



## *The Matthew 16:18 Group*

### Biblical Teaching on Mortal Sin and Confession

#### I. Old Testament Sin Classifications:

##### A. Leviticus – Basic Principles

1. God established a Priesthood to be intermediaries for sinners.
2. There is *no* record of a sinner receiving forgiveness by performing their own sacrifice
3. The liturgy (procedures) was established by God, for both His glory (10:3) and man's ultimate good. A death sentence was applied for unauthorized innovations (10:1-3)

##### B. Sins were classified by their severity and punishments fit the crime:

We see this in the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter where some sins are punishable by death, some by burning at the stake, some publicly executed, some ex-communicated from the people of Israel, some cursed with childlessness . Chapter 5 deals with lesser sins concerning false oaths and lying, and Chapter 4 deals with inadvertent sins.

C. The actions of the Priest changed the animal sacrifice from normal to Holy. This is important because the flesh of the victim took on such a Holy nature that anything that touched the flesh also became Holy.

D. Chapter 5:5&6 are key. Here we see a required confession & penance, a rite of expiation performed  
*for the purpose of forgiving sins.*

E. Conclusions: Leviticus gives a fore shadowing of how sin would be forgiven with in the new covenant: Classifications, mortal sins and non-mortal sins, sacrifices that fit the sin, divine liturgy of repentance and reparation, the absolute necessity of priestly involvement, transformation of the victims flesh by an action of God's appointed priests, transferred holiness.

#### II. The New Testament Clearly Classifies Sins:

**Certain sins are so wicked that if unconfessed they close the doors to Heaven-** Galatians 5: 19-21

Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness,<sup>20</sup> Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies,<sup>21</sup> Envy, murders, drunkenness, raveling, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, **that they which do** such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.

**Certain sins are called “mortal” meaning that the punishment for them is “death”**

Romans 1:

<sup>28</sup> And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient; <sup>29</sup> Being filled with all unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, debate, deceit, malignity; whisperers, <sup>30</sup> Backbiters, haters of God, despiteful, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, <sup>31</sup> Without understanding, covenant breakers, without natural affection, implacable, unmerciful: <sup>32</sup> Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things **are worthy of death**, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them.

**Some will be condemned to Hell by what they failed to do---not what they failed to believe:**

'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; <sup>42</sup> for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, <sup>43</sup> I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' <sup>44</sup> Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?' <sup>45</sup> Then he will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.' <sup>46</sup> And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

**Some sins will block out the inheritance in the kingdom and some sins will not block out your inheritance but are unfitting for a Christian:**

Eph 5:

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. <sup>2</sup> And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. <sup>3</sup> But fornication and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is fitting among saints. <sup>4</sup> Let there be no filthiness, nor silly talk, nor levity, which are not fitting; but instead let there be thanksgiving. <sup>5</sup> Be sure of this, that no fornicator or impure man, or one who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.

**One of the most grave sins that can be committed is to profane the communion cup and bread of the lord- such a sin is actually guilty of the blood and body of the Lord:**

1Cor 11:

<sup>23</sup> For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, <sup>24</sup> and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." <sup>25</sup> In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." <sup>26</sup> For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. <sup>27</sup> Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be **guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord.** <sup>28</sup> Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. <sup>29</sup> For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself. <sup>30</sup> That are why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. <sup>31</sup> But if we judged ourselves truly, we should not be judged. <sup>32</sup> But when we are judged by the Lord, we are chastened so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

**All wrongdoing is sin, however, scripture tells us in clear terms that sins are classified as those that are mortal and those that are not mortal. It teaches us that we can and should pray for our brothers and sisters that we might see committing non-mortal sins and that through our prayers God might forgive the wrong doer of these sins. It teaches that we are not to pray for the mortal sins of others:**

1 John 5:

<sup>15</sup> And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him. <sup>16</sup> If any one sees his brother committing what is not a mortal sin, he will ask, and God will give him life for those whose sin is not mortal. **There is sin which is mortal;** I do not say that one is to pray for that. <sup>17</sup> All wrongdoing is sin, **but there is sin which is not mortal.**

**What The Church Teaches About Mortal Sins:**

#1 It involves a grave and serious matter that strikes at the heart of the ten commandments or the specific sins that are listed in the scripture verses above.

#2. The sin is committed with full knowledge that it is evil and mortal (Hebrews 6:4-6)

#3 It is committed with deliberate consent

#4. The sin goes unrepented---the Christian is in danger of losing his salvation. Example- the fornicator in Corinthians that was ex-communicated and "delivered over to Satan"

## **Matching Mortal Sins With The Final Judgment**

Jesus teaches in Matthew 26:

<sup>36</sup> I tell you, on the day of judgment men will render account for every careless word they utter; <sup>37</sup> for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned." And Paul writes "<sup>10</sup> For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body."

Many believe that at the final judgment, the sins and problems that will be addressed are of the non-mortal nature, or the mortal sins that have been confessed but for which earthly penance was never made. Un-confessed mortal sin has no place at the final judgment because it damns the sinner to hell by his/her own free choice not to repent in the body on earth.

What we have done in the body is what we have done on this earth. If we appear before the seat of Christ covered in mortal sins then we are either forgiven freely of those sins, (in which case the scripture is confusing at best or false at worst) or else we are condemned to hell no matter what we did to cover up this un-confessed sin. For the soul that meets all four conditions above is a soul that is in rebellion against God and therefore is denying the faith.

### **How Protestants Confess Sin**

Protestants have multiple ways of coming to confess sin depending on their various denominations and the grace of God in them. Lutherans and Episcopalians have a general confession in church with absolution announced by the minister. Many others (Baptists, Non Denominational etc) seek forgiveness only through direct prayer to God or perhaps with an "accountability partner". This based on **James 5:16** – "Therefore **confess** your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects."

Many skip over or don't consider the scriptural verses of sin classification as valid and rely on - **1 John 1:9** – "If we **confess** our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Through this verse they believe that direct confession will cover all sin both mortal and non mortal with out the need for any priesthood.

They also believe that even though confessing sins to another believer is called for in James, it's not real clear as to why one must do this --because they rely on the idea that there is only one mediator between man and God and that is the Lord Jesus Christ. 1 Tim 2:5-6 "<sup>5</sup> For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> who gave himself as a ransom for all, the testimony to which was borne at the proper time." The confusion of course is that sacramental confession to a Priest is opposed because there is only one mediator but confession to an accountability partner is not opposed because it is mandated in James 5:16.

And if Jesus alone forgives sin, why do we need to confess to other believers?

Many protestant's respond to alter calls to be "born again" more than one time in their life. This is often a way of dealing with deep sin. Some pastor's teach that no "real Christian can commit sins" (based on verses like 1<sup>st</sup> John 2:3-5) and if a "so called" believer does live in sin, then they never were really "born again" in the first place. Thus, many confess the same sins in private to Jesus but can't seem to get victory over the sin—often feel guilty to the point of questioning that they are children of God. Thus, they feel the need to be "born again" to come clean. This is particularly true for certain sexual sins, which by there biblical nature are indeed mortal. One rarely feels deep and burdensome guilt because they told four our five off color jokes or thought a bad thought about their neighbor who cuts them off in traffic, but the guilt of fornication, adultery or extreme anger can be difficult to over come. What it comes down to is the confessing non Catholic brother and sister must develop an "internal" assurance of forgiveness based on their personal reading of certain scripture verses and an avoidance of others.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation takes the believer outside of himself and enters in to the divine grace of God. As seen above, the Sacrament is foreshadowed in the old testament. It is a powerful act that imparts *actual and direct grace and mercy* through Jesus' appointed Priest who does not act on his own but is "acting in the person of Christ". When a believer hears the words of absolution- he believes that he is hearing the words of Christ. The grace that flows from the sacrament is not just forgiveness and a new conversion but it imparts actual power to help in turning from sin.

#### **Catholics View Of Confession**

The Catholic Church embraces baptized Protestant believers as "separated brothers", as Christians and under the grace and mercy of God. The Catholic Church teaches that Protestants that repent of their mortal sin in the only way they have been shown how (direct prayer to God) are therefore not guilty because they have confessed in the only way they know how.

Catholics believe the Bible in James 5 means to confess sin to one another and do this publicly at each mass. They also believe that Jesus appointed his 12 Apostles as visible rulers and priests of the new covenant. The bible points to numerous verses showing that the authority to pass down this priesthood was by a careful plan of succession, the laying of hands and the structured authority of the council in Jerusalem in Acts Chapter 15.

The very first thing Jesus did after he rose from the dead and breathed the Holy Spirit into the Apostles ---the very first thing he did was set up his new authority for the forgiveness of sins in John 20: <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." <sup>22</sup> And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Now, this is a power that our Lord Jesus set up and it would be both unnecessary and silly to give this divine power if Jesus also taught the Apostles that believers would only go "direct" to Jesus for forgiveness. Jesus, in setting up his church, set up the sacrament and system of confession. From all the writings of Church history it is clear Christianity practiced the routine and regular confession of sins through a priest and did so long before the Bible was fully canonized and delivered out of the Church in the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

The Catholic Church teaches that forgiveness of sin is a grace of enormous power- beyond human power alone. There for it is a sacrament---meaning the act itself has cleansing power of God locked into it ---the Priest is only

a human delivery system of the grace of God—it is therefore not the Priest in his own power and self righteousness that forgives the sin but the priest becomes the vehicle of Jesus’ voice. The priest becomes the servant of Jesus for the purpose of “serving” up the sacrament appoint to him. Just like a Priest “stands in the shoes of Christ” at communion, he is “in Persona Christi” in the sacrament. This sacrament is a gift to the believer (establish by Jesus in John 20 below). It is a more full and complete concept of forgiveness because it is in both the spiritual *and physical realm*. That is, you physically go somewhere (to the house of the Lord) and hear the forgiving words of Jesus through the priest and then *do* something in the body to show restoration and repentance. However, if the confessing Christian is lying, gives a phony confession or covers up His/Her sin---the Priest through the gift of the Holy Spirit may discern this and not forgive the sin until a true repentance is made. Further, the believer must fear God in this confession knowing that a less than pure confession is not a lie to the priest but a lie to Jesus and the Holy Spirit. A God fearing Catholic thus in wisdom and fear will come to the confession with a full intent to “come clean” When done right, the forgiveness , because it is sacramental, is total, complete and forever---so mortal sin is cleansed . Just as baptism washes away Adams sin in the believer, this Sacrament washes away both mortal and non-mortal sin.

Catholics believe that mortal sin needs to be confessed to a Priest as a clear, open, obedient, and historic method of dealing with a severe problem. So for Catholics, they believe that a Protestant that is unaware of the sacrament and truly sorry is forgiven---but a Catholic can not clean himself of mortal sin without the sacrament. Further sins confessed are not fully repented of until penance is completed. So that one who breaks his neighbor’s windows isn’t really repentant just by saying “I’m sorry “, true repentance requires fixing the broken window or doing something to show real repentance.

It was the Lutheran reformation that eliminated the ancient sacrament of confession and the power of the priesthood to forgive sins in accordance with John chapter 20. Catholics believe that this was both a historic error and a misreading of scripture. The response was a restatement of the Sacrament of Reconciliation at the council of Trent.

Finally Catholics believe that the bible teaches the visible, unified Church has the power to define grave sin and discipline Christians. Thus, human cloning which was not possible in Jesus time on earth now needs a teaching authority to deal with it. Thus Jesus gives his church authority to call human cloning a grave evil and mortal sin. Without this teaching authority there is no “final arbitrator” of new and emerging expressions of mortal sins. (This sin is grave because it violates the 10 commandments)

This power to define and discipline sin, Catholics believe is one reason that the Church must be both visible and unified. If this were not the case then the teachings of Jesus in Matthew 18 (the step by step process of dealing with heresy or sin and finally ending in ex-communication) would not make sense. We see Jesus teaching put to work in Corinth where Paul, as overseer of the Church instructs them to ex-communicate the man sleeping with his step mother. The man simply could have gone to another Church or even started his own---an option which was not available until modern times when any believer who is chastised by his pastor can simply change Churches.

## Confession in the Early Church

Obtaining forgiveness for sins in the primitive Church wasn't only a private affair between the sinner and God; it also meant reconciliation with the community (see Jas. 5:14–16). Jesus advocated a fraternal process of reconciliation, including mutual correction and community discipline (Matt. 5:23–24; 18:15–19). A specific sacramental practice of reconciliation emerged within the first three centuries of Church history.

- **Origen**, a prolific theologian in the third-century Church, wrote:  
The layman who falls into sin cannot by himself wash away his fault. He must have recourse to the levite; he needs the priest. At times, he applies to one even greater: he needs the pontiff's help, that he may obtain the forgiveness of sins (*Hom. in Numeros* 10, 1).
- **St. Cyprian**, bishop of Carthage, also writing in the third century, said:  
I entreat you, brethren, that each one should confess his own sin while he who has sinned is still in this world, while his confession may be received, while his satisfaction and absolution given the priest are still pleasing to the Lord (*De lapsis* 28, 29).
- In the fourth century, **St. Ambrose**, bishop of Milan, wrote:  
Sins are forgiven through the Holy Ghost. Certainly, but men lend him their ministry. . . . They forgive sin, not in their own name, but in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost (*De Spiritu Sancto* iii, 137).
- St. Augustine (d. 430) warns the faithful: "Let us not listen to those who deny that the Church of God has power to *forgive all sins*" (*De agon. Christ.*, iii).
- St. Ambrose (d. 397) rebukes the Novatianists who "professed to show reverence for the Lord by reserving to Him alone the power of forgiving sins. Greater wrong could not be done than what they do in seeking to rescind His commands and fling back the office He bestowed. . . . The Church obeys Him in both respects, by binding sin and by loosing it; for the Lord willed that for both the power should be equal" (*De poenit.*, I, ii,6).
- Again he teaches that this power was to be a function of the priesthood. "It seemed impossible that sins should be forgiven through penance; Christ granted this (power) to the Apostles and from the Apostles it has been transmitted to the office of priests" (*op. cit.*, II, ii, 12).

- The power to forgive extends to all sins: "God makes no distinction; He promised mercy to all and to His priests He granted the authority to pardon *without any exception*" (op. cit., I, iii, 10).
- Against the same heretics St. Pacian, Bishop of Barcelona (d. 390), wrote to Sympronianus, one of their leaders: "This (forgiving sins), you say, only God can do. Quite true: but what He does through His priests is the doing of His own power" (Ep. I ad Sympron, 6 in P.L., XIII, 1057).
- In the East during the same period we have the testimony of St. Cyril of Alexandria (d. 447): "Men filled with the spirit of God (i.e. priests) forgive sins in two ways, either by admitting to baptism those who are worthy or by pardoning the penitent children of the Church" (In Joan., 1, 12 in P.G., LXXIV, 722).
- St. John Chrysostom (d. 407) after declaring that neither angels nor archangels have received such power, and after showing that earthly rulers can bind only the bodies of men, declares that the priest's power of forgiving sins "penetrates to the soul and reaches up to heaven". Wherefore, he concludes, "it were manifest folly to condemn so great a power without which we can neither obtain heaven nor come to the fulfillment of the promises. . . . Not only when they (the priests) regenerate us (baptism), but also after our new birth, they can forgive us our sins" (De sacred., III, 5 sq.).
- St. Athanasius (d. 373): "As the man whom the priest baptizes is enlightened by the grace of the Holy Ghost, so does he who in penance confesses his sins, receive through the priest forgiveness in virtue of the grace of Christ" (Frag. contra Novat. in P. G., XXVI, 1315).

And from the foundation of the Church the Fathers have encouraged **Confession**. As **St. Clement of Rome** said in the First Century: 'For whatsoever things, therefore, we have transgressed by any of the suggestions of the adversary, let us supplicate pardon. **Tertullian** says of this Sacrament that '**Confession** of sins lightens their burthen, as much as the dissembling of them increases it; for **Confession** savoureth of satisfaction, dissembling of stubbornness... if thou drawest back from **Confession**, consider in thine heart that hell-fire which **Confession** shall quench for thee; and first imagine to thyself the greatness of the punishment, that thou mayest not doubt concerning the adoption of the remedy.' **St. Cyprian** teaches: 'we have an Advocate and an Intercessor for our sins, Jesus Christ, our Lord and our God, if only we are penitent that we have sinned in time past, and confessing and understanding our sins whereby we now offend the Lord, we promise, for the future at least, to walk in his ways, and to fear his commandments.' **St. Cyril of Jerusalem** instructs us to 'Put off the old man, who is corrupted according to the deceitful lusts,<sup>4</sup> by means of **Confession**, that you may put on the new man.' **St. Ambrose** tells us that 'Sins are remitted by the word of God, of which the Levite is the interpreter, and also the executor; they are also remitted by the office of the priest, and the sacred ministry.'

Do we need a priest to confess to?

**St Augustine addresses this issue**. To quote him directly: 'Let no person say, I do penance in secret in the presence of God; it suffices that he who is to grant me pardon should know the repentance which I feel in the depth of my heart. If such were the case, it would be without reason for Jesus Christ to say, Whatsoever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven, or that He should have confided the keys to His Church. It is not, then, sufficient to confess to God; we must also confess to those who have received from Him the power of binding and loosing.

And again: 'There are some who imagine it is sufficient for their salvation to confess to God, from whom nothing is concealed, and who reads the secrets of all hearts, for they are unwilling, either from motives of shame, or pride, or contempt, to show themselves to the priests, although our Lord has appointed them to



discern between the different kinds of leprosy. Disabuse yourself of such an opinion, and be not ashamed to confess to the vicar of the Lord. For we must submit to the judgment of those whom He has not disdained to put in His place. When, then, you are sick, send for a priest to come to you and disclose to him all the secrets of your conscience. Do not permit yourself to be led astray by the false religion of those who tell you, in visiting you, that **Confession** made to God alone, without the intervention of the priest, is capable of saving you. We do not deny that it is often necessary to address ourselves to God, and make our **Confession** to Him, but, before all things, we have need of the priest. Regard him as an Angel sent by God; open to him the innermost secrets of your heart; reveal to him whatever causes you most confusion; be not ashamed to declare to one man what you have not blushed to commit in the presence of many. Make, then, an entire **Confession**, without dissimulation or excuses for your fault. Be simple and exact; make no evasions or circumlocutions, which only obscure and embarrass the truth. Note the circumstances of your sins, the places, occasions, and the persons, without however naming them.'<sup>6</sup>

The Eastern Churches hold to the same opinion. The *Confessio orthodoxa* directed against Cyril Lucar by Peter Mogilas (1642), which was signed by all the orthodox patriarchs of the time, enjoys among them the value of a creed. It contains the following statement: 'This contrition of the heart must be followed by an oral **Confession** of each and every sin, because the confessor cannot forgive anything if he does not know what there is to be forgiven and what sort of penance he is to impose.'

- Christ here reiterates in the plainest terms -- "sins", "forgive", "retain" -- what He had previously stated in figurative language, "bind" and "loose", so that this text specifies and distinctly applies to sin the power of loosing and binding.
- He prefaces this grant of power by declaring that the mission of the Apostles is similar to that which He had received from the Father and which He had fulfilled: "As the Father hath sent me". Now it is beyond doubt that He came into the world to destroy sin and that on various occasions He explicitly forgave sin (Matthew 9:2-8; Luke 5:20; 7:47; Revelation 1:5), hence the forgiving of sin is to be included in the mission of the Apostles.
- Christ not only declared that sins were forgiven, but really and actually forgave them; hence, the Apostles are empowered not merely to announce to the sinner that his sins are forgiven but to grant him forgiveness--"whose sins you shall forgive". If their power were limited to the declaration "God pardons you", they would need a special revelation in each case to make the declaration valid.
- The power is twofold -- to forgive or to retain, i.e., the Apostles are not told to grant or withhold forgiveness non-discriminately; they must act judicially, forgiving or retaining according as the sinner deserves.
- The exercise of this power in either form (forgiving or retaining) is not restricted: no distinction is made or even suggested between one kind of sin and another, or between one class of sinners and all the rest: Christ simply says "whose sins".
- The sentence pronounced by the Apostles (remission or retention) is also God's sentence -- "they are forgiven . . . they are retained".

According to the Council of Trent, the consensus of all the Fathers always understood that by the words of Christ just cited, the power of forgiving and retaining sins was communicated to the Apostles and their lawful successors (Sess. XIV, c. i). It is therefore Catholic doctrine that the Church from the earliest times believed in the power to forgive sins as granted by Christ to the Apostles. Such a belief in fact was clearly inculcated by the

words with which Christ granted the power, and it would have been inexplicable to the early Christians if any one who professed faith in Christ had questioned the existence of that power in the Church. But if, contrariwise, we suppose that no such belief existed from the beginning, we encounter a still greater difficulty: the first mention of that power would have been regarded as an innovation both needless and intolerable; it would have shown little practical wisdom on the part of those who were endeavoring to draw men to Christ; and it would have raised a protest or led to a schism which would certainly have gone on record as plainly at least as did early divisions on matters of less importance. But no such record is found; even those who sought to limit the power itself presupposed its existence, and their very attempt at limitation put them in opposition to the prevalent Catholic belief.