

A Forgiving Heart
Psalm 51.1-19
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Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

Introduction to the Morning Lesson

In these recent sermons we been reflecting on David, Israel's greatest king and last Sunday we looked at the wretchedness of David's sin. David's adultery with Bathsheba and the subsequent murder of her husband Uriah were only the most obvious wrongdoing. In reality, David broke almost every commandment in the book and the root of all that sin was his desire to be in control rather than depend on God. But we don't need to go as far as David to look at sin. We only need to look here — in our own hearts.

So this morning we need to think about things the memories of which are often very painful, things that we would just as soon forget. But we can't forget them: times when we hurt someone deeply, times of telling half-truths or no truths, times of envy and bitterness, of gossip and putting down others — maybe putting down ourselves too, times of spiritual and moral laziness. Of course, we would just as soon not think about these things but Psalm 51 says we must. If we want to know God and be in a right relationship with God, we've got to grapple with the reality that we are not what we should be. We have messed up, we do mess up, we will mess up. Psalm 51 is for people, like King David and like you and me, who mess up. So let's read it, Psalm 51.1-19.

Psalm 51.1-19 (NRSV)

To the leader. A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

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.
For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.
Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.
You desire truth in the inward being;

therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.
Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.
Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.
Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.
O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.
The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.
Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;
rebuild the walls of Jerusalem,
then you will delight in right sacrifices,
in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.¹

¹ Bernhard Anderson notes that this psalm fits the classic form of lament: address (1-2), complaint (3-5), petition (6-12), vow of praise (13-17). Bernhard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983) 95. Claus Westermann comments, "The special significance of Psalm 51 is that it witnesses to the way in which the promises of the exilic prophets were adopted and taken over into personal piety and individual prayer, and so lived on in post-exilic times to become an important link between the Old and the New Testaments. The prophetic recognition that a complete new beginning and entire renewal can only come about when guilt is forgiven conditions this psalm's understanding of the individual and his relationship to God.

"Its significance lies also in this: the change brought about by forgiveness which we see here is to be understood as a change to a new and joyful life, in a new and right spirit, through a renewed fellowship with God. It is not seen as consisting in a perpetual awareness of sin or an attitude of submissive penitence." Claus Westermann, *The Living Psalms*, trans. J. R. Porter (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989) 100-101.

ONE: The emotions of the penitent heart

These words are very familiar to us for many of them have found their way into all manner of prayers and liturgies and become part of the vocabulary of people of the Bible. And I think the particular power of Psalm 51 comes from describing four emotions of the penitent heart.

First, *there is a plea for mercy*. We might expect the penitent David to begin with the details of his sin. He doesn't. The psalm is about sin but begins with grace, not judgment. Rather than wallow in self-pity David throws himself unto the mercy of God. "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love." David knew that the penitent person finds not the angry God who is ready to judge but the loving God who is eager to forgive and heal. So the psalm begins with a confident appeal for mercy and compassion. David didn't deserve forgiveness and he knew that. That's why he began with God's mercy: "According to your abundant mercy, O Lord, blot out my transgressions."

A second emotion was David feeling *the deep guilt of sin*. "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me." He is overwhelmed by his personal accountability. No one else was to blame and the damning character of evil is that as much as it hurts other people it hurts God more. David also knew that the inclination towards evil stains the very fabric of his life. From conception on our lives are marred by sinfulness.² And rather than being an excuse we know rather that this is a final witness to our need for mercy.

What brought David to this point where he had to face his deep and terrible guilt? The inscription on the psalm says, "when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba." If you missed last week's sermon, catch up this afternoon by reading 2 Samuel 11. At the end of chapter 11, even after all David's evil, he may have thought to himself, *Okay. So far, so good*. But then comes chapter 12 which all of you can read later today. There we learn that Nathan the prophet came to the king and said, "David, the Lord wants me to tell you a little story."

We can do no better than to read this searing paragraph from 2 Samuel 12. Nathan "came to [David], and said to him, 'There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the

² Anderson, 96. "In the past this sentence has been taken to mean that sex is inherently sinful, though necessary for procreation, and that sin is transferred genetically from one generation to another. This dubious understanding of "original sin" finds no support here. The poet is speaking existentially — not proposing a "doctrine" that applies to human beings generally. From the standpoint of the existing self, the poet looks back over his life to its very beginning in his mother's womb and confesses that the whole story of his life stands under Yahweh's scrutinizing judgment. No attempt is made to exonerate himself by laying the blame on heredity or environment: the problem lies in his own being — a self that exists in broken relationship to God and a self that can be renewed only through a new act of creation."

wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him.' Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, 'As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.'

"Nathan said to David, 'You are the man!'" (2 Samuel 12.1-7a) *Ecce homo* is the famous Latin rendering of the phrase. ***You are the man.***

So in the heart song of David the penitent king expressed a third emotion: ***a deep longing to be clean.*** "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness." The true penitent feels dirty.

Not long after Merrie and I moved into our first house, we discovered the builders had left the wooden forms around the concrete foundations. Unless that wood was taken out we were soon going to have a horrible termite problem. So a friend and I spent several hours underneath the house, crawling around on our bellies in the muck, pulling out the rotting wood. It was hot, dirty work. When we finally emerged we were covered with grime and filth. I knew then the longing for being really clean and eagerly anticipated a good, hot shower. David experienced a similar, even deeper longing. "Wash me, O Lord, and I shall be clean."

A fourth emotion was a longing, not just to be clean, but ***to be made whole*** in a way that only God can do. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me." The word translated here as *create* is only used when God creates. It is the same word as in Genesis 1.1 "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." David realized that the forgiveness of sin is not something we can do on our own through better education or more effort or greater discipline or whatever. The healing of sin is a creation of God. It is a wholeness only God can accomplish.

Four emotions: a plea for mercy, a deep sense of guilt, a desire to be clean, a longing for wholeness. These are the cries of the penitent heart.

TWO: What is our response?

So what's the point? What good comes from a penitent heart? There is a clue for us in the last two verses of the psalm, verses 18-19. They are often left off when reading this psalm in public because they obviously don't fit. In verses 16-17 the psalmist tells us that God isn't interested in sacrifices. "For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."³ In other words, the external religious routines of the day were not important, but a penitent spirit was important.

Then in the very next verse the psalmist asks God to "rebuild the walls of Jerusalem." That's an obvious reference to a time 400 years after David when Jerusalem

³ Anderson, 95. "Like the classical prophets of Israel (e.g., Isa. 1:10-17), the psalmist was critical of the Temple services, especially the sacrifices that were presented (see Lev. 1-7). The psalmist's language, in fact, was so sharply critical that a later revisionist added a qualification at the end of the psalm (vs. 18-19), thereby justifying the use of the psalm in Temple services."

had been destroyed by the Babylonians. And the psalm concludes by saying that “then [God] will delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on [God’s] altar.”⁴ In other words, let’s get back to external religious duty. In one verse it’s not important. In the next verse it is. What’s going on here?

Well, it’s quite clear that an editor, living long after David, a religious person, probably a priest — a *minister!* — felt a need to touch up David’s psalm. The psalms were the hymnbook of the temple and for some it didn’t seem quite acceptable to sing David’s psalm in the temple where sacrifices were also being offered, especially when the psalm was so critical of external sacrifice. So a little touching up was needed to make sure that the importance of religious duty was not forgotten.

You see, religious people — that’s you and me — like to get our religion into a safe, understandable, predictable, external system. Then we can do our religious duty and everything will be fine. And it is fine. Religious duty is important.

But ... and it’s a mighty big *but*. But the danger of religious duty is that we begin to think that is the reason God loves us and forgives us. We begin to think that God loves us and forgives us because we go to church. God loves us and forgives us because we give money to the church. God loves us and forgives us because we pray. God loves us and forgives us because we read the Bible. God loves us and forgives us because we serve on the Board of Deacons or sing in the choir and help serve meals or ... and the list goes on and on.

All of those are good things and none of them is the reason God loves and forgives us. Not even being sorry for our sins or being repentant of them is the reason God loves and forgives us. God loves and forgives us because God is loving and forgiving. And it is the penitent heart, the heart that cries out in deep emotion for God’s mercy, that truly knows the loving and forgiving heart of God.

Conclusion

That’s why only the penitent heart is a forgiving heart and we must have forgiving hearts. We must forgive because Jesus Christ tells us to forgive. He tells us in many ways but the place where he tells us the most compellingly is when he teaches us the Lord’s Prayer: “forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” That’s talking about sins and sinners. In Jesus’ prayer we pray for God to forgive us in the same way that we forgive. Or, to put it differently just by stating it in reverse, we are to forgive in the way God forgives.

John Buchanan, who is co-pastor of the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, tells how when he was about 10 years old, his parents bundled him off to church camp one week every summer. After breakfast they attended classes, a lot like Sunday school but taught by ministers from other churches in the presbytery. John didn’t much like

⁴ Westermann, 100. “As all commentators agree, these verses are a postscript. In them we find a different and a positive attitude to animal sacrifices, which views the fact that, for the moment, they cannot be offered as a grievous loss. Hence v. 18 is a request to God to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, so that under their protection the sacrificial cult can again be carried out as before.”

those classes. But he remembers something he learned from a teacher named Ralph Illingworth, a big and jovial man who could hit a softball a mile. That gave Ralph a lot of credibility in John's eyes.

One morning Ralph was teaching a class of young boys about the Apostles' Creed and he said, "Fellas, when you get to the words 'crucified, dead, buried, he descended into hell,' bow your heads. It is an old Christian custom to bow your head in reverence at that part. And then, as you say, 'On the third day he rose again from the dead,' you can raise your head again."⁵

John reflects that years later he still doing it. And so should we all, if not literally, at least in our hearts. For that is the only basis for our forgiveness. That's why we come to table this morning, to remember that our Lord was "crucified, dead, buried" and "he rose again." Christ did that so we could be forgiven ... and then forgiving.

Forgiveness doesn't come because it is deserved. Forgiveness comes from a forgiving heart. Our only hope of being forgiven by God isn't because of religious duty or because we deserve it. We don't. You don't. I don't. David didn't. But God forgives. That's our only hope. And our greatest joy! And because God forgives us who don't deserve it, we are called to be forgiving of those who don't deserve it either.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

⁵ From John M. Buchanan, "No Story So Divine," online, <http://www.fourthchurch.org/>, Internet, 17 March 2002.