

A Personal Liturgy of Confession



by DAVID POWLISON

When I counsel with people who struggle with deep feelings of shame, guilt, and regret, I sometimes suggest that they design a personalized liturgy. In what follows, I walk through the example of a woman who has had an abortion, all that led up to that choice, and all that follows for someone whose conscience is alive. But you can tailor it to whatever struggle you or another person needs to deal with. Where is your struggle? Is it temper or bitterness? Sexual immorality? Amnesia toward God? Gluttony, laziness or greed? Judgmental words or thoughts? Gossip? Obsessive worrying? God welcomes all who are weary with sin.

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Designing your own liturgy of confession will help you to think through exactly what you need to bring to God, and what you need from God. It will give you serious words to express your sorrow, regret, guilt, and pain over your abortion. It will lead you by the hand to God's mercy and to his washing away of your sin and guilt. The parts of this liturgy in italics are taken and adapted from the General Confession of Sin in *The Book of Common Prayer*.¹ Even when your thoughts and feelings are chaotic, these words can serve as your guide. They are a channel for honesty. Instead of wallowing in misery and failure, these words help you to plan how you will walk in the direction of honesty, mercy, gratitude, and freedom.

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¹ *The Book of Common Prayer* (Kingsport, TN: Kingsport Press, 1977).

I suggest that you pray out loud. It helps you to remember that you are talking with someone who is listening. You aren't just thinking things inside your head. Use this prayer to express the gravity of what happened. Use it to remind yourself, out loud, that God's mercies are deeper than what you did or failed to do. Read through this prayer and meditation *first*. Then go back through it, writing out your own words to personalize it. Express your honest story to God in response to hearing what he says to you. Let's begin.

Almighty and most merciful Father,

Notice that you are talking with someone who is both all powerful and most merciful. The God and Father of Jesus Christ is the God of comfort and Father of mercies. God becomes your Father, our Father who art in heaven, through Jesus. He loves you in the exact way you most need help. He died in your place. He laid down his life for you. He is alive. He pursues you. Someday you will see him face to face. He comes to you in person, giving his Holy Spirit, who makes you childlike towards him: "Abba, Father!" You need this Father of life, this living Savior, this life-giving Spirit. Turn to him. Call on him for help.

Don't mistake the true God for other things. For example, what if your human father was weak, absent, fickle or harsh? The reason you know that such things are wrong is that you have a God-implemented sense within you: a true father should be strong, involved, faithful, generous and tender. Your true Father welcomes you. He is glad to see you and willingly listens to you. He will protect you. He will hear you. He is merciful. He is generous-hearted. He will help you. He will give you what you truly need. Speak to him now. _____

I have erred and strayed from your ways like a lost sheep.

Fill in the specific ways you have strayed from God's ways: "in my abortion, in my immorality, in caving in to the pressure of others, in living my life willfully, in living for convenience, in not wanting to interrupt my education, my career or my job, in not wanting to face the shame of being a single parent, in simply being overwhelmed with fear and confusion... I have erred and strayed." Because he is both strong and merciful, you can be honest. _____

I have followed too much the devices and desires of my own heart.

"It seemed like the right decision. It seemed like the only decision. It seemed like what I needed to do. In the end, I wanted to do it and chose to do it, even if

I had mixed feelings. It seemed like the thing that everybody was suggesting I do. It seemed like I had no options. Yet I realize now that I was following too much the devices and desires of my own heart, and not listening to God's voice." You can confess to God all the excuses and "reasons" that were once used to convince yourself that it was okay to do something that is wrong. _____

I have offended against your holy law.

Which laws of God have you offended? Think about the will of God that calls us to love the helpless, to be faithful to those in our care, to protect life, and especially to protect innocent, helpless persons. A gestating child is the most helpless and most dependent human being of all. God's holy law defines what love looks like, because God is love. How did you offend against the call of love? For help in seeing clearly, look at these Bible passages: Romans 13:9–10; Isaiah 49:14–16.

I have left undone those things which I ought to have done, and I have done those things which I ought not to have done. And there is no health in me.

The General Confession leads you to take seriously what is wrong—but not so you wallow in feeling bad. By becoming deeply honest, you see your need for help, and can receive the mercy and help you actually need. These are heavy, serious words. These words have gravity. Feel their weight. But they are a door that opens wide to the one who is your help and hope. Personal honesty before God is the path to the most wonderful release. You will be washed clean, your burdens removed. You will be filled with thankfulness, even thankful tears. _____

But you, O Lord, have mercy upon me, miserable offender. Spare me, O God, I who confess my faults. Restore me when I turn to you according to your promises that you have declared to me in Christ Jesus, my Lord.

The beauty of the gospel is that our confession is always linked with God's promise of good. Guilt and regret make you miserable, unhappy, in dire need of mercy. Mercy is not something anyone deserves; it is something undeserved that someone else gives. What are God's promises to you? Here are a few specifics to take to heart. Stop and think over each promise. What does it mean that this is true? What would it mean for you to truly believe and trust this? How does this promise

change the meaning of your failures and sins? Say these promises to yourself. Think about them. Say them aloud. Ask God to make them so. Turn to him on the basis of these promises.²

I will never leave you or forsake you.

Imagine—you will never be abandoned. He will not walk away. What does it mean to you that this is so? _____

The Lord bless you and keep you.

Imagine—God promises to do you pure good. He promises to keep you in his care, to watch over you. He will never betray your trust. _____

The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you.

Imagine—the Lord promises to turn a beaming face toward you. He will treat you with true kindness. Grace means undeserved kindness, and God is willingly gracious. _____

The Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.

Imagine—he promises to never turn away from you. He gives peace. He does not get disgusted and give up. He does not leave you in trouble, turmoil and confusion. What would it mean for you to know true peace? _____

The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.

Turn to him honestly, and he will be all these things to you. Imagine—here is someone who is faithful, who will never betray you. Imagine—here is someone whose love is steadfast and unwavering. Imagine—the very person who should condemn you is choosing to be merciful and forgiving. Because he is all these things, you can turn to him honestly. _____

² These italicized promises come from Deuteronomy 31:6–8, Numbers 6:24–26, Exodus 34:6–7, Psalm 25:11, and 2 Corinthians 1:20.

For your name's sake, pardon my iniquity, for it is very great.

Imagine—God does all this because of *who he is*. Who he is and what he does are far greater than what you have done. In effect, you are asking, “O God, when you think about me and what I have done, think of yourself and what you have done. When you take notice of my wrongs, remember your own mercies.” Think long and hard about that. Talk it out with God. Your hope comes from someone completely outside of you! No matter what you have done wrong—“my iniquity is very great”—you may cry out for an even greater mercy. _____

All the promises of God are YES in Jesus Christ.

Jesus fulfills all these promises and more. Your hope centers on a Person, not a feeling, not an idea, not something you do. Jesus is and does what God promises. Because Jesus loved you to the uttermost, you have true hope, not “I hope so...” or “Maybe...” or “If only...” Jesus went to his death on a cross for your wrongs, not for his own. The innocent died for the guilty. He personally took your shame and guilt onto himself. He died so you would not die for your sins. He is alive forever, so you will live in him and with him. He personally fulfills and embodies each and every one of the promises you have been considering. Because of Jesus’ death for you and because of his resurrection to life, you can bring your darkest sins into his bright light. Ask God for mercy because in Jesus he has shown that what he promises comes true. What he said he would do, he *did*. What he says he does, he *does*. What he says he will do, he *will do*. You can ask today. You can ask every day. Ask now. _____

Grant, O most merciful Father, for Jesus’ sake, that I may hereafter live a godly and righteous and sober life to the glory of your holy name.

You not only ask God for forgiveness, you honestly ask for his power to change you in the hard places of life. Ask him to make you a different kind of person. Here are some of the ways the Bible speaks about God’s work of changing us into people who live godly and righteous lives.³

Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

³ These italicized promises come from Hebrews 4:16; 2 Corinthians 5:15; Philippians 1:6.

Notice that he promises mercy and help in the very places where *you* most struggle, in *your* times of greatest need. He will help you to do the right thing. In your times of struggle, he will help you do the courageous thing, the loving thing. Even when it is hard, especially when it is hard, draw near to him with confidence. Can you do this now? Is something interfering with you doing this? _____

He died for all so that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

It cost Jesus his life to give you life. He who has truly loved you now calls you to give your life to him. Live for him, not for yourself. What will it mean for you to “no longer live for yourself”? _____

He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

Even when the road seems hard, God will keep working in you. And when you see Jesus face to face, you will be utterly changed forever to be like him and to love him. What would it mean for you to trust that this is true? _____

So think now: How might God’s love transform you? He is at work to make you treat other people in the very ways he treats you. Imagine—never abandoning another person, bringing blessing and grace to others, being patient, forgiving, generous, self-sacrificing, considering the interest of others.... That is a life worth living, one that brings life to others! How does heartfelt gratitude for God’s forgiveness change you, so that you become forgiving? How might your life become different by his power? Ask him for this. Ask him every day.

As you pray, remember that God promises mercy when you confess your sins. He does not desire the death of a sinner. God desires that you turn to him. And then, in the words of the liturgy that follow the Confession: *He pardons and absolves all those who truly repent.*

To “pardon” means to truly forgive. To “absolve” means to release you, to set you free. To “repent” simply means to turn to God. He says, “If you seek me, you will find me.” He makes you free and forgiven. Life, not death, gets last say. The misery of guilt recedes. The gladness of gratitude takes hold. Embarrassment and shame give way to courage and openness. The sense that you have been given a

most wonderful gift in what God has done for you replaces the sense that you have been a failure by what you have done.

Come to God. Imagine that you are holding in your hands all that you did wrong. Reach out for his mercy with both hands. He will take away what grieves and burdens you. He will wash you in fresh, clean water. Heartache and regret don't disappear, but he will take the sting and despair away. They will no longer torture you. He will heal you. He gives you a fresh start. God says, "I have seen your ways, but I will heal you. I will guide you and restore comfort to you" (Isa 57:18 paraphrase). Your faith will find it true that "His mercies are new every morning" (Lam 3:22–24). Let this very day be a day on which you find brand new mercies.

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We have concentrated our attention on finding the words to say as you seek the God who gives generously. Let me close by simply naming three other things that further contribute to the process.

First, you are not alone. The Bible says, "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another" (James 5:16). This liturgy has personalized words that each of us and all of us can say and mean. When we are honest, each of us "knows the affliction of his own heart" (1 Kings 8:38). We are in this struggle together. Each of us and all of us also share in God's great gift of mercies, in which the Holy Spirit unites us as the body of Christ. Like the Lord's Prayer, the General Confession that I adapted is intentionally plural—"we have erred and strayed like lost sheep...." Faith is viral as well as verbal, caught as well as taught, corporate as well as individual. Seek out the shepherds into whose care God has placed you. Seek out wise, honest people who can help to bear your burden, who will pray with you, for you, beside you.

Second, partake of Christ's feast of mercy: the Lord's Supper. God intends that the bread and wine make real to our senses the willing self-sacrifice and shed blood of the Lamb. This... really... happened.... God's promises are not just nice-sounding words. Mercy came in person and took action on your behalf. When it comes to guilt, shame and regret, it is so easy to bog down in an inner morass of confusion and misery. But the gifts of God for the people of God take you by the hand. They speak and taste of mercies much more real than your inner psychological experience.

Finally, give thanks to God. My goal throughout has been to give you a liturgy of confession that will lead you to the grace of God. But you will be well-served to also personalize your thankfulness. As a guide, here is how the General Thanksgiving words it (adapted from *The Book of Common Prayer*):

Almighty God, Father of all mercies,

We, your unworthy servants, do give you most humble and hearty thanks for all your goodness and lovingkindness to us, and to all men.

We bless you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all, for your inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory.

And, we beseech you, give us that due sense of all your mercies, that our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful;

and that we show forth your praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up our selves to your service, and by walking before you in holiness and righteousness all our days;

through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be all honor and glory, world without end. Amen.

Notice that there is an “all” in every section. To live in the light of those “alls” is to become sane and joyous. And “Amen” means, “I believe this with all my heart. This is true. I affirm this, and here I stand.” Gratitude runs deeper than misery, because grace runs deeper than sin.

Make all this your own, because almighty God has made you his own.

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