

Prayer of Confession

*A monk was once asked, "What do you do up there in the monastery?"
He replied, "We fall and get up, fall and get up,
fall and get up again."*

ESTHER DE WAAL

*Despite my struggles, brokenness, imperfection, and sin,
prayer is the redemptive gift of God that presents the greatest gift of all
—the chance to connect and commune with God.*

JIM MCLAUGHLIN

GOD AS HOLY

A newborn baby is so innocent, yet as the child grows so does her willfulness and so does his frustration. Parents remember the first times their sweet baby threw a temper tantrum. We are flawed human beings. We make mistakes, sometimes big ones. We are mean and judgmental to each other. We over- or underestimate our "quality." God, on the other hand, is perfect. God is a holy God. Holiness is fundamental to God's nature. Because God is holy, God is also perfectly just, distinguishing good from evil.

The first time *holy* is used in the Old Testament is in Exodus 3:5 when Moses saw the burning bush: "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." God's holiness covers and makes holy whatever or whomever God touches. In Moses' "Song of Deliverance" from the Egyptian army, Moses sings about God's holiness being majestic and God guiding the people to his holy dwelling. God set his people aside to be holy and to establish holy places. The Lord God is holy, so we are to be holy.

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: *You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.* You shall each revere your mother and father, and you shall keep my sabbaths: I am the LORD your God. Do not turn to idols or make cast images for yourselves: I am the LORD your God. (Lev 19:1-4)

In the Garden of Eden God created Adam and Eve to be his holy partners in work and rest. Holiness came through the integrity of their daily relationship with God. The primary means of experiencing holiness is in right relationships to God and others. The commandments in Leviticus are about maintaining right relationships with God by not turning to idols, with creation by resting, with family by honoring our father and mother, and with neighbors by not hurting or cheating them.

When Adam and Eve chose to sin in Genesis 3, they were no longer single-minded, seeking to be with God. They became divided and self-focused. With their sin came guilt and they hid. They knew they had disobeyed God's command not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. Prior to eating the fruit, knowledge came through their intimate relationship with God. It was what they shared together. Knowledge was discerned and shared in community with a holy God. Knowledge was not decided by independent interpretations.

By choosing to eat the fruit, they chose to stand alone. Adam and Eve separated themselves from God and hid; they knew they were naked and exposed. They felt ashamed. Shame results in feelings of ostracism and blame. The woman blamed the serpent. The man blamed the woman. They no longer knew themselves through their close relationship. Now they knew each other as sinners. They no longer walked and talked with God in the Garden.

God created us to be a holy people, a nation of priests, but our tendency to want to be a god and do our own thing separates us from God. Holiness comes primarily from staying connected to a holy God. It is not about behavior—doing the right things—but about being in right relationship with a holy God. When we are in a right relationship, we seek to honor God with our lives.

There are several ways in which we sin and separate from God:

- *It's wrong:* We know it is wrong, and we do it anyway. We know we shouldn't yell at our kids when we're tired. We know we shouldn't gossip about the obnoxious coworker. In the Old Testament God's provision was for a guilt offering (Lev 5). Guilt is the result of breaking a known law or rule of behavior. When we commit an intentional sin, we confess to God and to witnesses that we are guilty, offer atonement, and then we are forgiven.
- *Oops:* In life we all make unintentional mistakes. A comment we made in a meeting hurt a coworker. We forgot to follow through on an assignment from school or missed meeting a friend for lunch. In the Old Testament these required sin offerings (Lev 4). These are still wrongs because others are hurt by our thoughtlessness. We confess and apologize.

- *It's complicated:* Sometimes people are slowly caught in addictive behaviors that begin as small dangerous choices and then become completely overwhelming physical addictions. Smoking, drugs, pornography, overuse of social media, overexercising or overeating, any compulsion that fills our thoughts, isolates us and separates us from others and God is an addiction. The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous follow a similar pattern as the Old Testament sacrifice for sin. Admit your powerlessness and your need for God. Trust God. Admit wrongs and make restitution.
- *It's not my problem:* Sometimes people take responsibility for another's behavior. If I were kinder, he wouldn't yell at me. If I work harder, my boss won't cheat his customers. If I don't study and get As, then the other kids won't bully me. Whenever we take the sin or guilt or shame of another's bad behavior upon ourselves, we take away the opportunity for others to mature. There is nothing to confess.

I have learned through many hours of speaking plainly to God that confession is my honesty before God. But it isn't just honesty about the bad stuff, about me or others; it is also about good stuff. For me, confession, honesty, humility and thankfulness are tied together. Confession allows me to hear from God the totality of my life. Releasing the bile of my guilt allows me to receive the joy of God's grace, which eventually leads to thanksgiving. Then I am able to see the totality of myself: strengths and weaknesses through the grace of God. In shame, I found fear and hiding. In confession, I found relief and integrity.

—Larry Williams

When we choose our own way out of pride, rebellion, fear, brokenness or addiction, we separate ourselves from the love of God and thus God's holiness. Holiness is not something we earn but something that God sees when he looks at us. We are covered by God's gaze. We are on holy ground with God. When we sin, the way to restore the relationship is to recognize our sin, feel remorse and confess. This is the central tension of our faith. God is holy and just and yet God is also love. Our sinfulness and self-involvement separates us from the love of God. Turning to God and confessing reestablishes us with God. Confession returns us to being with God and not against God. Confession is a prayer of return.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

God created all things and God is perfect. We are imperfect, yet God loves us. So God designed a way for us to come close to God through the prayer of confession. From the Old Testament through the

New, God is a holy God. When we are made new in Christ, we can approach God's throne as holy, blameless and without accusation. When we slip up, our responsi-

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Every single day I am reminded of what a loser I am. I have this image of an angry God constantly telling me that I have wasted my life. It's funny how much God is like my own father. Every time I feel stressed I pull out that candy or bag of chips. I can't stop eating. I tried prayer but it didn't work. One evening I was desperate. I started yelling at God at the top of my lungs. I screamed and shouted and kicked cushions around. After a couple of hours I fell to the floor, sobbing and spent. I cried out, "Lord, Lord, help me. I am so miserable." Then I heard God say, "You are my beloved son." I could hardly take it in.

—Jeff Reynolds

ashamed and don't want to be reminded that they don't measure up. Others just don't care. Life is tough. Everyone makes mistakes. All these reasons for neglecting prayer are rooted in a behavior theology rather than a relationship theology. God is inviting us into a loving relationship. The apathy, blame or fear we feel is a result of our separation from God, ourselves or others.

In the Old Testament when people felt deep penitence, they used their body to make a statement of their sincerity. They would lie on the ground or kneel. The body, as well as the mouth, confesses a desire to be restored. Saying a quick prayer on Sunday or a simple "forgive us

bility is to confess our faults and God is just to forgive them. Confession is part of the daily rhythm of prayer. It reminds us that love and wholeness is in God and not in our efforts.

Some neglect prayer because they feel they are sinners and can never be safe with a God who is holy. They believe there is no hope. They have tried to live better lives, and it doesn't work. Others are angry with a God who would create us and then judge us for misbehaving. To them God is the unyielding parent ready to punish whenever we stray. Some are

Once as a new Christian in college, I backslid in a most terrible way. For a few days I tried to hide from God by not acknowledging what I had done until I couldn't stand it anymore. After a Sunday service, I returned to my room and began to plead for God's forgiveness. I was kneeling beside my bed, and then I was flat on the floor beside my bed. And then out of incredible shame for what I had done, I stuck my head under my bed and shimmied as much of me as I could fit, all the while confessing and pleading for release of the guilt and shame, not only for what I had done, but for destroying Christ's integrity in me to those who witnessed my sin. It was an occasion of extreme sincerity, and God's grace covered my sin.

—David Manning

our debts” is not enough. A Band-Aid is not enough. The wound needs to be exposed, cleaned, attended to and cared for in order for healing to be complete.

Confessional prayer is both individual and communal.¹ We sin in our personal lives and we sin as groups: churches, communities, institutions, schools and businesses all sin intentionally or unintentionally.

Corporate sin is so disconnected from the reality of our typical American Christian life that we are shocked when it actually enters our world. Rather than confront sin, we begin to look for ways to categorize it as a theologically liberal agenda—thereby stripping corporate confession and repentance of its prophetic power.²

Thinking together about how we might have sinned as a group and then confessing the sin, receiving God’s forgiveness and asking for guidance for restitution are all elements of community confession.

CONFESSION PRAYER GUIDELINES

- *Remember God’s goodness:* Begin in a place of love and grace by reflecting on God’s goodness.
- *Honest reflection:* In prayer, return to the specific event. Reflect on it. Take responsibility for the part you played, even if someone else was responsible for initiating it or for being more hurtful than you. What part did you play?
- *Specific confession:* General confessions, such as “Forgive me for being angry,” are not helpful. Specific confessions are: “Forgive me, Lord, for yelling at my son and calling him ‘hopeless,’” “Forgive me, Lord, for being impatient with my coworker when she asked me for the third time to help her.”
- *Tell someone:* Confessions are told first to oneself and God, and then to a trusted friend or a spiritually mature Christian. Have an accountability partner, someone who loves you and believes in you but who will walk with you in Christ.
- *Make amends:* Sin is not a personal affair. Someone is always hurt. Apologies are often needed. “Son, Daddy is sorry for yelling at you and calling you ‘hopeless.’ I love you more than anything and I was wrong. I’m very proud of you. Please forgive me.”
- *Remember God’s goodness:* Finish by thanking God for his goodness.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION EXPERIENCE

Group Experience

- If in your context it is not appropriate to do a group confession experience, pair people up and do the partner experience explained below.
- For a group confession read aloud together Psalm 32, “Blessedness of Forgiveness and Trust in God.”

- Group reflection
 - Is there unintentional sin?
 - Have we been hurt?
 - Have we hurt others?
 - Is there sin in our hearts?
 - Is there sin in our words?
 - Is there sin in our actions?
- As a group write
 - Contrition
 - Disclosure
- Kneel or lie on your side and write.
- Discuss how you will take action.
- Receive God’s forgiveness and forgive us our sins.

Partner Experience

- During your prayer, write down a hurt you caused or were hurt by.
- Following the prayer, discuss (be specific) and write down.
- Receive God’s forgiveness and forgive us our sins.
- Discuss how you will take accountable action.

Individual Experience

- You can do this daily for yourself or others. Write your confession and reflect on it.
- Or you can do this for someone who created this pain.

- Group reflection:
 - Is there something that the group as a whole has done either intentionally or unintentionally that has hurt others?
 - Have we made fun of someone or of a group of people?
 - Have we neglected to do something that we should do? Have we neglected the community or the environment?
 - Is there something for which we feel arrogant or prideful?
 - Is there a group we hate or feel jealousy toward?
 - Is there idolatry, something more important to us than God?
- As a group write a prayer of confession. It should include
 - Contrition—sadness for the sin
 - Disclosure—confession of the sin
- Kneel or lie flat on the floor, if you are able, and pray together the prayer you wrote.
- Discuss how you might make amends and follow through on some specific action.
- Receive God's blessing. "If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn 1:9).

Partner Experience

- During your prayer time together, share one specific event during the past week of a hurt you caused either intentionally or unintentionally. Be clear about the event.
- Following the pattern in the guidelines section, confess your sin to one another (be specific) and pray for each other. "Lord, I confess I sinned by X. Forgive me."
- Receive God's blessing and forgiveness (1 Jn 1:9).
- Discuss how you might make amends and how you might hold each other accountable. Confession is possible because forgiveness is free. Hold each other accountable to follow through with the amends.

Individual Experience

- You can daily reflect on your life and bring to prayer some hurt you incurred on yourself or others following the above pattern in the prayer partner section. Write your confession in your journal. Pray it out loud. Receive God's forgiveness and reflect on how you might make amends.
- Or you can follow a daily routine of confession from Psalm 139.³ Leighton Ford created this pattern for himself:

- *Morning*: "Lord, search me and know my heart." Is my heart centered rightly as I begin today?
- *Noon*: "Test me and know my restless thoughts." Recognize and rest from thoughts that you cannot let go.
- *Evening*: "See if there is any hurtful way in me." What hurts have I caused that need confessing?
- *Bedtime*: "Lead me in the way everlasting." As I sleep, I rest in God's hands.

PRAYER JOURNEY

Pamela Gifford

I had asked my husband daily for the past three weeks to check with his boss about a meeting with Human Resources. He had been at his new job for over six months, and the HR manual said that he would be reviewed and could get a raise at that time. We talked about it after work each day, very low-key and amicably. He agreed and sometimes would even ask me to write a note to remind him, which I did. Then he would come home and say he forgot or was too busy or didn't feel like it that day. We were really hurting financially and could use the raise.

After many weeks, I couldn't take it anymore. One night I couldn't sleep and was getting angrier and angrier that he hadn't done this simple thing for us. Around midnight, I jumped up and yelled, "I can't take this anymore!" He was

MaryKate Morse

Several years ago I met with a group of women leaders from around the

trying to wake up. "What? What? Was I snoring?" I stormed out in the dark, but came back shortly, yelling, "Why don't you make an appointment with HR? I don't understand it!" We didn't speak to each other the next morning. I felt terrible. During my prayer time I prayed and asked God to help me. I was wrong to get so angry, but I was really mad. I called my best friend and she laughed when I told her what happened. Then I realized how ridiculous it was to burst out in the middle of the night. No matter what, I still hurt him. When he got home I said I was sorry for being so angry. He said he was sorry for not taking care of this sooner and he had done it that day. We prayed and confessed to each other and asked God to restore our relationship.

world in Berlin, Germany. The purpose of the gathering was to encourage

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one another and to learn together about leading like Christ in difficult places. Most of the leaders were young entrepreneurs who were doing front-line work with the very poor and marginalized. It was moving for me to be in a city known for its brutal division between East and West Germany and now united again. One afternoon we visited the Reichstag Building, the parliament building that held in its chambers the history of the German people from its opening in 1894 to its present-day use. Across the face of the building were the words "For the German People." At the top of the building a huge glass cupola gave a 360-degree view of Berlin.

When we had finished walking the glass structure, one of the German women began to weep. She said that she had felt impressed for some time and it was now confirmed that she needed to ask forgiveness for herself

and her nation for the sin of the Holocaust. Some of the other women tried to stop her, saying that she was not responsible and she was a good person. However, she said she felt deeply the guilt for herself and her people and she wanted to confess the sin of the darkest kind of racism. She believed the Holy Spirit was calling her to stand and confess this sin in this place with us women. We made a circle around her on the roof of the Reichstag Building and moved into a deep silence. She prayed a prayer of confession for herself and the German people, asking for God's forgiveness. She also prayed for God's revival among the German people. Then we each prayed for God to pour out blessing and spiritual renewal on Germany. We went up the roof as tourists and we came down hopeful and touched by God's grace even for the darkest of sins.

FURTHER READING

Carter, Kenneth H., Jr. *Prayers and Liturgies of Confession and Assurance*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2009.

Renner, Rick. *365 Days of Power: Personalized Prayers and Confessions to Build Your Faith and Strengthen Your Spirit*. Tulsa, OK: Harrison House, 2004.