

The Basics of Orthodoxy Class 102

St. Gregory of Nyssa Orthodox Church, Kingston, Ontario, Canada

Topic 6: Holy Confession and the Baptism of Tears

(The Faith, Special Study, p. 187)

Sins committed **after** Holy Baptism are **washed** away by the Grace of God through the **holy tears** shed in **Holy Confession**. It is a **return** to one's Baptism. It is a work of Grace.

“Baptism bestows new life in Christ, but it is up to us to live in accordance with that life.” (p. 187) In other words, the seed that was planted in Holy Baptism must grow up, mature, blossom and bear fruit.

“Baptism bestows the forgiveness of sins, but it is up to us to walk in the commandments of Christ.” (p. 187) The newly-Baptized person took his or her first “**baby steps**” as a new Christian united to Christ when the priest led him or her around the holy Baptismal font singing, “**As many as have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ.**” But those were only the first steps. Many more steps are supposed to follow, as the newly Baptized learns to walk with the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, and not wander off into sin again.

“Baptism bestows the robe of righteousness, but it is up to us to preserve that garment unspotted. **All of this is easier said than done**, however. As long as we live in this world, the devil, whom we have renounced and spat upon, will oppose our efforts. **We all fall and soil our baptismal garments**, but God in His infinite wisdom and mercy has provided for the renewal of the grace of Baptism in the “**Baptism of Tears**,” which is the **Mystery of Repentance.**” (p. 187)

Listen to the holy opinion of St. John Climacus, a 6th Century expert on repentance, and hear what he had to say on the topic. He stated this in his super famous book, which has been held in high esteem by all the Orthodox Christians over the centuries:

The tears that come after Baptism are greater than Baptism itself, though it may seem rash to say so. **Baptism washes off those evils** that were previously within us, whereas the sins committed after Baptism are washed away by tears. The Baptism received by us as children we have all defiled, but we **cleanses it anew with our tears.** If God in His love for mankind had not given us tears, those being saved would be few indeed and hard to find. (St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*).

“In the Mystery of Confession, our **Baptism is renewed as we are cleansed of the sins we commit each day**. The **power to forgive sins** was conferred upon the Church by our Lord after His Resurrection.” (*The Faith*, p. 187-188)

“As my Father hath sent Me, even so send I you. And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and saith unto them, ‘Receive ye the Holy Spirit: **Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained**’.” (John 20:21-23).

This doctrine of our Lord was taught by St. James Adelplos, in the Book of James, chapter 5:16. It was public confession, to “one another”, not alone by yourself, in your room. Moreover, this open confession was **required**, not optional. It is a Scriptural command that we must all obey in order to be forgiven, healed, and saved.

“**Confess your trespasses to one another**, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.” (James 5:16)

The Apostle John also taught this doctrine of our Lord, in 1 John 1:9, reassuring us of the forgiveness that will come.

“If we **confess our sins**, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

The Lord Jesus made this all very clear in His **Parable of the Prodigal Son**. This “son” ran away from home, from God, from the safety of the Church (the Father’s House”), but in his life of sin, he was terribly spiritually hungry and poor. Finally, he grew tired of his life of sin and decided to return, to turn around, to go back home to his father, and **confess** his faults, saying: “I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.”

¹⁷“But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, ¹⁹and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.”’

²⁰“And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had **compassion**, and ran and fell on his neck and **kissed** him. ²¹And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

²²“But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring out the **best robe** and put it on him, and put a **ring** on his hand and sandals on his feet. ²³And bring the **fatted calf** here and kill it, and let us **eat and be merry**; ²⁴for this my son

was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ And they began to be merry.

The sinful son turns his life around. He returns home. **He repents and confesses his sin**. The Father joyfully forgives...with much embracing and kissing. The “**best robe**” is the Baptismal Garment, the Presence of Christ, which is returned to the youth who previously had discarded it. The “**ring on his hand**” signifies the return to his place as a son with authority within his father’s mansion and estate. The “**fatted calf**” who was killed is a reference to the Body of Christ Who was **sacrificed** on the cross for us so that His blood will “**cleanse us from all sin**” (1 John 1:7). “Let us **eat and be merry**” refers to the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, which will be continued divinely in the Kingdom of Heaven forever, in the everlasting joyful Banquet of Immortality.

In the early era of the Church, **confession of sin was public**, in front of God and many men, but in order to reduce the temptation of gossip, soon afterwards, the act of Holy Confession became *limited to ONE clergyman* (the bishop, or his delegate—the priest) and to God. The ONE clergyman **represented** all the rest of the Church members, and thus fulfills the Scriptural command of St. James to “**confess your trespasses to one another**.” And the Church, in her wisdom, put the canonical restraint upon the clergyman, that if he ever would reveal a sin that he heard in confession, he would be **deposed**. So the priest is a “professional forgetter”. He hears, he prays for God to forgive the sinner, he pronounces the words of forgiveness, and then he forgets the sins.

“When, therefore, we come to Confession, we **come** not before a mere man, but **before our Lord Himself**, Who grants **forgiveness** of sins **through His Apostles and their successors**: [*the priest says to the penitent*] “Behold, my child, Christ standeth here invisibly receiving thy Confession. . . Behold His icon before us! I am but a witness bearing testimony before Him of all things that thou sayest unto me.” (*The Faith*, p. 188)

“**Frequent Confession** is a prerequisite for **frequent Communion**. We cannot approach the Holy Chalice and partake of the Body and Blood of Christ while our soul is infected with sin and our conscience accuses us. St. Paul warns us, ‘he that eateth and drinketh **unworthily**, **eateth and drinketh damnation** to himself, not discerning the Lord’s Body’ (1 Corinthians 11:29). St. John Chrysostom adds: (p. 188)

I would give up my own life rather than grant the reception of the Blood of the Lord unworthily: I would shed my own blood rather than wrongfully grant reception of Blood so awesome (*Homily 82 on Matthew*).

“It is important to note here, however, that in the Orthodox Church **sin is thought of primarily as a sickness**. The emphasis is on healing, rather than on meeting a legalistic requirement or eliminating our guilt feelings. We should, therefore, approach our father confessor as we would our family physician.” (*The Faith*, p. 188-189)

“When we go to Confession we must tell the priest of our specific sins, but we need not go into detail. We must **never** implicate or **blame** another person for our sins, nor may we try to find **excuses** for our actions. We must lay our sins before our spiritual physician clearly and without elaboration. If he needs more information in order to diagnose and treat our illness, he will ask for it.” (p.189)

“It goes without saying that we must always answer the priest fully and truthfully, hiding nothing, for it is **not** the priest whom we address, **but the Lord Himself**: [*the priest says to the penitent*] “If thou shalt conceal anything from me, thou shalt have the greater sin. Take heed, therefore, lest having **come to the Physician**, thou depart unhealed.” (p. 189)

“When we have told our spiritual doctor of our symptoms, he will make his diagnosis. He may prescribe a penance (*epitimia*). This is **not** a punishment. It is a **medical treatment designed to cure us of our spiritual ills**. We must obey the priest as we would our family doctor and, taking the medicine that he prescribes, receive healing for our souls.” (p. 189)

Holy Confession is multi-faceted:

- 1) It is **Obedience** to Holy Scripture, “confess your sins to one another,” James 5:16.
- 2) It is **Accountability** to both God and men (the priest hearing the confession represents the whole community of the Church).
- 3) It is **Reconciliation** of man to God, as the repenting Prodigal Son returned home and was reunited to his father and to his father’s house (i.e. to God and the Church).
- 4) It is the proper **Preparation to receive Holy Communion** (the Prodigal Son confessed his sins to his father *before* entering the house to eat the Banquet).
- 5) It is **Preparation for a godly Departure (Death)** to meet Christ upon one’s death.
- 6) It is the **Preparation** to stand before Christ the Judge **at Judgement Day** and make a good defense. Luke 8:17 “For nothing is secret that will not be revealed, nor anything hidden that will not be known and come to light.”

Remember: **We all sin as easily as we breathe**. So we must all learn to repent that easily too. If we that we say we have NO SIN, we are LIARS. Hypocrites. Pharisees.

1 John 1:8-10 “⁸**If we say that we have no sin**, we **deceive** ourselves, and **the truth is not in us**. ⁹**If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness**. ¹⁰If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.

Let us all say all the time: “O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a **SINNER**.”

“Great is the Mystery of **Baptism**, and great is the Mystery of **Repentance** [*Confession*], whereby **our Baptism is renewed** and the sins that beset us day by day are **overcome**: “If Thou, LORD, shouldst mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand? But **there is forgiveness with Thee** (Psalm 129[130]:3-4).” (*The Faith*, p. 189)

Scriptural foundations for Holy Confession:

1) Isaiah 1:18

“Come now, and let us reason together,” says the Lord, “Though your **sins** are like **scarlet**, they shall be as **white** as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool.

2) Psalm 32:5

I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,” and You forgave the iniquity of my sin.

3) James 5:16

Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.

4) 1 John 1:7-10

⁷But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.

5) John 20:21-23

²¹So Jesus said to them again, “Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” ²²And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

6) Matthew 18:19-20

¹⁹“Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. ²⁰For where **two or three are gathered together** in My name, **I am there** in the midst of them.”

7) Matthew 18:15-18

¹⁵Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that “by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.” ¹⁷And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. ¹⁸Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

8) Matthew 18:21-35

²¹Then Peter came to Him and said, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” ²²Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to **seventy times seven**. ²³Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants...[*the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant*]... ³²Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, ‘You wicked servant! **I forgave you all that debt** because you begged me. ³³Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?’ ³⁴And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. ³⁵“So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, **does not forgive his brother his trespasses**.”

9) Matthew 6:12

And **forgive us our debts**, as we **forgive our debtors**.

10) 1 Corinthians 11:26-32

²⁶For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes. ²⁷Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the Body and Blood of the Lord. ²⁸But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks **judgment** to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body. ³⁰For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep [*have died*]. ³¹For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. ³²But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world.