your God...you have not obeyed me,' declares the Lord."

The Necessity of Confessing One's Sin

In the biblical literature, confession of sin is correlated with peace with God and spiritual well being, while failure to confess one's sins is associated with continuing enmity with God and spiritual decline:

- Prov. 28:13: "He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy."
- 1 Jn. 1:9: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives."
- Mt. 11:20: "Then Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent"

Confession Presupposes Repentance:

An Unsystematic Biblical Survey of the Elements of Repentance Which Should Be Present in Confession

Minimally, the repentance that motivates one to confess one's sins must include:

- 1) A recognition that
 - a) one has violated the Law of God and done what was wrong

- i) 1 Sa. 15:24: "Then Saul said to Samuel, 'I have sinned. I violated the Lord's command and your instructions. I was afraid of the people and so I gave in'"
 - ii) Ps. 51:4: "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge"
 - b) one's sin offends God and makes one an object of divine judgment
 - i) Lk. 5:8: "When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, 'Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!'"
 - ii) Lk. 15:21: "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner'"
 - c) one's sin has harmed others
 - i) Lk. 15:18: "I will set out and go back to my father and say to him; Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you"
- 2) This recognition should lead to
- a) a sorrow for the sin one has committed
 - i) Ps. 57:17: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."
 - ii) Is. 66:2: "This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word"
 - iii) Joel 2:13: "Rend your hearts and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love..."
 - iv) 2 Cor. 7:10: "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death"
 - b) an open disclosure (confession) of the wrong one has done, naming it as a sin
 - i) Jos. 7:20: "Achan replied, 'It is true! I have sinned against the Lord, the God of Israel. This is what I have done:....'"
 - ii) Lev. 5:5: "When anyone is guilty in any of these ways, he must confess in what way he has sinned"
 - c) a repudiation of the sin committed and a willingness to turn away from one's previous course of action and to repudiate actions of this type
 - i) Nu. 22:34: "Balaam said to the angel of the Lord, 'I have sinned. I did not realize you were standing in the road to oppose me. Now if you are displeased, I will go back.'" (compare Ezra 10:10-11; Ezek. 14:6; 18:21-22; Mal. 3:7-10; Acts 14:19-20 on the forsaking of particular past sins and see *Eph. 4:28 for a helpful example)
 - d) a willingness to set right the harm done by sin, insofar as this is possible. This may involve
 - i) apology [cf. Mt. 5:23-24],
 - ii) restoration of what was taken [cf. Lev. 6:4; Ezek. 33:15], or
 - iii) compensation for what was damaged, harmed or destroyed [Ex. 22:1; Lev. 6:5; 2 Sam. 12:6; *Lk. 19:8]

**Toward a More Systematic Theological Presentation:
The Three Things Required for True Repentance (Contrition, Open Confession and Restitution)**

Within the Western Church, these various elements necessary to true repentance (the repentance which should be evidenced in any confession of sins) were typically condensed down into three basic elements:

- (a) contrition="godly sorrow," i.e. a sorrow for sin which occurs for fundamentally God-related reasons (i.e. out of love for God, out of grief at having acted against God and a yearning to be restored to God, where God is the object of one's desire).
 - (i) This essentially corresponds to (1) and (2a) above.
 - (ii) *Contrition* is contrasted with *attrition*, which is a sorrow for sin rooted in and motivated by a fear of the consequences of one's sin to oneself (e.g. fear of having one's sin having been discovered; fear that one will have to suffer, lose face, be humiliated, be punished when one's sin is discovered; etc.).
 1. *Attrition*, as a servile fear of discovery and punishment, is rooted in a twisted form of self-concern and self-love, rather than being chiefly motivated by a love and concern for God. *Attrition* is a kind of sorrow that is primarily self-focused and represents a disordered form of self-love, in which the natural desire for self-preservation ignores the claims of justice.
 - a. As such, *attrition* involves planned action for self-protection. (For things to work out for me, I must protect myself as best I can by my own action.)
 2. *Contrition*, by contrast, is motivated principally by a love for God, since one is grieved at having acted against God and wishes to return to God and be reconciled to God.
 - a. *Contrition* is rooted in a faith in the Gospel that there is a forgiveness that can be had through Christ and for Christ's sake, quite apart from my management of the situation.
- (b) open confession of sin=taking full ownership/responsibility for one's sin (as a sin, as one's own) without evasion, minimization/excusing of the sin, or any shifting the blame to someone/something else.
 - (i) This normally takes the form of a *verbal acknowledgement* of one's acceptance of responsibility for the sin to God and those harmed by the sin.
 - (ii) This essentially corresponds to (2b) above
- (c) restitution="a firm purpose for amendment of life," i.e.
 - (i) a resolute desire to break with the sin in question and return to God (this essentially corresponds to [2c] above), which produces
 - (ii) a further desire to set right the harm caused by sin, insofar as this is possible (this essentially corresponds to [2d] above), , e.g. by
 - apologizing to the person harmed by one's sin;
 - restoring what was unjustly taken;
 - offering compensation for what was damaged, lost or destroyed

(The term *reparatio* ["reparation"] or *satisfactio* ["satisfaction"] are used in place of *restitutio* ["restitution"] in theological works of the Middle Ages.)

Repentance and Confession Must Precede

- **Gathering for Prayer**
- **Participating in the Lord's Supper**

The Church has also consistently taught that

- repentance and confession of one's sins should take place before one approaches God in prayer and
- this is especially important when this involves the prayers of the gathered church and participation in the Lord's Supper.
 - 1 Corinthians 11:27-30 is often cited in this context.
 - In the *Didache*, one of the earliest Christian documents outside the New Testament canon, we also find these directions:
 - "In church confess your sins, and do not come to your prayer with a guilty conscience" (4.14)
 - "On the Lord's own day, assemble in common to break bread and offer thanks; but first confess your sins, so that your sacrifice may be pure. No one quarreling with his brother may join your meeting until they are reconciled; your sacrifice must not be defiled" (14.1-2)

Why Repentance and Confession Cannot Remain a Purely Private Matter

Repentance and confession cannot remain a wholly private transaction between the individual and God for two reasons:

(1) We are not always very self-aware and therefore can never be self-sufficient in understanding and morally appraising our thoughts and actions.

(a) One often needs help in identifying one's own pattern of thought and action as a sin (and as a particular kind of sin and to identify the root/source of a particular pattern of sinful behavior).

(i) Part of the pastoral task is helping persons relate the faith to the concrete aspects of their everyday life and understand their lives in the light of the biblical stories about who God is, how God sees things and what God desires and commands.

(ii) We need to seek people who are truly competent to help us with this.

(iii) If one is oneself a pastor, one should ask oneself how one can become the sort of person to whom others could properly entrust themselves for this kind of help.

(2) Confession and repentance should normally receive a public expression when harm has been done to others (cf. Acts 26:20; Dan. 4:27; Mt. 3:8=Lk. 3:8; Lk. 3:10-14) because

(a) the external demonstration of appropriate emotion is considered to be a part of any sincere apology or request for reconciliation after harm has been done to others and persons have become alienated from one another;

(i) 1 Kings 21:27: "When Ahab heard these words, he tore his clothes, put

on sackcloth and fasted. He lay in sackcloth and went around meekly."

(ii) 2 Kings 22:19: "Because your heart was responsible and you humbled yourself before the Lord when you heard what I have spoken against this place and its people, that they would become accursed and laid waste, and because you tore your robes and wept in my presence, I have heard you, declares the Lord."

(iii) Ezr. 10:1: "While Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a large crowd of Israelites--men, women and children--gathered around him. They too wept bitterly."

(iv) Jnh 3:6: "When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust."

(v) Is. 22:12: "The Lord, the Lord Almighty, called on you that day to weep and to wail, to tear out your hair and put on sackcloth."

(vi) Joel 2:12: "'Even now,' declares the Lord, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.'"

(vii) Mk. 14:72: "Immediately the rooster crowed the second time. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him: 'Before the rooster crows twice, you will disown me three times.' And he broke down and wept."

Compare also 1 Sa. 7:6; Ne. 9:1-3; Joel 1:13-14; 2:12

(b) restitution is required to set right the harm that has been done (Ex. 22:3; *Num. 5:6-7; *Lev. 6:4; Prov. 6:31; *Ez. 33:15; 2 Kings 8:6; Neh. 5:12; Lk. 19:8) and this cannot be made until the wrong has been acknowledged to the injured party.

(c) reconciliation (Mt. 5:24; 18:15) and/ or restoration to the community (2 Cor. 2:5-11) is required and attempts to restore trust and pursue reconciliation with the persons harmed by one's sin cannot proceed until the wrong has been named as a wrong and repudiated. Seeking reconciliation with another often needs to take tangible form; see Lk. 7:44-47 and Mt. 3:8 ("Bear fruit in keeping with repentance").

The Pastoral Value of Confession

Q. Granted that one must confess one's sins in making apology to those one has hurt, nonetheless is there ever any reason to confess one's sins in the presence of another person, for example a person who is a minister of the Gospel and has pastoral care for the Church?

A. The practice of confessing one's sin in the presence of another Christian can create an opportunity to provide a form of pastoral counsel for those who will use it.

- The claim that God has "given power and commandment to his ministers, to declare and pronounce to his people, being penitent, the absolution and remission of their sins" (BCP) can claim a certain biblical basis in Mt. 18:18 (16:19) and Jn.

20:21-23. Christ has entrusted his ministers (the shepherds of his flock) with a ministry of discernment and counsel to promote and deepen both repentance and reconciliation.

It can be useful and necessary to

- a) help people name the sin as sin (i.e. for what it is), move beyond servile fear of the consequences to genuine fear of sin, and commit oneself to the struggle against sin (striving by grace to forsake the particular sin in concrete ways)
- b) remind people (whose conscience continually accuses them or are near death) of the Gospel promises and of divine mercy and
- c) to reassure and comfort those who are penitent by affirming their full and complete remission of sins and reconciliation to God
- d) use visible and tangible media (prayer, sometimes with laying of hands or anointing) to indicate this assurance to those afflicted by doubt.

Ted Kober has a fine book entitled *Confession and Forgiveness: Professing Faith as Ambassadors of Reconciliation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002), which discusses what the ministry of confession looks like within the context of Protestant pastoral care.

Historical Development of Private Confession

- The regular practice of private confession appears to start with the Egyptian ascetics of the fourth century; a younger or less experienced person would reveal the pattern of their thoughts/inner life (particularly, one's weaknesses and failures in the face of certain patterns of temptation) to an older, experienced monk and receive counsel (i.e. spiritual direction concerning the nature of this temptation and how to combat it). Cf. Sellner, *Celtic Soul Friend*, who looks at the way this practice was carried by John Cassian to ascetic and monastic communities in the Latin-speaking West.
- This eventually became a common practice in Western monasteries, although even within a more narrowly defined and hierarchical form of communal life, one always retained the choice of who to confess to (it didn't have to be the abbot and usually wasn't).
- Note that this confession was voluntary, being initiated by the penitent, who was free to approach for spiritual counsel any person whom they believed to
 - (a) be trustworthy;
 - (b) have a holy life,
 - (c) have spiritual discernment and be able to provide edifying counsel about temptation, sin and spiritual warfare (the spiritual guide drawing upon his or her study of the Scriptures and his or her own knowledge of human nature and experience of temptation and spiritual warfare).

The person one approached for spiritual guidance did not have to be a priest (and in fact was often a layperson known for their holy life, sometimes a woman). Sellner discusses the *anamchara* (the "soul friend") in early Christian Ireland, i.e. a person of holy life (typically an ascetic or monk) who heard confessions and

provided spiritual counsel to an individual or family, noting some holy women who served in this role.

- From the early sixth century onward,
 - (1) there is a persistent tendency to asceticize the clergy, i.e. ascetic/monastic spirituality often set the pattern for the spiritual ideals of the parish priest (which was a natural development, since clergy were expected to be celibate and often had limited personal property) and
 - (2) when there was a need for qualified persons to take up important positions of pastoral work they were sometimes recruited from monastic environments (again a natural development—where else could one regularly find people known for their holy life, unimpeachable character and previous oversight of a spiritual community and its resources?).
 - In the later Middle Ages, some religious orders sometimes specialized in preaching and hearing confessions, which were functions regularly exercised by the parish priest, so the overlap often worked in both directions, i.e. priests being assimilated to monks and monks to priests.
- From the sixth to ninth century, it seems that only limited numbers of laypeople made regular use of private confession to a priest/spiritual guide. Thus, the practice remained confined to monks, priests, and some especially religiously committed members of the local nobility (especially women).
- From the ninth century to the twelfth century, there are increasing attempts to
 - promote lay participation in confession (especially in preparation for receiving Communion) and
 - systematize the practice of confession (e.g. through the development of penitentials and confessor's manuals)
- In the twelfth century, there is renewed theological and literary interest in confession, due in part to the fact that the forgiveness of sins (and suitability to receive Communion) is seen as tied to the quality of contrition, i.e. the genuineness and depth of one's sorrow for one's sin (this being interpreted in more subjective manner, moving beyond merely the question of harm done to the neighbor).
- In the thirteenth century (Fourth Lateran Council of 1215), one is required to confess one's sins at least once year.

(a) To whom should confession be made?

- a. The original discretionary practice (being able to pick for yourself the person to whom you are going to confess) could be abused when people
 - (i) sought out a lax, indulgent person (cheap grace) or
 - (ii) shopped around, approaching different confessors until one finds one who says what one wants to hear (this subverts the external guidance process)
 - (iii) used this as an opportunity to pass a vote of confidence or no-confidence upon their local parish priest (undermining the latter by choosing a person outside the local community for guidance).

- b. Can confession be made to laypeople (including holy women)? (Cf. the Celtic *an(a)mchara*)
- (b) What private information will be sought and how will confidential information received during confession be protected/kept private?
 - a. Interrogation and exhaustively naming the sins committed (cf. Biller, “Confession in the Middle Ages,” p. 4).
 - b. The “seal of the confessional” — information received during confession is to remain confidential (not to be discussed by the confessor with other parties or even with the penitent outside the rite of confession itself).
- (c) How will boundaries be kept in place to prevent the relation between the person hearing the confession and the person making the confession from being manipulative, exploitative or abusive?
 - a. One does not hear confessions as a private person, but rather in the role one has as a minister of the Gospel and this sets the boundaries.
 - b. All that one is authorized to do is to hear the confession, provide pastoral counsel and pronounce God’s forgiveness of sins to the penitent. Period.
 - c. One may ask only a few carefully selected questions to get to the heart of the penitent’s struggle. One may not go on a fishing expedition, ask the penitent to name co-conspirators, discuss unnecessary or imprudent matters when hearing a confession from a child or a person of the opposite sex, etc.