

Prepare! | Repentance and the Advent of Joy

Benefits of True Repentance

Psalm 51; Psalm 32

12.19.21

*Psalm 51 (For the choir director. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba) Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your **lovingkindness**; According to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions. ² Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity And cleanse me from my sin. ³ For I know my transgressions, And my sin is ever before me. ⁴ Against You, You only, I have sinned And done what is evil in Your sight, So that You are justified when You speak And blameless when You judge.*

⁵ Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me. ⁶ Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being, And in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom. ⁷ Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. ⁸ Make me to hear joy and gladness, Let the bones which You have broken rejoice. ⁹ Hide Your face from my sins And blot out all my iniquities.

¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a steadfast spirit within me. ¹¹ Do not cast me away from Your presence And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. ¹² Restore to me the joy of Your salvation And sustain me with a willing spirit. ¹³ Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, And sinners will be converted to You.

¹⁴ Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, the God of my salvation; Then my tongue will joyfully sing of Your righteousness. ¹⁵ O Lord, open my lips, That my mouth may declare Your praise. ¹⁶ For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; You are not pleased with burnt offering. ¹⁷ The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.

By Your favor do good to Zion; Build the walls of Jerusalem. ¹⁹ Then You will delight in righteous sacrifices, In burnt offering and whole burnt offering; Then young bulls will be offered on Your altar.

Psalm 32 A Psalm of David. A Maskil. How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, Whose sin is covered! ² How blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, And in whose spirit there is no deceit!

³ When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away Through my groaning all day long. ⁴ For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer. Selah. ⁵ I acknowledged my sin to You, And my iniquity I did not hide; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD"; And You forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah. ⁶ Therefore, let everyone who is godly pray to You in a time when You may be found; Surely in a flood of great waters they will not reach him. ⁷ You are my hiding place; You preserve me from trouble; You surround me with songs of deliverance..

⁸ I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go; I will counsel you with My eye upon you. ⁹ Do not be as the horse or as the mule which have no understanding, Whose trappings include bit and bridle to hold them in check, Otherwise they will not come near to you. ¹⁰ Many are the sorrows of the wicked, But he who trusts in the LORD, lovingkindness shall surround him. ¹¹ Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, you righteous ones; And shout for joy, all you who are upright in heart.

This year we've joined with others in Christendom, especially those in the High Church traditions who use the weeks leading up to Christmas as a time solemn reflection. We sing sad words like "ransom captive Israel" and "long lay the world in sin and error pining" – so, we DO enter IN to that sense of longing and imagining a world without a Savior.

Many Christian traditions use the Advent Season, to prepare the way of the Lord (Isa 40.3; Mat 3.3) in just the way John the Baptist called people to do i.e. by contrition and repentance. And this far we've looked at King David as a model for repentance. Following his notorious sin of adultery and murder and deceit, when he was called to account by his minister, Nathan, King David repented and then wrote it down as a poem – Psalm 51.

Some say our second reading is a sequel to Psalm 51 (safe bet). There are actually seven such Psalms called "penitential psalms" in which the writers reflect on their failings poetically before God (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143).

In the Bible, wherever people face their faults/sins AND where we get examples of that practice, we find...counterintuitively/unexpectedly that the act of repentance yields benefits. THAT's our topic today – how saying the words we ALL dread to say, "I am wrong..." how speaking those repulsive/vile words, "I have sinned" – if that horrid phrase (we hate to say) if it's a part of true repentance it will lead to all kinds of positive results... benefits you'd never imagine.

This sermon unpacks the truth of those verses that say, "God gives grace to the humble but opposes the proud" (James 4.6; 1 Peter 5.5) If we knew how great the gains maybe we'd repent more boldly! So let's look at:

- 1) The Silent Treatment**
- 2) Breaking the Silence**
- 3) Silent No More**

IF Psalm 32 (second reading) really IS a sequel to the famous "create in me a clean heart"-Psalm then this less-famous second reading addresses perhaps the biggest threat to true repentance, which is SILENCE.

"When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away" – David's looking back over those apparently torturous nine months when he acted like everything was fine and even acted like he was a hero for marrying the widow of a soldier killed in battle. Those agonizing months took a toll on David – spiritually and physically. And even though he tried to believe that no one knew what he'd done, the fear of exposure and the knowledge of his wrong made David sick and tired.

We can sort of read between the lines a little and we can imagine why David was seduced into silence and why others (like we ourselves) keep silent about OUR failings and sins. For David,

fear of exposure and the sense that God was unhappy with his actions were central in his motives but there are LOTS of reasons we loathe admitting our wrongs.

We hate to be wrong because it's embarrassing and worse: exposure leads to shame and shame feels like the experience of hell (it's the deepest kind of emotional and spiritual pain).

I could also imagine David (and others) procrastinating. We've all heard a noise coming from our car and hoped it would go away...because sometimes it does. And David wondered if, with the passing of time, the pounding of his tell-tale heart would quiet down but instead... it got worse. *"My vitality was drained away like the fever-heat of summer."*

Likewise, to say, "I'm wrong" will make people think less of us and that's part of the seduction of silence. It makes us look needy or incompetent or worse in the eyes of others. David wanted to look royal and holy – that's why he *"sent"* and crafted that elaborate cover-up and that's why he was seduced into silence. We may think, "I'm a Christian and Christians are supposed to be good people!"

Also, at some point, *David probably told himself that all kings do this kind of thing...* so maybe it wasn't that bad after all. He minimized his own sin and found ways to suppress the guilt but in time he was able to say, (51.3) "I KNOW my transgression..." The Greek word for confess (ὁμολογέω) means "to say the same" i.e. to see sin as God sees it not trivialize it.

Another reason David (and WE) have a hard time being open about our faults is because we get good at managing them. We atone for our sins. Men do this with their wives (and the other way around). I've met couples whose whole relationship was an elaborate system of atonement – hurting each other and then silently "making it up" but not talking/confessing.

People make deals with God – "Oh Lord, if YOU get me out of this jam, I swear I'll become... a monk..."

Additionally, we go silent when we don't want to bother God... In other words, we've committed this sin before... many times before...many, MANY times! "And I'm beginning to think I'm taking advantage of God's grace... so instead of dumping this in God's lap AGAIN I'm gonna pledge to stop it! I'll get an accountability partner: every time you hear me gossip, I give you permission to call me out!"

At the core of all these efforts is doubt in God's goodness and readiness to forgive and a dodging of God's real way of dealing with sin. They're ways of saying, "Lord, THĒ way You dealt with sin is apparently not working for me so if it's ok with You I'll just take care of this one myself – gonna really set my mind to stop it! I'll take an anger management class; gonna have a mystical experience; volunteer at church...gonna be a nicer person" But in the end, we've, "insulted the

Spirit of grace" (Heb 10.29) we've actually rejected God's remedy as insufficient and we've made up our own (Gal 5.2).

So how do we find the nerve to break the silence? There's a lot of spiritual inertia holding us back into the silent treatment so how do we break the inertia and break the silence.

Well it begins with this unlikely word in 32.2 *"Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity"* – it's not a word we use very often: impute.

The Apostles picked up on this word and see it as a seed that would blossom with the coming and work of Jesus Christ. In *St Paul's Letter to Rome* (CH 4) he looks back on Abraham and then on David (from this very Psalm) and Paul describes how Abraham believed God and God COUNTED Abraham righteous *NOT because Abraham worked to be godly and in response God compensated Abraham for his work* but instead because God COUNTED Abraham righteous and Abraham received this new status as a gift and NOT as what God owed to Abraham. (

God imputed to Abraham a new status – he was ungodly but God counted him righteous because Abraham received it through TRUST.

Then, quoting this very Psalm (32), St Paul writes: *"David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: "Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin."* (Romans 4.6-7)

In other words, "we don't get a good report card or a clean slate with God by BEING good but by trusting His way of dealing with sin..." What Abraham and David saw from afar, St Paul is expanding and explaining: God has imputed or ascribed or assigned the believers blame to Jesus Christ *and God imputes or ascribes or assigns credit TO THE BELIEVER because of what Jesus Christ has done* – His life of perfect love is attributed to ME when I believe and MY guilt, my record of wrongs, is attributed to Him.

Paul uses the word and idea AGAIN in 2nd Corinthians CH 5 (19) when he writes, *"God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing or counting their trespasses against them"* Believers in Jesus Christ aren't righteous; God counts them righteous before they ever act/think that way and they receive that status by trust, by repentant faith.

The real difference between David and Saul is NOT so much that David was a good man and Saul a bad man but that David was a repentant and Saul kept silent... David broke the silence. Christians are NOT famous for being good...but for repenting/believing.

Now what happens when we DO break the silence and *we take hold of God's way of dealing with our faults and sins – we apprehend the mercy of God by trust* – we take our sins, again and

again and again to Jesus where we see our sins imputed to Him and His right status imputed or attributed to us. (Wait: did I say, “again and again”? I MEANT: “again and again and again and again and again and again and again” etc.)

And as we do, we find forgiveness and RELIEF from guilt is sort of reapplied or assured to us. We get not only relief (isn't that a wonderful word?!) we get RELIEF from guilt-feelings and from the guilt-record.

We get joy – “how blessed” (vv 1-2 & ending)... in 51 “*restore to me the JOY of YOUR salvation*” – It's a repeated, solid emphasis – the restoration of joy and gladness or rejoicing. Mourning turns to dancing for those who repent... Paul asked the Galatians (4.15), “*Where is the sense of JOY or blessedness you once had?*” Well, it returns through repentant faith. It's counter intuitive that the way up is to go DOWN...

AND repenters get instruction of a kind that can't be had any other way – “I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go; I will counsel you with My eye upon you.” (32.8) Isn't it odd how David wrote at the end of the first Psalm (51) – first, “You do not delight in sacrifice...you are NOT pleased with burnt offerings – The sacrifices of God are a broken and contrite heart”?

And then immediately it says, “Then You will delight in righteous sacrifices...” (v 19) – When sacrifices are used as an alternative to repentance, they're an insult to the One who gave THE Sacrifice. But repenters who rejoice in God's free grace can worship and sacrifice out of joy/freedom and it delights God's Heart!

Repenters have their motives and hearts and desires transformed – they begin to BE in practice what God has already declared to them to be. They change inwardly NOT only in behavior (like horses and mules!)

Also, there's protection for the repentant. 32.10: “Many are the sorrows of the wicked, But he who trusts in the LORD, lovingkindness (hesed) shall surround him.” It's not to say that they don't face sickness or unemployment etc. but that all that tough stuff is permeated with grace and with God's good intentions (hesed) and works together for our ultimate good!

Additionally, when we practice repentance as a pattern, we become spiritually helpful to others in new and exciting ways: “THEN, I will teach transgressors and sinners will be converted to You!”

When people see that YOU, as a Christian, need the grace of God every day and you're NOT cocky and self-confident but that you fail a lot and repent a lot – they will be drawn to that. Repentance builds up the walls of Jerusalem (51.19) – it invites real sinners to join the grace-people. It extends hope and leads to worship.

OK – I'll close with three quick ideas on how to open up and stay open (Silent No More). First: trade in your definition of what a good person is. It's NOT sacrifice but repentance that leads to righteousness. Without faith it's impossible to please God i.e. repentant faith. Christians ought to be famous NOT for being righteous but for being humble (cf. Saul and David).

Second, if you've repented the same sin again and again then DO IT AGAIN...and again because turning to other sources like will-power, mysticism, asceticism, accountability and strictness can be a form of idolatry and may be an insult to God. Hebrews talks about those who go back to the sacrificial system in Judaism because they have sin in their lives. The verdict is "you have insulted the Spirit of grace" (10.29). If sacrifices could take care of your sin, then Jesus Christ's death was unnecessary. It insults Him when you go somewhere else. Instead, ask the Holy Spirit's help in your repentance; see the beauty of God's grace in Jesus and go back again and again (see also Colossians 2.16ff).

Third: look for JOY (Gal 4.15) and the other benefits in your daily walk with God and when it's absent – just try to smile... try to be happier...no... counter intuitively: REPENT! HOW BLESSED (2x) All these benefits are unexpectedly for the godly and WHO, pray tell are the godly? The godly are those who see their sin and keep on repenting. (see 32: vv 6 and 11)

LAST: move toward others (see 51.13, 18-19 & 32.11). If you're humbling yourself before God and breaking the silence...If you're open with others that YOU GOT NOTHIN'! Nothing but Jesus Christ's righteousness that's on LOAN to you...and "by the way, I had to call on Him today when I blew up at my kids...when I was an approval seeker... when I lusted ...when I spent too much money shopping"

Repentance let's people see what it really means to be a Christian.

We're NOT calling "them" to shape up... but to break the silence, humble themselves, and find relief and new joy leading to actual transformation, peace with God, peace with self and peace with others.