



James

Confession of Sin

History of the Early World	Patriarchs	Israel in Egypt	Conquest of Canaan	Judges	United Kingdom	Divided Kingdom Exile	Exile	Return	Maccabean Revolt	Jesus the Messiah	Church
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Introduction

It is fitting that James ends his string of lessons with a teaching on confessing sins. His readers have experienced many struggles and temptations in their attempt to live lives pleasing to God, and no doubt some have fallen short by giving into sin. As Christians, our goal is to abide in Christ and walk in the same way He walked. At the beginning of our relationship with God, baptism was necessary for salvation. From the point of baptism on, we were made to live our lives dependent upon the grace of God, which is the very life of the Trinity. Because we sin, God has graciously given us the sacrament of penance as a direct encounter with Christ, whereby the life of God continues to flow into our lives resulting in reconciliation with God and with the Church. 1 John 1:8-9 says, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

The sacrament comprises two equally essential elements: confession on the part of man and God's intervention through the Church. It is called the sacrament of confession because there is a disclosure or confession of sin, but also a confession or acknowledgment of God's holiness and mercy.



James 5:16-20

16 Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects. 17 Elijah was a man of like nature with ourselves and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. 18 Then he prayed again and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth its fruit.

19 My brethren, if any one among you wanders from the truth and some one brings him back, 20 let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.





Catholic Scripture Study



Questions on the Text

Have you ever...

1. Have you ever wondered why you should confess your sins to a priest?
2. Have you ever gone to confession, but didn't really "tell it like is?"
3. Have you ever experienced the relief of the forgiveness of a sin?

Homework

1. Have you ever expected to receive condemnation for something you did and instead were granted mercy? What was that like? How did you respond?
2. Have you ever had an experience of attempting to be reconciled with another person and been rebuffed? What did you do then?
3. James 5:17-18 shows us the figure of Elijah and reminds us he was "a man of like nature with ourselves." Among other things, this means Elijah was not a super-hero but a man subject to frustration and depression just like you and me. When he was in anguish and depression, he did not remain silent but cried out to God (1 Kings 19:4). What do you do when you are in pain?
4. Have you ever had a friend that was wavering from the truth and you wanted to turn him or her back to it, but failed to due to fear? Why do you think we hesitate to become involved the lives of others when it comes to sin and repentance?
5. In confession, we speak the truth about our sins to God. In absolution, the priest speaks the truth about the mercy and forgiveness of God to us. Do you find it easier to believe you are a sinner than to believe in God's mercy? What concrete steps can you take to receive as deeply as possible the mercy God truly gives us in Reconciliation?



Questions for Reflection

1. When it comes to sin, we often hear the response, "It's my business and no one else's." But the Church teaches (CCC No. 1422) that when we sin, not only are we wounded but the Church as a whole is wounded. James assumes there is a communal dimension to sin and healing and urges the members of the Church to pray for one another when there is sin. What might be some ways in which we as lay people can do this so as to cooperate with the work of God in the Sacrament of Reconciliation? How can we better promote this sacrament within the local parish?
2. When we confess our sins, not only are we freed from sin, but also it facilitates our reconciliation with others (CCC No. 1455). Why do you think this is the case?





Questions for Reflection (cont.)

3. The priest acts *in persona Christi* (in the person of Christ) when we make our confession and is absolutely forbidden, under a penalty of excommunication that can only be lifted by the Pope himself, to reveal the contents of any confession. How should we treat things told us in confidence?
4. The Church teaches us that we should look squarely at the sins we are guilty of, take responsibility for them, and thereby open ourselves again to God and to the communion of the Church in order to make a new future possible (CCC No. 1455). Briefly discuss how unconfessed sin can influence your future.
5. Towards the end of the sacrament the priest will prescribe penance or some show of repentance. Penance is a movement whereby the preceding attitudes of conversion and repentance are manifested externally. To do penance, Pope John Paul says, “means above all to re-establish the balance and harmony broken by sin, to change direction even at the cost of sacrifice” (*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, No. 26). How are the Church’s teaching on doing penance consistent with James overarching principle that the heart and one’s actions should be in harmony. Or said another way, “faith without works is dead” (James 2:17)?
6. Pope John Paul II says, “The confession of sins therefore cannot be reduced to a mere attempt at psychological self-liberation even though it corresponds to that legitimate and natural need, inherent in the human heart, to open oneself to another” (*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, No. 31). What is the difference between the therapy a psychologist may give to one bound in sin verses the medicine of the sacrament of Reconciliation?
7. Just as we are to pray for one another as laypeople in a way distinct from the sacrament of Anointing, so we are to “confess [our] sins to one another” (James 5:16) in a way distinct from the sacrament of Reconciliation. What are some practical ways to fulfill this commandment as lay Catholics?
8. James 5:16 tells us, “The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects.” If we are in a state of grace, then by virtue of the gift of Christ’s righteousness we are that righteous man or woman. James does not say the prayer of the clever or unique or talented or eloquent man has great effects, but the prayer of a *righteous* one. What concrete steps can we take to rely on Christ’s “great power” as we pray?
9. A simple but easily overlooked fact of the Christian life is that God answers prayer. Both the drought and the rain which ended the drought during the time of Ahab were a direct result of prayer. But, of course, prayer is grace not magic. God answered Elijah’s prayers because Elijah prayed what God wanted him to pray. What practical steps can we take to conform our prayers more closely to the will of God in a given situation, as Elijah did?
10. James 5:20 says that “whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.” History (and perhaps even our own lives) offers many examples of sinners brought back from the errors of their ways. What are some common threads in these stories of redemption? How can we apply this knowledge in our own lives?





Catholic Scripture Study



Questions for Reflection (cont.)

11. You may read or assign someone in your group to read Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*: Reconciliation and Penance. Highlight a few points that will add to the group discussion. This small booklet is a wonderful source for understanding the Church's teaching on this precious sacrament.



Opportunities for Additional Study

Points to Ponder

Why Confess to a Priest?

A common question concerning the sacrament of confession is simply, "Can't we confess our sins to God alone?" Yes and no. Obviously, we commit dozens of little peccadilloes every day for which we offer quick prayers of repentance to God and move on. On the other hand, Scripture says, "It is not good for man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18). That is, we are created by God to be social. Moreover, our social nature has been raised to transcendent heights by Christ Jesus. When we become one with Jesus in baptism we are not thereby freed from human relationships. Rather, we become more intimately involved with the human family than ever. We become not just members of Christ, but "members of one another" in Christ (Romans 12:5). Thus, our sin has a horizontal effect on the body of Christ as well as a vertical effect on our relationship with God. Nor do we have a "purely spiritual" relationship with God unrelated to our bodies. We need to "hear with our ears" and "confess with our lips" and not just "believe in our hearts" (Romans 10:9). Faith, in short, must be incarnate in us just as the Word became incarnate in the person of Jesus. That is why James 5:16 tells us to confess our sins, not only to God, but also to one another. Both the horizontal and vertical dimensions of our relationships matter to God. This being so, we find the same principle at work in the sacrament of confession. Jesus established that sacrament when he breathed on the apostles (in symbolism of his gift of the Holy Spirit) and told them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (John 20:22-23). In so doing, Jesus gave the apostles the authority to forgive sins in his name. This meant that they and their successors are able to speak and act for our forgiveness with the authority of Christ and on behalf of the community which is his body.

Moreover, they are empowered to speak that forgiveness to our whole being—body, soul and spirit. The benefits of this, both to the body of Christ and to ourselves as penitents, are immense. For the Church, it means that there stands open until the day of judgment a constant means of reconciliation that is dependent, not on human opinion, but upon the authority of Jesus Christ himself. For us as individuals approaching the sacrament, one of its great gifts is simply the freedom to approach Christ in terms of real relationship and not simply via a sort of subjective navel-gazing. For, of course, the great peril of limiting confession to a mere "me and Jesus alone" model is that we have no perspective. We tend to be either far easier on ourselves than we should be (particularly when we are immersed in grave sin) or far harder on ourselves than we should be (particularly when we struggle with scruples). Actually talking to someone else has amazing curative powers for both these diseases of the soul. That is why the Church urges the sacrament of reconciliation upon us and requires us to receive it at least once a year or (in cases of grave sin) before receiving the Eucharist. But, of course, though this is the bare minimum requirement, we should have hearts that seek the sacrament far more frequently as it is a means of grace for daily living.





Opportunities for Additional Study (cont.)



Catholic Scripture Study

What Confession Looks Like

When God became man in Jesus he ordained that we should meet with him in a human way. This being so, all the sacraments are given to us in the form of simple, human encounters. The sacrament of reconciliation follows this pattern and also has a rather simple form. The penitent, depending on the circumstances, may confess either face-to-face or anonymously. The priest blesses the penitent and the penitent tells how long it has been since the last confession (mostly to give the priest a clue as to how much contact with the Church and the sacraments the penitent is likely to have had), and then speaks the truth about his sins to the priest. The Church's tradition distinguishes between mortal (that is, grave) sins and venial sins and it is, of course, necessary to confess any grave sins one has committed. In the words of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (No. 1857): "For a sin to be mortal, three conditions must together be met: mortal sin is sin whose object is grave matter and which is also committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent." If any sins which correspond to these three conditions are on one's conscience, they must be confessed before one receives Eucharist. Beyond this, it is also a good thing to confess our run-of-the-mill venial sins as they come up. That is because Reconciliation is not only a sacrament of forgiveness, but of strength. We receive not merely mercy for our sins, but the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome them in the future as we cooperate with God. So confession of our venial sins can be helpful in making us more Christlike over time. On the other hand, it is wise to avoid over-scrupulosity and not get over-focused on micro-examining everything about our personality. The main thing is to offer what might be called the "presenting symptoms" of sin in our lives to the mercy and grace of God and to express genuine sorrow and a sincere desire to repent. If there are small things we are overlooking accidentally, the Holy Spirit can bring them to our attention as he wills.

Once the confession has been made, the priest will usually give counsel as well as some practical steps for making amends if necessary. He will then assign a penance (this is also often directed toward drawing close to God and making some sort of reparation to the damage caused by sin) and ask us to make our act of contrition. There are several formulae commonly used (such as the "Act of Contrition" or the "Jesus Prayer". Some people simply use their own words to say they are sorry they have offended God and that they seek God's help to sin no more and to avoid the near occasion of sin. The priest then pronounces the words of absolution over the penitent, prescribes penance if needed and he or she leaves the confessional—sinless as the day of their baptism!

Catechism Connection

Referenced from the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

No. 980 "This sacrament is necessary for salvation for those who have fallen after Baptism."

No. 1448 "The sacrament of Penance is comprised of two equally essential elements: confession on the part of man and God's intervention through the Church."

No. 1455 "The confession (or disclosure) of sins, even from a simply human point of view, frees us and facilitates our reconciliation with others."

No. 1458 "Indeed the regular confession of our venial sins helps us form our conscience, fight against evil tendencies, lets ourselves be healed by Christ and progress in the life of the Spirit."





Opportunities for Additional Study (cont.)

Family Devotions

When families make a habit (at least once a month) of going to confession together, children learn from the parents the importance of this sacrament. Preparation for the sacrament is important, for without a proper examination of one's heart confession is reduced to the repeated mention of a few common venial sins. On the way to and from Church protect the moment by focusing the conversation on reconciliation. As a help for children, as well as adults, use the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17) as a guide to examine your heart. Some families print out the Ten Commandments, laminated it and give it to their children to carry with them. After confession, pray as a family, thanking God for his grace and mercy.

Rome to Home

A papal quote relating to the lesson:

"A good catechesis will show how repentance, just like conversion, is far from being a superficial feeling but a real overturning of the soul....A third value is contained in penance, and this is the movement whereby the preceding attitudes of conversion and repentance are manifested externally: This is doing penance. This meaning is clearly perceptible in the term *metanoia*, as used by John the Baptist in the texts of the synoptics. (Mt 3:2; Mk 1:2-6; Lk 3:1-6) To do penance means above all to reestablish the balance and harmony broken by sin, to change direction even at the cost of sacrifice." (Pope John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*)





In this lesson, we observed that:

One of the sources of despair in the life of believers is unconfessed sin. Sin hidden in the human heart acts as a cancer, breaking down the integrity and resolve of Christians. Pope John Paul II says, "it is thanks to the medicine of confession that the experience of sin does not degenerate into despair" (*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, No. 31). It is critical that in confession one's heart be straight forward and honest with Christ, holding back nothing. For the degree of one's sincerity and contrition in confession determines the effects of the sacrament in terms of conversion.

On our earthly pilgrimage, sin weakens and sometimes as in the case of mortal sin severs our relationship with God. Both the graces of God and sin are to be taken seriously in this age of indifference. As you close out this study on James, make it a point to participate in the sacrament of confession. By your own admission, look squarely at the sin you are guilty of, take responsibility for it and open yourself to God. By doing this a new future will be made possible.

A Message from the Authors

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God Bless,

Scott, Jeff, Mark and Gayle

