

1. REFERENCES

The Forgotten Medicine; The Mystery of Repentance: *Archimandrite Seraphim Aleksiev*

2. SERVANT BACKGROUND MATERIAL / READING

- This lesson is taken from the above reference which is a very short well written book on repentance and confession, and it would be advisable if all the servants could read this book before the lesson for themselves and for the lesson

3. MEMORY VERSE

And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." (John 20:22-23)

4. MAIN POINTS

- What is sin, and why we need confession?
- What is Confession?
- Some popular objections to confession, and how to answer such questions!
- Some guidelines on how to confess before during and after confession!
- The consequences of a true confession
- Closing questions

5. SPIRITUAL PREPARATION FOR THE SERVANT(S)

- All servants in the class should be actively repenting daily, and be practising confession on a regular basis, or it would be pointless to try to convince the kids of its value.
- It would also be advisable to read the reference above just to get some issues clear in the mind of the servant, so they would be equipped to answer any questions thrown at them!

6. ACTIVITY

- Start the lesson with the analogy given to point out the effect sin has on the heart, and thus why we need confession.
- It may be useful to get the class to individually write down their confessions, or to at least write up a template of subheadings they could fill in later before entering into confession, so as to not forget anything, and to get them used to a good structure of how to confess.
- The servant could also organise a session with Abouna, (maybe on Sunday afternoon, or maybe on a night in the week), where the class could go and have confession.

7. INTRODUCTION

- Whilst some kids confess regularly, the majority of the kids will be found to confess very irregularly if at all.
- The aim of this lesson is to imprint on the classes mind the value of confession, and just how essential it is for each individual person.

- Some kids don't go to confession simply because they put no value on it and therefore forget to go at all.
- Other kids may have specific issues with the idea of confession. This lesson will deal with some frequently asked questions (so hopefully this will dispel any issues). If the issues are different to the ones addressed in this lesson, the servant should do the best they can to dispel them on their own.

8. THE LESSON

The Rich Traveller:

- Once a rich traveller travelled to a beautiful countryside. He desired to find shelter at some-one's house, and to the person he sheltered with he would bestow some of his great riches.
- The rich man found a house that was beautiful to look upon and when he knocked on the door to lodge there he found the owner of the house very welcoming indeed. But as he entered the house he realised that the pig pen was situated inside the house with the residents of the house. The rich man found the stench unbearable and immediately left the house.
- He then went to the next house and found the owner to be very cruel, as he had posted dogs at the gate to not allow anyone into the house.
- The 3rd house again welcomed him but he found it completely out of order and he found waste piled up everywhere.
- By the time he got to the fourth house he was so tired he was going to stay there regardless. So he went in and even went into the bed to sleep, but as he was sleeping he found bugs and parasites all over him, and was thus forced to leave.
- Finally he found a small simple home that was well ordered and maintained by a family, that when he met them they met him with smiles, happiness and a well ordered house. Here the rich man lodges and left his great gift.
- The houses are likened to our hearts. The first house had the unbearable spiritual stench of selfishness, debauchery and malice due to it being the home of the demons (pigs). The second house simply was not interested in inviting god in his heart and put up barriers for his entry. The 3rd house felt they wanted the lord in their heart, but through neglect had left sins (both small and large) to accumulate to the point where his heart was filthy. The fourth house was filled the parasites of sin.

Sin

St. Augustine : "Thou madest us for thyself, and our heart is restless until it repose in thee" (Confessions)

- As the quote above alludes to, as humans we are designed for God to dwell in us and to become one with God. Thus the thing in the world that is most evil is anything that disallows us to be what we were designed to be. This is sin.
- Often we think of worldly things (i.e. poverty, disease, tragedies, death) as the evil things of this world. But this is far and away not the case. In fact these things are often things that make us closer to God, which is the ultimate good. We even need death to pass from this life to a life with God.
- But sin is the only thing that separates us from God. It destroys both our body and our soul. It is due to sin that there is discord, fighting and disagreement

with our neighbours, family and friends. We destroy our bodies via the sins of greed, lust, pride etc... Sometimes we wonder why life is so hard and the only conclusion we come to is that sin has corrupted this world and thus it is hard for us.

- According to 1 John 3:4 “*Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness*”. So sin is simply a transgression of God’s law. And like our very own legal system when we break the law we are punished. And again like our legal system this punishment is designed for rehabilitation. But when we insist on breaking the law we are sentenced to death or prison. God has no choice but to then separate himself from us if our hearts are filthy like in the story given above.
- But we have one saving grace:
The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29)
For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16)
- All the righteous acts in the world have not the power to take away even one sin. Only Gods grace can take away sin.

The Forgotten Medicine

- Sin is like a disease. As such we can only be cured by going to the doctor and being treated. God (as noted above) is the only doctor for such a disease.
- Like going to the doctor, the doctor can only do so much for you, then sends you away to take your medication. Unless a patient willingly takes his medication he will not be healed. Similarly God has one prerequisite to being healed (forgiven) from sin. Repentance and confession.
- God thus set up a system for us to receive this healing. Confession. To mediate the transaction. Who other than the apostles received the Holy Spirit from Christ himself and again on the day of Pentecost.

And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” (John 20:22-23)

- Immediately after he gave them the Holy Spirit, the next thing he told them was that they now had the power to forgive or to retain sins.
Assuredly, 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. (Matt 18:18)
- Another proof of God instating such a system on earth was when Jesus himself sent the lepers to the priest to be cleansed from their leprosy (leprosy is often likened to sin (we are spiritual lepers)) (Luke 17:14)
- So if a confession is adequately detailed, frank, sincere and the priest is convinced of this sincerity than that sin will be remitted on earth and in heaven.
- Isn’t it incredible how such an enormous thing as sin and such an enormous consequence as death can be avoided by so simple a gesture!!!!
- Some indeed think it is too simple, for example Naaman who thought it too simple to be cleansed from leprosy simply by washing in the Jordan, at the word of Elisha, and by scoffing at it he almost lost the blessing of being cleansed. (2 Kings 5)

- God can choose to forgive us and heal us in any way he chooses, and if that way is simple it is as he wishes!

Objections to Confession

a) I am so sinful! Can God forgive my sins?

- How could we not be forgiven when the power of repentance, confession and forgiveness is based on the power of God? Is not God's power limitless?
- If forgiveness was based on us and our weakness indeed this would be a rational fear, but since it is not this is not a real fear!
- John Chrysostom likens it to a furnace cleansing a piece of metal (it matters not how impure the metal is to begin with the metal comes out pure) or to medicine curing a disease.
- When we repent God wipes the sin away as though we had never sinned, so we are fresh everytime we exit confession.

b) I don't need it! I have no special sins!

- This is like spending a long time in a room with a foul stench. Eventually our noses adjust and we no longer realise that the room smells. An outsider coming in however cringes upon entering the room.
- *If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.* (1 John 1: 8-10)
- If we fall into this trap we must immediately pray that god reveal our sins to us as this is a vice sent from the devil to hinder us from repenting.
- This trap is often when we commit a lot of seemingly small sins that pile up until eventually our heart is full of dirt (like the 3rd house in the initial analogy).

c) Why should I confess when I know I'm going to sin again tomorrow?

- Do we not clean our hands every-time we dirty them? Or do we (or our mothers) not make our beds and clean our rooms every morning?
- If we don't clean up after every time we dirty ourselves we will live in filth. This is the same with the spiritual life.
- We must enter confession honestly hoping and trying to never commit the same sins again, and one day hoping that this in fact will come true.
- Probability tells us that if we are constantly picking ourselves up from sin that God will come at a time when we are picked up as opposed to on the ground.
- A young monk once went to his spiritual father and said to him "Father I fell". His spiritual father simply replied "get up!". The young monk, a bit disappointed with this response, replied "I did but I fell again". The learned monk again replied "get up again". A little frustrated the young monk asked "till when?" and the aged monk answered "till you die".
- Confession and repentance is a lifelong battle.

d) I confess before God! Why do I need a priest?

- This is God's system as discussed earlier. It is good for us to confess before God but our sins will not be forgiven unless we confess to a priest. This is similar to the fact that we must partake of communion to reap the rewards thereof not simply look upon a mass.
- We cannot overlook the practical benefit of confessing before a priest. The first such benefit is the spiritual words of wisdom of someone who is generally further along the spiritual path than we ourselves. The second benefit is that it is shameful to mention our sins over and over again to the same priest face to face. If we only confess before God it would become too easy for most of us.
- It is important to note that even if the priest we confess with is a sinner this does not take away from the sacrament of confession. It is like the sun, are the rays dirtied when the rays hit the mud?

e) I go only for the priest only to pray absolution on me!

- This is a waste of time and an abuse of the system God has put in place for us. It is not designed for unrepented or hidden sins.
- If this happens and the sin remains, and the person continues to partake of Holy Communion this is a very dangerous game!
Therefore 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. (1 Cor 11:27)
- This is also like the lie Ananias and Sapphira told the Holy Spirit in Acts (Acts 5: 1-11)
- We will feel no relief from our sins unless we repent and confess them in the proper way set out.

Rules for a Saving Confession

a) What should I do before confession?

- If we look at the crucifixion and betrayal of Christ we see 2 characters in desperate need of confession, Peter and Judas. Peter regained his dignity, whilst Judas is condemned forever.
- If we read Mat 27: 3-6
*Then Judas, His betrayer, seeing that He had been condemned, was remorseful and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood."
And they said, "What is that to us? You see to it!"
Then he threw down the pieces of silver in the temple and departed, and went and hanged himself.*
- We could then say that Judas confessed his sin, returned what he gained for the sin and even was remorseful for the sin. But we cannot say that Judas enters God's grace because he despaired and killed himself. He did not lead the life worthy of forgiveness. We must know God's grace and believe in it that it can save us. This was Judas' fundamental mistake.
- If we despair we are lost and the Devil has triumphed.
- Peter on the other hand left immediately. Wept bitterly and repented and lived a life worthy of Christ's grace.

- First thing we must do before confession is believe in Christ and his grace.
- We should also have some quiet time before confession to reflect on our sins (write them down if we must to not forget anything), and pray before confession, repenting sincerely.
- Go through the 10 commandments and apply them to ourselves to ensure we did not unwittingly forget to mention a sin.

b) What should we do when we are with Abouna?

1. Remember we are in the clinic of the greatest physician: go with respect and trembling remembering always that it is God who is present in confession.
2. No false fear: Socrates once saw a young man come out of the house of a harlot. Seeing Socrates the young man went back into the house out of shame. Socrates cried out “Oh young man, it is not so shameful to come out of such a house, it is shameful to remain in such a house”. Don’t be ashamed of the sin not the fact that you are confessing it. The confession is something to be proud of.
3. Don’t seek excuses for our sins: we will lose the repentant mood if we do this.
4. Consciously hide nothing: it comprises of 2 sins. The sin itself and the act of hiding the sin. St Basil says “the hidden sin is the incurable sickness of the soul”. How can it be healed when it is not confessed?
5. Give no general terms: either in an attempt to hide the sin, out of timidity or out of a lack of experience. There is no benefit in this.
6. Briefly and accurately tell the sin: the priest is busy. And sometimes we do this to take away from the sin by confusion in the story. God cannot be fooled
7. Never tell of other people’s sins: this is an extra sin on us and is of no benefit to our sins.
8. Don’t boast in confession: this is a terrible sin of pride, and goes no way in remitting our already existing sins.
9. Don’t blame others. Only blame ourselves: this is what Adam and Eve did. Who knows what the outcome of their sin would have been had they repented and confessed rather than putting blame on others.
10. Have a firm intention not to sin anymore: don’t confess just to have communion or to just sin again.

c) What should we do when we leave confession?

- Make sure to take the medication the doctor has given you (any spiritual exercise that abouna has given us, or advice he has given us make sure to complete)
- Forgive anyone we have a problem with
- Return anything that does not belong to you. If we sin against God he can forgive us. But if we sin against man then we must seek forgiveness from the one we sinned against.

9. CONCLUSION

The consequences of a true confession are joy in our soul and joy in heaven (like in Luke 15 in the parable of the lost son). The following are some stories about the consequences of a true confession.

1. A Bishop was once giving communion. This priest had the spiritual gift of being able to see the soul of a person reflected on their face, via how bright their face was. There were these 2 women who were part of his parish whom he knew did not live celibate lives. Thus, when these two women came along for confession the Bishop expected to see darkness all over their faces, but instead these 2 women were extremely bright indeed. They shone even brighter after they had communion. He was so amazed that an angel appeared to him and explained to him that these women had in fact repented and that the sin was taken away completely.
2. A man once died and the angels were carrying his soul up to heaven. At the base of the road all the demons were gathered complaining: "Why are you taking this soul away from us? Do you not know that he was guilty of lewdness, robbery and avarice? He is our!" The angels then responded that "anyone who is repented and confesses their sins will receive pardon from God. This man confessed his sins on his death bed. Only those that die without repenting will be sent to eternal torment with you!"
3. A parish priest once fell ill, to the point of death. Some demons came to the end of his bed ready to take his soul, in their hands having a book with all this priest's sins. Another priest came to take his confession just before he died. At this time also there were three angels present attempting to argue for his soul but could not due to the contents of the demons book. The dying man seeing the demons book in front of him, and feeling extremely remorseful admitted and confessed each one individually. One by one he noticed that the ones he was saying were being wiped away. As such the angels got to take this priest's soul and the devils were left empty handed.