



# Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

February 1988

## ADMITTING OUR FAULTS

We have trouble admitting our faults. We simply do not enjoy the reality that they present to us: we are not perfect. So we try to cover them up, deny that they are there or that they are faults, or we simply ignore them. For us as Christians this is a problem. If we really have faults, then they are part of the truth about who we are. Our religion is based on truth (about ourselves and about God), so we will not get very far so long as we are evading the truth.

Our faults include everything that is not perfect about us. Obviously our sins head the list: all those things we do, great and small, which offend the righteousness of God. But there is more than our sin here. Our faults include our imperfections which are not actually sinful. We get a question wrong on a test: hardly a sin, but surely a fault. Or the mistakes we make with no intention to do ill, or the accidents which we cause. Were we perfect we would never do such things. Our faults are all those things (including our sins) which show us that we are imperfect.

Faults are a problem for exactly this reason: we often pretend that we are (or at least ought to be) perfect. We might even think that as Christians we are not supposed to have any faults. In one sense this is true: by the power of God's grace we are to live without sin. But we usually mean something quite different: either that we should live without sin by our own power (which is how we try to do it), or else that we should never make any mistakes (which is quite beyond us). Neither of these is possible, and both would tend to set us apart from God. If we were perfect we would not really need God.

We therefore want to cover up or erase or deny all our faults. We sometimes go to great lengths with these efforts, and it can become so habitual that we do not even notice what we are doing. We need to see three things: first, why we are tempted to deny our faults, then, why this is a problem for Christian life, and finally, what is to be done about it.

First of all, we want to conceal our faults from other people. We don't want them to know how bad we really are. We are afraid that if they find out they might not respect us any more. They might not give us the love and attention we want. We assume that we must earn others' affection, and our faults (if known to them) will keep them from liking us. Often however our faults are not nearly as hidden as we think they are, and our efforts at concealment are futile anyway. But when there is any chance for success, we try to conceal our faults, for fear that we will not be lovable -- warts and all.

We also try to keep our faults from other people because we are afraid they might be used against us. We know from experience that we can use others' weaknesses against them. Others can do the same to us. A subordinate can use his superior's fault to undermine his authority; this seems to happen often these days in the political realm. Or (to take another sort of example) J. S. Bach was in charge of a boys' choir (and school), and the boys discovered that he had little patience with unruly behaviour. So they would provoke him at the beginning of a rehearsal, and he would get angry and call the whole thing off. They got out of a rehearsal by exploiting his fault.

Faults are not only exploited by subordinates. A superior can use his knowledge of his subordinate's faults to put him down and keep him in his place. Some people seem to have an uncanny sense of where a person is vulnerable, and make use of it in a constant game of one-upmanship. We are particularly fearful lest our competitors (whether for jobs or advancement or glory or affection) find out about our weaknesses. For it would give them an advantage in the competition.

We have many reasons for trying to conceal our faults from other people. We are tempted to construct a facade, an unreal face of who we are, which we present to the world. The facade (unlike the real self) is perfect, without faults. Since the facade is not supported by reality, it often requires much effort to sustain it.

The facade is supported not only by our relations with other people. There are also pressures within us to make us deny or ignore our faults. We want to think of ourselves as good: we have this image of ourselves as basically good people (or at least that we ought to be and therefore all faults are unnatural). Our faults undermine this image. They can make us depressed that we are not as good as we would like to think. Indeed, one fault can be sufficient to plunge us into despair, especially if it is something we cannot correct. Sensing this, we may feel hopeless, "Since I am not good, since I have done this thing, what hope is there for me?"

Another obstacle within us to admitting our faults is the fear that we will be unlovable to ourselves if we do. Just as we think

that others' love and respect for us will depend on our not having visible faults, so we may stake our own love for ourselves on being good. We fear that if we admit all the things that are wrong with us, we will end up despising ourselves. We compensate by not looking very carefully at our faults. This actually makes matters worse, for then we are not sure how many faults we actually have or how bad they are. The ignorance feeds the fear, for it adds the fear of the unknown to the fear of what is actually there.

The point is that if we stake our self-love on our not having faults, then we put ourselves in a position where we are unable to face our weaknesses. Our effort will go into avoiding and denying them rather than dealing with them in any constructive way.

There is a third kind of obstacle to admitting our faults, in addition to ourselves and other people. This one often lies beneath the surface of our consciousness. We are afraid of what God might do to us because of our faults. We fear that we might be condemned, and that would be a condemnation from which there is no appeal. We know (however dimly) that we deserve to be condemned for our sins. When we are conscious of our sins, we know that we cannot have them forgiven except by God's act. We cannot do it ourselves. And we are afraid that He might not forgive. One way to avoid having to face the condemnation (we think) is to avoid facing the sins. Moreover, if we have any imperfections we cannot deal with God from a position of strength. Since He is perfect, He will have something over us if we are not. Our imperfections will make it impossible for us to deal with God on our own terms.

So we construct a facade of goodness, and try to maintain it before other people, before ourselves, and even before God. This takes tremendous energy, since the facade is not supported by the truth about who we are. We must always make excuses for the bad things we do: extenuating circumstances, a good intention gone wrong, somebody else is responsible, I didn't mean to do what I did.

When we have trouble maintaining our facade intact, we are apt to turn on others. We attack their goodness. We point out their faults, and use them to show (us and them and God) that they are terribly bad people, at least compared with us. We are not really so bad by comparison. This is a way we shore up the facade in the face of the facts. It does not alter the facts however: it matters not at all that someone else is a sinner, even a worse sinner, than I am. I am still a sinner, whatever he does.

The denial of our faults is a love of untruth. Salvation is based on the truth of who we are. As Christians we must have a full commitment to truth. When our faults are involved, the denial is pride: asserting our own illusion over against reality. Our pride prefers the illusion of goodness to the reality of forgiveness.

This decision between the illusion of goodness and the truth of forgiveness lies at the very heart of the Gospel. John the Baptist came preaching repentance as the preparation for Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God. Repentance requires that we acknowledge the truth about ourselves. We must admit that we have faults. We are not the people we would like to think we are. The faults are faults and we are responsible for them.

If we deny our faults, we refuse to accept God's offer of forgiveness and healing. The sick person who refuses to believe that he is sick will neither go to a doctor, nor do what the doctor says he must to be healed. His denial of his illness keeps him from being healed. This is exactly our position before God. We need His grace to be healed of our sins. We cannot do it ourselves. Without His act, our sins will go on festering within us forever. Thus John the Baptist emphasized sin in his preaching. His hearers had to confess their sins to be baptized: they had to face their faults squarely as a condition for seeking God's mercy. No cheap grace there!

Repentance works the same way for us. We cannot turn from our sin to receive God's grace unless we are willing to admit just what our sin is. We must look it square in the face. We must see that our sin is sin, and admit that it is our responsibility. We must be willing to ask God's grace to enlighten those dark recesses of our being, so that we can see all that is wrong within us. Our goal is to bring all of our being within His saving grace.

We cannot do this as long as we are committed to maintaining a facade of goodness for ourselves and others and God. Then we will not face the reality of our situation, and will be unable to open ourselves to grace. The facade is an obstacle not just to good, honest relationships, but to our Christian practice as well. Nor can we repent so long as we are trying to deal with God as an equal. We must admit that we are imperfect while He is perfect: and accept this (indeed, rejoice in it) as the basis of His relationship with us.

Repentance is the beginning of salvation. When we confess our sins and admit that we need help in getting rid of them, then God can give us forgiveness. We cannot receive it in any other way. Our repentance is the key to reconciliation with God. Admitting our sickness, we can give ourselves to the healing which He will administer. We will then obey what He tells us we must do to stay cured -- which requires that we change the way we live.

The point is that we often unthinkingly maintain the facade of goodness, and there are strong pressures which push us to do so. But as Christians, we must strive instead for honesty about who we are. For without it, we are in constant danger of refusing the grace which God offers, the grace to save us from our sins.