

**Altavista Presbyterian Church
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“Speaking with God:
Prayers of Confession”
I Corinthians 15:1-11
Psalm 6:1-10**

**Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 3, 2019**

I Corinthians 15:1-11

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

Psalm 6

To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments; according to The Sheminith. A Psalm of David.

O Lord, rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline me in your wrath. Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing; heal me, O Lord, for my bones are troubled. My soul also is greatly troubled. But you, O Lord—how long?

Turn, O Lord, deliver my life; save me for the sake of your steadfast love. For in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who will give you praise?

I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping. My eye wastes away because of grief; it grows weak because of all my foes.

Depart from me, all you workers of evil, for the Lord has heard the sound of my weeping. The Lord has heard my plea; the Lord accepts my prayer. All my enemies shall be ashamed and greatly troubled; they shall turn back and be put to shame in a moment.

“Speaking with God: Prayers of Confession”

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Every Sunday when we gather for worship, we always include prayers. We are commanded to pray by God, by Christ, by the Apostles, and by doctrine. Prayer often takes on many forms. Some may stand with arms lifted upward. Some may kneel with head in hand. Others may full-on prostrate, lying flat on the floor. Still others may simply sit with eyes closed and heart open. Howsoever you pray, the fact remains, we do pray. But just as prayerful postures differ, so do the words and emotions of prayer.

When we pray, we are speaking to God. We speak to God for many different reasons. Sometimes we are giving thanks to Him for something in life. Sometimes we are begging for forgiveness when we do something wrong. Sometimes we are frustrated and confused with the way things are going. Sometimes we are moved to pray for someone else. The many different styles of prayer are modeled for us in Scripture. Believe it or not, the Psalms are prayers that the Israelites lifted up to God in song. We should not be surprised, then, that there are many genres of Psalms. This month, we will journey through the Psalms as models for our own personal and corporate prayers.

Hopefully you've noticed that every one of our Lord's Day worship services begins with a call to worship and immediately moves into a call to and prayer of confession. Have you ever considered why? I've had a number of conversations with people who come from traditions that have altar calls. These conversations are usually started when I reveal that most Presbyterians do not do altar calls. My interlocutors are oftentimes shocked at that. These denominations have in their liturgy an invitation for rededication or conversion, usually at the end of the service. The theology behind that suggests a person should be moved by the Spirit through the music and preaching of the Word to a point of rededication or conversion.

While that type of altar call is few and far between in Presbyterian circles, we are not without such an element of worship. Reformed theology, especially Calvinism, holds that a person cannot even approach the throne of God nor hear his blessed Word without first seeking forgiveness from him. Indeed, without first being opened by God, a person cannot begin to discern his Scripture. You see, our "altar call" is the prayer of confession. This is the moment when Presbyterians bring themselves under the yoke of God in humility and forgiveness so that they may receive his Word and respond thereafter.

Because God is holy, and we are not, we must have a right attitude when we interact with him. As we'll see in this series, that does not mean we can't be emotional with God, in fact, we'll hopefully come to see that God wants us to bear our emotions to him. But we are still to come before our righteous God knowing that we bear unrighteousness. We are sinful creatures. The most faithful Christian you can ever imagine can and does sin. What distinguishes the Christian from the non-believer is that when the Christian sins, she recognizes her transgression, and turns to her Holy God in repentance. We see this beautifully written out in several of the penitential Psalms, the Sixth Psalm included.

The Geneva Bible, the first English study Bible, printed in 1560, summarizes the Sixth Psalm thusly: "When David by his sins had provoked God's wrath, and now felt not only [God's] hand against him, but also conceived the horrors of death everlasting, he desireth forgiveness." David, while God's anointed king over Israel, was nevertheless an imperfect being. He sinned before God, and more often than he should. If God's own anointed can sin, how much more are we capable and culpable for our sins? Indeed, since even David sins, we are the more blessed, because we have his words to help guide us in our penitence.

The Sixth Psalm teaches us how to pray a prayer of confession. The first step is to recognize God's holiness. Without a right understand of who God is, there's no way that we could ever understand who we are in relation to him. The whole of the Christian life—nay, the whole of human life—is about our relationship with God. In this Psalm, David, upon remembering God's profoundness and

greatness, recognizes how little he is before God. “Rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline me in your wrath.” We had a good discussion in Bible Study this week about what it means to fear God. The Book of Ecclesiastes echoes the rest of Scripture when it suggests that a fear of the Lord is not just reverence, but also apprehension. We see this in our Psalm. Not only should we have a reverential fear of God, but true and righteous fear includes a level of caution when we are in the presence of the Almighty.

As David realized, God has the power—and the right—to rebuke us in his anger and discipline us in his wrath. Church, this should scare us. God’s righteous anger and holy wrath is not something we should scoff at or ignore. Indeed, the fear of upsetting God should motivate us to examine our thoughts and deeds. And when we find that we are truly in rebellion to God, we must quickly, as David did, move to remorse: “Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing; heal me, O Lord, for my bones are troubled.” When we have a right understanding of our relationship with God, then we rightly understand that he is Creator and we are creature, and in our sin we rebel against him. But we must not forget that we are created in God’s image. The human race is special to God. And so we move from, first, recognizing God’s holiness to, then, remembering his mercy.

“Turn, O Lord, deliver my life;” begs King David, “save me for the sake of your steadfast love.” Because of who God is, because he is perfect, pure, unchanging, and immovable, we can fully trust in his steadfast love. Some churches and pastors have a hard time accepting the immutability of God. They think that if God is unchanging and unmoved, then he is impersonal and aloof. The problem with that is those are postmodern ideals. If God were mutable, able to change or, better put, able to contradict himself, then we couldn’t trust him. When you place your confidences in someone, and then they go behind your back and betray your trust, the wise thing to do is never trust them again. If God were mutable, in the sense that he could redact his love or backstep on a contract, then we couldn’t trust him. You see, it’s a good thing that God is unchanging. The immutability of God is what leads to his steadfast love. And so we, like the psalmist, can pray to God, asking that he save us for the sake of *his* steadfast love.

If we were to say in our prayer of confession that God should save us on our own merits, that would hold no water. Since God is without sin, we know that we can trust on his steadfastness. Likewise, because of our individual and collective sins, we are incapable of being steadfast. Notice I said individual *and* collective sins. Presbyterians in particular, and most Christians in general, are clear that we are not only culpable for our individual sins, but, to a lesser degree—though still not insignificant extent—we are also culpable for the collective sins of the human race. If this were not so, then Christ, the Second Adam, would never have needed to come after the first Adam’s transgression. Adam’s sin is our sin. The church, as a collection of human beings, can and does sin as a corporate entity. Too often the church remains silent when it should speak, and speaks when it should listen.

Later in our service we will partake of the Lord’s Supper. Many of my colleagues in ministry will downplay a vital aspect of Communion, and that is our need of confession before we can share in Christ’s body. The Apostle Paul, in the eleventh chapter of First Corinthians, has a lengthy treatise concerning Communion. The climax of which is in verse twenty-seven, where he writes, “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord.” My friends, when we gather around the Lord’s

table, we must do so with a right heart. It doesn't mean we have to be perfect, but we do need to recognize our imperfections. We know that we fall short of Christ's command to be perfect as the Father in heaven is perfect. We must come before the Lord with contrite hearts, for as David says elsewhere, a broken and contrite heart will not be turned away by God. But the heart that is prideful and revels in its sin, that person is despised by God.

This is why the third and final step of confession is confronting and denying iniquity. True prayers of confession are about true changes. The Greek word often translated as repentance is *metanoia*, literally a "change of mind." There's a difference between changing your mind over wanting ice cream or wanting cookies and a deep-seated turning, which Paul describes as putting to death the old way of living. We can't just confess our sins verbally, but then continue to revel in them. There must be a true change in heart, mind, and body. Don't confuse this with the fact that we will sin. You and I will make mistakes. What I'm talking about here is the wanton desire to continue in iniquity. A love for sinning. This is different from "we will sin." As James says, friendship with the world is enmity with God. We cannot have true confession and we cannot receive true forgiveness if we desire to remain friends with iniquity. Or as Jesus says in Revelation 3:16, "because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth."

This concerted effort to turn away from wickedness is a necessary aspect of confession. This is why David says in verses eight and nine, "Depart from me, all you workers of evil, for the Lord has heard the sound of my weeping. The Lord has heard my plea; the Lord accepts my prayer." There are things God hates in this world, things that he finds abominable. And these are things that the Christian must strive against. The chief among these is pride. From pride stems all other forms of unrighteousness. Humility ought to be deeply rooted in us. This is the very reason why prayers of confession start out with recognizing who God is. The thread running through all of our conversations with God should be this thread of humility. My prayer for all us, myself certainly included, is that we may find that humility, so that we may then commune with God in confession and in truth. And when we are in communion with God, we can trust that he hears our pleas and accepts our prayers.

Let us pray. Everlasting Father, you are sure and unchanging, perfect and free from any stains. In your righteousness you judge us. Lord, have mercy on us. Forgive our sins. Forgive us for doing things we ought not and leaving things undone that we should change. We know that as our Father you hear the petitions of your children. As the Good Shepherd you hear the cries of your sheep. Accept our brokenness and make us new. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.