

Sunday 06th April 2025

Practicing The Way – Week 6 Healing from sin: Sin & Confession

Tom Peryer on Romans 6:8–14 & 20–23; EZRA 9:3-8 & 10:12-2

PART ONE:

Our second reading ended with what was once a very well-known verse. 'The wages of sin is death'. You would occasionally see it on posters on railway stations. The full verse is of course '*The wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life.*' Nowadays we are far more comfortable about preaching the second part of the verse than the first part. Historically speaking that was not the case.

Last Sunday In our series Practising the Way Ruth Rhodes spoke powerfully and movingly on pain and suffering. I encourage you to listen to it if you were not here last week. And today we have come to a section in the course on sin. For those in the home groups, please note that I am taking a slightly different approach to the subject that the course does but they are not at odds with each other!

Listening to a sermon on sin is, you may feel, rather like going to the dental hygienist or having a necessary but deeply unpleasant medical procedure.

Talking to James Couchman yesterday about this talk, he suggested "why don't you ask everyone who is living in sin" to stand up. Good idea I thought. So, would you all please stand up if you are living in sin.

And of course you should all be on your feet! Because we are all to one extent or another living in sin. Living with the effects of our own sin on our lives, the effects of our sins on others' lives and the effects of others sins on us. Yes God has forgiven us. Yes we are born again. But the old nature still lurks. The old wardrobe is still there. We do not always stick to the narrow path. There is a constant need for repentance and renewal. For beginning again and again and again. For a contrite heart and a new spirit.

In the 1920's there was an American President called Calvin Coolidge. His nickname was 'Silent Cal' because he was known for his brevity of speech. He reputedly never used three words when one or two would suffice.

Oh for such a President to come again.

A story told about Silent Cal is that one Sunday morning, he went to Church without his wife, who wasn't feeling very well. When the President returned to the White House, Mrs. Coolidge asked what the sermon was about.

"Sin," Coolidge said. "And what did the preacher have to say about sin?" Mrs. Coolidge persisted. Silent Cal thought for a minute and then replied "He was against it,".

There I have made a joke about sin. I'm not sure the Apostle Paul would approve of it. Sin is no joking matter.

Of course we are all against sin – especially other people's sin. And how much of it we see. The sad but undeniable fact is that every day of our lives we are confronted by sin on a global scale and at a personal level. We see its terrible effects and the pain it causes. The damage wrought by human sin and failing is incalculable Everything from relatively petty things in our relationships affecting a small number of people through to crimes and sinful actions that have devastating consequences for thousands perhaps millions of people and for the planet.

Sin is serious stuff.

But here's a strange thing, in the media and even in the church, we are reluctant to use the word sin or words like it. Oh yes we are happy to criticise anyone and everyone but we are reluctant to talk about the propensity to sin which is a mark – not the only mark I know but a mark of every human being. But we are all flawed. Even in that lovely funeral service for Robert Page yesterday when we heard so many lovely things about him, we were told 'he was not perfect, none of us are.'

As Paul said earlier in Romans, another verse which you do not hear so much these days *'All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God'* (**Romans 3:23**) – and we might add “of the glory they were meant to be”.

And yet people don't like to talk about sin nowadays. For example, and I hope I am not doing a disservice to schools nowadays, I think it may be the case that if a pupil does something wrong, they may be told that not that it was a wrong thing to do but rather *'I think you're making some inappropriate choices.'* Or *'that is unhelpful behaviour'*. It's a euphemism because we don't want to name it. Rather like when we say “Time for a comfort break” rather than *“time for everyone to go have a pee after all that coffee you have drunk”*.

I guess schools (and maybe parents) are too afraid to label people, too nervous about appearing to be judgmental or doing damage to the self-esteem of people so 'sin' becomes an inappropriate choice which of course it is, but it is more than that. Imagine God saying to Adam and Eve “I'm sorry you've made an inappropriate choice.” Imagine God saying to King Herod, you've made an inappropriate choice slaughtering all those babies. Imagine God saying that to us over some of the things that we do and say. No - sometimes we need to call a spade a spade, a sin a sin, a wrong-doing a wrong-doing .

There is a story which may or may not be true but which is often quoted by preachers. It is said that at the start of the twentieth century the Times newspaper sent out an inquiry to a number of distinguished writers and thinkers. The inquiry was simply this” “What is wrong with the world today?”

The Catholic writer G K Chesterton (he of the Father Brown series) replied very succinctly to that question “what is wrong with the world”, His was a two word answer.

Dear Sir

I am

Yours etc

And that is true for us too, no matter how many years we have been a Christian. Yes we know that those who are following Jesus have been born again, have been transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light, but it is also true that we have to go on being renewed. Every day we have to go on repenting every week. In our second reading, Paul urged those who were well and truly born again, not to let sin reign in their bodies. The writer to the Hebrews, that is Hebrew born again Christians urges us to consciously and deliberately throw away everything that holds us back and down in our Christian journey *'especially the sin that so easily entangles us'*.

PART TWO:

HOW DO WE DEAL WITH SIN THAT SO EASILY BESETS US

That was Part One. I now want to turn to one way in which we can help to throw away the sin that so easily entangles. As with so many subjects we could spend a whole series on how we deal with sin and the effects of sin on our lives. But I want to focus in the short time we have just on one thing, which relates to this idea of spiritual disciplines or practices or building a rule of life.

Confession.

Confession is the act of naming in sadness and remorse those things which we have done and which we ought not to have done and those things left undone which we ought to have done.

Our first reading was from the book of Ezra when first Ezra and then many of the people living in Jerusalem publicly confessed their sins which in their case was living compromised life with the world around them. Half in and half out. No one here today I am sure in that situation! In the case of Ezra the confession was very public very dramatic, very emotional. Not very British.

When I, Ezra heard about the lifestyle of the leaders of the Jews, I tore my tunic and cloak, pulled hair from my head and beard and sat down appalled ... And I sat there appalled until the evening sacrifice.

Then, I rose from my self-abasement, with my tunic and cloak torn, and fell on my knees with my hands spread out to the Lord my God and prayed:

'I am too ashamed and disgraced, my God, to lift up my face to you, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens.'

Ezra 9:3-6

Notice that his confession was not about what he himself had done wrong. He was confessing for the wrongdoings of others. But his identification with the sin of his fellow Jews provoked them to public confession.

While Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a large crowd of Israelites – men, women and children – gathered round him. They too wept bitterly. Then Shekaniah said to Ezra, 'We have been unfaithful to our God ... But in spite of this, there is still hope for Israel.'

Ezra 10:1-2

Of course there is. There is always hope for the one who comes to God in repentance, confessing what he or she has done wrong.

It is frequently said that the road back from addiction starts when someone recognises and tells another person that they admit that there are no longer in control but something – alcohol, gambling, drugs, pornography controls them.

The Prodigal son's journey starts when he says to himself and out loud to God, "I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

Luke 15:18-19

But I think like a number of spiritual practices that are helpful, sometimes necessary, the practice of confession, especially in lively, evangelical, charismatic traditions doesn't figure much.

Let me draw your attention to four ways in which confession should or could appear in our spiritual walk. As I talk you through them you will see that they get harder to do.

The first one is the most obvious one:

1. In our personal prayer life

We have been reminded again through this course of importance of setting time aside to be with Jesus in prayer and in reflecting on scripture. Part of that time aside should include looking back on the day or days before since we last sat down. You may have heard of the Jesuit practice called the Examen. This is a way of reflecting on the day that has passed.

You begin with asking the Holy Spirit to help you see your day clearly. Now, walk through your day as though you are playing a movie in your mind. What stands out? Any particular emotions or moments? Any consolations – when you felt close to God or noticed Him working? Or desolations – times when you felt far from God and from who you are called to be?

Talk with God about what stood out from your day. What might God be telling you through your experiences and feelings? Take some time to ask forgiveness for the times you weren't at your best. Offer up more gratitude for the blessings that stood out. Whatever comes to mind, talk with God about it.

Offering up to God in prayer our failings and our regrets about what we have and have not done, is in one sense the easiest form of confession– unless we are wracked by guilt and find it hard to believe that we can be forgiven. But in our private prayer, no one is listening except God. We can say what we like and it will not be shared on the internet. It is private confession but vital confession.

2. In church

The second kind of confession is not that much harder. We have already done it today.

*Lord God,
we have sinned against you;
we have done evil in your sight.
We are sorry and repent.*

It is rather more prosaic than the one in the old book of common prayer.

“Almighty and most merciful Father; We have erred, and strayed from your ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against your holy laws.”

Now I am fully aware that many people, and not just younger people find the whole practice of saying prayers and words that are written down in a set order of service too formal, too ritualistic and too just going through the form. And indeed, it can be all of those things. Just as 30-minute worship slots can be too! But I think there is something in the wisdom and practice of the church whether Catholic, Protestant or Orthodox which said that when people come together corporately for praise and worship and to hear and receive God’s word, there should be a pause, a moment when the whole congregation whether 2 or 3 or several hundred corporately confess out loud their failings. No matter that people do not name their individual sins. The moment is there. It is establishing a principle that the business of confession ideally should be both personal/private and corporate. Each week at the very least we need a collective breathing out of our failings and a breathing in of the forgiveness and grace of God.

I do wonder if something important had been lost in much of contemporary worship patterns and liturgy which only focus on sung worship and the preaching of the word, omitting other significant elements of worship including the confession.

3. Going to someone to say sorry

Now, the third form of confession is getting harder. You could perhaps call this form 'an apology' as when go to another person and say sorry for some wrong done or for some good not done that should be have been done by us. Saying sorry and apologising to a person or persons is hard. It is costly in terms of our pride. If there is fault on our side, we may also feel there is fault on the other side.

One of the many hard things Jesus said in what we call the Sermon on the Mount was:

*Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift. **Matthew 5:23-26***

That is not an easy thing to do. And of course even if we hold out the hand of apology and reconciliation, it will not always be accepted. It may be even harder to forgive that brother or sister for the harm they have done to you. another part of the New Testament, Paul urges us this way: '*In so far as it lies with your power, live in peace with all*'. And that living at peace with all may require some kind of confession or apology on our part.

4. Confessing our sins to someone else

My fourth spiritual practice or discipline when it comes to confession may be the hardest of all, and it is a practice not much seen in Protestant, much less evangelical circles. This is the business of going to someone else within the church and confessing the wrong things in your life. Of course, in the Roman Catholic Church this is still very much a part, indeed a requirement. I think every Catholic is expected to go to a priest at least once a year to confess their sins.

I was speaking yesterday to a not-very-practising Catholic whose mother urged him to make his confession prior to some major heart surgery – which he did. If you are one of those who likes to visit Cathedrals when on holiday in Europe. you will have seen the wooden confession boxes with the grille between the priest and the person.

I heard once of a large new Catholic cathedral built somewhere in the USA. The building included some very contemporary looking confessional boxes. One of them at the end of the line had a sign outside it which said “Five items or less” Yes, I know for pedants of the English language it should be “Five items or fewer” but the sign was in America.

Of course, when the Reformation came in, many practices which had become abuses were thrown out by the Reformers. One of these, along with candles on the altar, masses for the dead and the idea of paying money to get out of purgatory quicker, one of these was the practice of going regularly to Confession.

I say dropped but not entirely. There is still provision for this practice. The old prayer book put it this way – rather beautifully I think in words that were to be read before taking Holy Communion.

And because it is necessary, that no man should come to the holy Communion, without a full trust in God's mercy, and with a quiet conscience therefore, if there be any of you cannot quiet his own conscience [through personal prayer]; but requireth further comfort or counsel; let him come to the priest, or to some other discreet and learned Minister of God's Word, and open his grief; that by the ministry of God's holy Word he may receive the benefit of absolution, together with spiritual counsel and advice, to the quieting of his conscience, and avoiding of all scruple and doubtfulness.

The mandate for this is in Jesus' words for this in John chapter 20 and the book of James who writes:

Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

James 5:16

Maybe some of you already do this – perhaps as part of your prayer triplet. Or because you have a trusted soul-mate or a spiritual director. Perhaps all counselling sessions whether in the church world or the secular world have this element, this unburdening, this practice of naming the thing that is troubling us. In naming something outright to another person, there will be a kind of release.

Going to someone like Tom Yacomeni or a trusted friend and bearing my soul with its warts and all is not something I have done but I do wonder if it is something we/I should at the very least consider as being part of our spiritual discipline. I say this also using another Anglican expression about whether or not we should go to confession.

'All may ...none must ...some should'

There is more that could be said on this one aspect of confession as indeed on all the others, but as Jesus said to his disciples 'I have many more things to say to you but you cannot bear them now.'

I leave you with hoping that as I have been speaking you have been reflecting on the place of openly confessing to God and to others those things which you have done which you ought not to have done and those things which you ought to have done but haven't. How to do they figure in your daily, weekly, yearly life?

May God grant us his grace allied with our will to do what needs to be done. Amen.