

Summer Sermon Series in the book of Psalms. We'll look at Psalm 51 today, and, Lord willing, next week as well. You know that in June Pastor Randy and I were looking at *Psalms That Meet Us in Our Time of Sorrow* and in July, we thought we would look at *Psalms That Lead Us into Worship*. Last week Psalm 100 was presented, and we saw how God calls us into a time of praise---reflecting on who he is causes the believer's heart to praise. And today and next week, we want to look at Psalm 51 as the Psalms lead us into worship. The first aspect of this Psalm is confession as a part of our worship, and next week, the Word and the sacraments.

So we look at Psalm 51, verses 1 through 9 today. Before we read I want to ask you if you're familiar with this Food Network Channel show called *Mystery Diners*. Anybody? Maybe? Maybe not. My family is. It's just like a host of other reality TV shows. The basic premise of this show is that restaurant owners who suspect that one or more of their employees are either stealing or lying, or in general mistreating their customers, call in a group of mystery diner investigators. These operatives set up hidden cameras all over the restaurant and the bar and the kitchen and the back porch in order to find out what's going on when no one thinks anyone is looking. All the proceedings are videotaped and they stream them live to these TV consoles that are set up in an antechamber, some control room that's off of the restaurant property. (All of you chefs are paying attention.) Now, I may have been born on a weekend, but it wasn't last weekend, so I know that 'unscripted' and 'TV reality' rarely come together, and this show really does seem to have villains and heroes and all that stuff. But that doesn't change the basic premise, namely this: when what is thought to be hidden from the sight of others is eventually brought abruptly into the light, the reactions are all the same. Eventually the suspects are confronted, and in the midst of their outrage at being accused for what this wrong is, and their vehement denial of that wrong, they're treated to the videotaped presentation. And there in living color they can see themselves stealing wallets, spitting in the food, and all the other things that are presented in the show. And they either come clean at that point and face the consequences, or they run from the control room, never to be seen again, trying to hide from the camera's all-seeing eye.

We may not live in an environment where continual surveillance over our lives takes place. Or maybe you do. No comment. But we can enter into this sermon with the certain knowledge that every creature that lives does so under the all-knowing gaze of Almighty God. It's a truth that we give intellectual assent to, but it often doesn't penetrate our minds deeply enough, nor does it migrate to our hearts soundly enough in order to inform our wills enough, and as a result, we sin. As a result of not realizing that God sees all, we sin. I remember when we walked through the children's catechism with our kids and I shuddered at question twelve every time. *Does God know all things?* And in their small voices they would repeat back the truth, *Yes, nothing can be hid from God.* I don't know how many times I've returned to that answer over and over and over again as an adult man. *Does God know all things?* Yes, nothing can be hid from God. It's a terrifying thought, it's a comforting thought, and all at the same time.

The text before us today is a recollection of a time when King David encountered the reality of an omniscient God, and the awareness of his sin was made very clear. Let's read from Psalm 51, versus 1 through 9. God's word for us.

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 only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your works and blameless in your judgment.

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.

Behold you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the 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 broken rejoice.  
Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

God's word for us.

What we have before us today in this text is a privilege. It's a tough privilege, it's a hard privilege, but it is a privilege, nonetheless. If we, I trust, can see the dark depravity of our human hearts and the glorious beauty of our merciful God, that's what's here. That's what's here before us today.

I began at verse 1, but the Psalm, as you've heard us talk about from this platform, begins actually with the superscript. The superscript is "To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba." It's a Psalm of David. It's a song. It's one of six personal laments, a penitential Psalm. These are Psalms that occur when the heart is penitent. We see this here, we see this in Psalm 32, Psalm 6, other places. But the superscript is this: it's a Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet comes to him after David had sinned with Bathsheba. So the setting of the Psalm is perfectly set for us, it's very clear.

Some of the most sobering words in print in the Bible are found in 2 Samuel 11, that first passage there, 1 through 5, where we read these words, among others: In the spring of the year, when kings go out to battle, David remained behind in Jerusalem. Samuel goes on to record for our instruction the tragic drama that followed: an unbridled lust, devious scheming, adultery, murder, a tangled web of deceit designed to cover the scandalous sin between David and Bathsheba, and eventually the murder of her husband, Uriah. It is sordid, it's ugly, it's grotesque, and it's in the Bible. It's there to present to you and to me that that's what lies in here. Make no mistake, that's what we are capable of. Because that's what the Scriptures are trying to communicate. That's what it is to actually receive Christ as Savior---we admit that fact. When people come and join our fellowship and they take those membership vows---that second vow is stark. I am unfit and unable to come to God on my own. If I'm to be saved, I must trust in Christ alone for that salvation.

The difference that we see in the David depicted in Psalm 51 and the David of 2 Samuel 11 and the first part of 2 Samuel 12, is an encounter with the prophet Nathan. The conversation is recorded in 2 Samuel 12:1-7. Nathan---maybe you recall this story---comes to David after the sin, and basically uses an analogy, a story. Nathan presents the picture of a man who has much property and many sheep, and this rich man selfishly looks at the ewe lamb of another man and takes it for himself. David's anger and indignation at this individual rises up within him, and David pronounces the death penalty for that abusive one with all of his property, who took this advantage. Nathan realizes that at that time it's the right time to say that word, 'You are the man, David.' Think for a moment with me, imagine with your sanctified imagination, what is going on in David, the king of Israel, at that moment. Just moments earlier he was puffed up with rage at this horrible injustice, and then the world gets peeled back. His heart is exposed and laid open bare. That which had been done in the secrecy of darkness is now exposed to the light of truth. He hit the brick wall of actual reality. The brick wall of actual reality.

Because we live sometimes in this imagined fantasy of a world that we create---that there doesn't exist this God who is holy and righteous and just and cannot look on sin. We've created a world where it's okay to do all manner of things that God says he forbids us do. And that is not reality. What David experienced was the brick wall of reality. Matthew Henry, the great Bible scholar and commentator, says that it is a terror to a hypocrite to think that Christ knows all things. It's a terror to a hypocrite to think that Christ knows all things, because eventually those things will be brought to the light.

Have you ever been in that place? Maybe it didn't come in such dramatic fashion as it did in David's life.

Perhaps you've had someone bring something to your attention that you hadn't previously taken into account, and it uncovers your heart, and it's a shock, and it's abrupt, and it's humbling. Or perhaps you knew what it was that the person was bringing your way, but you just couldn't bring yourself to acknowledge that what they were agreeing with was reality, and you had to agree with that as well. That's who you are---that you are actually capable of being that person that they were describing. O it just may be that you've been committing serious sin and believing to yourself---because no other humans had seen---that you're free to continue in the way of destruction without restraint, until divine intervention took place and abruptly, that which was done in secret, was brought to the light.

If that's you in any one of those categories, this sermon is for you. This sermon is for me, because I confess that over the years I've been each one of those scenarios and then some. I need God to not leave me alone, and respectfully, so do you. I've had my high view of myself brought low to a God-honoring level of reality. It's never pleasant, but it's always productive as I submit to it. That's the kind of God we worship, that's the kind of God we serve. He's not content to leave us where we were when he saved us initially, but each of us, by his grace, and by his power, are more and more transformed into the image of our glorious Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. This Psalm is simply a sinner---just like you, just like me---recognizing their sin and their sinfulness. None of us have arrived. We know that. And this is the recurring journey, the Christian walk---from desperate cries for mercy to a confident assurance of forgiveness and then repeat. It's like the shampoo bottle that I don't use much of. Confess, repent, believe, repeat. That's our walk. That's what we do.

So in this Psalm, I want to point out in these first 9 verses, four characteristics of Christian confession to draw our attention to. Four characteristics of Christian confession.

The first one is that Christian confession is characterized by a *Desperate Cry for Mercy*. A desperate cry for mercy. Verse 1. "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions." Often when I'm in trouble I'm not even sure of what comes out of my mouth. I hope it's like 'Yikes' or something like that or 'Help.' But I daresay that probably in time of trouble what comes out of my mouth is something that's not considerable for this mixed audience. That's not what we have here. What we have before us in verse 1 is far from a knee-jerk response to the exposure of sin. Rather, what we have in Psalm 51 is a considered and deliberate cry for help that's informed by a knowledge of the one from whom the help is sought. David begins with 'Have mercy.' The root word there has 'grace' contained in it. David is well aware that the mercy he is pleading for, he does not deserve in the least. There's nothing that he's accomplished or could accomplish that could cause God to look on him with mercy or with favor. It's the same root word that we find in Numbers 6, that blessing of Aaron that we hear often at the end of the service. "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you." Right there in that phrase is what David is crying. If there is to be mercy coming my way, it's all on you, God. It's not on me, I don't deserve it. In fact, not only do I not deserve that---I'm ill-deserving---I deserve something else altogether. I deserve divine judgment. I deserve wrath.

David knows this and that's why he makes the foundation of his cry for mercy, he makes his appeal, according to God's steadfast love and according to God's abundant mercy. You see what he says there? Have mercy, O God, according to your steadfast love---your *hesed*, your covenant, faithful love, your kindness---and according to your abundant mercy. When Moses was issued the law that he delivered to the Israelites, this is the second issuing, the second tablet, we find in Exodus 34. In verses 6 and 7 God declared his righteousness and his faithfulness to his people. In verse 6 we read, "The LORD passed before [Moses] and proclaimed, 'The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty---he visits the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation.'" What God was delivering to Moses and what I believe David was calling upon was, you

are a righteous God, you are a holy God. You cannot look on me in my sin. I know that because of my iniquity, I am unclean before you, but you are the God of steadfast love, you are the God of the covenant-completing love and abundant mercy. So Lord, have mercy on me, according to your character.

You see, that's Christian confession. We don't just say, oh, I got caught, oh, sorry, I don't want these consequences, I hate them, let's get out of this as soon as we can. Christian confession says, that's me. I did that. But according to the steadfast love of Almighty God delivered to us through Christ's sacrifice and according to the abundant mercy that God displayed toward sinners, I'm forgiven, and I cry out to him with that foundation. That's the first characteristic of Christian confession.

The second is a *Critical Need for Cleansing*. A critical need for cleansing. In verse 1 David cries out to God to blot out his transgressions and in verse 2 he pleads with God for a cleansing that is complete and comprehensive. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, cleanse me from my sin. Because David recognizes that he has replaced God's glory with his own glory and it's ugly. It's disgusting. David acknowledges to his shame that his sins have polluted his soul, they've tarnished him in a way that the image of God has been obscured. Listen, the faithfulness of God---this is what David is acknowledging---the faithfulness of God has been replaced by David's infidelity. The characteristic of the God who protects and shepherds the ones who cannot protect themselves has been replaced by David taking advantage of another man's wife. The loving sovereignty of a powerful God who wields his power wisely has been replaced by David with an abuse of power that resulted in the death of Uriah the Hittite, one of his generals. When we sin, the image of God and his original design for us is clouded over and his glory is veiled. That's what David is confessing. I'm guilty, I'm polluted, I have robbed your glory, I wanted to make a name for myself. And David is horrified by that fact, and he cries out to have it blotted out from his record.

Now I have rejoiced with several of you over the years---I've been here fifteen years this summer---I've rejoiced with several of you when the state of Maryland has expunged your criminal record. I've rejoiced with you, that the state of Maryland has cleaned your record of the crime, or various ones, that you committed. We rejoice because Maryland was going to, from that point forward, treat you as if that never occurred. And that was a time of rejoicing. That's what David cries out for: I want my record blotted out, I don't want this between us any longer, this sin that I've committed. I don't want that I tried to rob your glory always before me, because you are the glorious one, not me.

David also cries out, wash me thoroughly, cleanse me from my sin. It's a verb actually associated with laundering clothes. It's right there in the Scriptures---we're supposed to do laundry, college students. But I digress. This is a term that refers to scrubbing and cleansing and getting out the stain. We have a goldfish pond out in front in our garden. Now, I'm not going to try to gross you out, but you may be grossed out as we go with this illustration, because every so often we have to clean the filters out, and sometimes we do it on a day when we've done yard work, too. So imagine this: a summer day, temperatures in the 90's, cut the grass. Got a picture of the body and the clothes yet? Then, pull out the two filters. Now you've got goldfish goo and pond scum and all manner of other things under your fingernails and on your skin and your clothes. And now, don't you just want a big hug? Don't you just want to grab the person that's been doing that, and, just, oh, I don't know, just breathe it all in and make a memory like they do in *The Parent Trap*. Probably not, because we're repulsed by that, it's disgusting. Trust me, we can tell you. Come interview us afterwards, we're disgusting when we do that.

Beloved, listen. Jesus came to hug you in that state. You're disgusting and filthy, polluted---just all manner of desperate was your heart in its blackness because of sin. Jesus wanted to embrace you. But in order to embrace you, he had to take that pollution on himself. That's what he did. That's the great exchange. God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us. All the guilt and pollution, all the deceiving, and all the

treacherous ways---everything was mounted onto Christ. Then he suffered and bled and died in your place, in my place. He did it. He wanted to embrace us, to hug us. He knew the stench. And David knows the stench, and he says, Lord, please cleanse me. You see, it's not just about the clothes. It's that we are the garment. We are the soiled clothes. It's our heart. It's our mind. It's our very soul. And that's what David was confessing. We need a soul-cleansing agent, and the only source given by which the foulest of us can be made clean is the cross-shed blood of the sinless Savior. That's how God does it. I don't understand it, do you? It's a mystery that we're cleansed by the blood of another. It's a mystery, but it's a sweet and glorious, amazing, wonderful mystery, nonetheless. That's how God saves sinners like us. So he does that.

The third characteristic, then, that we need to see, of Christian confession, is an *Honest Agreement with Reality* because we can't get there by pretending that we don't need it. We can't get there by pretending we don't smell. You've been with people who do that, and it's like, wow, they're really self-deceived, there. I think they think they're ready for the dinner party, and they are not. I've been on camping trips with high school guys---I know.

The honest agreement with reality is what we're called to, because the Scriptures show us that that's what David did. Verses 3 through 6, I think, break out for us four quick lessons of what it means to own it. I think we could rename this section, 'Owning it,' owning it on every level. Think back to the call to worship we heard right at the beginning of the service. When we read from 1 John chapter 1, what goes through your mind when you hear verse 8? Verse 8 says this: If we say we have no sin, then we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. What hit your mind when you hear verse 8? We must be aware, I must be aware, all of us together must be aware, that there is a constant threat before us to self-deception, to deceive ourselves, and to minimize the reality of sin in our lives. That's why we come to church. We need these reminders on a regular basis. The beauty of God's word is, alongside the sobering reminder of the possibility of self-deception is the powerful promise of the character of Christ. Verse 9 of 1 John: If we confess our sins---that's what we're looking at today---if we confess our sins, he is faithful, he is just, to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. The call to confession is the call to be honest and agree with reality. The David of 2 Samuel was asking constantly, whether consciously or not, he was constantly trying to figure out, how do I manage my sin? How can I get Bathsheba over to my house? How can I get her husband to the front lines? How can I make the front lines of my army pull back, so that Uriah probably will get killed? How can I cover when they tell me the good news that Uriah is dead? He is constantly expending energy trying to maintain the caricature of the person that he had created for everybody to see. Gosh, that's what we do. He is just the first of many in a long line of others, like us. We do that. Managing sin is all about me guarding my reputation and safeguarding my name. Listen, confession of sin is all about God and honoring his reputation and safeguarding his name. When I agree with reality that I'm a sinner and I need a Savior and that Savior has been gloriously provided in Christ---I am honoring God. You get that, right? Oh, we need that. We need that.

So David says---I believe there's four lessons for us to have here---David was owning his sin on every level. He was essentially finding his place before God again. The first lesson comes from verse 3. There is a constant need for forgiveness for all. A constant need for forgiveness. David says, "I know my transgressions, my sin is ever before me." The Hebrew word he employs here is the word, *yada*, 'I know.' It's an intimate knowledge. We see in Genesis, Adam *yada* Eve and they begat Seth. You get the intimacy of that word. It's a full-orbed knowledge of this thing, and David says, I *know* my sin. I'm painfully aware of my transgressions. In fact, in that passage he uses three separate words: iniquity, transgression, and sin. He's confessing that he has seen clear, he's discovered the 'why he does' behind the 'what he does' and it's ugly and it's selfish and he agrees with it. It's a sad reality of living in a fallen world. There's a constant need for forgiveness.

The second lesson we can learn of what 'owning it' means is that there's only one party chiefly offended when we sin. In verse 4 David said, "Against you, and you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight." Isn't

David so cruel, so crass. What? Doesn't he know how he's injured Bathsheba in this activity, how he injured Uriah in this activity, the son who was a product of the liaison who died as a result, all the people that were affected, all the people that looked up to David now had his reputation change for him? David knows all that and then some, I guarantee you. But he recognizes that his sin, all our sin, is a chief offense against Almighty God. That's what an honest agreement with reality is all about. So that when God speaks about who we are, he may be justified in his words and blameless in his judgment. Have you agreed with God to that level? Because that's really the entrance of salvation, that's how we get saved. We humble ourselves and we agree with God. I'm a sinner. And I have sinned.

David came to the sad reality that his mindset of trying to manage sin is as futile as the aunt at your Fourth of July picnic last week who is trying to figure out who gets steak and who gets chicken off of the grill. You say that's ludicrous. I say, good, you got the illustration. It's ludicrous for the aunt to try to determine who gets the steak off the grill. And it's ludicrous for you and for me, the creatures that God has created, to attempt to rob him of his glory. It won't happen and if we think it is happening, it won't happen for very long. So when we sin, we're trying to make a name for ourselves, and when we confess our sin and we cry out to him for mercy, we're honoring his name. That's how we worship. That's why confession is a part of the Christian worship---we come to confess our sins. David's saying, I don't have an excuse. No one finds fault in your judgment. I am what you have said I am through Nathan the prophet. So 'owning it' means those two things.

'Owning it' also means that we confess our sin as well as our sinfulness. Verse 5 says, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." David is not talking about how his mother and father got together in some back room and conceived him in a liaison. What he's saying there is that everyone who is born, is born in Adam and in Adam we have been given this original sin. Because Adam sinned, we sin. When Adam died, we died. David says that I sin because I'm a sinner. I'm not a sinner because I sin. There's a distinction there, a very great distinction. Sin springs forth from my heart by nature. And that's what David says. 'Owning it' includes confessing our sin as well as our sinfulness.

And 'owning it' also means that the word of God is given in order to protect us from sin and its ramifications. Verse 6 says, "Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart." There's another use of the word *yada* here---intimate. In the inmost being, David says, you want your truth to pervade my heart. You want your truth to be that which drives me in everything I do. You want it to be intimate. So David says, I understand that what you have called me to confess is that I was not meditating on your word. That protection that you have given to me to guard my heart and to guard my mind---I neglected that. And so agreeing with reality and owning it is to recognize that the word of God has a more important place in our lives than we give it. And I think that that statement is no less true regardless of where you place the word of God in your life. It may be of paramount [importance] to you and you read it every day, praise be to God. I don't think we can over-emphasize the Scripture that the psalmist in 119 talks about: Your word I have hidden in my heart so that I might not sin against God. That's what David is confessing. He wasn't organized, driven, motivated by the word of God, by the truth of God. That's why he fell. When we confess we are agreeing with reality.

The last point that I want to make of the four major ones [on the outline] is that a characteristic of Christian confession is that there's a *Radical Redemption and a Radical Restoration* that takes place. I don't think we give God enough credit in salvation. Not that we don't sing 'Salvation belongs to the Lord.' But what he does in salvation: He converts dead people to living beings in love with him. David says, "Purge me with the hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear the joy and gladness; let the bones you have broken rejoice. Hide your face from my sins, blot out my iniquity." David is resting in the promise of completeness. He's resting in the promise that he will be completed. He's going to be perfected. He knows he's on the journey, but he's resting in the promise of completeness by the God who completely keeps his

promises---if I could be so bold as to turn those words that way. It's a complete forgiveness and cleansing that David expects, it's a complete restoration of relationship that David expects, and it's a complete restoration of joy that David expects. Contentment in Christ alone.

“Purge me with the hyssop.” Purge. The word there in the Hebrew actually literally means to de-sin, to take it out, to get it from me, to get the effects from me, to take that away so that's not what defines me any longer. “Purge me with the hyssop.” The hyssop is that branch that we've seen a lot in the Old Testament if you have taken note in various places where God is instructing how to be clean: with the lepers in Leviticus 14 or after someone comes in contact with a dead body in Numbers 19 the hyssop branch is used in the process in the ceremony of cleansing . And at the end of each of those passages it says that the one who does these instructions shall be clean. That's what David is calling upon the Lord. He says, I know that if you purge me with hyssop, I shall be clean, completely. That's confidence in the work of the Savior.

Of course we the familiar passage from Isaiah 1:18 come into view as well, where the prophet says to the people of God, Come, let us reason together, let us dispute together. Let us---come on, let's work this out. I'll tell you who you are as my people, what you've done, I'll tell you what I'll do for you. “Let us reason together, says the LORD; though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.” That's complete transformation. That's what happens in our hearts when Jesus heals us. Hyssop was also used in Egypt to apply the blood of the lamb to the doorpost lintel and to the side post, so that when the angel of death passed over on that night, if the blood was seen, the firstborn was spared. This hyssop has a lot of connection to salvation.

This is complete restoration of forgiveness and cleansing, and a complete restoration of the relationship, too. David says, “Let me hear joy and gladness.” Literally there the Hebrew is, ‘Thou shall make me hear joy and gladness.’ You're going to unclog my ear so that I can hear being received again, because all the images here are of one who is outcast, one who is ostracized. Because of his sin, that's the feeling he had. What David says is, you completely restore the relationship, you're going to make me hear the joy and the gladness of being restored to the family of God. You'll open my ears and you'll let me hear that, and that's what I'm going to rejoice in. So the complete restoration of relationship leads to a complete restoration of my joy. David says, ‘Let the bones that you have broken rejoice.’ Literally, the Hebrew there is, “Let these broken bones dance.” Let these broken bones dance. Can you see the complete work from black to white, from death to life, from outcasts polluted, guilty to received cleansed, forgiven.

How about you? How about me? What is God's word saying to us today? My prayer for myself, for my family, for you, dear brothers and sisters, is that we will begin to think more deeply about the God who saves sinners because we need to know him more completely.

Let's pray together. Lord, I pray that you would help us as those who have come---some of us aware of the consequence of our sin, some of us still reeling from confession that others have brought our way, others may be in that managing-their-sin kind of state right now. Lord, I don't know, but I know you do. I pray that you'd help us all. Lord, draw us as we sing these songs of response, Lord, there is mercy now as ever was with Christ, and we trust you to draw us close. In Christ we pray, Amen.