

The True Confessor and the False

“I have sinned”—Matthew 27:4

Horatius Bonar (1808-1889)

This is *confession*, so far as words go; we shall see what it amounts to. God lays great stress upon confession in his dealings with sinning man. It is as a confessor of sin that he draws near to God; and it is as such that God receives him. This is the only position, the only character in which God can deal with him. Covering over sin will do nothing for us; it only doubles the transgression (Isa 30:1).

Confession is the closest and most personal of all kinds of dealing with God. As praise is the telling out what we see in God, so confession is the telling out what we see in ourselves. It specially comprises matters which can be spoken in no ear but God's. There is, no doubt, *public* confession—but the largest part of confession is *private*. Man cannot be trusted with it; man must not even hear it. Hence, the potential wickedness of any man setting himself up to be a confessor. Hence the potential sin of a *dishonest* confession—and the necessity of dealing honestly with God and our own consciences in a matter so entirely private and confidential. The attempt to deceive God, or to hide anything from Him, is as dangerous as it is wicked and inexcusable.

False Confession

There are two kinds of confession, a false and a true. We have instances of both of these in Scripture. They both make use of the same words, “I have sinned”; yet they do not mean the same thing, nor indicate the same state of feeling. Let us note some of the instances of the false. There is...

- 1) *Pharaoh*. Twice over he says, “I have sinned against the Lord” (Exo 9:27, 10:16).
- 2) *Israel*. After deliberate disobedience, and as a declaration of farther disobedience, “We have sinned” (Num 14:40).
- 3) *Balaam*. He said to the angel of the Lord, “I have sinned” (Num 22:34).
- 4) *Achan*. “Indeed, I have sinned against the Lord God of Israel” (Jos 7:20).
- 5) *Saul*. “Saul said unto Samuel, I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord” (1Sa 15:24).
- 6) *Judas*. “I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood” (Mat 27:4).

These are examples of false confession. And its falsehood consisted in this,—

- 1) *It was constrained*. It was extorted by terror and danger. It was not spontaneous or natural. These men would rather not have made it; but they could not help themselves. It was merely the natural heart crying out in trouble.
- 2) *It was selfish*. It was not the dishonour done to God, nor the injury to others, that they thought of, but the consequences to themselves. It was not sin, as sin, that was confessed and hated.
- 3) *It was superficial*. It was not the conscience, the inner man, that was stirred, but the mere external part of man's being. The real nature of sin was unfelt. *Self* was not abased nor loathed. There was no broken nor contrite heart (Psa 51:17).
- 4) *It was impulsive*. Some judgment smote, or was to be averted; some affliction overwhelmed them; some sermon roused them. And under the impulse of such feelings they cried out, “I have sinned.”
- 5) *It was temporary*. It did not last. It was like the early cloud; it passed away. The words of confession had hardly passed their lips when the feeling was gone.

Let us beware of false confessions. Let us not cheat our souls, nor lull our consciences asleep, by uttering words of confession which are not the expressions of contrition and broken-heartedness. Let us deal honestly, searchingly, solemnly, with God and our own consciences. Godly sorrow is one thing, and the sorrow of the world is quite another. “Be not deceived; God is not mocked” (Gal 6:7). He wants *real* words.

But we have some examples of no-confession. We have *Adam* trying to hide his sin (Gen 3:7, 12); *Cain* refusing to confess (Gen 4:9); and *Lamech* glorying in his shame Gen 4:23, 24). They are specimens of the immoveable and impenetrable, showing the lengths to which a human heart can go.

True Confession

But we have many notable instances of true confession; proclaiming to us the truth of the promise, “Whoso confesseth and forsaketh his sins shall have mercy” (Pro 28:13); “If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins” (1Jo 1:9). David said, “I have sinned” (2Sa 12:13), and his confession brought forgiveness. Daniel said, “we have sinned” (Dan 9:5), and he found forgiveness. Yes, true confession brings certain pardon. We have but one Confessor and one Confessional; and both are heavenly, not earthly; we need no more.

In true confession we take our proper place. We take the only place in which God can deal with us, the only place in which it would not dishonour him to pardon us—the sinner’s place. And he who is willing to take this place is sure of the acceptance which the forgiving God presents. The Spirit’s work in convincing of sin is to bring us to our true place before God. He who takes this but in part gets no pardon. He who tries to occupy a higher or better place must be rejected. He who tries to deal with God as not wholly a sinner, as something better than a mere sinner, shuts himself out from favour. He who goes to God simply as a sinner, shall find favour at the hands of Him who receiveth sinners, who came not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance (Mat 9:13). Everything depends on this. If he goes to God with some goodness to recommend him, some good feeling, some softness of heart, some excellence in his own faith or repentance to recommend him, he cannot be received. But he who goes simply as a sinner, will taste that the Lord is gracious (Exo 34:6, 33:19).

In true confession we come to see sin somewhat as God sees it; and ourselves somewhat as God sees us. I say somewhat, because we cannot here fully enter into his mind regarding sin and the sinner; we see but in part, and feel but in part. It is but a faint glimpse we get of sin and of ourselves. But it is with this that we go to God, having learned something, though but in the remotest degree, of what sin is and deserves, and of what He thinks of it. We take His report of what sin is, and of what we are, whether we feel it or not. We believe what He has said about these things. And accepting His testimony to the evil of sin, even in spite of our own want of feeling, we confess it before Him, and receive at His hands that forgiveness which, while it pacifies the conscience, makes sin more odious, and our own hearts more sensitive and tender.

We take the prodigal’s words, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and in thy sight” (Luk 15:21). We turn our eye and our feet homewards. We remember the past; we look round us on the desolation of the “far country”; we listen to the good news of our Father’s open door and loving heart; we arise and go. And at every step, as we draw near, our view of sin intensifies; our self-aborrence increases; our sense of ingratitude deepens—and yet the certain knowledge of our Father’s profound compassion and unchanged affection sustains us, cheers us (Luk 15:11-32). So that we draw near with a true heart, in full assurance of faith, knowing that “if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins” (1Jo 1:9).