

Confession and Forgiveness

Scripture distinguishes between two types of sorrow. “*Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death*” (2 Corinthians 7:10). Godly sorrow expresses itself when we see our offence for what it really is: sin against God and sin against people. Worldly sorrow reveals itself when we appear sorry that we got caught or must suffer some consequence. It is often accompanied by attempts to justify, cover up sin, or accuse others.

Repentance means coming to one’s senses and turning back. In the parable of the lost son who squandered his share of his father’s estate, Jesus talked about this man’s regret: “*When he came to his senses, he said ...*” (Luke 15:17). The son returned home to confess “*Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son*” (v. 21).

The Augsburg Confession (Article XII) defines repentance in two parts: *Properly speaking, repentance consists of these two parts: one is contrition, that is, terror smiting the conscience with a knowledge of sin, and the other is faith, which is born of the Gospel, or of absolution, believes that sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake, comforts the conscience, and delivers it from terror. Then good works, which are the fruit of repentance, are bound to follow.* (3-6)

Repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret is found in confession and forgiveness. Confession of a penitent lays one bare and pitiful before God, open and thirsting for absolution. Faith receives God’s forgiveness, which covers one’s nakedness, providing comfort and hope, and makes him righteous in God’s sight. In response, the forgiven sinner praises God through good works.

Because we are conceived and born in sin, our most natural expression of sorrow leads to death. That which comes naturally is frequently practised throughout life. Worldly sorrow tends to be on “automatic pilot.” Thus, it becomes necessary to choose words carefully for confession of our sin as well as the announcement of God’s forgiveness and our personal forgiveness.

Even when we begin to realise our sin, our practised words of self-justification and blaming others instinctively fall from our lips. We inherit this trait from our father Adam, whose first confession typifies man’s most natural response. “Well, yes, Lord, I did eat some fruit. But it was the woman, whom, incidentally, *You* gave me, that caused me to trip up.” Eve learned from her husband’s example: “Not me! It was the serpent who tricked me into eating it!”

When we blame others, we really blame God. We call Him a liar. “*If we claim we have not sinned, we make Him out to be a liar and His word has no place in our lives*” (1 John 1:10).

In addition to examples of lousy confessions, the Bible furnishes us with beautiful confessions, such as David’s confession to Nathan (2 Samuel 12:13), and penitential psalms, such as 6, 32, 38, and 51. With fasting, sackcloth, and ashes, Daniel prayed a wonderful confession of repentance and praise for God’s mercy, a portion of which follows:

O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant of love with all who love Him and obey His commands, we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from Your commands and laws. We have not listened to Your servants the prophets, who spoke in Your name to our kings, our princes and our fathers, and to all the people of the land.

Lord, You are righteous, but this day we are covered with shame - the men of Judah and people of Jerusalem and all Israel, both near and far, in all the countries where You have scattered us because of our unfaithfulness to You. O LORD, we and our kings, our princes and our fathers are covered with shame because we have sinned against You. The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against Him....

Therefore the curses and sworn judgments written in the Law of Moses, the servant of God, have been poured out on us, because we have sinned against You....

O Lord, listen! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, hear and act! For Your sake, O my God, do not delay, because Your city and Your people bear Your Name. (Daniel 9:4-19)

Both parts of repentance are expressed in this confession. Contrition for sin is clearly articulated, acknowledging sin before a holy God. Faith in a merciful and forgiving God is explicit in these words. Daniel’s prayer testifies to his trust in God by admitting sin and seeking forgiveness. Specific sins are identified, although he does not detail an exhaustive list of sins. There is no blaming God or others for sin. Daniel recognises that consequences are deserved because of Israel’s unfaithfulness to God. Praise for God and His mighty acts become part of the overall confession of sin and faith. May Daniel’s confession be a model for us to copy! As we, too, confess our many sins, let us also remember that there is complete forgiveness offered since we are made righteous through the blood of Jesus.