

His Mercy and His Men - II

What sins should we confess?

One of the main errors of the church of the Pope that the Reformation had to address was the perception that confessing your sin is a good work by which sinners *earn* forgiveness for their sin; that by admitting to our sin we make right the wrong that our sin is. With this perception came also the teaching that only the wrongs and wrongdoings explicitly mentioned before the priest are forgiven, whereas those not specifically mentioned still lie unatoned for and unforgiven, waiting for the sinner to be confronted with them in the life to come, along with the judgement of God against them. In the teachings of the church of the Pope, this is what *Purgatory* is, years and years of agony necessary to purge sinners from any and all remaining sin.

As Lutherans we now know better. Or do we? Although most of us do not think of confessing our sins to our Pastor as absolutely necessary for our sins to be forgiven, or even as a good and healthy thing to do, many Lutherans still live with the notion that only those wrongs and wrongdoings of ours of which we specifically repent and to which we specifically admit and for which we specifically seek mercy with God are covered by His forgiveness. For one thing, this is what causes many Christians, and even many Lutherans, to worry about the eternal fate of a Christian they loved who took his or her own life, and thus died sinning, without any opportunity to subsequently repent specifically of this sin before God.

It also causes many Christians, and many Lutherans, to worry about their own eternal fate, fearful for any wrongs and wrongdoings of which they may not have specifically repented before God, to which they may not have specifically admitted before God as sin, and for which they have not specifically asked for His forgiveness; perhaps because they forgot about something; perhaps they are not aware that this or that particular thing they did or said or thought or felt was wrong in the sight of God, and as such, sin.

Most likely Peter was not aware, when he struck the high priest's servant and cut off his right ear, as we hear about it tonight, that he was sinning. He was acting out of the best intentions, was he not, wanting to protect his beloved Master against injustice and evil. Nevertheless, his good intentions were misguided. He was acting against the will of God, as He should have known from Holy Scripture.

As we hear it tonight that our Lord Jesus said it: *How then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?* Moreover, his act was one of unbelief; as we also hear it that our Lord Jesus said it: *Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and He will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?* Worst of all, what he set out to do was to prevent the plan and purpose of God from being brought to completion for the salvation of sinners, Peter himself, and everybody else. As our Lord Jesus also said it, as we hear it: *Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given to me?*

To save the Saviour was not for Peter to do; just as it was not for the Saviour to do, save Himself, and He would not, not even as His enemies cried out to Him, mockingly, to do that, at the height of His sufferings: *If you are the Son of God, save yourself and come down from the cross!* Later Peter would see, and write of his Master that instead *He continued entrusting Himself to Him who judges justly.*

For now, though, Peter did not see it. And this was not the first time he had tried to save the Saviour from being exactly that, the Saviour. *Far be it from you, Lord!; this shall never happen to you!*, he had said, when our Lord Jesus had spoken of how He was to suffer for the salvation of sinners. *Get behind me, Satan!*, our Lord Jesus had said to him then. *You are an offence to me. For you discern not the things of God, but rather the things of man.*

So much that goes against the good and gracious will of God seems good and right to us because we do not discern the things of God, but rather the things of man; because the evil one has taken hold of our hearts and minds with his false promise that we should be like God in judging and mastering good and evil. And so we trust our own judgement rather than His in terms of what it takes, if not to save the Saviour Himself, then to bring His good will about, and what will be good and right.

So many wrongs and wrongdoings of ours we are not aware of as wrongs and wrongdoings. So many conclusions we draw and act upon without knowing the whole truth, and doing so we lie, to others, or to ourselves, and so we sin without knowing that we sin, because we do not care to know. Or perhaps we do know the truth, but we manage to convince ourselves that we do not see it, because we do not want to, or cannot bear to. So deeply rooted is sin in us.

Who can discern his errors?, the Psalm exclaims, implying that no one can. And then it goes on to make us pray: *Declare me innocent from hidden faults.* Which is also exactly what our Catechism teaches us to do.

Before God we should plead guilty of all sins, even those we are not aware of, as it says, as we do in the Lord's Prayer.

Now, when our Lord Jesus told His Christians: *Pray, then, like this!*, He did not demand of us that we dive deep down into the depths of our memories and minds to seek out and bring up each and every wrongdoing of ours; He did not command us to inform Him about each and all of our specific sins and shortcomings, as if He did not already know. Technically speaking, He did not even command us to point out specifically that *we are sinners*, and that *we do sin*; rather, in the prayer He taught and entitled His Christians to pray, all that goes with without saying as established and acknowledged fact: *Forgive us our trespasses.*

Our Lord Jesus allowed us to leave it at that. He did not demand of us that we make each of our wrongs and wrongdoings right by going through the agony of spelling them out. First of all, that would be impossible. For *who can discern his errors?*, as the Psalm says it. And, more importantly, as another Psalm says it: *Truly no man can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life.* Before God we cannot even ransom ourselves. For, as the Psalm goes on to say, *the ransom of their life is costly and can never suffice, that he should live on for ever and never see the pit.* No agony of ours could make right the wrong that our sin is. If we were to suffer for all eternity in Hell, under the wrath and judgement of God against the evil that is our ungodliness and unbelief and impurity, we would but have begun to pay the price and penalty for our sins and shortcomings. So great an evil is any and all sin in the sight of God, which means that it really is that evil in *real* reality, in the reality of God.

The only Man who can ransom another is the Son of God, who had Himself made Man to ransom all sinners and give to God the price for their lives, that we may live for ever and never see the pit.

For this the Son of Man was given over into the hands of sinners, as we hear it tonight that He said it, not only by Judas the betrayer, but by God Himself. And He whose name is *I am*, who is God Himself from eternity, and the ground of all being, He gave Himself over, not only to the agony of being unfairly judged and condemned by sinners, and given over to physical agony, beaten and crucified, but also to the agony of the judgement of God, the judgement of His own goodness against the sin of all sinners, His righteous wrath against all wrong and wrongdoing, His holy hatred against evil, to fulfil the Word He had spoken to the heavenly Father: *Of those whom you gave me I have not lost one.*

As we also heard it tonight, that He said it: *All this has taken place that the Scriptures of the Prophets might be fulfilled*, what God through the ages had declared by the Prophets to be His eternal will: the salvation of sinners.

Only His sufferings and death for sin, who is Himself *without sin*, could make right the wrong that sin is. Only *His blood*, who is Himself God from eternity, and the Holy One of God, who *through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God*, only that could *purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God*, as the Letter to the Hebrews writes it. Only He could be a sacrifice sufficient to make up for the sin of sinners.

But with His sufferings and death it is done. The price and penalty has been paid, in full and in abundance, for all sin, for all evil and ungodliness and unbelief and impurity in our hearts and in our lives, and we are right with God, and righteous before His judgement, so that we shall not perish and die for ever in His wrath, but rather live and be with Him in the fullness of His goodness and His glory.

Such is His promise, which He has His faithful Church proclaim to all sinners. And with His promise, all that He promises is given, really given, to all sinners who hear His promise, and take it to heart, and surrender to His love.

His Word of salvation presents our salvation to us as full and complete, with nothing lacking, nothing left for us to do to complete it and make it our own, other than to hear His Word and take it to heart. All our sin is dealt with and done away with with His sufferings and death, also that of which we are not aware. *Therefore is there now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*, as the holy Apostle Paul writes it. *For in Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life has set you free from the law of sin and death*, that is: the law which demands that all sin be punished by death. Christ Jesus has died for the sin of all sinner and so set us sinners free from that law.

Therefore is it that we need not be fearful for any and all sin we fail or forget to speak to specifically, before the priest, or even before God Himself. Therefore is it that *before God we should plead guilty of all sins, even those we are not aware of, as we do in the Lord's Prayer*, and need not seek out sin to bring up; therefore is it that *before the Pastor we should confess only those sins which we know and feel in our hearts*; and this we should do in order that we may hear and know that they also are covered by His mercy.

O Christ our God, Lamb of God, who have borne, and take away, the sin of the world, have mercy upon us. Amen.