

Psalm 51 – Confession

It was a third year science class. Someone in the classroom has let off a stink bomb. And the teacher is the most terrifying teacher, Mister Watson: precision board-rubber throwing, merciless-cane delivering Mr Watson. And Mr Watson turns from the blackboard, and scans the room – and in words that for some reason are etched on my memory – he simply says very softly, “who’s been being silly?” Nothing. So he asks again. “Who’s been being silly?” Who in their right mind is going to confess? Well, sure enough – Tommy Nathan’s hand goes up slowly. A classic confession – that resulted in only a merciful detention I think. There you have it – the classic understanding of confession.

If you’ve done the Alpha course, then you already know what confession is! Why a whole sermon about it! We all know that there are different kinds of prayer – Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. It’s quite a good shorthand mnemonic kind of remember-y thing: Adoration is telling God how good he is; Confession is saying sorry and repenting of sin; Thanksgiving is obviously saying thank you and Supplication is asking God for stuff. At least, that is the basic short hand of the Alpha Course. If you are not familiar with different types of prayer, then it is quite a good introduction.

I suppose my only concern with this kind of approach is that – once you have learned this information – you simply move on to gather the next type of information. Read the next Christian paperback... Because now, we know what these things are – why do we need to learn any more. And confession is a real victim of this.

We mess up with our sins, then we come to God – wipe our slate clean – so that we can get forgiven by him and get on with worshipping properly. That is why some liturgical traditions always have confession near the beginning of an order of worship.

But – in reality – there is a bit more to confession than owning up to stuff! Of course, in popular language now, making a confession is little more than putting your hands up and accepting your guilty. And that probably is part of what genuine confession is. But maybe it is not the biggest part, or the most important part.

Confession is not simply something negative. It means simply “saying the same thing!” You encounter something – and then you speak it out. It is allowing your mouth to say what is going on inside. And so confession rightly comes after Adoration in worship. You experience something of God – and then you speak it out, you confess it. Now, subsequently, if we experience God then, then look at what happens in the bible when people experience God!

Think of Isaiah, at his calling in Isaiah chapter 6 – where he is confronted by the majesty of God in the heavenly court. And his confession – his verbal declaration which says what he experiences is – woe is me, because I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell amidst a people of unclean lips. Or think of Simon Peter – out there in a boat, been a fisherman all his life, reluctantly taking fishing lessons from a builder! And when he sees the authority of this Jesus, what does he confess? Depart from me, because I am a sinful man!

In these instances, it is not as though God points the finger and demands a confession. It is simply what happens when these people experience God. Not coming before Him to wipe the slate clean so that they can communicate on equal terms. Instead, you have people confronted

with utter beauty and majesty – and in my little experience – when you are confronted with that stuff – it highlights stuff in your life: It is an experience so glorious that the shadows in your own life become all too obvious and inescapable. And confession is almost an involuntary reaction!

But when we develop a mechanical mentality, some might call it catholic guilt, others might blame the alpha course mentality, confession becomes little more than a transaction in which we are supposed to feel very guilty and naughty and bad, but good news eh – God forgives us soon after to we can feel happy and liberated and forgiven. But there is more to confession, because not only are we called to confess our sins, but to confess our faith. To experience God and to speak it out, to say the same thing!

But in the reading this evening we have heard David, confessing his sins. He has just been nailed by the prophet Nathan. And launches into this confession of sin. We looked at this psalm in Xchange just recently, and as ever I was left hearing something entirely other than the way I have always heard it. Because it is psalms like this that always seem to have served as a good example of confession – of owning up – and admitting your guilt and seeking to be restored. It looks like a good thing, and beautiful text. A great example. But then, I do wonder if this is how the psalm is supposed to function. Because, after all, when you know the story of David – and the psalm itself encourages us to explore this – then it starts to read a little bit differently.

Probably, what strikes me as particularly disturbing is this beautiful line: “against you – and you only have I sinned.” Now, when I began reading theology, I remember reading a well respected popular theologian building a theology of atonement around this. “Against you and you only have I sinned...” Well – hang on – shall we listen to the text: “Against you and you only have I sinned.”

Well – just a minute. How would Bathsheba feel about that? How would Uriah the Hittite feel about that – having been murdered by David so that David can hide the fact that he slept with his wife. How would David’s offspring feel about that – given that it reaked misery throughout his family? How would Nathan the Prophet feel about that – when it was this courageous man that confronted a warmongering King! How would any of these people feel when pious King David kneels before God and says “against you and you only have I sinned.”

This psalm is part of the story of David’s life! And I wonder if you get the feeling that he is trying to absolve himself of guilt when he goes on ... surely I was sinful from birth – sinful from the time my mother conceived me! Ah, the golden age of exoneration! Well, as the psalm goes on – it does seem genuine, and sound beautiful, and inspires radical belief in this God. But David’s pious ‘poor-old-me’ polemic does leave a bitter taste in your mouth.

I suppose the way to read this is literally as a sinners confession. Which is what it is. But the confession itself is marred with the sin of the sinner! The motives are mixed. It’s not ‘forgive me’, it’s ‘hide your face from my sins!’ - it’s an appeal not to have the Holy Spirit removed – because in those days, the Holy Spirit came and went. It’s an appeal for Jerusalem to be kept safe.

But it is also a beautiful prayer, in which brokenness is recognised, guilt is crippling, and promises are made. It really is a sinner's prayer. And worth asking ourselves how even our prayers of confession can be marred with our own sin.

And I wonder whether this is where, in the New Testament, James is onto something important when he encourages us to confess our sins to one another. It is one thing to keep our sins as some privatised, quiet thing between me and God, that no one else need ever know about. It is natural I suppose, to keep our sins to ourselves – to buy into that unbiblical cliché – “that's just between you and God”. And in an era of rampant individualism, to think about our sin and say privately to God “against you and you only have I sinned!”

I don't know. If we are unfaithful to a partner – and remember that does not just mean sleeping with someone else. Unfaithfulness takes many forms – especially if we read the sermon on the mount – can we really say “against you and you only have I sinned!”

If our pointless holidays, our excess of selfish spending habits, our lust for the powerful cars – are these things, which are creating climate havoc that destroys the lives of real people today – can we really say “against you and you only have I sinned?”

If our self-deluded, defensive nature creates a lack of self-awareness, so that we are unaware of the way that we can hurt, and bully and neglect other people – is it enough to confess our sin in some general way, and then to say ... “against you and you only have I sinned?”

But – if we do what James suggests, and confess our sins to another person (not necessarily the person we have sinned against) but another person. Then we encounter our sin in a deeply disturbing, but even more deeply liberating way. We hear back something of an affirmation – as we are told that actually, it's not that bad – or actually – you have got to go and do something about this – kind of way. Confessing our sins to another real life person is a biblical activity, too often neglected in many traditions.

And then, when our sin is no longer simply about us and God. When it is acknowledged as three-dimensional. And when forgiveness is no longer some spiritual fuzz that we try to work up, but comes to us in a three-dimensional, life changing way – then our relationship with God, with others and with the world can be utterly transformed.

And maybe, if confession is not some attempt to wipe the slate clean, but a response to God – our theology of God might be different. If we encounter the holiness of this God. The utter beauty of this living, loving God – the sheer but gentle authority of this Christ – it can come to us in a way that seems to originate so far beyond this world – that we might actually find ourselves saying “against you and you only have I sinned”.

Lord, teach us to confess our sins

Teach us to confess our faith

Teach us to confess with our mouth that Jesus is Lord, and to believe in our hearts that God raised him from the dead.

Forgive us, restore us, recommission us, and send us out to live and work to your praise and glory.