

# Forgiveness and Reconciliation

When Jesus came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him. And a leper approached, did him homage, and said, "Lord, if you wish, you can make me clean." He stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, "I will do it. Be made clean." His leprosy was cleansed immediately. Then Jesus said to him, "See that you tell no one, but go show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses prescribed; that will be proof for them."  
-Matthew 8:1-4

The Catholic Sacrament of Reconciliation (which is also performed by the Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran and many other Churches) is often questioned by certain Protestants. Many simply question why a priest is needed to forgive sins, but some are so hostile to the idea that they call the practice "blasphemy" (suggesting it means priests are gods). In all cases, the Biblical support for such a practice is often called into question. I hope to answer some of these issues.

To begin with, the Catholic Church describes a Sacrament as a visible sign of God's hidden Grace. In the Catechism of the Catholic Church #1084, the exact wording is "perceptible signs (words and actions) accessible to our human nature." They are instituted by the Christ as a means to "communicate his grace." (also CCC #1084) Sacraments are never forced upon people, they are voluntary. Therefore, for one to partake in a Sacrament is making a declaration of faith.

Next, I want to address a fallacy many Christians have about this Sacrament, including those who receive it. Many people mistake the Sacrament to be one of only confession. It is also a common mistake to assume this Sacrament is only about being forgiven. Certainly these two elements are important, but they are only the means, not the end. The real goal is to be brought back together with God. In a word, reconciliation.

Let's look at what is probably the most famous Biblical example of forgiveness: the Prodigal (or Lost) Son (Luke 15:11-32). Notice how the father had obviously forgiven his son long before the son came back, as the father embraced and kissed the son before the son said a word (verse 20). It's not that God hasn't forgiven our sins the moment we did them (or even in advance because of his Omnitemporalness), but rather the fact that we need to recognize we did wrong. Also look at the slaughter of the fatted calf and feast (verse 23). It was not enough to merely let the son back into the house, there needed to be a tangible aspect of the reconciliation to show everyone that the son was indeed a full member of the family again. We see similar themes of celebration in the parables that led up to this one (The Parable of the Lost Sheep (verses 1-7) and the Parable of the Lost Coin (verses 8-10)).

Now let's look at the scripture I led this paper off with, and we will see the first miracle of Jesus mentioned in the Gospel according to Matthew, which is traditionally the first book in the New Testament. The theme of forgiveness and reconciliation is the very first miracle a reader comes to in reading the New Testament! And for 1st Century Jews (who comprised most of the early Christians), leprosy was not a matter of bad luck, it was identified with a particularly vile sin of the sufferer. Any Jew who had leprosy was expelled from the Jewish community; just as a Christian can be expelled from the Christian community (denial of the Eucharist in particular) for performing a mortal sin.

Jesus forgave the sin without a second thought (shown by his healing of the leprosy), but the former leper was still exiled from his community at this time. By Mosaic law (which God the Son not only observed but mandated as the great I Am), the former leper still needed to be reconciled into the community. Forgiveness was only part of the procedure; it was not complete on its own. To truly be one with the community again, the former leper had to go to a *priest* and he had to perform a *penance* in the form of an offering.

But some may say that the New Covenant of Jesus replaced the Old one of Moses. Let's look at this miracle one more time. Notice that the first seven words of the scripture talks of Jesus coming down from the mountain, and then remember that this wasn't just any mountain Jesus came down from. In Chapters 6 and 7, we see Matthew's account of what is commonly called the Sermon on the Mount. In this sermon, Jesus, who is the New Moses, gave His followers a new law. But whereas Moses came *down* the mountain to give the law, the people had to follow Jesus *up* the mountain to receive it. The law Jesus gave (which is of the Spirit) was described as being given in a higher place than the law that Moses gave (which is of this world). In this sense, the New Covenant did indeed replace the old. But when this miracle of forgiveness and reconciliation took place, Jesus was back down off the mountain again. By placing the miracle of healing the leper as Jesus came down the mountain, we see a parallel to the ritual laws of Moses. In a subtle way, Matthew is actually showing us how the philosophical aspect (spiritual law) combines with the ritual (law of Moses) to make the Sacrament.

But is this just a singular example that I am making too big a fuss over? I don't think so. We see Jesus healing lepers in all three synoptic gospels, with Luke giving a second account of healing ten at once. *All* of them required the leper(s) to see a priest so they could rejoin the community. In all the teachings of Jesus healing lepers, we see the pattern of a grave sin requiring faith of the sinner to seek forgiveness outside his own means, how a confession was required (asking to be "clean") and a penance performed (animals were offered) in order for the sinners to return to the community. We also see this pattern in the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

The final argument against the Sacrament is claiming that having to confess to a (human) priest is a sin against God as only God can forgive sins. This is the grounds those calling it blasphemy use. Yet we see Jesus giving authority to his apostles to do just that (Matthew 10:1 is the first example of several), but perhaps the most powerful example is John 14:20: On that day you will realize that I am in my Father and you are in me *and I in you*. (italics mine) This is the key to the mystery. Through the Holy Spirit, priests are *in persona Christi Capitis*. Jesus is indeed present during confession, as the body of the priest becomes a vessel of the Christ. We see Jesus spending virtually the whole of John 17 petitioning the Father for such unity. And not just for those at table with him but also for those who follow.

And the New Testament has no shortage of speaking of those who followed. Matthias replaced Judas Iscariot as an apostle of Jesus (Acts 1:15-26). In Saint Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus, we actually see three examples of an apostle giving instruction to the Bishops he left to maintain the churches he created in Ephesus and Crete, complete with instructions on how to establish the Priesthood (presbyters) and Deacons. Admittedly, the word "presbyter" is sometimes used interchangeably between "bishop" and "priest" in the 1st Century, but the fact that the new Church was building a threefold pastoral ministry based on and combining the Jewish Temple (sacrificial) hierarchy (High Priest>Priest>Levites) with the Synagogue (liturgical) hierarchy (Ruler of Synagogue>Board of Elders>Servants) is quite clear in scripture. And here we come full circle to the example established by Jesus, who directed the repentant lepers to seek a priest, who could offer a sacrifice (for Jews, an animal, for Christians, the Eucharist) on behalf of the repentant.

While anyone can recognize a fellow Christian performing a grave sin and understand the gravity of such a thing, God's Grace is for God to give and for one to voluntarily receive or reject. The ultimate fate of any one soul is not for others to judge. Ritual reconciliation is a commandment given to Moses for the faithful. Jesus not only validated this ritual but turned it into a Sacrament by being present during the ritual. He also established a new order of priests so all can participate in it. One may not need the sacrament to regain God's grace (God is free to extend His mercy as He sees fit), but *it is* the way Jesus told us to go about it.

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