

Guilt, Confession, and Forgiveness

The Sin/Purification Offering for Sins of Omission

Leviticus 5:1 If anyone sins in that he hears a public adjuration to testify, and though he is a witness, whether he has seen or come to know the matter, yet does not speak, he shall bear his iniquity;

² or if anyone touches an unclean thing, whether a carcass of an unclean wild animal or a carcass of unclean livestock or a carcass of unclean swarming things, and it is hidden from him and he has become unclean, and he realizes his guilt;

³ or if he touches human uncleanness, of whatever sort the uncleanness may be with which one becomes unclean, and it is hidden from him, when he comes to know it, and realizes his guilt;

⁴ or if anyone utters with his lips a rash oath to do evil or to do good, any sort of rash oath that people swear, and it is hidden from him, when he comes to know it, and he realizes his guilt in any of these;

⁵ when he realizes his guilt in any of these and confesses the sin he has committed,

⁶ he shall bring to the LORD as his compensation for the sin that he has committed, a female from the flock, a lamb or a goat, for a sin offering (*chattath*). And the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin.

⁷ "But if he cannot afford a lamb, then he shall bring to the LORD as his compensation/reparation for the sin that he has committed two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a sin offering (*chattath*) and the other for a burnt offering (*olah*).

⁸ He shall bring them to the priest, who shall offer first the one for the sin offering (*chattath*). He shall wring its head from its neck but shall not sever it completely,

⁹ and he shall sprinkle some of the blood of the sin offering (*chattath*) on the side of the altar, while the rest of the blood shall be drained out at the base of the altar; it is a sin offering (*chattath*).

¹⁰ Then he shall offer the second for a burnt offering (*olah*) according to the rule. And the priest shall make atonement for him for the sin that he has committed, and he shall be forgiven.

¹¹ "But if he cannot afford two turtledoves or two pigeons, then he shall bring as his offering for the sin that he has committed a tenth of an ephah of fine flour for a sin offering (*chattath*). He shall put no oil on it and shall put no frankincense on it, for it is a sin offering (*chattath*).

¹² And he shall bring it to the priest, and the priest shall take a handful of it as its memorial portion and burn this on the altar, on the LORD's food offerings (*ishsheh*); it is a sin offering (*chattath*).

¹³ Thus the priest shall make atonement for him for the sin which he has committed in any one of these things, and he shall be forgiven. And the remainder shall be for the priest, as in the grain offering (*minchah*).

(Lev 5:1-13)

Penance and Confession

BETWEEN THE 11TH AND 13TH CENTURIES, the church entered into a period known as [the Crusades](#). There is a military context most have never heard. Beginning in 632 with the death of Muhammad, Islam waged a multi-century jihad against the classical civilization of Europe that had come out of the Roman and Greek Empires. Hundreds and hundreds of battles over the next 400 years led to over a million Europeans being taken into slavery back to the Middle East,

while Spain, Sicily, Sardinia, south France, and southern Italy essentially became Muslim states.¹

It wasn't until after 450 years of unrelenting assaults that the popes began to lead the counter attacks known as the crusades. Beginning around 1090 A.D., and carrying on for about 200 years, a series of between 9 and 16 battles were waged, three in Turkey, three in Egypt, and the rest in the Holy Land, Syria, and Lebanon. In them, fighters from European counties like France, Germany, and Italy made their way to the lands surrounding Israel in order to try to free the once Christian lands from the hands of Muslims.



Jihad Fought Against Europe at the Time the Crusades Begin



Number of Crusades for the Next 200 Years

My purpose is not to debate the morality of the crusades, though I did want to put them into a better context than people usually understand. Rather, what I'm interested in is

¹ Dr. Bill Warner has put together what he calls a “dynamic battle map” showing the relentless jihad of Islam against the west in order to put the crusades into perspective. He recounts 548 battles that are countered by a mere 16 (by my count) crusades from Christendom which had finally had enough. To see the map see Bill Warner, PhD: Jihad vs Crusades,” <https://www.politicalislam.com/jihad-vs-crusades/>.

what came out of them in the Church. Led by the feudal nobility of Europe, the way the popes mustered their armies was through promises of land and money. As Bruce Shelley tells it,

The popes needed money to meet such obligations as providing legates [emissaries] for the new Christian lands in the East. So they turned spiritual benefits into moneymaking advantage.

In the Middle Ages sins to be forgiven had to be confessed. Upon hearing a confession, the priest not only pronounced the penitent's guilt for sin forgiven (thanks to the merit of Christ) but also required a penalty or satisfaction—some “act of penance”—as a mark of the penitent's sincerity. If the penitent died before performing this penance, purgatory afforded him an opportunity in the life after death. Such penance, whether in this life or in purgatory, was called “temporal” punishment.

For years the church had claimed the power to remit part of this temporal punishment, but no complete remission had been granted until Urban II at Clermont [1095 A.D.] offered total remission or “indulgence” for crusaders who headed for Jerusalem “out of pure devotion.”²

² Bruce Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, second edition (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 189.

Confession of sins **to one another** obviously has biblical warrant, as James says, “**Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed**” (**James 5:16**). But it was here, at the crusades, that remission of sins through **confession** and **reparations** and indulgences really takes off.

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Nearly 400 years after the first crusade, not far from Berlin, a man was born, **536 years ago to the day**, on Nov 10, 1583 in in Eisleben, Germany. His father named him **Martin** after Saint Martin, whose feast day was celebrated the next day, the same day that Martin was **baptized**.³ After being groomed to be a lawyer, something happened to Martin on July 2, 1505. He was walking between Mansfeld and Eufurt, when suddenly he was caught in a terrible thunderstorm. Lightning bolts hurled down from the sky as if Thor himself was after him. Martin thought he was going to die, and so he vowed he would become a monk if he survived.

³ On this part of the biography see **John Woodbridge**, “Martin Luther: A Courageous Man of Faith,” *TableTalk* (Oct 1992): 4-7 [4-9].

It was a perhaps a rash vow and he regretted it afterwards, saying, “many counseled me against it. Nonetheless, I remained steadfast ... I never thought that I would leave the cloister. I had died unto the world.” Upon entering the monastery, he was soon burdened like perhaps no other man in history with the weight of his sin. He said, “I did not think about women, money, or possessions; instead my heart trembled and fidgeted about whether God would bestow His grace on me.” He believed God could only be appeased by doing good works. So, he set out to be the perfect monk.

Like the monks of old, he would flagellate himself, fast for days on end, take up prayer vigils longer than all the other monks. He wouldn't take blankets and almost froze to death inside the cold dank walls of the *Augustinerkloster* (Monastery of St. Augustine).⁴ He would later write, “I was a good monk, and I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery, it was I. All my brothers in the monastery who knew me will bear me out. If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading, and other work.” It was in doing these things that his life-long stomach problems began.

⁴ On this part of the biography see R. C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1993), 128ff.

As Sproul recounts, probably the **most bizarre** of the practices was his habit of **daily confession**. First of all, there was no requirement in the monastery for daily confession. But Luther was overwhelmed with **guilt**, so he went every day to receive **absolution**. Where other brothers would confess things like “I stayed up after ‘lights out’ and read my Bible with a candle,” or “Yesterday at lunchtime I coveted Brother Philip’s potato salad,” and so be the end of it, Luther would stay for hours every day. He once spent **six ours confessing** just the sins he had committed the previous day!

Finally, he mentor **Johann von Staupitz** (1460-1524) told him, “If you expect Christ to forgive you, come in with something to forgive—parricide, blasphemy, adultery—instead of all these peccadilloes ... Man, God is not angry with you. You are angry with God. Don’t you know that God commands you to hope?” He then urged Luther to think of **Christ’s love** rather than the vengeful judge. He was a Christian after all, not a pagan. He wanted him to read Augustine, suggested that the doctrine of penance might not have biblical warrant, and pointed him instead to **Matthew 4:17**, “**Be repentant in your heart.**”⁵ Luther would later say, “It sounded like a voice from heaven when we heard you say

⁵ This is the way Woodbridge puts it.

that true repentance begins only with the love of righteousness and of God; and that this love, which others hold to be the find end and consummation of penitence, is rather its beginning.”

Thus, through Martin Luther, what began as something from good motives and biblical warrant, confessing sins to one another; something which had become so corrupted through time and wars and foolishness was “Reformed” through a disturbed monk. God used him to set a fire to Europe and the movement of God’s Holy Spirit would not be soon quenched.

Continuation or New Offering?

We are turning now to **Leviticus 5:1-13**. The passage is a kind of **buffer between two offerings**. The offering of Leviticus 4 is the **sin or purification** offering. The offering of **5:14-6:7** is the **guilt or reparations** offering, where not only is an offering required, but also reparation damages had to be paid to the person who had been harmed. The question is, what offering do these verses reflect?

On one hand, the word used for the **guilt offering** (*’asham*; we will look at this next time in more detail) appears

in vv. 6-7 as the ESV's "compensation." The NAS translates it as "guilt offering." The two translations therefore disagree as to whether or not our passage is a guilt offering. On the other hand, at the very end of that verse, you have *chatta't* appearing, and this is the word we saw in ch. 4 for the sin/purification offering. The ESV therefore has one offering, "He shall bring to the LORD as his compensation (*'ašam*) for the sin that he has committed, a female from the flock, a lamb or a goat, for a sin offering (*chattath*)." But the NAS has two, "He shall also bring his *guilt offering* to the LORD for his sin which he has committed, a female from the flock, a lamb or a goat *as a sin offering*."

I'm not really sure how you can have two offerings in the death of only one animal, especially when there is no explanation that parts of it go for one thing and parts for another. If you look at vs. 7, you will see that *two* birds are brought and each one will be for a different offering. In vv. 11-13, flour is brought, and some of it becomes one offering while *a portion* of it becomes a second offering. That makes sense. But not here. When we look at the Targum and LXX, we see that the NAS's "guilt offering" is translated as "offenses" (LXX) or "penalty" (Onkelos), and the ESV seems to be following this idea so that the offering in mind is a

sin/purification offering, but the offender feels guilty about it and in some way is having to **pay God back**.

The idea is explained in the story of the Philistines (**1Sam 5-6**) who had stolen the ark of the covenant and God was now punishing them with tumors. The response of the Philistine soothsayers was to offer an *'asham*, which the ESV in **Lev 5:6** translates as “reparations.” What were the reparations for stealing the ark? **Five golden mice and five golden “tumors.”**⁶ The idea was that in returning the ark with these

⁶ **Going Deeper.** While a side-note to Leviticus, I’ve long wondered what these “golden tumors” might have looked like. In a fascinating short article written as a response to a previous one, one possible answer is that they were actually representations of the god Apollo Smintheus and the golden tumors were understood to be “Apollo’s mark.” Apollo was the terrible god of plagues. The term “Smintheus” is a surname of Apollo derived from *sminthos* (a mouse). Apollos is sometimes depicted with a bow in one hand and a mouse in the other or by his foot. In one story, the city of Sminthe was overrun with mice, Apollo intervened, and was then worshiped as Apollo Smintheus. The point is, he is Lord of the mice. So, with the worship of this god being well attested, the idea is that in simultaneously appeasing Yahweh, they were also calling upon Apollo to heal them of their tumors! In other words, even while invoking Yahweh’s help, this would have been syncretism in the extreme.



Ancient Hellenistic-Roman bronze mouse statuette



Apollo (obverse). Apollo Smintheus with large mouse at his feet (reverse).
Alexandria Troas (301-281 B.C.)

On the tumors are looking like Apollo see **Othniel Margalith**, “The Meaning of *plym* in 1 Samuel V-VI,” *Vetus Testamentum* 33:3 (July 1983): 339-41. He is responding to the article **John B. Geyer**, “Mice and Rites in 1 Samuel V-VI,” *Vetus Testamentum* 31:3 (July 1981): 293-304. On the city of Sminthe and other Apollo Smintheus origin stories see “Apollo Smintheus,”

added golden figures, Yahweh would be appeased and might relent from the plague he had sent.

This story combined with the language of the Hebrew,⁷ and the fact that unlike the next section, which is clearly a reparation offering, there is no literal amount of reparation that can be made. This all helps us understand that our passage is still dealing primarily with the [sin/purification offering](#), a continuation of Leviticus 4.

Sins of Omission (Lev 5:1-4)

The difference between Leviticus 4 and our passage now starts with the difference between [sinning without knowledge](#), which would be the actual committing of a violation vs. [sins of omission](#). What is a sin of omission? An omission is something that is missing. A sin of omission would therefore be the lack of doing something you were supposed to do. James says, “[Whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin](#)” ([Jas 4:17](#)). This is a sin of omission. A sin of [commission](#) is the opposite. It is

Forum Ancient Coins, <http://www.forumancientcoins.com/numiswiki/view.asp?key=apollo%20smintheus>.

⁷ On that language see Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 118.

doing something you know you are not supposed to do (steal, lie, murder, commit adultery, take God's Name in vain, etc.). We summarize these two nearly every week in our corporate prayer of confession. “Father, forgive us for what we have done [commission] and what we have left undone [omission].”

All of the sins of Leviticus 4 were violations of Yahweh's ceremonial sacrificial commandments, but they were done unintentionally. There are four sins in our passage. These are all sins of omission. They are:

1. The failure to testify in a court even though you are a witness (5:1)
2. Touching an unclean animal and forgetting about it (2)
3. Touching an unclean human and forgetting about it (3)
4. Uttering a rash oath and forgetting about it (4)

The first one is clearly an omission. It says, “If anyone sins in that he hears a public adjuration to testify, and though he is a witness, whether he has seen or come to know the matter, yet does not speak, he shall bear his iniquity” (Lev 5:1). The circumstance is not defined other than some kind of a legal obligation to testify. The witness fails to do so even though he should have. This is an omission.

Let's look at the next three. They say,

- ² or if anyone touches an unclean thing, whether a carcass of an unclean wild animal or a carcass of unclean livestock or a carcass of unclean swarming things, and it is hidden from him and he has become unclean, and he realizes his guilt;
- ³ or if he touches human uncleanness, of whatever sort the uncleanness may be with which one becomes unclean, and it is hidden from him, when he comes to know it, and realizes his guilt;
- ⁴ or if anyone utters with his lips a rash oath to do evil or to do good, any sort of rash oath that people swear, and it is hidden from him, when he comes to know it, and he realizes his guilt in any of these...

You might think that these three are sins of commission, not omission; that is, they actually committed a sin rather than failed to perform some action (omission). It kind of sounds that way because they are “**touching**” unclean things or they are “**speaking**” rash oaths. That would be something done rather than left undone. However, there is nothing intrinsically sinful about touching an unclean body, nor is there anything intrinsically sinful about taking an oath. The commission is not the problem here, there, it is not a sin.

Unclean bodies are ceremonially unclean, not morally unclean; oaths are themselves permitted throughout the Scripture.

The problem is understood once you realize the meaning of “it is hidden from him.” Wenham explains, “The common factor in these sins is that someone knows he ought to do something, but then forgets about it, *it slips his memory*⁵⁷ (vv. 2,3,4). The first case deals with an obligation to give evidence in court (v. 1), the second and third deal with the duty to undergo ritual cleansing after becoming unclean (vv. 2–3; cf. 11:24–28, 39–40; 22:4–7), and the fourth with self-imposed obligations which are then forgotten (v. 4).”⁸ What he is suggesting here is that the omission in examples 2–3 are that the person *should have undergone a ritual bath* to remove the impurity and be cleansed (see *Lev 11:24-28, 39-40; 22:4-7*). But they forgot about it and thus remain ritually unclean. This could result in serious contamination of the tabernacle precincts, should he decide to go there while in this unclean state. The 4th example is not that he has *failed to perform this oath, but that* he forgot about it. It would be like Martin Luther not going through with his rash vow to

⁵⁷ [original note] Lit. “is hidden from him.” The context shows that forgetfulness is the cause of the sin.

⁸ Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), 93.

become a monk. If he didn't go through with it, he would have, under the Levitical system, had to bring this offering to God for reparations, because he didn't follow through after swearing.

So, in all four cases, the problem is a sin of omission. This keeps us still in a state of sins that are **not done deliberately**, just like Leviticus 4. We have not yet moved into sins done with knowledge and intent, so we have to keep ourselves tuned into and content to think about what we are looking at in the text.

The Purification Offering for Sins of Omission (Lev 5:6-13)

In these cases of sins of omission, **what is the remedy?** This is spelled out in **vv. 6-13**. **First**, he has to bring his “**compensation**” for the sin that he has committed to the LORD (**Lev 5:6**). I agree that this should be translated as the ESV has it and not as “guilt offering.” It seems to me that the sin is now more than purely ritualistic, it has moved into the moral realm because of the forgetfulness. Therefore, compensation or reparations are owed to God. These are sins against him or others (the harming of someone you could

have helped in court; the spreading of spiritual pollution; sweating to God and not following through).

Unlike the sacrament of **penance** in Rome, where the priest determines what will bring absolution, God is clear and simple about it. It is **the offering that is to be brought**. The offering is the compensation! This doesn't last for weeks on end, like Robert De Niro's Rodrigo Mendoza in the movie *The Mission*, or like the child who is punished with a month without TV. It is quick ... one and done.

God tells Moses that there are **three levels** of compensation that he will accept in this purification offering. They accord with all we have seen up to this point in the book. They moved from the most expensive to the least expensive offering.

Burnt: herd (1:3–9) \rightarrow flock (1:10–13) \rightarrow bird (1:14–17)

Grain: grain (ch. 2)

Well-being: herd (3:1–5) → flock (3:6–16)

Purification: herd (4:3–21) → flock (4:22–35; 5:6) → bird (5:7–10) → grain (5:11–13)⁹

Goat or lamb. The first is the **lamb or goat**. This must be a female from the flock. The priest then takes the animal and “**makes atonement for him for his sin**” (6). **That’s all that is said** about this particular offering. No other details are

⁹ Gane, 122.

given. Presumably, everything is carried out as it was in **Lev 4:28-35**. As we saw in that chapter, purgation is made both **for the altar (or the holy space)** and **the person** through this idea that sin is transferred from the person to the holy places, while atonement is transferred from the holy places to the person. The ESV translates it with the focus on the sinner, presumably because the focus is on him for the moment.¹⁰

Two turtledoves or two pigeons. The second possibility is that the LORD will accept as compensation “**two turtledoves or two pigeons**” (**Lev 5:7**). This is, as we have seen before, “**if he cannot afford a lamb.**” **God’s mercies** run throughout the Levitical ceremonies! He cares about the poor, not just with platitudes, but by enacting laws to that end.¹¹ Why two? In the burnt offering it was only one (**Lev 1:14-15**). The reason is because the birds become **two offerings** rather than just one. One is for a **sin/purification** offering; the other is for **the burnt offering** (**Lev 5:7**). Why two offerings? The reason is that it is going to take two of the smaller animals to make up for the one larger one; the burnt

¹⁰ **Milgrom** remains consistent and translates it “... shall effect purgation on his behalf for his wrong” as he does in 4:20, 26, 31, and 35.

¹¹ Notice, however, these laws do not erase the poor’s obligation. They do not get a free pass on bringing an offering because they are poor. But they are allowed to offer something that was widely available to them, if they would just go out and get it.

offering will supplement the quantity lack of the purification offering (see **Num 15:24-28**).

The priest is to take one of the birds for a sin offering by **wringing its neck**, though not severing the head (**Lev 5:8**), **sprinkling some of the blood** on the side of the **altar** (as per Lev 4), and taking the rest of that blood and draining it out at **the base** of the altar (**5:9**). He does this in the courtyard, as was the case in the last offerings of ch. 4. As for the second bird, it becomes a burnt offering “**according to the rule.**” In other words, he is to follow the rule for the pigeon of the burnt offering found in **Leviticus 1:14-17**. Thereby, atonement is made for him and the sin he has committed.

The third option is if he can't even afford two turtle-doves or two pigeons (11). He can bring a tenth of an ephah of fine flour. This becomes his sin or purification offering. He puts no oil on it and no frankincense, because this isn't to be eaten. As he brings it to the priest, the priest takes a handful of it as “its memorial portion” and burns it on the altar, on the LORD's food offerings; as a purification offering (12). But the remainder becomes a grain offering for the priest (13), and he may eat it.

Confession and the Sacrifices of Israel (Lev 5:5)

As we've now looked at the actual offerings and how the LORD yet again provides for all the people of Israel to come before him with an offering they can afford, I want to turn our attention to what I think is the most important aspect of our portion of Scripture. This deals with the "guilt" and "confession" and "atonement" and "forgiveness" that comes through it.

We've seen how Leviticus 4 dealt specifically with "**for-giveness**." This word (*salach*) means **to be pardoned** to be able to stop taking blame for an offense even though you are guilty. It is a precious word that anyone guilty of anything, if they have any sense or remorse, desperately wants to hear. **Many don't know** if they can ever hear it in their life, especially when, like Luther, they can only think of the justice and wrath of God. But the whole point of this offering is that there is forgiveness. This word can be directed at you. But how?

The first thing that appears in our passage is the word "**guilt**." We saw this word earlier with the whole idea of whether or not this is a "guilt offering." The word has a broad range of meaning, from a **sacrifice of reparation**, to the

penalty for guilt, to the actual state of guilt or feeling guilty.¹² This is a key point to the sacrifice. Though it is mandatory, the idea of personally feeling guilt is in view. It says, “He realizes his guilt” no less than four times (vs. 2, 3, 4, 5). In other words, realizing your guilt is a prerequisite for offering the sacrifice.

You do not come before God with a sacrifice hoping that somehow some vague thing that you did might be forgiven. Nor, especially, do you come before God with a sacrifice thinking that all God wants in that! As if personal accountability, responsibility, and a smiting conscience do not matter. As if it is just about the ritual. In fact, the recognition and guilty conscience do matter, and the sacrifice does nothing without them. Do you really think that simply by killing an animal that God will forgive a person *ipso facto* (by the act alone), that they never have to have remorse? That’s sociopathic. And it goes against the grain of the Bible. “For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart” (Ps 51:16-17).

¹² John E. Hartley, *Leviticus*, vol. 4, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1992), 67; Michael Jemphrey, “Translating the Levitical Sacrifices,” *Journal of Translation* 3:1 (2007), 17 [9-23].

More than any offering thus far in the book, this focuses on personal guilt and the recognition that comes from it. Here, it seems that the chief agent of that recognition is your **conscience**. Remember, this deals with sins that have been forgotten and left undone. When you forget about something, you lose it to your memory. The conscience strikes when that memory is jogged by someone, some thing, some event taking place in your life. The idea is that when your conscience strikes, the worshiper must immediately take that guilt and do something positive with it.

That positive thing here is “**confess**.” “**When he realizes his guilt in any of these and confesses the sin he has committed...**” (**Lev 5:5**). To **confess** (*yadah*) comes from a word meaning “**to throw**” or “**to cast**.” You are literally taking something inside of you (your guilt) and throwing it or casting it. You do this by taking the guilty conscience and recognizing it for what it is: guilt before God. You did something that violated his commandments.

This acknowledgement is a recognition of guilt, a taking personal ownership in it. It is **not a throwing of the guilt on to another person**, which is what **blame** does. Rather, it is a **throwing it upon God**, not blaming God, but casting it upon him. As the Psalmist says, “**Cast your burden on the LORD**”

(Ps 55:22). Why? He says because “he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved.” Peter says, “Cast all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you” (1Pe 5:7). This is the heart of confession.

Note the context of this confession in Leviticus. First you realize your guilt. Then you confess the sin. Then you bring to the LORD the offering. Therefore, where does the confession take place? Roy Gane makes a great observation. “There is no evidence in the Pentateuch for verbal confession at the sanctuary in connection with leaning one hand on the head of the victim just before it is slaughtered. Therefore the confession required ... cannot be to a priest; it must be to the Lord.”¹³ It is against the LORD that the worshiper has sinned; it is to the LORD that the worshiper must confess. Only once the guilt is recognized and the sin is confessed to God can he then bring his offering for purification. When he does, “He shall be forgiven” (Lev 5:10, 13) and he shall be atoned (6, 10, 13).

What Does This Look Like Today?

Confessing Sins of Omission

¹³ Gane, 125.

What does all of this mean in terms of us today? Obviously, we do not go to a temple and offer a purification offering based upon our guilty feelings and confession of sin. Nevertheless, as with everything in Leviticus, there is a ceremonial fulfillment in Christ and an application that remains in his NT Temple.

First, you must be **burdened by your sin**. You must feel the weight of your guilt before God. You must internalize what you have done wrong. You must not pass blame upon someone else. You must not blame God. You did the thing. You did the wrong. You fell short of God's glory. You are guilty, and you have to feel that in your mind and heart. Only then can you confess anything to God and move towards hearing this word about you being forgiving.

Second, my suspicion is that when Christians confess sins, the overwhelming majority of them are sins of **commission**. That is, you tend to think of things you did positively to violate God's commandments. You spend all your time in prayer thinking about those things, and probably many of you fixate on one or two of those to the exclusion of the dozens or scores that you have probably committed. For, to break one sin is to break them all (**James 2:10**), and

most of us only take the time to think about how the sin was just violation only of one commandment, rather than to think through how one sin can actually violate all of the commandments.

Return to Martin Luther for a moment. Here was a man so obsessed over his own guilt that he could spend six hours in confessional thinking about the sins he committed only the day before. There is no possible way he committed six hours' worth of laundry list single sins in a monastery! Thus, the man had to be confessing how a single sin worked its way through the dough of his life in multiple ways.

Furthermore, it seems to me that he would also have had to be thinking of all the **things he did not do** in order to spend that much time in a confessional. In other words, he had to be consciously thinking of sins of omission, things he had not done that day that he should have done. The person with an easily pricked conscience would have had to take James to heart when he said, **“to the one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is a sin”** (**James 4:17**). He probably thought of other passages too, like **1 John 3:17-18**, **“Whoever has the world's goods and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?”** If he had thought he was

hiding his lamp (**Matt 5:14-16**) or losing his saltiness (**13**), sins of omission could come flooding to his mind, especially in a monastery where he was totally cloistered from the world.

Nevertheless, our passage demands that we take greater care to think about the things we have not done that we should have done. We commit sins of omission every day, and most pay no heed to those. Fact is, **many sins of omission lead directly sins of commission**. Think of **David**. Why did he commit adultery (commission) with Bathsheba?¹⁴ The text clearly tells us it began with a sin of omission. “**In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab, and his servants with him, and all Israel. And they ravaged the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem**” (**2Sa 11:1**). Kings are supposed to go out to battle, to fight for their people. That’s what God does for us. But David stayed home. He neglected his duty. He omitted or neglected his duty.

The next verse says, “**It happened, late one afternoon, when David arose from his couch and was walking on the roof of the king’s house, that he saw from the roof a woman**

¹⁴ A good article on sins of omission is **Joel Ryan**, “What Is the Sin of Omission? Its Definition and Consequences,” *Christianity.com* (June 10, 2019), <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/sin/what-is-the-sin-of-omission-its-definition-and-consequences.html>.

bathing; and the woman was very beautiful...” (2). His negligence lead to idleness, which as the old saying goes, is the devil’s workshop. And in this case, it led to his committing adultery with one of his good friend’s wives ... his good friend, you should note, who was out on the very battlefield where David was supposed to be. Considering sins of omission can be a way of short-circuiting sins of commission.

But they are also simply wrong, and you need to pay more heed to that. When you do, and when the proper steps are taken from that moment forward, it can have a drastic change in the life you live, for suddenly, you realize you have been living an utterly selfish life and God commands you to care for those in need. You aren’t doing it, you feel your guilt, and you do something about it. That’s how the world is changed.

Faithful and Just

But this is not done by fixating all your time on your sins, whatever they are. No, old von Staupitz was right. There has to be a turning point. Guilt alone is not enough, nor is confession. That kind of attitude is not thinking of Christ’s love, but only his wrath. It is only the gospel that

sets a guilty conscience free. And that Gospel is that Jesus Christ has become the sacrifice for sins of omission that brings about forgiveness. Upon this recognition, you are set free.

John says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1Jn 1:9). Did you know that the root of this thought comes from Leviticus 5? Not the cleansing us from all unrighteousness. Not yet. Again, that will come later in Leviticus through the same offering in still another context. But confessing sin to receive forgiveness has its root here in Leviticus 5. That makes John’s statement one deeply rooted in ceremonial law.

As such, you must not forget that confessing sin leading to forgiveness has something necessary that comes between those two things. That necessary thing is the purification offering, which is sometimes included with the burnt offering or the food/grain offering. Only a prescribed offering can bring atonement and forgiveness. God will not forgive without one.

That offering is so costly that it is called here the compensation. It is a kind of payment or penance. But friend, you can’t pay enough to God to make up for what you have

done. But Jesus did. That's why the confession of sin that John has in mind must also have the offering of Christ to purify you and give you forgiveness. That is the compensation for your guilt!

As such, when you confess your sins, you must cast them outward to him, to the life, death, and resurrection of Christ where all of these offerings find their fulfillment. Only then can the confession lead to forgiveness. For this is the only offering that God accepts as compensation for your trespasses against him. Incredibly, that compensation came at his own hands, and the Son of God was delivered up to the Father as the restitution that alone atones for the sins of mankind.

But then, in Christ, the burden and guilt and weight of sin lifted. His yoke is easy, his burden is light. Here is where you find absolution. He has done the penance. Here is the forgiveness. Here is the atonement. And now, confessing your sins one to another makes good sense, in light of the forgiveness you already have in Lamb of God. Coming to see that even statements like John has made have their origin and fulfillment in the Law of God and the coming of God's Only Son is the reason we have the Bible. Often in Leviticus

I am thankful I no longer live under that system. And why not? Because those whom the Son sets free are free indeed!

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