

Spiritual Exercises for Adventists

**“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.”**

James 5:16

Chapter 4

PRAYERS OF CONFESSION

“Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy loving-kindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions.” Psalm 51:1

IT IS important to achieve and maintain humility. If you read the Gospels in the Bible you will discover that Jesus was most critical about pride. He, Himself, demonstrated humility, and He made it clear how high an attribute it is. The person who emulates Jesus is always humble and sincere.

There is only one way for a sinner to become humble, and that’s through confession. Without confession, great problems arise.

I like to think of my church and my personal issues in medical terms. The church is a hospital for sinners, and my sinful condition is like a disease is how I like to think of life. But Jesus Himself expressed our situation in judicial terms. I wish He hadn’t done that, but it forces us to face the fact that there is a final judgment. Yes, I am relieved to know that The Father is the judge and He will decide based upon the law of love.

The law of God is not arbitrary, but a carefully crafted set of rules that are required to put into existence a society of beings

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who can make decisions for themselves and who can live peacefully forever. Heaven's society is loving just like God, and every member makes every attempt to serve and please others. In Heaven there is no selfishness. No one is self-centered. Because of this, God can't change any of the laws of love. To change one law would ruin the framework that allows everything to work smoothly.

God's society is very fragile. One decision by Lucifer, and one decision by Adam and Eve have resulted in a disaster too large to describe in this manuscript. Yes, God's society is fragile, and His creation is careful to always be humble and loving. They don't need to always be thinking about the details and the exact rules because all the law and testimony resides under the law of love. So to be loving is to be like God. It's simple and it gives great freedom of action and movement.

But for us sinners to be humble requires us to do something about our mistakes and our defective conditions. And that's where 'confession' comes into the picture. When I sin I feel guilty afterward.

I'm guilty, and something needs to be done to rid myself of the guilt or it will burden me even further. As more and more guilt piles up, I'll reach a point where I will either become insane or self-destruct.

God has given us a way out of the bondage of guilt, and it's a simple procedure called confession. Confession is feeling remorse for what we have done and asking God to forgive us. It's a simple process, but one that brings us to Him on a regular basis.

After we have confessed our sins to God, we feel better and know we are forgiven. Of course, if I have wronged you, then I

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also need to talk with you and make it right. If I have damaged your reputation, then I need to confess publicly to undo the wrong and also to ask for your forgiveness. If I have hurt you materially, then it is only proper that I restore what I have destroyed. We know the Biblical principle involved here, and we know it resolves issues and allows us to have a fresh beginning each and every day.

We are counseled to confess but “not to look at ourselves. The more we dwell upon our own imperfections, the less strength we shall have to overcome them.”⁽¹⁾ So, our confessions can be made, and then we should turn our attention to heavenly subjects.

Aren't you glad we don't need to grovel in our sins?

In the gospel of Matthew is a description of the process for resolving conflicts between two people. The first step is for one of the two to make an attempt. If that fails, then he is to take another person as a witness, and if that doesn't work, then he is free to take it to the church body for a judgment.

But in I Timothy 5:20 is another process that is slightly different for conflicts that are public to begin with. It says, “Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning.”

In either case, either a private or public confession is required by one or both parties. And we should be humble enough to accept the appropriate judgment.

The apostle Paul said that he died daily, and he was referring to this process of confession and forgiveness. It allows us to enjoy life and gives us yet another reason to praise God.

This sounds nice and it's easy to talk about, but there is an-

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other problem that arises, and that's contrition. The dictionary says contrition is "deeply felt remorse and penitence."

I'm sure that in the past I've taken advantage of God's willingness to forgive. I have sinned; I have done things on purpose knowing I could get right with God later. So how do I know that I really feel contrition?

How do I know that I'm really sincere?

I'm the party who can't be trusted!

This is where step 1 above offers assistance, because when I praise God, it actually helps me realize how guilty I am. It helps me see the great distance between God and me. It helps me feel remorse because I do really desire to be more like Him.

As I imagine myself at the foot of the cross at Calvary, I am broken and full of emotion; committed to make things right. My desire is strongest at that point and it goes deep. It isn't just an empty phrase; no, it's a conviction to move on with greater zeal for God. To be more like Him, I can only make progress as I get closer to Him where His desires become my desires; where His thoughts become my thoughts. When I partake of His divine nature at the cross, then I can be assured that my intentions are sincere and I can be trusted.

So having been forgiven for offending God by my speech or actions, what now? We are told to go in peace. That's all? Is there no penance?

As early as the 800's A.D. the Christian church began auricular confession to the priest. At first it was not compulsory, and sometimes the confessions were also public. It didn't take long for the priests to realize that the penances could be monetary and could fill the coffers of the church. It also didn't take long

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for the laity to realize that they could hire people to act out the penances that were behavioral. For example, if the penance was to sleep on the bare floor for one year, then the person could hire 12 people to do it for a month and all was well.

Finally, in the 4th Lateran Council held in 1215 A. D. auricular confession was made obligatory upon all members who were now required to confess to a priest at least once per year.

In the 1600's A. D. the Roman Catholic church realized that there was no consistency from priest to priest regarding penances. One priest might prescribe a light penance while another might prescribe a heavy one. So the pope had the Jesuits create a database of prescriptions for the whole church to use. This area of study is called Casuistry, and they listed each and every sin that they could think of and decided what the penance should be. They consulted other religions, such as the Jewish system, and learned all they could. When their research was completed, the database was so large that it took seven volumes to contain it all. Imagine how large it must be today?

In a small book called *Bible Text Book* printed by the Review and Herald in 1900 some penance examples are listed on page 45:

- For procuring an abortion \$1.82
- For robbing \$2.90
- For burning a neighbor's house \$2.90
- For murdering a layman \$1.82
- For laying violent hands on a clergyman \$2.54

Of course the last one is rather high compared to the others. But can you imagine rating an abortion lower than some of the others? Can you imagine, prior to these new standards, shopping

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for the most lenient priest in order to have a more lenient penance? It reinforces my thankfulness that God is so righteous and just. He is fair in addition to loving.

Many religious systems have penance requirements, and that's because we feel guilty and look for some way to make amends with God.

The apostolic church did not have a penance system, and they kept Jesus as the main focus of their worship, and I like that, and that's what we try to do today.

I am thankful that God is my judge and not some priest who lives next door, some man who has problems of his own, some man who might or might not be close to God.

Jesus Christ sacrificed Himself for my sins and I need not be concerned about penances. It frees my mind to praise Him all the more.

And that leads us to the next phase of our prayer.

REFERENCES

- 1 *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, January 14, 1890.