

Prayers of Forgiveness

“Lord, Have Mercy on Me a Sinner”

This prayer is particularly important for those with a Level 4 purpose in life or moving concertedly toward it, because Level 4 (transcendent/spiritual) individuals can suffer when their relationship with God is disturbed by sin. I will speak about this spontaneous prayer from the vantage point of the Christian tradition, but it can be used with slightly different interpretations in other non-Christian spiritual traditions (see Volume II, Chapters 1 and 2). For the moment, suffice it to say that for Jesus, sin is equivalent to “unlove” – attitudes and behaviors that undermine love – “the unity with other human beings whereby doing the good for them is just as easy, if not easier, than doing the good for ourselves.”¹ Jesus describes these attitudes and behaviors quite thoroughly in Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5-7) and Luke’s Sermon on the Plain (Lk. 6: 17-49). When we engage in such behaviors, we not only cause harm to others, but also to ourselves, for they can pull us into spiritual darkness with its concomitant feelings of alienation from self, God, and the human community. This can be deeply painful on many levels.

As by now may be clear, this pain does not come from *God* withdrawing from us or punishing us in anger or disgust, but from *us* entering into a condition or situation which obscures and interferes with *our* ability to relate to Him. Our desire to be with Him, act on His behalf, and draw closer to Him gradually diminishes – and soon we find ourselves feeling quite alone and empty. Though God has not left us, we cannot sense His loving presence through the darkness surrounding us. When the feelings of alienation and loneliness become acute enough, Level 4 people are inclined to turn to Him like Peter sinking into the water – “Lord, save me!” (Mt. 14: 29-30). This plea for help is the perfect context for repentance and prayers of forgiveness.

Before moving to these prayers, it may prove helpful to give a shorthand discussion of Jesus’ teaching on sin (unlove) in the Sermon on the Mount. This can be accomplished by making recourse to the medieval synthesis of His Sermon -- the 7 Deadly Sins. This synthesis is an excellent way to check our spiritual health because it is concerned with both interior attitudes and behaviors. Since I will be writing another book on this matter,² I will here only list the sins – gluttony/drunkenness, lust/infidelity, sloth, greed, anger, envy, and pride. Much has been written about these sins and the darkness, alienation, emptiness, loneliness, self-destructiveness, and harm to others they cause. For the moment, I will depend on the reader’s intuitive grasp of these sins as well as their capacity to undermine love, other people, and our relationship with God.

Let us return to the cry of Peter when he realized he was in trouble – “Lord, save me!” The moment he utters this plea, Jesus *immediately* extends His hand to Him and catches him. God helps us in just the same way – immediately. When we begin to sense His loving presence breaking through *our* darkness, we will want to move to a prayer of repentance – which is a two-fold prayer – a prayer of *regret* for allowing ourselves to move away from the Lord of light and

¹ The term “good” here is meant in the sense of Level 3 and 4 – contributive and transcendent good. It may also include some Level 1 and Level 2 goods – such as material goods, sensorial pleasures, status, and self-esteem consistent with love and faith. There are other Level 1 and 2 “goods” that may not be consistent with love and faith – these are not included in the idea of “good” given in the definition of love.

² The book is entitled *Called out of Darkness: Contending with Evil through Virtue and Prayer* (Ignatius 2016-2017). This section is by no means an exhaustive treatment of that book, but only a method of prayer to help with reconciliation and spiritual healing.

love – and a prayer of *resolve* to try our best to stay on the path to love – that is, to temper our egocentric, domineering, and self-idolatrous desires so that we will not undermine love for others and God.

With respect to the prayer of regret, my favorite is the one expressed by the tax collector at the back of the Temple – “God, have mercy on me, a sinner” (Lk. 18:13). It should be remembered that tax collectors were considered egregious sinners in First Century Judaism, and so he had much for which to be sorry. Yet the humility and sincerity of his request – which expressed his need for God and his desire to be with Him – was sufficient for Jesus to declare, “I tell you, ‘this man went home justified before God’” (Lk. 18:14). Recall that justification before God means readiness for salvation. For Jesus then, the tax collector’s sincere prayer of need and regret opened the door to salvation and heaven. I take his declaration to be absolutely true – and when I find myself wondering off the path of light into the darkness, crying out like Peter – “Lord, save me!” – I say immediately, “God have mercy on me, for I am a sinner.” My dread of the darkness and emptiness in which I find myself produces a heightened awareness of my need to be saved from drowning by Jesus, and so my prayer of regret is filled with sincerity – I *do* regret moving away from Him – and I *do* want His mercy with all my heart – so that I too may “go home justified” – restored to the light and love of Jesus – the light and love of sanity and salvation.

My prayer of resolve follows quite naturally – “Lord, I will *try* with all my heart not to go back to the road to darkness.” I cannot promise the Lord that I will succeed in my resolve because I feel like the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane – “The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak” (Mt. 26:41). Nevertheless my resolve is sincere. I trust that my imperfect resolve and my likely imperfect “follow-through” will be acceptable to the Lord – for I am given hope by His acceptance of Peter after three denials. Recall that Peter promised that he would never deny Jesus – “Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will.... Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you” (Mt. 26, 33, 35). No doubt Peter’s resolve was completely sincere, but he failed in that resolve – three times. He bitterly regretted his weakness, but trusted that the Lord would accept him again. He demonstrated this by diving into the water to greet Him when He appeared after His resurrection (Jn 21:7). Jesus not only accepts Peter’s regret and contrition, He also commissions him as leader of the Church (Jn. 21: 15-17). I cannot help but think that the Lord will treat me in exactly the same way. If my prayer of resolve is sincere, but my follow-through is less than perfect, He will take me back – if I sincerely ask Him -- again and again.

St. Paul acknowledges this same weakness of the “flesh,” but does not give up – trusting that the Lord’s unconditional saving love will bring him to where he cannot bring himself – to his eternal salvation in Christ Jesus, his Lord:

We know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin. I do not understand my own action. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. So then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me.

... Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Rom. 7: 14-20, 24-25).³

St. Paul clearly experiences a bifurcation within himself – a spirit that is willing but flesh that is weak (Jesus’ perception of the apostles’ behavior in the Garden of Gethsemane). St. Paul believes that his true intention is to follow the law and teaching of Jesus, but he experiences base urges within himself that drag him away from it. His higher self wants to follow the law and Jesus, but the base urges within his flesh block his way. He is clearly frustrated by these base desires, exclaiming, “Wretched man that I am!” Nevertheless, he does not consider these base urges to be his *true* self, and so he does not give up, but rather asks, “Who will deliver me from this body of death?” At this point he turns to Jesus his Lord, *confidently* aware that Jesus will bring him to where he cannot bring himself – to complete spiritual freedom – the capacity to *do* fully what he *wants* to do in his spirit – to become his true self.

We must have the same confidence of Peter and Paul in the forgiving, redeeming, and healing love of Jesus, otherwise, we will not be able to bridge the gulf between our willing spirits (our true selves) and the weakness of our flesh. Without this confident trust in the love of Jesus, we will not be able to reach true spiritual freedom – the capacity to *do* what we truly *want* to do – to follow Jesus in virtue and love. Let us then say with the confidence of Saints Peter and Paul, “Lord, save me,” and know that Jesus *will* pull us out of our turbulent waters, deliver us from “our body of death,” and bring us to our true selves in His heavenly kingdom.

My prayers for forgiveness do not end here. When I was in the novitiate, I doubted the sincerity of my prayers of regret. I would harbor little thoughts in my mind like, “I can’t hide my insincerity and ulterior motives from God -- He knows everything – and I know I’m harboring all kinds of insincerity and ulterior motives somewhere down there, and therefore, I’m still in trouble.” When my novice master asked me, “What’s troubling you?” I told him the whole matter. He looked up at me and said, “I detect a closet Pelagian⁴-- *you* don’t have to be perfectly sincere -- I don’t think anybody can be. *God’s unconditional* love makes up for whatever insincerity and ulterior motives that lurk in the depths of our hearts.” I thought to myself, “Whew – that’s a relief!” He went on to explain that if we regret our sin because it has caused separation from the God who loves us, God accepts it – unconditionally -- even if we cannot be perfectly sincere or devoid of ulterior motives. So He suggested that after saying my tax collector’s prayer of regret and my prayer of resolve to stay out of the darkness, that I add the prayer, “Lord, I accept your forgiveness.”

I asked him if such a prayer might be presumptuous, to which he responded, “We have to be presumptuous about accepting God’s unconditional love – if presumptuous means being overly confident in *God’s* love.” I thought to myself, “Well that makes sense – if God’s love is really *unconditional*, then I *should* be able to be not only confident in it, but ‘*overly* confident’ and even ‘*absolutely* confident’ in it.” He went on to explain that we should have the same confidence in Jesus’ Father as we had in our own parents when we were *children* – after all, Jesus taught us to address His Father with a childlike name, trust, and appeal – “*Abba*.”

³ I discussed this passage thoroughly in the sequel to this quartet – *Called out of Darkness: Contending with Evil through Virtue and Prayer* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, projected 2016-2017).

⁴ Pelagianism in the modern interpretation holds that human beings can save themselves by their own efforts alone.

I reflected back upon some experiences of my childhood when I had done some “doozies” – fighting on the playground, disobeying direct instructions, and sneaking off to my grandmother’s house for a tuna sandwich when I was supposed to be going to catechism class. When the errors of my ways were detected by my parents, they informed me of their displeasure – and I was sent to my room for a prolonged period of time. After a while I reemerged – tentatively and expressed my sincere apology, “Mom and Dad, I am really sorry. I knew better than that.” My parent would always accept me back -- and more to the point, I *accepted* their forgiveness unhesitatingly, without doubt -- with absolute confidence – with the heart of a child.

This reflection led me to Jesus’ declaration, “Anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (Lk. 18:17). It occurred to me, “I think I understand that passage – what is it in the heart of a child that will so readily and confidently receive the kingdom of God – what is it in the heart of a child that is lost in adults?” I get it -- childlike – *unquestioning* trust in love – particularly the unconditional love of good parents and God. Adolescents and adults may get jaded over the course of time, but children really do have a pure and unquestioning trust in the ones who are supposed to love them. I resolved from that day forward that I would use my novice master’s additional prayer with the unquestioning trust of a child – “Lord, I presumptuously – like a child – accept the forgiveness of your unconditionally loving heart.”

I add one more prayer to the above set when it is relevant – “Lord, make good come out of whatever harm I might have caused.” There are many occasions in which I may say or do something too quickly, carelessly, or even heartlessly, and it suddenly occurs to me – invariably at 3:00 in the morning – that my action or statement could be misinterpreted, giving rise to hurt feelings or resentment. If I am unsure of whether a harm has been caused or the situation would be further complicated by my trying to clarify it, I put it into *God’s hands* with the above simple prayer. It amazes me how often and effectively this prayer works. It seems the Holy Spirit reaches right into the heart of someone who could have been offended by a careless or even heartless remark or action for which I was responsible – and gives that person new perspective about the statement, my motives, or my personal weaknesses. Frequently enough they come up to me and say, “Fr. Spitzer, when you first said this I was really taken back, but now I can see what you meant and why you said it.” They then proceed to give an even better interpretation to my statement or actions than the one I had intended! My one thought is, “Whew, thank you Holy Spirit!” Some of the most remarkable manifestations of grace in my life have come through the use of that prayer, and I can guarantee that the Holy Spirit works in our and others’ hearts in ways that are unseen, powerful, compassionate, sensitive, and beautiful.

When Level 4 people – particularly Christians – find themselves straying from the love of Christ – and begin to feel the cosmic emptiness, darkness, loneliness, and alienation, arising out of this movement away from the light, I recommend immediate action. Start with Peter’s prayer in his moment of panic, “Lord, save me!” and then proceed to the prayer of the tax collector, “God have mercy on me, for I am a sinner.” As you repeat these prayers and the light and peace begin to return, make your prayer of resolve, “Lord, I will try with all my heart to walk in your light and love.” Try to find ways to stay close to Christ on your journey – avoiding proclivities, thoughts, and actions that could cause you to stray again. Then say, “Lord, I accept your

forgiveness.” Repeat this prayer until you can say it with the trust of a child’s heart. Then, if relevant, turn to the Spirit for help in reconciling yourself with others by using the simple prayer, “Lord, make good come out of whatever harm I might have caused.” These prayers will help you to stay in the light of Christ – and through it – to remain in the peace, security, and love of the One who will bring ultimate good out of all human words, actions, and endeavors.