



Preparing Souls To Serve The Lord

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Reflecting on Confessions

By

Steve Atnip

“Confess your faults one to another, and pray for one another, that ye may be healed” (James 5:16 KJV).

The passage found in James 5:16 has played host to a number of differing interpretations over the years. Each of them boils down in some way to the idea that we must tell other saints all the sins in our lives. The “prayer partner” discipleship movement set up a system similar to Catholicism where the new convert, or mentored disciple, confessed his sins to his “mentoring” partner. Catholicism uses this passage to teach confession of sins to its priests. (Some have hinted that since we are all priests, we should all confess our sins to each other; though I am unaware of any place in the Old or New Testament where the priest’s office was to hear confessions of any and every sin that a person committed. Only our High Priest would hear those types of confessions.) A friend of mine from an earlier time uses this verse as grounds for standing at the Lord’s table each Sunday morning and confessing every sin in his life to the poor congregation which has since

dwindled to mainly his family. Some of the confessions he has given over the phone to me would make it very difficult to mentally center on the scene of our Lord’s body and blood, if given just before the Lord’s Supper. Others believe that this verse teaches a personal catharsis of the soul so that the spiritual (read psyche) portion of the saint may feel refreshed. Some feel that having someone to whom they may confide their deepest sins is a growth oriented process which the church lacks today. A Protestant friend of mine says that in his Protestant denomination, they are now emphasizing “accountability partners” when going online with the internet, based on James 5:16. Now, all of these concepts have one basic tenet in common: We are to confess all of our sins to other saints. Now, brethren, if this is the teaching of this passage, I want to be the first to obey it; however, allow me to point out that such random confession of sin is not what is under consideration in James

5:16

As one examines the words of James 5:16 we would center for a moment on the word for “faults.” The Greek word for “faults” is “paraptoma.” There are at least six words for sin in the New Testament, the most common being “hamartia.” In James 5:15, the word for “sins” is “hamartia,” while we find “paraptoma” in verse 16. Whatever else we may think about the meaning of James 5:16, James uses a different word in verse 15 for “sins” than the word he uses in verse 16 for “faults.” That is a significant point. If James had wanted us to confess sin in general, he would have used the word “hamartia,” but he did not. God purposely chose a different word to tell us what to confess to one another. But what might that difference be? Thankfully, we are given another passage where “hamartia” and “paraptoma” are used in relation to one another.

In Matthew 18:21 (KJV) the text reads “Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft

shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?" The word for "sin" in this passage is "hamartia," a generalized word for sin, in which one "misses the mark" with regard to how he is to treat his fellow man. There are many ways in which this is done, but the chief consideration in this passage is when one misses the mark in a personal offense: "sin against me." Now continue in this passage and notice that Jesus gives an illustrative example of two different men who owe differing amounts to another. The conclusion of the example is that the one who had been forgiven a personal debt by the king, should have likewise forgiven the one who personally owed him. Now notice the last statement given by Jesus: "So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses" (Mat 18:35 KJV). In this passage, the word for "trespasses" is "paraptoma," the same word used in James 5:16. The subject under consideration is Peter's question about a brother who may "sin against me." He may sin (hamartia) in any number of ways against me, and thus the use of "hamartia," but when such a sin is done against me, Jesus specifies that this sin of doing a personal offense against a brother is called a "paraptoma." Thus, a paraptoma is a situation in which a personal offense (of any kind of sin - hamartia) is committed against another. Thus Jesus himself defines for us the

definition of "paraptoma."

Setting the Lord's definition of "paraptoma" into James 5:16, we come to understand that the we are to confess to our brethren our personal trespasses against them. Whatever may have been our sin against a brother, when we have trespassed against him, we are to acknowledge such a trespass. We are not to pridefully refuse to admit our wrong done against him. And this action is to be reciprocal. He is likewise to confess the wrongs that he has perpetrated against me and others. Many a church squabble would die quickly if we obeyed the true command of James 5:16.

Thus, James 5:16 is not at all a general command to all saints everywhere to begin telling every sin that they have ever done, regardless of whether the hearer of the confession was personally affected. Such a situation would create bedlam in the church. But allowing the Lord's definition of "paraptoma" to define "faults," we realize that the command of James 5:16 is that those who have personally offended another should admit their personal offense and then prayers for one another should follow, showing that they are brethren in heart again, concerned with each other's welfare.

A final word is in order here about the needs of saints to find someone with whom to talk about their problems and sins. The fact that James 5:16 is not an appropriate passage for dealing with such problems on a general level does not mean that the Lord

has not made provision for helping saints with their problems. Three such provisions are noted from the scriptures:

(1) Talk to the Lord, himself, about your problems. The Hebrews writer states: "For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb 4:15-16 KJV).

(2) Talk to your elders: "Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation" (Heb 13:7 KJV). And again, "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you" (Heb 13:17 KJV). Godly elders are watching for your souls. When

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you have problems, go to them. They wish to help you.

(3) Younger ladies, talk to the older ladies when you have feminine problems dealing with children and home life. "The aged women likewise, that they be in behaviour as becometh holiness, not false accusers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things; That they may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children, To be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed" (Titus 2:3-5 KJV).

There are countless resources available to the saints for working through their problems, but the greatest resource of all is the Lord who loves us and died for us, who understands and will provide help to us in our time of need. But beware of confessing your problems to every member. Not only is such random confession not the teaching of James 5:16, such confession is potentially highly deleterious to both the life of the church and the life of the one doing the confessing.

A common objection often raised against the foregoing line of reasoning is that there is a variant in the text. Instead of "paraptoma," some early manuscripts have "hamartia." Thus, the argument is made that instead of only personal faults being the subject under consideration in James 5:16, the command is to confess all sins openly or privately to one another. One consideration here is that if the manuscript evidence

is at best ambiguous, it would certainly not behoove us to begin a practice based on questionable manuscript evidence, especially one so rife with such potential problems; and I know no other passage anywhere which plainly teaches such a practice of open or private confession of all sins by all members of the body. While there are other plain passages which certainly teach confession of sin to God (Psalm 51:3-4), in the presence of others already aware of another's sin (2 Samuel 12:13) and to an offended brother (1 Samuel 26:21), none teach the open confession of all sins to another.

However, let us for a moment grant the possibility of "hamartia" in James 5:16 (and the lack of "paraptoma" in the passage in Matthew 18:35, where there is again manuscript variation). Here are two observations which might yet help us to see that this passage ought still to be limited in its scope.

First, let us notice the earlier portion of Matthew 18 as it addresses a problem between two brethren. The offended brother is told to go and tell his problem between him and the offending brother "alone" (Matthew 18:15, no manuscript variations). Why tell him "alone?" If the offending brother does not repent, his sin will be broadcast over the whole church (verse 17). And if James 5:16 refers to all sins, even if he does repent, the offending brother still must confess it to everybody anyway. So, why tell it to him "alone" when the whole thing is

going to be confessed openly before others whether he repents or not?

Second, we have among our distant acquaintances an elder's wife who took a "hankering" after another elder. The elder of her desire evidently felt the same toward her. Now, should the first elder's wife openly confess her sinful lusts before the church, and the lustful elder likewise confess his sinful thoughts publicly? Now someone may respond, "Well, I think we have to use our common sense in these matters." I totally agree. But in making this statement, have we not limited the scope of "hamartia" in this passage? (For those who think that this kind of confession ought to go on in the assembly, or in private, we simply respond that now the both of them would know the feelings of the other, and that opens up a worse can of worms. As a matter of fact, these feelings were later expressed in private, and adultery ensued.) The idea of open confession of all sins would exacerbate many such problems, whereas the idea of confessing personal transgressions in which I actually act against a person (not simply think sinfully about him or her) would help to alleviate many church quarrels and difficulties.



Gene Burgett Report

Let me begin by keeping before our readers my two-fold purpose as the Public Relations Director for the Florida School of Preaching. As I travel to various places I am seeking two things. First, I am looking for men who desire to

preach the gospel. Paul began his discussion regarding the qualifications of elders by asserting that the first thing a man must have is a desire for the office (1 Tim. 3:1). The same is true regarding preachers. If a man desires to preach the gospel, then my hope is to get him started at the Florida School of Preaching where he can get training to help him fulfill that desire. The second matter I seek are the funds necessary for the school to operate. Like any concern, training preachers requires money. Also, like any other concern, the costs continue to escalate. Thus it necessary to continually put our cause before the brotherhood. We appreciate those who have faithfully supported us through the years. We hope you will continue to support our work, and, if possible, increase that support. Any congregations or individuals looking for a good work to support, please give us a call.

Since the last issue of the

Harvester appeared I have spoken at several congregations and events. February 20th I preached for the Parkway church of Christ in Savannah, Georgia. Once every month one of our students preaches at Parkway, but circumstances made it possible for me to be there in February. They are a very friendly congregation and have always been quite gracious whenever I have had an opportunity to be with them.

The 39th Avenue church of Christ had a gospel meeting beginning the last week of February. I spoke three times on Sunday, February 27th. Also, one of our graduates, Ryan Roark, spoke the following night. The brethren at 39th Avenue are long-time supporters of the Florida School of Preaching. I spoke with their preacher, Bob Carey, after the meeting was completed. He said he felt it was the best meeting held at 39th Avenue during his tenure as preacher. They are to be

commended for the faithful stand for truth they have made through the years.

March 12th I spoke to a group of men and their daughters at a Father-Daughter Retreat. With my own daughter nearing the end of her second year of college, I realize the urgency of parents training their children. The opportunity for training is over sooner than one expects.

Finally, I visited with the church at Lake Butler, Florida on March 13th. Their preacher, Scott Fisher, is young and enthusiastic. He also directed the Father-Daughter Retreat and had extended to me the opportunity to speak the previous day.

My schedule is rapidly filling. I encourage any congregations or individuals who would like me to come and speak with them about the Florida School of Preaching to call me as soon as possible.

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