

"Confession of Sin"

by
James Yonge

"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8,9).

The confession of our sins is one of our very first duties; for if we do not know ourselves to be sinners, then we do not know that we have need of a Redeemer. It is reasonable, therefore, to begin our devotions with a confession of our unworthiness and sinfulness. This, of course, is not for the purpose of informing God of that with which he is very well acquainted, but rather that we may constantly keep alive in our own minds a conviction of our sinfulness. Without this conviction there is no true repentance and therefore no amendment of life. Consequently, there is no pardon and therefore no salvation.

Although much stress is laid upon confession, you cannot suppose that the mere confession is itself worth anything; it is only valuable for the sake of the repentance which ought to follow. Confession in and of itself is an easy enough duty, and I doubt if there is any man in the world who would seriously deny that he was a sinner. But, strangely enough, worldly and irreligious men often make the very acknowledgment of their sins a kind of apology for them. When charged with a sinful life, how often you will hear a man confess that he is "no saint," or that he is a "sad example of the infirmity of the flesh." At the same time you may observe an air of secret satisfaction, as if he believed he had done something meritorious in making the confession, as if he thought he might now continue in his vices with less scruple in that he acknowledged how wicked he is. But he is deceiving himself, and as plainly and fatally as if he were to say he had no sin. He might just as well deny his sinfulness as acknowledge it without repentance.

The end goal of confessing our sins is that we may sincerely repent of them. This is indispensable. It is absolutely necessary to salvation. There is no hope of going to heaven without it. Read the Bible from beginning to end, and you will find no promise of pardon to the impenitent. The whole emphasis is "repent and be converted." Was not repentance preached by all the prophets in the Old Testament? Was it not preached by John the Baptist? Was it not preached by our Saviour himself when he said, "*Except ye repent, ye shall all perish?*" The very first words with which he began his preaching were, "*Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.*" And almost the last words he uttered before ascending into heaven were, "*that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations.*"

Observe too how faithfully his apostles fulfilled his instructions. On the very first day of their public ministry, the Day of Pentecost, Peter said, "*Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ, for the remission of sins.*" His order was the same as that of his master--repentance first, then remission of sins. No forgiveness is proclaimed to the impenitent. It is not only vain but presumptuous to hope for heaven and eternal life without repentance.

Surely you are not ignorant of this, for there has hardly been one sermon which you have read or heard where this doctrine has not been taught. You must be acquainted with the dreadful warnings against sin which the Gospel everywhere contains. You must have heard and known long ago that Christ came into the world to save those only who would turn from their evil ways and bring forth fruits suitable for repentance. Obstinate and impenitent sinners have the wrath of God hanging over them and the prospect of eternal misery lying before them. While men live in sin, they cannot possibly expect the divine favor.

But perhaps there is among you one who is persuaded that the Gospel is not true. Why then do you come here? Why be seen praying on your knees? Why sit with patience to hear the word of God? Why not just throw off the name of "Christian" and give up your profession altogether? Why not declare among your neighbors that the Gospel is only a cunningly devised fable, that those who talk of God and judgment, of heaven and hell, are nothing more than impostors? If you do not believe the Gospel, why not honestly declare yourself to be an infidel?

Although I have set forth these questions, I do not really suppose that there is among this congregation an absolute infidel. Nevertheless, I am not equally confident that there may not be more than one who is living, if possible, in greater sin and greater danger. I am speaking now of impenitent professors of the Christian faith. Are none of you addicted to uncleanness and debauchery? Are none of you drunkards? Are none of you profane swearers? Are none of you given to evil speaking, lying, and slandering? Are none of you covetous and worldly-minded? Are none of you lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God? Search your own hearts and consciences. Do not be ashamed to confess the truth to yourselves, for God knows it whether you will admit it or not.

You believe that there is a God in heaven whose eye is always upon you, and yet you insult and defy him by every sin you commit and every evil thought you indulge. Consider who it is you dare to disobey. It is the great Creator and Sovereign of the universe. It is he who gives laws to all the world, by whose command the sun and moon give their light. It is the great God who needs only speak the word and whatever he wills is immediately accomplished. This is the Being whom man--that little, insignificant, weak, helpless, dependent, and mortal creature--is bold enough to willfully disobey. But do you think that God does not take notice, or that he will pardon you even without repentance? Did he not cast out of heaven the very angels who resisted him? Did he not drive Adam and Eve out of

paradise and inflict a deadly curse upon their whole posterity for one transgression? Did he not drown all the world for their wickedness, sparing only Noah and his family? Did he not overthrow the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because their sin was very grievous? Did he not send his own Son into the world to be a sacrifice for sin, because sin was so odious that no other expiation could appease him? And though he does not usually punish sin during our earthly pilgrimage, has he not revealed to us that there will be a day of retribution hereafter, that the "hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear his voice and come forth--those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of damnation?"

Perhaps there is someone here overwhelmed with the consciousness of his manifold and grievous sins, pricked to the heart with the greatness of that God whom he has insulted. He is ready to fall into despair thinking that he has now sinned beyond all hope of forgiveness. But, my friend, do not entertain so dismal a thought. The Gospel, severe as it is upon the impenitent, is full of encouragement to those who are convinced of their sins and eager to forsake them. There is no reason for the greatest sinner to despair, for there is no attribute of God more emphasized in the Scriptures than his mercy. Did he not proclaim his name to Moses at Mt. Sinai as "the LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin?" Did not David say, "as a Father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear him?" Did not the prophet Joel say that "he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness?" Did not the prophet Daniel say, "To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, though we have rebelled against him?"

And the same doctrine is taught in the New Testament. The Gospel abounds with the most consoling assurances of pardon and acceptance to the very worst of sinners if they will only repent. Did not our Saviour say that he came expressly "to seek and to save those who are lost," to "call sinners to repentance?" Did he not associate with persons of notoriously bad lives for the purpose of reclaiming them? The Bible declares that "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." In the parable of the Prodigal Son, God is represented as willing to receive the most profligate and rebellious as soon as they return to him. In the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, we find that however vile a man may have been, yet when once he has come to a conviction of his sins and prays for mercy, he is regarded with favor. And in the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard we read that though a man's repentance may have been long delayed, yet if it is sincere it will be accepted.

The Gospel is not a mere book of terrors but a book of consolation to those who are weary and heavy laden with a sense of their sinfulness. It is the best news that ever was published to the world, the glad tidings of great joy to every individual who hears and truly receives it. It assures every person that "he has an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ

the righteous, and that He is the propitiation for his sins."

My sermon has had this double aim: first, to make those who do not repent fear and tremble; second, to inspire with confidence and courage those who do. Impenitent sinner, you are on the brink of a dreadful precipice and ready to fall into destruction; but to the penitent there is a hand stretched out to pull you back if you will be lay hold of it. To the impenitent, God is an enemy and avenger; but to the penitent he is a friend and merciful Father.

Let me warn you once more not to imagine that the mere confession of sins is true repentance. Many know and confess themselves to be sinners who are yet far from sincerely repenting. Repentance is, first, genuine sorrow for sin; and the fruit of that sorrow is a changed life. When we begin to struggle with our sinful inclinations, when we heartily pray to God to help us in overcoming them, and when we anxiously try to avoid the occasions for sin and the temptations to it, then and only then is our sorrow of the godly sort which leads to repentance. To confess our sinfulness and yet remain as great a sinner as ever is only to acknowledge that we shall be deservedly punished at the day of judgment.

Let our repentance, then, be not in word but in deed. Let it be made known to God by the humble acknowledgment and contrition of our hearts. And let it be known to the world by the purity and holiness of our lives.

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Note: This sermon has been condensed and moderately rephrased for clarity.