



What About . . .

Confession and Absolution

Are we poor, miserable sinners?

Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:9–14 confronts each of us with an important question: Am I a poor, miserable sinner?

The Pharisee in the parable is not alone. We too are often unaware of our sinfulness, or don't want to admit it. How easy it is for us self-righteously to compare ourselves with others. Thanks be to God, that the second man, the tax-collector, is not alone either! Jesus Christ is with him. When Jesus calls, sinners come. They receive His forgiveness, life and salvation. And thus, we too say, "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner," for Jesus is the friend of sinners. The precious gift of our Lord's absolution is what confession is all about.

In confession and absolution, Jesus Christ, who poured out his life-blood as the perfect and complete sacrifice for all sin, pours into our ears the life-giving promise of absolution, "My son, my daughter, go in peace, your sins are forgiven." Trusting that promise, we say, "Amen. Yes, Lord, it is true." Thanks be to God!

What is confession?

*Confession has two parts. First, that we confess our sins, and second, that we receive absolution, that is, forgiveness, from the pastor as from God Himself, not doubting, but firmly believing that by it our sins are forgiven before God in heaven.*¹

It is hard to say, "I was wrong. I am sorry. Forgive me." God's Word makes it clear that the "wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). In confession and absolution, God's Word is having its way with us, moving us to confess the truth about ourselves and our need for His forgiveness.

Because of Jesus Christ, confession and absolution is a blessed, joyful, happy exchange! "For our sake He made Him to be sin, who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). When Jesus hung on the cross, He became sin—for us. He was the ransom for sin. God poured out His just wrath on Christ. Christ won peace between God and man. In confession, Christ takes the burden of our sin and gives us in exchange His complete forgiveness and love.

Absolution is the ongoing work of Holy Baptism, in which our old, sinful nature in Adam is drowned and the new man in Christ arises. Through Holy Absolution we receive "the gift of God," which is forgiveness of sins and "eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23).

What sins should we confess?

Before God we should plead guilty of all sins, even those we are not aware of, as we do in the Lord's Prayer; but before the pastor we should confess only those sins which we know and feel in our hearts. Which are these? Consider your place in life according to the Ten Commandments: Are you a father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, or worker? Have you been disobedient, unfaithful, or lazy? Have you been hot-tempered, rude, or quarrelsome? Have you hurt someone by your words or deeds? Have you stolen, been negligent, wasted anything or done any harm?

Confessing our sins in the Divine Service, we hear the Lord's servant, our pastor, absolve our sins in the name of Christ. Privately, we go to the pastor for confession and absolution precisely for those sins we are most aware of and those sins that are particularly troubling to us. These we confess to our pastor and hear the words of Christ, "I forgive you."

By what authority does the church forgive sins?

The Office of the Keys is that special authority which Christ has given to His church on earth to forgive the sins of repentant sinners, but to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent.

After His resurrection from the dead and before His ascension into heaven, our Lord Jesus Christ breathed on His apostles and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven" (John 20:22-23).

Sometimes visitors in a Lutheran service of worship are surprised to hear in the general confession and absolution our pastors saying: "Upon this your confession, I, as a called and ordained servant of the Word, announce the grace of God to all of you, and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit!"

Our Lutheran Confessions help us to understand why our pastors speak this way: "It is not the voice or word of the man who speaks it, but it is the Word of God, who forgives sin, for it is spoken in God's stead and by God's command" (AC XXV.3).

Absolution is the Lord's life-giving, sure and certain word that does for us what no surgery, medicine, therapy, counseling, or advice can do for us. The Lord's word of absolution doesn't cover up or hide our sin. Nor does it give us only a temporary relief that soon fades away. Our Lord's word of absolution reconciles us to God the Holy Trinity.

What About Confession and Absolution?

Luther put matters well when he wrote, “It would be far too great for any human heart to dare to desire if God Himself had not commanded us to ask for it. But because He is God, He claims the honor of giving far more abundantly and liberally than anyone can comprehend like an eternal, inexhaustible fountain which, the more it gushes forth and overflows, the more it continues to give. He desires of us nothing more ardently than that we ask many and great things of Him; and, on the contrary, He is angered if we do not ask and demand confidently” (*Large Catechism*).

What do you believe according to the promise of God?

I believe that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, in particular when they exclude openly unrepentant sinners from the Christian congregation and absolve those who repent of their sins and want to do better, this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself.

Burdened and weighed down by sin, we are able to go to our pastor and confess our sins, knowing that by virtue of his office, he has been called to speak the word of Christ to us and in the stead of Christ to forgive our sins. Through the Christian congregation, Jesus Christ calls men to the office of the ministry He has given to His church, the office of the keys. Thus, our pastors carry out this office publicly, on behalf of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the Christian congregation. Also, all Christians extend the forgiveness of Christ to one another privately as they console fellow Christians sorrowing over sin.

At times, our pastors, with considerable sorrow, may have to tell a person not to attend the Lord’s Supper until he or she has repented of sin. If the situation continues without repentance, the pastor may have to declare to the person, on behalf of the congregation that has made this decision, that he or she is excluded from the church until there is repentance.

Excommunication is a last resort to help a person recognize the extremely dangerous situation he has placed himself in because he will not repent of his sin. It is a final attempt to win someone back from Satan’s influence.

Is confession and absolution a Sacrament?

Although Holy Absolution has no visible element, it definitely does have Christ’s institution. The Lutheran Confessions refer to Holy Absolution as a Sacrament (LC IV.74; Ap. XIII.4). The Lutheran Confessions also wisely point out that “No intelligent person will quibble about the number of sacraments or the terminology, so long as those things are kept which have God’s command and promises” (AP XIII.17).

Luther speaks often about Holy Absolution, connecting it with the oral proclamation of the Gospel and with the ongoing living out of Holy Baptism. While it is customary in

Lutheranism to speak of two Sacraments—Baptism and Holy Communion—we do well to keep in mind this important truth: “God is surpassingly rich in his grace: First, through the spoken word, by which the forgiveness of sin is preached to the whole world; second, through Baptism; third, through the holy Sacrament of the Altar; fourth, through the power of the keys; and finally, through the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren” (SA III.4.1).

What is private absolution and what is its benefit?

Our Lutheran Confessions say, “It is taught among us that private absolution should be retained in the churches and not be allowed to fall into disuse” (AC XI). The founding father of the Missouri Synod, C. F. W. Walther, said that a pastor, in an evangelical way, through careful instruction and encouragement, and through praising private confession and absolution, should work toward the goal where private confession and absolution is used in addition to general confession and absolution.²

Private confession and absolution is a very important tool in the practice of pastoral care. Pastors use confession and absolution in a variety of situations—for example, in the midst of marital and family difficulties, and in other such pastoral counseling situations. Private confession and absolution is used by pastors to bring forgiveness and healing into the lives of those who come to them with troubled and anxious hearts.

Our church’s hymnal, *Lutheran Worship*, contains a suggested order for private confession and absolution (pgs. 110–111). This order may be used in the context of a visit with your pastor. The order of private confession and absolution suggests that specific sins be confessed, but certainly does not require it. Another important point is that pastors are sworn at their ordinations never to reveal the sins confessed to them. As one Lutheran pastor put it, “The pastor’s ear is a tomb. What goes in, never comes out.”

Conclusion

Rejoicing in the forgiveness of sins, we pray that God gives us the strength to resist temptation, and to live lives that glorify Him, seeking to please Him by what we do, in accordance with His holy and perfect will. And as we do, we always are aware of our sin and so we flee for refuge to His boundless mercy, seeking and imploring His forgiveness for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. Thank God for the gift of confession and absolution!

1. Words in italics are quotations from Luther’s *Small Catechism*.

2. C. F. W. Walther, *Pastoral Theology*, Chap. XVI.

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