

What Saith the Scripture?

<http://www.WhatSaithTheScripture.com/>

Confession of Faults

by Charles Grandison Finney
President of Oberlin College

from "The Oberlin Evangelist" Publication of Oberlin College

Lecture XXI

November 4, 1840

Public Domain Text
Reformatted by Katie Stewart

Text.--James 5:16: "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed."

In this discussion I shall show:

I. What is intended by faults in this text.

II. To whom this passage requires confession to be made.

III. The design and use of confessing faults one to another.

IV. That we are under special obligation to pray for those who confess their faults.

I. What is intended by faults in this text.

- 1. Offenses against our neighbor.
- 2. Public offenses, or offenses against the public.
- 3. Secretly besetting sins, or those secret lusts and appetites, and passions, and temptations and states of mind that easily beset, and frequently overcome us.
- 4. Offensive and injurious traits of character. There are very few persons who have not more or less features of their character that are particularly offensive, either to good morals or good breeding, and are therefore injurious and disastrous in their tendencies and results. These are to be regarded not as isolated faults, but as faults of character--habitual faults, in opposition to accidental or occasional faults. All such faults should be confessed, one to another.
- 5. Such weaknesses and infirmities as lay us open to the power of temptation. These

weaknesses may be owing to some constitutional infirmity, or they may arise out of evil habits that have acquired great power over us. Whatever they are, if they are faults in such a sense as to bring us into legal bondage to sin, they doubtless come within the scope of the Apostle's meaning.

- 6. All such things as grieve the Spirit of God, and hinder our growth in grace.

II. To whom this confession is to be made.

- 1. To those especially who have been injured by our faults. That we are under obligation to confess to them, and make what reparation is in our power, is too plain to need comment.
- 2. Public sins are to be confessed to the public. By this I mean, that if sins have been injurious to the public, to the Church, or to the world, or to both, the confession should be as public as the injury.
- 3. But especially does this text require confession to our praying friends. "Confess your faults one to another," says the Apostle, "and pray one for another that ye may be healed." Although the duty of confessing sin to all that have been injured, is abundantly taught in other parts of scripture; yet in this particular text, the Apostle manifestly intended to enjoin the duty of confessing our faults to praying friends, for the purpose of enlisting their sympathies and prayers in our behalf.
- 4. And more especially still does he seem to require the duty of confessing our faults to eminently praying persons; for he immediately adds, "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." Hence it is plain, that the Apostle designed to direct persons to confess their faults especially to those who offer effectual fervent prayer.

III. The design and use of confessing faults one to another.

- 1. To make known to Christian friends our real circumstances and wants, so as to enlist their sympathies and enable them to pray for us intelligently, and present our case before the Lord as it is. Without this knowledge, persons may either altogether neglect to pray for us, or if they pray at all, they may be in such ignorance of our real necessities as greatly to misconceive our wants, and therefore never benefit us by their prayers.
- 2. Another design and use of confessing our faults one to another is, to make reparation, so far as confession goes, for the wrong we have done. Until this is done, God will not forgive. For while we refuse to make the reparation within our power, it were not only unreasonable, but unjust in God to pardon us.
- 3. To remove temptation to hard feelings on the part of those who have been injured by us. To injure a man by our faults is bad enough, but to refuse or neglect to confess is often worse, and may often result in worse consequences, and prove a greater injury to him, than did our original fault. If, after we have done wrong, and injured a brother or a neighbor, and he knows that we have done so, we persist in refusing to confess, it is a grievous temptation to him to entertain

hard and revengeful feelings toward us. And where this course is persevered in it often results in the greatest injury, if not in the absolute annihilation of the piety of the injured party. If, then, you have committed a fault, take the earliest opportunity to confess it, lest you lay a stumbling block, a grievous, fatal stumbling block, before your brother's feet.

- 4. Another design and use of confession is, to remove obstacles to the restoration of Christian confidence and fellowship. When you have been guilty of a fault, and this is known to your brethren, they cannot and ought not to have Christian confidence in you, until you confess your faults. And it sometimes comes to pass, that church members so long refuse to neglect to confess their faults to one another, as to render Christian confidence impossible. And members of the same church have little or no confidence in each other's piety. And whatever hope one may have, that another is pious, is founded not in the fact that he has any evidence that he is a Christian, but in the fact that he knows himself to be as bad as others, and is, therefore, constrained to hope for others upon the same principle that he hopes for himself. In such cases there is not and ought not to be Christian confidence and fellowship. Nor ought there to be any hope among them that they are Christians. For until they confess their faults one to another, and can heartily pray one for another, they are as far as possible from having any evidence that they are the disciples of Christ. Now the only possible way in which Christian confidence and fellowship can be restored in such cases, is honestly and freely to confess your faults one to another.
- 5. Another design and use of confessing our faults is, to enlist Christian prayer and sympathy in our behalf. Nothing is more calculated to beget sympathy, Christian compassion, and brotherly love--to draw out the heart in fervent prayer--than to confess our faults and lay our hearts open to our friends and brethren.
- 6. To promote our own humility. Humility is a willingness to be known and estimated according to our real character. While we are unwilling to confess, we have no humility at all. Nothing is more directly calculated to deepen, perpetuate, and perfect humility, than a full and frequent confession of our faults.
- 7. Another design and use of confessing is, to promote our own watchfulness. The very fact of confessing our sins to one another, has a strong tendency to put us on our guard against repeating them. And on this account confession is of great importance to us.
- 8. To promote watchfulness over us. If we confess our faults to others, we call their attention to our faults, and easily besetting sins, and thereby lead them to notice our walk and conversation, and to watch over us with a greater degree of Christian faithfulness than they otherwise would.
- 9. Another design and use of confession is, to encourage Christian reproof and admonition from our brethren. If we do not confess our sins, but on the contrary, show a disposition to conceal them, our brethren know that we are proud, and have reason to believe, that we would take it amiss if they should reprove us; but if, on the contrary, we open our hearts to our brethren, we invite and encourage their Christian watchfulness and reproof, and thereby greatly promote their faithfulness to us.

- 10. Another design and use of confession is, to promote self-examination in them. Few things have a stronger tendency to fasten conviction upon the mind of a man, than to go to him with a frank and full confession of our sins. It is often holding up a mirror, in which he is constrained to behold himself. Under scarcely any circumstances have I seen myself so utterly vile, as when persons have been ingenuously confessing to me their sins. It has so strongly called my attention to the facts of my own history, as not unfrequently to fill me with shame and confusion of face.
- 11. Another design and tendency of confessing is, to impress others with the truth of the Christian religion. When ungodly men hear the frank and heart broken confessions of Christians, they are often struck with the contrast between this spirit and the spirit of the world. They secretly, and sometimes openly exclaim, if they see themselves to be so great sinners, what am I?
- 12. Another design and use of confession is, to insure spiritual healing. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."
- 13. Confession is indispensable to forgiveness. "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper; but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall find mercy."
- 14. It is indispensable to a present walking with God. If persons, for the time being, are brought into the light, and when they remember their sins, do not confess their faults, and ask the prayers and forgiveness of their brethren, they will undoubtedly and surely backslide. For in neglecting this duty, they will grieve the Spirit, harden their hearts, and immediately fall again under the power of sin.

IV. We are under special obligation to pray for those who confess their sins.

- 1. Because, by their confessions, we have been made acquainted with their necessities, and are, therefore, not in the dark, in respect to what we should pray for as it respects them. Now as light increases obligation, peculiar light in regard to their necessities, brings with it peculiar obligation.
- 2. We are under peculiar obligation to pray for them, because there is special encouragement to pray for those who are willing to confess their faults. We have express promises upon which we can fasten, in praying for such persons; especially when they not only confess but forsake their sins. "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." "Whoso confesseth and forsaketh shall have mercy."
- 3. To pray for them will be peculiarly useful for us, especially if we have been injured by them.
 - (1.) It will reveal to us the real state of our feelings towards them. Let a man attempt to pray for another, and he will soon discover the real state of his heart, in relation to that subject of prayer.

- (2.) It will beget in us the spirit of forgiveness. We cannot pray that an individual may be forgiven, and be honest and sincere in this prayer, unless we honestly forgive him ourselves. And nothing is more highly calculated to beget in us a spirit of forgiveness, than to be much employed in praying for the forgiveness of others, especially for the forgiveness of those who have injured us.
- 4. The duty of praying for those who confess their sins, is expressly enjoined in the text, and therefore a special obligation exists, to make them particular subjects of prayer.

REMARKS.

1. We see from this subject, why so many are in bondage to sin. The fact is, they do not and will not confess their faults. They have too much regard to their own reputation, ingenuously to confess their faults; and hence they wear their galling chains and remain the miserable slaves of sin.

2. We see why there is so little Christian sympathy and love. So long as professors of religion remain so ignorant of each other's history, joys, sorrows, trials, and besetting sins, there is no such foundation or reason for Christian sympathy and love, as there might be and ought always to be among the followers of Christ. We sometimes see two Christians who are in the habit of confessing their faults to each other, and disclosing their own experience to each other, and praying one for the other. In all such cases, without exception, you see much Christian sympathy and brotherly love. Such a course of conduct as this, is indispensable to Christians sympathy; and this ought to be universally understood by the Church.

3. This subject shows, that there is very little humility in the world. I have already said, that humility consists in a willingness to be known and estimated according to our real character. While there is so little confession as there now is in the Church of God, how can there be much humility?

4. We see why there is so little humility in the Church. If Christians would but begin, and make thorough work of confession, this would greatly promote their humility; but until they begin, cast away their pride, and address themselves in earnest to confessing their faults one to another, their pride will never be crucified, or their humility perfected.

5. There is but very little confidence among professors of religion, in each other's prayers. If there were, they would more frequently confess to their brethren, and beg them to pray, that they might be healed. It is often amazing to see how little confidence professors of religion have in prayer.

6. Living as they do, professors of religion have no right to have confidence in each other's prayers. And without utter presumption, it is impossible that they should. Professors of religion very generally know, that their own prayers are not answered; that they live in such a manner, as to have no right to expect an answer to their prayers; and from observation they perceive, that other professors of religion, with very few exceptions, live as they do. And in this view of the subject, how is it possible for them to have confidence in each other's prayers, so as to render it an object to solicit the prayers of their brethren.

7. There is here and there a professor of religion, who is regarded by other professors of religion, and

by the Church generally, as one who prevails with God. And it is truly wonderful, that they do not resort to such persons, to confess their sins and ask their prayers. This can be accounted for only upon the supposition--

8. That there is very little honest and earnest desire to get rid of sin, among professors of religion. If they were really agonized, to get rid of sin, it does appear to me impossible that they should not avail themselves of the prayers and counsels of those whom they regard as eminent Christians, in order to get rid of their loathsome depravity. James Brainerd Taylor was, according to his own account of himself, in earnest to get rid of his sins. He believed the thing possible, and felt that it was indispensable to his usefulness as a minister. He gave himself up thoroughly to the work of getting away from his sins; and, as was very natural and scriptural, went to those whom he considered eminently pious and praying persons. To them he opened his heart and solicited their prayers in his behalf, that he might be healed. And, blessed be God, he was healed. And so, Christian, may you be healed, if you will go and do likewise, with as much honesty and earnestness as he did.

9. The fact is, that most professors of religion prefer remaining in bondage, to confessing that they are so. They wear a cloak over their chains, and while their hands are manacled, and they are fast bound in the chains of sin, the law in their members so warring against the law in their mind, as to keep them in a state of perpetual captivity, they gather their cloak of concealment all over them, try to cover up and conceal their loathsome servitude and detestable chains, rather than throw off the mask, confess their faults, and be healed. O professor of religion, what a miserable slave you are. Hold up your hands. Let us see if they are not chained. Lay aside your cloak. Are you not the bond-slave of Satan, or of lust, or of the world?

10. How shameful and lamentable it is, that persons regard their reputation more than they hate sin, and prefer concealment to humility, reputation to holiness, the good opinion of their brethren to the favor of God.

11. But in a very few cases, after all, do they by such concealment, secure any reputation for real piety. Although they are ashamed to confess, and do not confess what the difficulty is; yet, as a matter of fact, every discerning mind sees, that there is some difficulty--that they are not spiritual--that they do not walk with God--that they do not prevail in prayer. So that, after all, they gain nothing, even of reputation, by their concealment. And this is the folly of sin--a man under its dominion will think to cover it up. But while some particular form of it may be disguised, its existence in some form will be known, from the spirit and temper of the man, in spite of himself.

12. Confession, to be of any avail, should be ingenuous and full, so as to give our brethren as full a view of our real character and wants as possible; so that they may understand, as far as may be, the worst of our case, and know how to present it before the Lord. If individuals will but half confess, they will find that such confessions will do no good, but only harden their hearts. You must fully confess, and cover up no essential feature of your depravity, if you expect to be healed.

13. Few things are so useful and important to us and to those against whom we have sinned, as to confess our faults to them. When difficulties have existed between brethren, nothing can restore permanent confidence, but a full, thorough, hearty, mutual confession of faults, one to another, and

praying one for another, that they may be healed.

14. There are but very few professors of religion who seem to know, or believe, that there is any such thing as spiritual healing in this world. They seem to reason thus: "Of what use would it be for me to confess my sins, as I am continually sinning? Why should I trouble the brethren with a detail of my sins, for they are as constant as the flowing of the waters? Why should I make myself the loathing of the Church of God, by continually confessing my sins? It will do no good. I shall continue to sin on as long as I live; and I may as well, therefore, groan under my chains and continue this infernal service till I die. As to ever being healed, so as to get away from my sins, in this life, it is out of the question."

Now I see not why all this is not very natural and reasonable, upon the supposition that Christians have no reason to expect, in this life, entire emancipation from the bondage of sin. But brother--sister--let me beseech you to be no longer deceived in this thing. Remember, that Christ is faithful, who has expressly promised, that if you confess your sins, He will not only forgive you, but "cleanse you from all unrighteousness."

GLOSSARY

of easily misunderstood terms as defined by Mr. Finney himself.

Compiled by Katie Stewart

1. **Complacency, or Esteem:** "Complacency, as a state of will or heart, is only benevolence modified by the consideration or relation of right character in the object of it. God, prophets, apostles, martyrs, and saints, in all ages, are as virtuous in their self-denying and untiring labours to save the wicked, as they are in their complacent love to the saints." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE VII)*. Also, "approbation of the character of its object. Complacency is due only to the good and holy." *Lectures to Professing Christians (LECTURE XII)*.
2. **Disinterested Benevolence:** "By disinterested benevolence I do not mean, that a person who is disinterested feels no interest in his object of pursuit, but that he seeks the happiness of others for its own sake, and not for the sake of its reaction on himself, in promoting his own happiness. He chooses to do good because he rejoices in the happiness of others, and desires their happiness for its own sake. God is purely and disinterestedly benevolent. He does not make His creatures happy for the sake of thereby promoting His own happiness, but because He loves their happiness and chooses it for its own sake. Not that He does not feel happy in promoting the happiness of His creatures, but that He does not do it for the sake of His own gratification." *Lectures to Professing Christians (LECTURE I)*.
3. **Divine Sovereignty:** "The sovereignty of God consists in the independence of his will, in consulting his own intelligence and discretion, in the selection of his end, and the means of accomplishing it. In other words, the sovereignty of God is nothing else than infinite benevolence directed by infinite knowledge." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LXXVI)*.
4. **Election:** "That all of Adam's race, who are or ever will be saved, were from eternity chosen by God to eternal salvation, through the sanctification of their hearts by faith in Christ. In other words, they are chosen to salvation by means of sanctification. Their salvation is the end- their

sanctification is a means. Both the end and the means are elected, appointed, chosen; the means as really as the end, and for the sake of the end." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LXXIV)*.

5. **Entire Sanctification:** "Sanctification may be entire in two senses: (1.) In the sense of present, full obedience, or entire consecration to God; and, (2.) In the sense of continued, abiding consecration or obedience to God. Entire sanctification, when the terms are used in this sense, consists in being established, confirmed, preserved, continued in a state of sanctification or of entire consecration to God." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LVIII)*.
6. **Moral Agency:** "Moral agency is universally a condition of moral obligation. The attributes of moral agency are intellect, sensibility, and free will." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE III)*.
7. **Moral Depravity:** "Moral depravity is the depravity of free-will, not of the faculty itself, but of its free action. It consists in a violation of moral law. Depravity of the will, as a faculty, is, or would be, physical, and not moral depravity. It would be depravity of substance, and not of free, responsible choice. Moral depravity is depravity of choice. It is a choice at variance with moral law, moral right. It is synonymous with sin or sinfulness. It is moral depravity, because it consists in a violation of moral law, and because it has moral character." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE XXXVIII)*.
8. **Human Reason:** "the intuitive faculty or function of the intellect... it is the faculty that intuits moral relations and affirms moral obligation to act in conformity with perceived moral relations." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE III)*.
9. **Retributive Justice:** "Retributive justice consists in treating every subject of government according to his character. It respects the intrinsic merit or demerit of each individual, and deals with him accordingly." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE XXXIV)*.
10. **Total Depravity:** "Moral depravity of the unregenerate is without any mixture of moral goodness or virtue, that while they remain unregenerate, they never in any instance, nor in any degree, exercise true love to God and to man." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE XXXVIII)*.
11. **Unbelief:** "the soul's withholding confidence from truth and the God of truth. The heart's rejection of evidence, and refusal to be influenced by it. The will in the attitude of opposition to truth perceived, or evidence presented." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LV)*.