

Prayer Course II: Week 3

Penitence (Praying for help)

Introduction:

Penitence, or praying for forgiveness from God, is a key part of Christian prayer throughout the ages. It is not enough however just to say we are sorry, there is a long tradition that we both have to try to put right the harm our sin has caused and change our behaviour.

Background:

The Christian understanding of sin is based on the ethics found in the New Testament, which is a fusion of two traditions. The Hebrew tradition in which sin is a falling away from purity by failing to love God or our neighbour as we should and a Greek understanding of Ethics where virtue is found in discerning the ever moving perfect point of balance between extremes both of which are sinful. This leads to a Christian virtues which have their origins in the Hebrew world being applied to the Greek model of discerning a moving point of perfection between unhealthy extremes. That needs continual discernment, and as we learn to do that discernment we realise we have habitual errors we make, often very wilfully, it is the correction of those habitual errors in our discernment of what is right that today's exercise seeks to correct.

Purpose:

To hold a habitual sin before God and seek to allow God to change that habit and our behaviour as a result.

Process:

- Get yourself comfortable.
- Pray for God's help in your prayer.

- Honestly examine the last day noticing your sins.
- Identify one that you recognise as repeating over many years.
- Pray for God's help in letting go of this habit of sin. Ask God to forgive you and offer to help God change your behaviour.
- Notice if there are any patterns or behaviours that lead to this sin. Then pray for God's help to intervene with these, and seek God's forgiveness for those.
- Picture the whole bundle of this sin and ask God to forgive you, then let it go into God's hands.
- Ask God how to change.
- Sit in silence and listen.
- Give thanks for what you have been shown.
- Say the Lord's Prayer
- During the day if you notice you are about to commit a sin pray "Help" with all your will.

Further reading and resources:

'The Nicomachean Ethics' Aristotle
'After Virtue' Alister MacIntyre
'The Confessions' St Augustine
The letters of St Paul