

Peter's Epistles #15

Confession of Sin

(also available on-line at www.ICHTHYS.com)
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Review of Spiritual Growth: As we have noted in our preceding studies of the believer's growth pattern, the process of spiritual growth is a phased one, requiring for maximum effect that we:

1. Seek out God's Word (*listening* phase).
2. Put our faith in His truth (*believing* phase).
3. Live our lives by that truth (*living* phase).
4. With our spiritual gifts, assist others in doing the same (*helping* phase).

So far in our study, we have examined *listening*, the first step in the process where we initiate spiritual growth by seeking biblical truth, and *believing*, the second step which emphasizes the transfer into our hearts by faith of the principles of truth we have received.

It is now time to take up the third and fourth steps in the process of spiritual growth, "living" and "helping". As we have learned, so ought we to live, and as we have benefitted from the grace of God in our quest to grow spiritually, so we should lend a hand to others pursuing the same goal. The truth we have received should not lie dormant within us. On the contrary, we should be energized and motivated by it. We should take the information we have learned and believed, and use it to mold and form our lives, our thoughts, and ourselves, and by that same truth help others to do likewise.

Maintaining our Lifeline: First and foremost, both living a good Christian life and serving God as He wants us to do require that we sustain the pattern we have established of "growing by the knowledge of God" (Col.1:10). After all, God's Word is our spiritual food, and overlooking it has all the negative consequences for our hearts that neglecting physical food has for our bodies (1Pet.2:2; cf. 1Cor.3:2; Heb.5:12-14).

Living the Word: Hearing the Word of God is not enough. We must believe what we have heard in order for it to profit us. And if we do truly believe His words, can they help but have a powerful effect on what we think, what we do, and how we live our lives? Jesus said, "He who hears these words of mine *and does them*, will be like the wise man who built his house upon a rock" (Matt.7.24), and it was in exactly the same spirit that James wrote "be doers of the Word and not merely hearers who are deceiving themselves" (Jas.1:22). Both of these scriptures move directly from hearing to doing (or living) the Christian life, taking it for granted that if a person believes the truth of God's Word, and if that belief is genuine, then such belief must necessarily

be followed by action, by the putting into practice of that faith. "Pure religion", as James calls it, demands that we actually live according to what we believe (Jas.1:27).

Spiritual Fitness: Just as proper nutrition must be combined with adequate exercise to get into good physical shape, so merely hearing God's Word and claiming that we believe it is not enough. It takes consistent application to our daily lives of the Biblical knowledge we have acquired to get into good "spiritual shape". Living according to the truth we believe is an essential form of spiritual exercise which adds muscle to our faith and begins to transform us into the people God wants us to be. As Paul says in 1Tim.4:7-8, "exercise yourself unto godliness." Without developing the habit of putting our faith into practice according to the principles we believe, it is impossible to achieve the godliness we seek, and we run the risk of becoming spiritually weak to the detriment of our spiritual health.

Running the Race: In 1Cor.9:24-27, Paul compares this daily process of applying what we believe to our actual experiences to the running of a race. "Run to win!", he exhorts us. Like it or not, we are all in this race which constitutes our life as Christians here on earth, and in order to "win" it, we must "exercise self-discipline in all matters" as the athletes of old did to gain their wreath of victory (v.25).

This means quite simply that there are certain things we must consistently do and certain things we must assiduously avoid in order to obtain victory with the life God has given us to lead. As it is in many forms of athletic competition, so in living the Christian life it takes a "good defense" as well as a "good offense" to win. So before we proceed to a discussion of all the positive things necessary for and connected with spiritual growth, we should first consider the problem of personal sin and how to deal with it.

The Sin Problem: We need to note immediately that even a genuine process of change in our hearts will never produce "sinless perfection". While our Lord faced all of life's temptations without error (Heb.4:15), the rest of us necessarily fall short of that mark (Rom.3:23). This is because our very physical makeup is corrupt, or "indwelt" by sin (Rom.7:20; Gen.6:5, 8:21). We must therefore not make the mistake of "redefining" sin for our own benefit. Sin is not just what we personally find offensive, but rather everything which God has forbidden. We can neither add to God's list of prohibitions, nor subtract from it with impunity. To God, *all* sin is an offense against His Person, for all sin is in essence disobedience to His will. Adam and Eve were expelled from paradise for eating of the forbidden fruit, an act which does not seem particularly immoral in and of itself, but which was a clear and willful rejection of God's authority (Gen.2:16-17). Actions prohibited by God, even if they may not seem terribly wrong to us, are just as sinful as those which shock and offend us personally.

The Myth of Sinless Perfection: Even though we have been given the charge "be holy as I am holy" (and this is a standard to which we must cleave: 1Pet.1:15-16), and even though we are expected to improve as we grow up spiritually (and this is a goal to which we must aspire: Heb.5:11-14), absolute sinlessness is nonetheless unattainable in this corrupt body and in this corrupt world. "Sinless perfection" is a false doctrine, and a dangerous one at that, because of

the enormous psychological pressure it generates. The reality and inevitability of sin most often lead adherents of such views to deny that certain categories of sin are really sin at all, or to deny that they commit certain sins (even though they may). But the reach of sin is so broad and insidious that it embraces the very motivations and expressions of the human heart (Jer.17:9; Gal.5:19-21; Eph.4:29-31; Phil.2:3-8). No matter what standard of perfection we choose to try and prove our own righteousness, we are bound to fail (cf. Rom.9:31; 10:3). The Ten Commandments, the most specific standard of human conduct ordained by God, concludes by pronouncing the acquisitive and lustful desires of our hearts just as utterly sinful as idolatry or murder ("thou shalt not covet": Ex.20:17; cf. Rom.7:7-12). And in fact, Paul tells us that God's *very purpose* in giving the Law was to prove to all mankind that beyond any doubt we are all sinful and therefore in need of God's solution to the sin problem, Jesus Christ (Rom.3:9-20; Gal.3:19-25). Many of the "religious" people of Paul's day tried to use the Mosaic Law as a standard to prove their righteousness, but in doing so only managed to condemn themselves (Rom.3:20). The only true righteousness is that given us by God when we believe in His Son (Rom.4:5). As followers of Jesus in a hostile world which is in the devil's grip, we cannot afford to be under any illusions about our personal foibles, errors, and sins. We must recognize them for what they are and make use immediately of the grace God has given us to deal with them.

Cleansing from Sin: As believers, we have already been "washed" clean of our sins, that is, forgiven and pronounced holy by Christ's work when we accept that work by faith (Eph.2:5-9). But although we are clean and pure "in Christ" (1Cor.6:11), it is still possible for our feet to pick up a bit of dirt as we walk about in the devil's world. God has given us the status of "holy people", but we are still imperfect and still capable of sin. We must therefore be alert to the fact that as long as we sojourn on this earth we shall always be vulnerable to personal sin, and we must be ready to confess it whenever we become entangled in the "sin which so easily besets us" (Heb.12:1). This is the point Jesus made when He washed the disciples' feet before the last supper (Jn.13:1-17). Peter was unwilling to allow Jesus to wash his feet along with the other disciples. But when Jesus told him that without the washing of his feet, Peter could have "no share" with Him, Peter demanded that the Lord wash his body also. Jesus replied, "One who has had a bath needs only to have his feet washed, otherwise he is completely clean" (v.10). Our Lord was telling us that we are in need of only one release from the bondage of sin which has held all mankind under condemnation since Adam, and that this release or "redemption" was provided by His death in our place and appropriated by us through our faith in Him (Col.2:13-14). This is the "bath" or cleansing from sin which has already been accomplished and need never be repeated. We do, however, continue to commit acts of personal sin as believers, and when we do, we are in need of "foot washing", that is, of the forgiveness and restoration which comes to us when we confess our sins to God. We need to be washed *from sin* only once. We need to be cleansed *of our sins* as often as we commit them.

John's Primer on Sin: For all the reasons mentioned above, sin is a very personal, very disturbing issue. Writing to a congregation which, though ethnically and geographically diverse, had had the benefit of apostolic teaching for many years, the apostle John nevertheless felt the need to review at length the sin issue in the epistle we know as 1st John. In chapter one, verses five through ten, he covers the doctrine of sin in a pithy summary:

v.5: And this is the message which we have heard from Him and report to you: that God is light and there is no darkness in Him.

This verse states the principle emphatically that God has nothing to do with sin. He is not the originator of it and bears no responsibility for it whatsoever. Nor does He condone it in the least. Sin is foreign, antithetical to God, so if we would belong to God, sin can have no place with us either.

v.6: If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and yet we walk in the darkness, we are lying, and not accomplishing the truth.

Since God and sin are unalterably opposed to each other, we must choose whether to follow God or sin. We cannot simultaneously follow the dark path of sin and at the same time have a relationship (fellowship) with God. If we claim that we are enjoying a relationship with God while living under the dark power of sin, we are only deceiving ourselves and making God out to be a liar, for He tells us that He cannot accept what is sinful. Without the power and wonder of God's grace, these two verses would be terrifying for anyone viewing themselves and their lives with an honest heart. The words of the disciples spring to mind: "Who then can be saved?" (Matt.19:25).

v.7: But if we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we do have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from *all sin*.

The use of the Greek word *pas* ("all") without a definite article suggests that John is here referring to all acts of personal sin. For those who choose against God in this life, there is no escape from sin and therefore no fellowship with the holy people of God. But for those who choose to walk in the light and follow Christ, God has provided a means of cleansing from every aspect of sin: the work of His Son Jesus Christ on the cross (referred to here and often in scripture as "His blood", cf. Matt.26:28). Because of what Jesus Christ did for us in dying in our place, the Father is justified in accepting His work on our behalf, forgiving us all our sins, and considering us clean despite the sinful nature we retain in these earthly bodies, and despite the personal sins we continue to commit. In the analogy, covering the sin God the Father sees "the blood of Christ" with which we "have been sprinkled" (cf. Heb.10:22). He is satisfied that the death penalty for sin has been paid on our behalf. He regards us as guiltless on account of our relationship with His Son rather than judging us according to our necessarily sin-tainted merits. Note carefully in verse seven, however, that believers who are approaching the Christian life in the correct way ("walking in the light") *still need cleansing from sin* as part of their Christian walk.

v.8: If we say that we don't have sin, we're deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

Verse eight is an important caveat to believers who would rather not think of themselves as sinners. If we are unaware of committing any transgressions lately, it is most likely because we

lack a clear understanding of the wide ranging and insidious nature of sin. The scripture here is quite clear. As believers, we still sin. It is true that we are commanded not to sin. It is true that suppression of sin is a necessity for spiritual growth and even spiritual safety. But it is also true that as long as we inhabit these imperfect bodies and reside in the devil's world, we must continue our struggle against personal sin, even resisting "to the point of blood" (Heb.12:4). Verse eight is written neither to discourage us to resist sin, nor to encourage us to commit it, but rather to alert us to the cold, hard reality of the situation in which we find ourselves, and to awaken us to the necessity of *dealing* with personal sin in the correct, biblical way, namely, *confession*.

v.9: If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just so as to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Verse nine means that God's forgiveness of our personal sins is consistent with both His faithfulness (He doesn't break His word) and righteousness (because of Christ's pre-payment on our behalf); when we confess our sins in prayer to the Father, He forgives us and restores us to full fellowship with Himself and His Son.

v.10: If we say "I haven't sinned!" we make Him out to be a liar and His Word isn't in us.

Confession of sin is an essential part of the Christian's daily walk. Combined with regular self-examination, a biblical understanding of personal sin should provide plenty of material for the average Christian to confess. The claim of "sinlessness" is an erroneous one, and is extremely hazardous to the Christian's spiritual health (1Cor.11:28-32).

Confession of Sin: As believers we are completely "clean" from sin only when viewed from the standpoint of our relationship with Christ. By virtue of our "position" in Christ, God the Father considers us totally washed of our sins, past, present and future. We are "clean on the inside", so to speak. In our everyday experience, however, we frequently get "dirty on the outside". We don't cease to be Christians because we have made a mistake - we still "hold on to Christ" and so are still considered clean by God in that critical respect. When we err, we don't need another "salvation bath"; only our "feet" need washing as a result of the personal sins we commit.

Confession is the solution which God has provided for this continuing problem. Just as the work of Christ is sufficient to free us all from sin *at the point of time* when we believe in Him (as represented by the ritual cleansing of baptism), so that same work of Christ is also sufficient to wash us clean whenever we sin *after that point* of salvation.

David's great psalm of confession, Psalm 32, is a model for the mechanics of confession in that it demonstrates so clearly the two most important principles to keep in mind as we face the vexing problem of personal sin. On the one hand, we must own up to our mistakes realizing that sin is a serious business which carries with it serious consequences, and we must approach God for

forgiveness with a genuinely contrite attitude. On the other hand, we must also approach Him in the sure and certain confidence that He *will* forgive us immediately and unconditionally, for His forgiveness is not based upon our personal merit, but upon the work of His Son, Jesus Christ. As is often the case in the application of Christian truth, we must avoid extremes on either hand. We cannot afford to ignore the seriousness and the wrongness of what we have done, any more than we can afford to give in to excessive guilt or uncertainty about the perfect, loving forgiveness of God.

David's experience illustrates both of these principles clearly. When he tried to hide his sin from God, David was visited by God's stern discipline (vv.3-4). But when he "made known" or acknowledged it, "ceased to hide it and confessed" it, God forgave him (v.6). Acknowledgment, cessation of covering up, and confession are not separate "stages" of confession, but rather different aspects of the same process of owning up to one's sin. The idea is that we need to tell God about it in prayer (see v.6), to get out of denial, and to admit the truth of our sin. When we do so, we can confidently expect God to forgive us as He did David (cf. 1Jn.1:9). As it says in Proverbs 28:13, "The one who hides his transgressions will not prosper, but he who admits and abandons them will be shown compassion" (read also Psalm 51). Next time, we shall continue our study the spiritual life, moving on from the "defensive" issue of recovery from sin to the "offensive" principle of "virtue thinking".