

CONFESS AND PRAY

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on July 30, 1961 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

“Is any among you suffering? let him pray. Is any cheerful? let him sing praise. Is any among you sick? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: and the prayer of faith shall save him that is sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, it shall be forgiven him. Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much. Elijah was a man of like passions with us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain; and it rained not on the earth for three years and six months. And he prayed again; and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit.” (James 5:13-18).

From this great passage in James I have chosen the sixteenth verse of the fifth chapter for special study. It is not a long verse, but it has a great deal of meaning. “Confess therefore your sins one to another, and pray ye one for another, that ye may be healed.” Then James adds, “The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much in its working.”

Confession To A Priest

When we read the expression, “Confess therefore your sins one to another,” our minds often go to a practice very widely followed in certain religious circles--auricular confession to a priest. Some time ago the Knights of Columbus, in advertising the doctrines of their church, used the pages of a great many American newspapers. In speaking of those who confess their sins to a priest, the Knights of Columbus had this to say: “They go to confession to a priest for one reason only, to obtain divine forgiveness of their sins. But why, you ask, go to a priest? Why not confess your sins directly to God? Ask a man who goes to confession and here is what he will tell you, ‘Sin is an offense against God, and it must be forgiven by God.’ It is God, not man, who determines how forgiveness must be obtained. Christ plainly pointed this out when he empowered his apostles and their successors to forgive sins or to refuse forgiveness. ‘Whose soever sins ye remit,’ Christ said, ‘they are remitted unto them, and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained.’ (John 20:23). Thus, Christ authorized the apostles and their successors to pardon or to deny pardon, as they judged the sinner worthy or unworthy. To do this they had to know what they were forgiving, the secret dispositions of the sinner, his sorrow and willingness to repair the wrong done to his neighbor by his sins. Who could make this known but the sinner himself, and what is this but confession? ... Confession is the sacrament of Penance, one of the seven sacraments Christ left in His church.”

The Wrong Passage

They have stated their case with maximum force and you notice that they have made it all depend upon a statement in John 20:23, where Jesus speaks in terms of the remitting and the forgiving of sins. Let us turn to that passage and carefully study its meaning. John 20, you may remember, is near the end of the gospel according to John. The chapter begins, “Now on the first day of the week cometh Mary Magdalene early, while it was yet dark unto the tomb.” In other words, it was resurrection morning. Christ had been crucified and had been raised from the dead. Later, in that chapter in verse 19 we find, “When therefore it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and when the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst.” It is in that same paragraph two sentences later that we find, “Jesus therefore said unto them again (That would mean to the ten apostles, because Judas and Thomas were absent). Peace be unto you. As the Father hath sent me, even so send I you; (Notice the emphasis upon “send I you.” He was ready to send them out to preach his gospel to the lost world) and when he had said this, he breathed on them and said unto them, Receive ye the Holy Spirit. Whose soever sins ye forgive they are forgiven unto them, and whose soever sins ye retain they are retained.”

When you take this 23rd verse out of its context it does sound as if God were giving the apostles the right to bind and to loose sins, but when you put it in its context it is quite something else. In effect, Jesus was saying, “I am sending you out to preach the way of salvation to lost mankind. Receive ye the Holy Spirit to guide you in all that you preach and write.” They were going out to declare the truths of God: the death, burial and resurrection of the Lord, and his plan for saving men from their sins. According to what the Holy Spirit was going to guide these apostles to preach and write, man’s sins would be bound or loosed.

Binding and Loosing

This becomes all the more obvious when you turn back a few chapters in the book of John and see what Jesus had previously said, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that heareth my word and believeth him that sent me hath eternal life and cometh not into judgment but hath passed out of death into life.” (John 5:24). It is the one who hears the words of Christ who is free of sin and has passed from death unto life.

There is a parallel passage in the gospel of Matthew in which Jesus said to these same apostles, “Verily I say unto you, whatsoever things ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and whatsoever things ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” (Matt. 18:18).

The Knights of Columbus’ interpretation of John 20:23 is in error. Jesus was not giving to certain men, nor to their successors, the right to sit and pass judgment and say, “I absolve thee.” The prerogative of forgiving sins belongs only to God and was never given to men in the sense that their interpretation suggests. Rather, Jesus was saying to his disciples, “I am going to send you out to preach, and in your preaching by God’s direction you will describe what sin is. How people hear and heed my gospel will determine whether their sins will be loosed or will remain.”

This is further evidenced when you study the New Testament in its entirety. There is no auricular confession to a priest anywhere in the New Testament. It is not there. It is not in any one of the gospel narratives; it is not in Acts; it is not in any of the epistles; it is not in the book of Revelation; it is not there. Rather, the apostles instructed sinners to pray to God for forgiveness.

#### A Crucial Case

There is a case that ought to be quite definitive in the eighth chapter of Acts. In this story the apostle Peter is the central character. Simon the Sorcerer came to Peter to buy the power of the Holy Spirit with money. “But Peter said unto him, Thy silver perish with thee, because thou hast thought to obtain the gift of God with money. Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter, for thy heart is not right with God.” Now notice this, “Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray the Lord if perhaps the thought of thy heart shall be forgiven thee.” Then a moment later, Simon answered and said, Pray ye for me to the Lord.” (Acts 8:20-24). Now if the apostle Peter had been given the power to hear confessions and to remit sins, would not this have been an ideal time to use it? But he rather says here, “Repent and pray the Lord.” Simon clearly got the point, for he said, “Pray ye for me to the Lord.”

The idea of the special institution of Confession came about in this way. About 250 A.A. there were some who had lapsed in their religion. Under heavy persecution they had denied the Lord, and then after a time they had wanted to come back into the church. The church installed a “penitentiary presbyter,” in other words, an elder who would hear penance and determine whether or not the person should be brought back into the church. This was in both the Greek and the Roman churches. In the Eastern church it only lasted 140 years, until 391, then because of a very ugly moral situation that grew out of a confession in Constantinople it was abolished. The Eastern church, however, again picked up the practice of private confession to a priest in 692. In the Western or Roman church it continued from 250, but for a long time it was public confession. It was in 450 A.A. that Leo I forbade public confession and made it private confession. Pope Innocent III. in 1215, declared that every member must confess at least once a year. Notice these dates. Thomas Aquinas, in 1260, spoke of Confession as one of the sacraments, the sacrament of Penance. Then, in 1555, the Council of Trent prescribed that all moral sins must be confessed, thus making confession mandatory or compulsory. Since 1555 it has been binding in the Roman church.

#### No Evidence of Confession

What I am saying is that there is no evidence anywhere in the New Testament that the apostles commanded people to come to confess to them or their successors. There is no evidence that anybody did come. Clement of Rome, who died in the year 100 A.A. Does not mention it in his writings. Ignatius, who died in 107 A.A, does not mention it in his writings. Polycarp, who died in 155, does not mention private confession or any kind of confession to a religious leader. Neither does Papias, who also died in 155 A.A. It was not in the early church and it was not mentioned by any of those who followed immediately.

The New Testament teaches that we are to come to God for forgiveness. “If we confess our sins he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (I John 1:9). Luke 18:13 finds Jesus telling of one who prayed, “God, be thou merciful to me, a sinner.” I like especially the passage in I Tim. 2:5-6 where Paul write to Timothy, “There is one God, one mediator also between God and man, himself man, Christ Jesus who gave himself a ransom for all.” God here, man there, and one mediator, Jesus Christ, between. In I Peter 2:9, the apostle Peter said, “Ye are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession.” We Christians are described in Peter’s writings and in Hebrews as a race of priests. Christ is our high priest, the writer of Hebrews tells us, and we need no other mediator.

#### Mutuality ... Equality

That is what our passage does not mean; now what does it mean? “Confess, therefore your sins one to another.” Do you notice the words “one to another”? And then a moment later, “Pray ye one for another.” It comes from the Greek word “ALLELOIS,” which suggests the idea of mutuality, and equality. In other words, James was saying to Christians generally, “You will have pressures about you and will be tempted to sin. Lean on each other. Confess your faults to each other; pray one for another.” All Christians need prayers, so we pray for each other. It is not the clergy hearing the confessions of the laity, but Christians praying for each other.

Often Christian prayers become selfish. We pray for ourselves and our loved ones and our interests. This text emphasizes, “Pray ye one for another.” Also, there may be a tendency to feel that as people grow older and become more prominent, they need prayers less.

Yet, there is not an elder old enough to be beyond the need of the prayers of the youngest Christian. There is not a preacher who does not need the prayers of every teenage boy or girl who listens to him. We need each other's prayers. We may be older and more mature, but we need each other's prayers.

### Prayer At Its Best

Finally, there is that great sentence, "The effective fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much in its workings." There are three elements in this sentence. First of all, there are the qualifications or requirements of the prayer. Then, there are the qualifications and requirements of the one who prays. Third, James tells us what the results of that kind of prayer will be. Look at the first of these elements. There are certain requirements for the prayer itself: it is the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man. It must be earnest, sincere, with feeling, and with depth. No casual half-hearted prayer will do. In view of what we have studied earlier in this passage, it means a prayer offered in accordance with God's will. Next, we see the necessary qualification of the man who prays. He is to be a righteous man. Christ said, "If ye abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatsoever ye will and it shall be done unto you." (John 15:7). The young Jewish boy who was healed of blindness by the Lord was quite correct when he said, "We know that God heareth not sinners, but if any man be a worshipper of God and doeth his will, him he heareth." (John 9:31). We must be righteous before we can pray with the promise of being heard. Finally, we are told that the earnest prayer of a righteous man will accomplish much.

Truly, this scripture is a great text. Let us all lean more heavily on prayer. Let us appropriate the blessings of prayer more fully, and let us conform our lives to the pattern of righteousness so that our prayers will be heard.