JAMES 5:16
Confession, Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Repentance, confession, forgiveness and reconciliation are truly what can restore our relationship with God. But they can be also involved in restoring relationships among believers.

Our main text will be James 5:16, but it will only be a starting point to consider connections with other Bible passages and let the Word speak for itself.

The King James Version reads James 5:16 as follows:

"confess *your* faults one to another."

In so doing it translates the Greek original:

"ἐξομολογεῖσθε ἀλλήλοις **τὰ παραπτώματα.**"

ἐξομολογεῖσθε — exomologeisthe — confess
ἀλλήλοις — allēlois — to one another
τὰ — ta — the
παραπτώματα — paraptōmata — trespasses (offenses)

I like the New King James Version here as well:

"Confess your trespasses to one another."

The simple interpretation of this passage is that we need to ask for forgiveness directly to those we have done wrong to or offended.

It is both simple and at the same time complicated, since this matter has to deal with personal pride.

This teaching in James is consistent with what Jesus taught.

> "Therefore if you offer your gift on the altar, and there remember that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift." (Matthew 5:23-24)

There are instructions given by Jesus not only if we do wrong, but also when we are the ones who have been wronged.

> "And when you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive it so that also your Father in Heaven may forgive you your trespasses (τὰ παραπτώματα). But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in Heaven forgive your trespasses (τὰ παραπτώματα)." (Mark 11:25-26)

Mark 11:25-26 is not about reconciliation like James 5:16 or Matthew 5:23-24. It is about the need to forgive those who have offended us, treated us badly, hurt us, said something bad about us, etc. Some people make the mistake of going to the person who hurt them and tell them: "I forgive you." It is not biblical. The Word teaches us to go and ask for forgiveness when **we** have done wrong to someone.

Sometimes reconciliation is not possible, but forgiveness must always be there, in the heart.

Why must we always forgive?

> "For if you forgive men their **trespasses** (τὰ παραπτώματα), your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their **trespasses** (τὰ παραπτώματα), neither will your Father forgive your **trespasses** (τὰ παραπτώματα)." (Matthew 6:14-15)

In order to understand what the Bible teaches about "forgiveness" of faults, offenses, and even sins that we commit against one another, we need to read the text carefully. I have heard some people say: "I forgive but I will not forget." Well, in the biblical concept of forgiveness forgetting is involved. That is why I taught my children to clarify: "forgiven and forgotten" when an argument was settled.

Matthew was a tax collector, so it is natural to find the following expression in his gospel, in the Lord's prayer:

> "forgive us our debts as we also forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:12)
>
> καὶ **ἄφες** ἡμῖν τὰ **ὀφειλήματα** ἡμῶν, ὡς καὶ ἡμεῖς **ἀφίεμεν τοῖς ὀφειλέταις** ἡμῶν·

καὶ — kai — and
ἄφες — aphes — forgive
ἡμῖν — hēmin — us
τὰ — ta — the
ὀφειλήματα — opheilēmata — debts
ἡμῶν — hēmōn — of us (our)
ὡς — hōs — as
καὶ — kai — also
ἡμεῖς — hēmeis — we
ἀφίεμεν — aphiemen — forgive
τοῖς — tois — the (to the)
ὀφειλέταις — opheiletais — debtors
ἡμῶν — hēmōn — of us (our)

Luke has a slightly different choice of words, he makes his point as clear as possible. He openly spoke of sins in relation to our offences to God, but spoke of debts when speaking of human affairs.

> "and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves also forgive everyone who is indebted to us." (Luke 11:4)
>
> καὶ **ἄφες** ἡμῖν τὰς **ἁμαρτίας** ἡμῶν· καὶ γὰρ αὐτοὶ **ἀφίεμεν** παντὶ **ὀφείλοντι** ἡμῖν

καὶ — kai — and
ἄφες — aphes — forgive
ἡμῖν — hēmin — us
τὰς — tas — the
ἁμαρτίας — hamartias — sins
ἡμῶν — hēmōn — of us (our)
καὶ — kai — and
γὰρ — gar — for
αὐτοὶ — autoi — ourselves (we ourselves)
ἀφίεμεν — aphiemen — forgive
παντί — panti — everyone (to everyone)
ὀφείλοντι — opheilonti — who owes (who is indebted)
ἡμῖν — hēmin — to us

Concerning the way we are quick to judge as sin every wrong that we receive, let us read what Jesus says about it:

> "Moreover if your brother sins (ἁμαρτήσῃ) against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector." (Matthew 18:15-17)

Here there is something quite important going on. One brother has **sinned** against another. Sin (ἁμαρτία) is involved, not a fault or a trespass (παράπτωμα). The need for correction is necessary in order to heal his spiritual condition. It was not a mistake or an offence; but a sin. So the church is needed, witnesses are needed and the action cannot come from the individual. We are looking at a collective, loving call to repentance to save the brother and not only reconcile him with another brother.

For such a serious matter, Jesus adds:

> "Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (Matthew 18:18)

Then Peter – always him – asks:

> "Then Peter came to Him and said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" (Matthew 18:21)

How wonderful is the Word of God! Jesus replies, but he does not mention the word "sin."

> "Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven." (Matthew 18:22)

Here Peter speaks of "sin." Because every one of us, when we are offended by a brother or a sister, believes that that sin is the greatest in the world. But it is for us simply because it hurts us personally.

To explain the practical implications of what he said, Jesus tells a parable (Matthew 18:23-34) and ends up saying:

> "So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses (τὰ παραπτώματα)." (Matthew 18:35).

Jesus shifts the attention from sin to trespassing. From will to mistakes. Because very often we offend each other, and it is true, but not intentionally. When we realize it, we must be ready to ask for forgiveness. But, at the same time, let us not always think that we are the center of everybody else's whole attention: someone may hurt us. Very often it is done with no intention or premeditation and the person does not even realize it. Very few people do it intentionally in the church – it is 45 years of experience speaking here.

What we call sin was possibly just a mistake. What we often see as premeditated and direct is very often just a misunderstanding. And, as Jesus reminds us, God has forgiven us – and very often we do not even want to sin – and so we must forgive our brothers and our sisters every time they come to us asking for forgiveness. Every single time. 70 times 7 is idiomatic: it means always.

Since one of the safest ways to understand the Bible is to let Scripture interpret Scripture, the meaning of James 5:16 becomes clear when read in light of other Bible passages that deal with this matter.

The Roman Catholic practice of listing sins committed to a priest, in a confessional, in order to be absolved has nothing to do with a correct interpretation of this passage and, in general, cannot be fully justified in light of any passage of the New Testament. It is "tradition" that contradicts what the Bible openly teaches. In fact, our sins must be confessed to God, because it is he whom we have actually offended when sinning.

> "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us." (1 John 1:8-10)

Furthermore, "confessing" has nothing to do with "making a list" of our sins. It involves repentance and open admission of having sinned.

> "Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins." (Matthew 3:5-6)

They were not listing their sins one by one, but admitting their state of sinners. In this passage, the Greek verb translated "confessing" is the same as in James 5:16, ἐξομολογέω.

ἐξομολογέω — exomologeō — confess, acknowledge openly, openly declare.

A textual problem

The NIV reads James 5:16 as follows:

"Therefore confess your sins to each other"

It is not because it translates differently, but because it translates another critical edition of the Greek New Testament, the UBS and Nestle-Aland editions, the so-called Standard text.

The KJV and the NKJV translate the *Textus Receptus*. In this specific passage the TR is in accord with the Majority Text, the Greek text found in the vast majority of extant manuscripts, over 90%.

I have written extensively on this topic, stating the case for the Majority Text of the Greek New Testament, which, in any case, is supported by a growing number of scholars.

In this case, as well as in many others, the King James Version has still proved its case as the best and most widely spread translation of the Majority Text. It is also a literal translation – not a thought for thought, but a word for word translation – which is still the most desirable kind of version to use when seriously approaching the biblical text.