

## *True Confessions*

Joel 2: 12-19 Luke 18: 9-14

The norm of confession and contrition before God is well established not only in Judaism and Christianity, but also in every major religion. It is usually formed into a particular ritual act designed to show remorse, often involving an offering together with a petition for forgiveness. But does this provide the necessary candor and sincerity? Ritual may be seen as the effective way for sacred reconciliation to occur, but we also know that ritual can lose its meaning, becoming routine, even trite, and often misunderstood.

We confess our sinfulness every week, reading the same prayer in unison that has varying degrees of meaning, relevance, and impact each week. This is our opportunity to admit how our lives, our actions and attitudes, have failed to meet God's expectations. The key is actually recognizing what God finds sinful. It shouldn't be about what *we* find sinful, but what *God* finds sinful. Those can be quite different things.

Polling indicates that Christians find abortion sinful. But polling also show plenty of Christians think the death penalty is appropriate. They also think that health care for people who can afford it is the way it should be, and it is okay for people to die because they cannot afford readily available treatments or medications. They are also okay with a drone strike on a building that kills innocent people if there was a belief that terrorists were there, too. We even have a name for those deceased men, women, and children: collateral damage. It is okay because it involves national security and sometimes innocent people die to serve the greater good of our national security. That is the way *we* regard and value sinfulness; we have no problem naming one action as horribly sinful, and remaining at best indifferent, or worse affirmative, toward a host of actions that produce the same result. We may rationalize that they occur in a different context and circumstances, but it is rationalizing.

Do we imagine that God sees things in the same selective manner that we do? Do we imagine our views to be some reflection of what God's views are? Or do we recall the serpent's word in the Garden saying that humans will become like God and redefine the terms of good and evil for themselves? This separation between what we regard as sin and what God regards as sin is what we do to suit our own values. In doing so, we live precisely as the serpent describes, acting God-like in redefining the terms of good and evil to match our preferences and then acting as if God is okay with the ambiguity and hypocrisy.

This isn't something that we invented in the modern era. This human trait was pointed out in the earliest times, by the serpent in the Garden of Eden no less. That story simply points out a universal truth about our human ways. We find people doing this stuff all the time in scripture. And just as often as it happens, we find God getting mighty irritated at being ignored, or worse, co-opted to validate our corruptions of good and evil.

The prophet Joel in chapter 2 relates God's word to God's sinful people, having declared that "the day of the Lord is coming ... a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness," and the host of nasty things scheduled for that day. The corruption and sinfulness of God's people have brought about this day of reckoning.

With this specter looming, our passage opens, *Even now* [with this ghastly day set on the calendar], *says the Lord, (re)turn to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing.*

What we do not hear is the call to do 'business as usual.' For one thing, 'business as usual' would seem to have meant accepting corruption and sinfulness in social and religious expressions as normative, standard, acceptable behavior. We can look at other prophetic writings to get the specifics, but generally it has meant dismissing the expectations of God and acting as if there is no God with expectations of God's people, or in short, acting as if there is no God at all who truly matters. In God's place, we have substituted ourselves as defining what is good and what is evil and what to do about it.

For another, we can also imagine that the priests have been doing their ritual thing and people have been engaging in their ritual thing with the priests, however these rituals have become impotent expressions of a people that are truly indifferent to what God expects from them. They've become routine and meaningless.

God says in effect through Joel that there is no sincerity in previous acts of confession and contrition. These aren't true confessions. The emptiness of these rituals reflects a sinful spirit that is unmoved to do anything differently. God has no reason to withhold the promised wrath and condemnation. Yet here we find God urging his people to do the right thing, to sincerely come before God, sincerely show regret, commit to turning things around, and earnestly petition for the gracious mercy of your God. It isn't too late, but truly, they're warned that the typical ritual act isn't enough. They are instructed: *Rend your **hearts**, not your **garments**.*

The prophet allows that there is no guarantee that their acts of confession and contrition are going to change the outcome, but the possibility certainly exists, and the love of God for God's people should never be in doubt.

Something seems odd when it says: *Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him, a grain-offering and a drink-offering for the Lord, your God?* This is not having the **people** leave grain and drink offerings for God, but **God** leaves grain and drink offerings for the people. Apparently the ravages of drought and pestilence described earlier in Joel have so decimated the land that the people don't even have food or drink to *make* any offering to God in their ritual. By forgoing the ritual for lack of elements, the people are left without a meaningful ritual to perform. However, the prophet Joel seizes on this condition as the **right one** for the people to dispense with ritual and truly come with a repentant heart and a changed spirit, ready to offer their sincerest confession and contrition. Doing this, God may bless them, but in no way does Joel suggest that their actions will put any requirement on God. Forgiveness will be by the grace of God alone.

Faithfully and sincerely acting in the manner described by Joel, the prophet shares God's good news: *In response to his people the Lord said: I am sending you grain, wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied; and I will no more make you a mockery among the nations.*

The factors of sincerity and integrity are of the highest importance in the acts of God's people before their God. This is critical when we come to terms with our own sinfulness measured against God's true expectations from us.

Let's remember that sinfulness in God's eyes is **not** what we tend to imagine. In fact, our quick response to 'what sinfulness is' often has us citing rather trivial items of behavior when in fact, sinfulness consists of more substantial matters which are more common and problematic as those trivial items. Our measures for what constitutes sinfulness are often taken from traditional understandings, cultural norms, or whatever things seem problematic in our own behavior. What if we got it all wrong when we considered the true nature of sinfulness?

Let's briefly consider the two worshipers at the Temple in the parable told by Jesus. Each one has come to present himself before God. One is a Pharisee while the other is a tax collector.

The Pharisee stands and prays, thanking God that he is not like others – thieves, prostitutes, drug addicts, pedophiles, Samaritans, or even scum like that tax collector. Proudly the Pharisee noted that he fasts twice a week and tithes all of his earnings.

The tax collector stood away, refusing to look up, and beat his breast saying, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." The tax collector would seem to be admitting that he was not only a wretched scuzz bucket, but as far as being faithful to God, he *never* fasts and doesn't tithe *any* of his substantial earnings. Frankly, there is no redeeming quality to him, unless you consider that sniveling appeal to God for mercy as sincere.

Jesus said that this tax collector was the one who went home justified before God. He knew what he was and admitted his sinfulness. He felt unworthy to be there, standing at a distance from his fellow worshiper, and keeping his face turned down in shame. He made no pretense to being anything but loathsome to God, having failed in obedience and service in every possible way. He speaks directly to God and considers nothing else besides his own sinfulness before God. Yet Jesus clearly states that **this** guy was justified, having had his relationship set aright with God. He understood his sinfulness and made no pretensions of righteousness. He sought God's grace and mercy, knowing that he deserved nothing.

The Pharisee on the other hand was so thoroughly self-deceived and self-absorbed that he could not even imagine any sins that he'd committed. After extolling his own virtue, he looks sidelong at the tax collector with despising and derision, comparing himself to the obvious and woeful sinner. This Pharisee believes that what is normative for him is what is normative for God. Yet such norms miss God's love and

grace, God's compassion and justice, and God's peace and healing, all aspects of new life in the Kingdom.

Could we have missed a higher understanding of God's expectations of us and of what constitutes sinfulness to God? Could we be as self-deceived and self-absorbed as the Pharisee? Heaven forbid!

Imagine the Son of Man comes to us and asks: 'Your brothers and sisters are suffering; what are you doing to help them?' After we stammer about trying to compose a worthy answer, he asks: 'Are you doing what I would do?' We might resort to talking about the money we put in the collection plate, the earnest nature of our prayers, letting someone with only two items go ahead of us in the express lane, just about anything to justify ourselves. We don't want to admit that we spent an ungodly amount of money redoing two bathrooms, the master bedroom, the kitchen, and the floors for your home when brothers and sisters have no home, no medicine, no food, no car. 'Yes, I have two cars in my driveway, but I really needed to get those home jobs done.' And that's when we can catch a reflection and see the visage of the Pharisee.

That's the nice thing about the church, too. We are grouped by affinity in the churches so that we can all validate our corrupt choices and agree that 'yes, if you're going to re-do your kitchen, you should get marble countertops.' Of course. Then we can all be Pharisees together.

We need to always remember that God's expectations are not our expectations. Our established norms do not necessarily reflect what God and Jesus have said are explicitly important for the Kingdom. And they may be off base even though there are lots of people who think the same way.

The fact that we're all sinners is probably not in dispute. What sinfulness truly consists of is the question. That's why making a true confession matters.

May we not be lulled into false righteousness simply because we come to church, say a corporate prayer of confession, dutifully listen to the annoying preacher, and repeat the process on a regular basis. That doesn't produce a scintilla of righteousness, a hint of justification, or a crumb of substance for the Kingdom of God. May we seek to offer true confessions, to rend our hearts, not our garments, seeking his grace and peace, and not our own.