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Psalm 51

A Model of True Repentance

If you want an example of what it looks like to live a life of faith and have a deep, rich relationship with the Lord, it's hard to find a better example than the life of David (apart from Christ, of course). David had an extraordinary life. He slayed the giant Goliath, saved Israel from the Philistines and other enemies, and was anointed King over Israel. But above all this, he was a man of *faith in God*. David was a man after God's own heart (1 Sam. 13:14). He was a godly man and a spiritual leader; he wrote many prayers and hymns used for corporate worship - over half the psalms were written by David! And what we see in them is a vibrant, deep, rich personal relationship with the Lord, full of genuine faith and love for God!

But we also know that even King David, the man after God's own heart, sinned grievously and terribly. We see David sin several times, but his biggest fall, by far, is in the tragic story of David and Bathsheba, in 2 Sam. 11-12. While his armies were away fighting battles, King David remained in Jerusalem; and one day, walking on his roof, he spotted a woman named Bathsheba bathing. Now, David was married, and so was Bathsheba; yet he gave into temptation, sent for her, and committed adultery with a married woman. Now, that's bad enough, but it gets worse; after she becomes pregnant, David goes to incredible lengths to try and cover up his sin. He calls Bathsheba's husband, Uriah the Hittite, home from the front lines. He tries to get Uriah to go home, so that everyone will think the pregnancy is from him, but Uriah won't do it, because of his, tragically ironic, allegiance to King David. David tries to get him drunk, but it still doesn't work. So, finally, David sends Uriah back to the war front, and gives orders to the general to have Uriah abandoned at the front lines so that he's killed in battle. In short, David murdered Uriah, to cover up his own sin, and then married his wife, Bathsheba. But no matter what lengths he would go to, it didn't work; he couldn't cover up his sin. The Lord knew what he had done. And he sent Nathan the prophet to expose the sin and bring great conviction upon David for his guilt.

So how is it that David, this terrible sinner, is also David the great King, the Psalmist, the man after God's own heart? It's because David is *repentant* - he is truly, humbly broken and sorrowful over his sin and turns to the Lord, begging for mercy, truly aware that the Lord's grace is his only hope - *that* is the true difference that marks David as a man after God's own heart:

David had a heart full of repentance and faith! And such repentance marks every true Christian, every true child of God. As we heard from Cliff's sermon from 1 John last week, all of us are sinners, and if we try to deny it, we're calling God a liar. But we also heard that if we confess our sins and turn to Christ in faith, "God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9)! But how do we do that? What does it look like to truly repent?

We see a perfect example of it here, in Psalm 51. As the title makes clear, David wrote this Psalm right after being confronted by Nathan and convicted for the guilt of his sin regarding Bathsheba and Uriah. This psalm is David's personal, emotional prayer of repentance, confessing his sin to the Lord and pleading for mercy, forgiveness, and restoration. But this Psalm is not just an account of David's own personal confessions and repentance; it is a model, an example to each of us, of how we, too, should personally confess and repent of our sins to the Lord. It begins, first, with *confession*.

I. True Repentance Begins with Confessing our Sin and Acknowledging our Need for God's Grace (51:1-6)

David begins this prayer of repentance by first acknowledging that he is a desperate sinner who's only hope is the mercy and grace of God. This is where he begins in vv.1-2: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin!" David also asks for forgiveness here, which we'll come back to in our second point, but first and foremost, what David is doing here is that he's acknowledging his *desperate need* for God's grace and mercy! He's acknowledging just how sinful he is, using three words to describe this: "transgressions," "iniquity," and "sin." These words are used here as synonyms; they're all three referring to the fact that David has sinned against the Lord, disobeying God's standards of perfect holiness, righteousness, and love. But as one commentator noted, these words - sin, transgression, and iniquity - they might be *too familiar* to us; they're supposed to bear weight, but sometimes we grow used to throwing around words like "sin" and "transgression." But we're talking about *rebellion* against God, evil *perversion* of the heart, moral *error* and *failure*, doing the wrong thing.¹ David is acknowledging just how sinful he is by recognizing that his only hope

¹ Michael Wilcock, *Psalms, vol. 1: 1-72*, Bible Speaks Today series.

is that God would have mercy on him. He isn't appealing to anything good in himself - he knows how sinful he is - rather, he is appealing to the mercy and steadfast love of God.

So David doesn't come and ask God to forgive him because he will do better; he doesn't pretend like he can make up for his sins somehow. He doesn't try to justify his sin or explain it away as being "not that bad." He doesn't plead ignorance, or say that he didn't mean it. He doesn't make excuses for his sin, or blame others, or try to make it sound like it wasn't his fault. No, David acknowledges his sin and owns up to it; that is, he *acknowledges and confesses his sin to the Lord*. We see this in vv.3-6: "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me" (v.3). Before Nathan the prophet rebuked him, David was trying to ignore and cover up his sin; he was hardened to it. But now that conviction has come, his guilt crushes him; his sin looms over him. He is expressing not just awareness of sin but *contrition* - sorrow over the sin and a commitment not to do it again. He continues, v.4: "Against you, you only, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment." Yes, David really did sin against Bathsheba and Uriah; but he also acknowledges that at the end of the day, he was sinning against God. Every sin we commit is evil direct rebellion against the Lord. When we sin against others, we're sinning against people that God made in His own image, and we stir up His wrath. Even when our sin only seems to hurt ourselves, we are not our own but belong to God and have to answer to Him. We must acknowledge that every one of our sins, whether big or small, is cosmic *treason*, an evil attack against the Lord Almighty. And we must also acknowledge that God is the righteous judge, that He will judge all of us, and that we all deserve His wrath, and that His judgments against us are just.

But we naturally want to push back against this, don't we? That voice in the back of our heads says, "Come on, I'm not that bad; I haven't committed adultery or murdered anyone like David has." But that's just not the case; we're all sinners by nature, by birth. David recognizes this in v.5: "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." He's not speaking against his mother, or conception itself, or excusing his sin. He's acknowledging his sin nature and complete, utter, sinfulness. His sin with Bathsheba and Uriah is not an isolated incident but is further evidence of his sin nature. *Sin isn't just a matter of what we do or don't do; sin is fundamentally a matter of who we are*. Like all of us, David is a sinner and has had a sin nature since conception in his mother's womb. This verse recognizes that life begins in conception - that the unborn baby in the womb really is a human being that shouldn't be

murdered - but it also recognizes that every human being, from the moment of conception, inherits a *totally depraved sin nature*. God made Adam and Eve, the very first human beings, to be good and without sin, free to obey! But they chose to disobey God, becoming his enemies, and from that moment on, humanity and all of creation has been cursed with the consequences of sin: corruption, decay, and death. Every bad thing in this world is a reminder of our sin and God's wrath against it; this is why we all die: because we're all born sinners and we all deserve God's wrath! Physical death is but a reminder of spiritual death, and the eternal Hell we deserve.

So David here speaks of the *total depravity* of our human nature, that we all inherit because of the *original sin* of Adam and Eve. But this doesn't justify or minimize his sin; David recognizes that his whole life is characterized by sin, just like all of us! And in this moment of conviction and contrition, he does the only proper thing: *he confesses his sin to the Lord*: "Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart." It does us no good to hide or cover up or ignore our sin; we must acknowledge it and confess it to God; we must *repent*.

All of us are sinners, just like David. All of us sin all the time; perhaps your sins are ever before you, and you're weighed down by the guilt of the sin you committed this week, last night, maybe even this morning before church. The first step in dealing with our sins is *acknowledging our guilt and confessing our sin*. And because we regularly sin, we must be in the habit of regularly confessing our sin and repenting from it. Unconfessed sin robs us of our joy, peace, and contentment. It makes us miserable. This is implied by v.8, where David prays, "Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice." Or as David says in a similar passage, "For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength dried up as by the heat of summer" (Psalm 32:3-4). Walking in unconfessed and unrepentant sin is a poison to our hearts and will ruin our lives. If you're miserable and depressed, it's worth examining your heart and life and asking yourself: is there any unconfessed sin in your life? Are there any secret sins you're holding on to, that you're hiding and nursing in your heart? Sins you're not bringing before the Lord in prayer, confessing them to Him, asking for forgiveness and the grace to repent of them? Are there sinful habits, patterns, and lifestyles that you've just stopped worrying about, that you're simply ignoring and acting like they aren't there? Maybe you have a broken relationship with God. Maybe God feels distant. Maybe you have no peace with God, you don't

want to worship Him, pray, read your Bible, or spend time with Him. Maybe the thought of God scares you or depresses you. If so, you need to ask yourself: Have you sinned against God but aren't confessing it to Him?

The only way to deal with your sin is to repent of it, which begins with sincerely confessing it to God; for only when we acknowledge our sin can we ask for and receive forgiveness. Which leads us to the next step of repentance...

II. True Repentance Requires Turning to God for Forgiveness (51:1-2, 7-9)

When we feel the weight and conviction of our sin and guilt, we desperately want it to be dealt with - not ignored, not sympathized with, but truly *reckoned with* and forgiven. If we are truly repentant of our sins, then we will necessarily cry out to God; and if we truly have faith in God's mercy, then we won't just confess our sins - we will boldly plead with God to forgive us! This is exactly what David does here. Go back up to verses 1-2, where David is begging for the Lord to mercifully forgive him. When he says, "blot out my transgressions," in v.1, he's asking God to cancel out the record of his sin and transgression, as though blotting out written words from a book. The idea here is like erasing the wrong answers from a test, after you failed it; like deleting an email or text message you didn't mean to send or that was full of errors, so that the other person never got it; like canceling out a record of debt that stands against you. Have you ever said something you wish you could take back? Or done something that you wish you could have erased from history? That's what this is an appeal for - to have our transgressions blotted out in the eyes of God: erased, deleted from history, no longer held against us.

He also asks God to "wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin!" (v.2). Feeling the guilt of his sin, David pictures himself like a nasty, dirty, stained piece of clothing that needs to be washed over and over again until the stain comes out. Picture a crisp, clean white dress shirt. But now imagine that you spill coffee all over that shirt in the morning; then you dump a bowl of spaghetti sauce on it at lunch; then you fall in the mud on the way home; then a toddler scribbles all over it with a marker; then someone spills a gallon of black paint all over it. That shirt isn't so white anymore, is it? And it's not like we could fix the problem by just saying, "Gee, I really made a mess of things; I'll be more careful tomorrow and try not to ruin my shirt anymore." That won't fix anything! And a simple run through the washing machine won't fix it either. It needs to be radically cleansed it, to thoroughly wash it clean. That may seem like a silly example, but it's the same way with our sin. Our souls are black

and stained by our sin. We can't just promise to sin less and be better; that won't fix it or take away the stains! Nor can we clean it up ourselves. We need to be vigorously, thoroughly washed clean by God! We need God to wash us whiter than snow.

David prays this in versus 7 and 9: "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.... Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquities." Where does this cleansing come from? It comes from God. Our sins are against the Lord and only He can fully deal with them, forgive us, and cleans us from our stains. When he prays, "purge me with hyssop," he's probably referencing the sacrificial system, where the priests would take a hyssop branch, dip it, and then sprinkle someone who is unclean, pronouncing them clean.² But religious ceremonies themselves don't save us; it only symbolizes what we truly need: God to cleanse us on the inside, to wash away our sins so that we are whiter than snow.

And this points us to the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ. Being forgiven and cleansed of our sins is only possible for us through the gospel of Jesus Christ, through which God has "forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us, with all its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross" (Col. 2:13-14). Though we have each sinned, Jesus, the God-Man, is the only human being ever to live a perfectly righteous, spotless life; and as the spotless, blameless Son of God, he died on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins, bearing our sins and the wrath of God we deserve. And on the third day, Christ arose, announcing that all who repent and believe in him will be justified before God, purely by grace through faith in him alone! Christ shed his blood on the cross so that sinners like you and me can be cleansed and washed clean! This is the beautiful gospel that we sing about: "What can wash away our sins? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. Oh, precious is the flow, that makes me white as snow!" "There is a fountain filled with blood, drawn from Immanuel's veins; and sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains!" "Jesus paid it all, all to him I owe; sin had left it's crimson stain, he washed it white as snow."

This is the beautiful news of the gospel of Jesus Christ: as black as the stains of your sin may be - even if you've lied, slandered, yelled in anger, cheated, stolen, lusted, committed adultery, or murdered, or committed treason and blasphemy against the only God - the blood of Christ is sufficient to wash all your sins away; you, too, can find forgiveness at the foot of the cross! If you're not a believer today, no matter how young or old or sinful or messy or ignorant

² See Leviticus 14:6 and Numbers 19:16-19.

you may be, I want you to know that this good news of grace is for *you*. But you have to repent - you have to turn to God, confess your sin, acknowledge your guilt and hopelessness, and beg God for forgiveness! But don't barter with God; ask God to forgive you purely out of His mercy and grace, accepting Christ's sacrifice in your place - and He will! Ask Him to wash your stains clean by the blood of Jesus and you will be whiter than snow!

And if you're trusting in Christ this morning, this is true of you! But this doesn't mean that we only repent and ask for forgiveness once in our lives, just when we become Christians. No, this is something we pray *as believers* as well! This is why Jesus taught us to regularly pray for forgiveness in the Lord's prayer (Matt. 6:12). We don't just repent and believe in the gospel to *become* Christians; if we are Christians we will *continue* to repent and believe. We've already seen that we regularly sin, and need to regularly confess; but our confession always must lead to *asking God for forgiveness and receiving forgiveness, by grace, through faith in the gospel!* And this means we must *live at the cross*. If our sins are ever before us, then we will continually recognize our need for the Cross. But if we only stop there, we might be terrified of God and think that He doesn't want us to come near. But that's the exact opposite of what we see here! The exact opposite message of the gospel! As often as you sin, *run to the Lord*, draw near, confessing your sins and believing that He is faithful and just to forgive us and cleanse us from all unrighteousness! We're often tempted to skip this step in our repentance: to move straight from confession to promising to do better. But when we do that, we forget and undermine the gospel. God doesn't forgive us based on us promising to do better or cleaning up our act! He forgives us purely out of mercy, by accepting Christ's sacrifice on our behalf! So brother, sister, when you wake up in the morning and you're crushed with the weight of your sin and guilt, and ashamed of how you continue to sin even as a Christian, here's what you do: *repent and believe in the gospel!* Go to God, confess your sins, and *turn to the Cross!* Ask God to forgive you and cleanse you with the blood of Jesus! And then rest, believing that Christ's grace is sufficient, that His blood has washed you white as snow.

But true repentance doesn't stop there: it leads to a new heart and a changed life.

III. True Repentance Leads to Spiritual Renewal and a Restored Relationship with God (10-12)

David continues his prayer of repentance; having confessed his sin and asked for forgiveness, he now asks God to change his heart, to give him a spirit that is willing to obey God.

We see this in vv.10-12: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.” In other words, he is praying for a restored relationship with God, and for God to hold him fast, giving the grace he needs to persevere and not fall away again. He’s praying for a changed heart that leads to a new life, not living in sin but in right communion with and obedience to God. he’s praying for inner, spiritual renewal and a restored relationship with God. David knows that his sinful heart is prone to sin, so he asks God to change the desires of his heart, to strengthen his spirit to walk not in sin but in obedience to the Lord. David knows that he is prone to wander, so he asks God to not give up on him, but to hold him fast, to give him a commitment to obey the Lord, and the grace he needs to persevere in faithfulness.

True repentance leads to a restored relationship with God - and that means a changed life. If we are truly repentant, then it will lead us to desire to sin no more but to obey God; to no longer walk in darkness, but in light; to walk not in unconfessed, unrepentant sin, but to instead walk in a restored relationship with the Lord! So after turning from our sins and confessing them to God, and turning to the Cross in faith, we then keeping turning to God and pray, “Lord, change my heart; help me to go forth and sin no more!” So as you are broken over your sin and resting in God’s glorious grace and mercy, ask God to hold you fast, to not let you fall away into sin and unbelief, and to give you the grace you need to be committed to walking with Him! Repentance isn’t complete without turning back to a restored relationship and walk with the Lord, a renewed spiritual commitment faithfulness, in light of his forgiveness and grace. Brothers and sisters, as we repent and believe, let us be committed to pursuing holiness, obedience, and steadfastness, trusting that He who has saved us will surely hold us fast.

As we genuinely repent and it leads to our spiritual renewal and restoration, it naturally leads us to want to *glorify and please the Lord all the more*.

IV. True Repentance Leads us to Glorify and Please God (51:13-19)

We see this in vv.14-15: “Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.” When we turn to God in repentance, confess our sins, and rest in the grace of the gospel, we are restored to the joy of our salvation. And when we experience a the joy of forgiveness afresh, it leads us to want to praise God and see Him glorified. This is true

the first time we become Christians, but it *grows* throughout our walk; the more we realize the depths of God's holiness, our sinfulness, and just how much we have been forgiven and cleansed by the blood of Jesus, it increases our delight and desire to praise God all the more!

It makes us want to see *others* experience the liberating joy of repentance and glorify God as well. This is why David prays in v.13: "Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you." Since we all continue to sin, we need to continually encourage each other to keep confessing, repenting, and believing the gospel. This is why we corporately confess our sins, as Cliff led us to do in prayer earlier. But even more fundamentally, it's absolutely crucial that we be a church community where it is considered normal to vulnerably confess our sins, to encourage each other to repent and turn to God, and to remind each other of the glorious grace and forgiveness we have at the cross. God is glorified among a church community characterized by true confession and repentance.

And that's because, when our hearts are truly repentant, the Spirit brings healing and spiritual renewal into our hearts that compels us to *respond* to the Lord, to glorify and *please him*. We see this in vv.16-19: "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, O God, you will not despise. Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; build up the walls of Jerusalem; then will you delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar." When we're truly repentant, we naturally want to respond in ways that glorify and please God. We want to live differently, walking not in sin but in communion with God; we want to rightly worship and obey Him. We want to show this in outward signs of worship and service - like the OT sacrifices. But God doesn't delight in mere outward signs or sacrifices or mere behavior changes - He delights in what they represent: *a broken and contrite heart*, genuine inner repentance and faith. We glorify and please God when our outward obedience flows out of a sincerely repentant heart.

So when our hearts are genuinely repentant, how do we respond in a way that pleases God? We're not under the Old Testament sacrificial system like David was. We know that Christ has come as the only sacrifice we need, once and for all. So we repent by confessing our sins, looking to Christ in faith, and asking God for the grace to please Him in our live - to present ourselves as living sacrifices in all that we do. But there are still two formal religious ceremonies God has given us as ways to outwardly respond and express our inward repentance and faith: that

is, *Baptism* and *the Lord's Supper*. No, the acts themselves don't save us, anymore than God delighted in empty, meaningless sacrifices; God delights in a broken, contrite heart, in true repentance and faith. And when we first believe, we can glorify and please God by professing our inward faith through the outward sign of baptism, where we profess our faith in the sacrifice of Christ; as you are immersed in the water, it's a symbol that you have been washed clean by the blood of Christ, being united in His death and resurrection through faith. So if you're interested in becoming a Christian and have questions, or if you think you are a believer, but have not yet been baptized, then I encourage you to come and ask me about it after the service (and kids, that means you, too, only ask your parents first).

And if you are a baptized believer this morning, there's another way God has given us to *continue* to outwardly proclaim our inward repentance and faith: and that is, the Lord's Supper. As we come to the Table, we are publicly acknowledging our sin and need for grace, proclaiming our faith in the gospel of Christ, and glorifying God by assuring one another that we are completely forgiven and cleansed from all our sin in Him. So if you're a baptized believer in good standing with a gospel-preaching church, I invite you to come to the table with us this morning. But first, let us have a moment of silence before we pray, in which I encourage you to take a moment to privately confess your sin to the Lord and run to the Cross.