

I Believe.... the Forgiveness of Sins

Lord's Day 21

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Bible Text: Psalm 51

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2 Samuel chapter 12 I am beginning at verse one. This is the Word of God, congregation.

And the LORD sent Nathan to David. He came to him 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. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children. It used to eat of his morsel and drink from his cup and lie in his arms, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the guest who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him."

Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man, and he said to Nathan, "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, and 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! Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Saul. And I gave you your master's house and your master's wives into your arms and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah. And if this were too little, I would add to you as much more. Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and have taken his wife to be your wife and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.'

Thus says the LORD, 'Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house. And I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. For

you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun.””

David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the LORD.” And Nathan said to David, “The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die. Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the LORD, the child who is born to you shall die.”

Then Nathan went to his house.¹

Here ends the reading from 2 Samuel.

Let’s turn now to Psalm 51 which is the focus of our sermon this evening.

In light of Nathan’s confrontation and the exposure of David’s sin of adultery and conspiracy and murder, David now composes this song by the Spirit’s guidance.

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 words
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.
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,

¹ 2 Samuel 12:1-15.

and uphold me with a willing spirit.
Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.

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.
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.²

Here ends the reading from Psalm 51.

Keep your Bibles open to that psalm this evening while we turn for just a moment now to the catechism as we read this responsively from Lord's Day 21 of the catechism. You will find this on page 28. This is the final question and answer dealing with our confession concerning the Church, the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ. We will read responsively tonight just that last question and answer, number 56.

Congregation, what do you believe concerning the forgiveness of sins?

I believe that God, because of Christ's atonement, will never hold against me any of my sins nor my sinful nature which I need to struggle against all my life. Rather, in his grace, God grants me the righteousness of Christ to free me forever from judgment.

Here ends the reading of the catechism. And I commend this to your further reflection in the week to come.

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, I don't know how well you know or if you have ever heard of an English, British writer named G K Chesterton. He was a very notable literary figure during the latter part of the 19th and early part of the 20th centuries. Known for his cleverness, his wit, he wrote on many subjects, often on religious subjects. His perhaps most famous work is entitled *Orthodoxy*.

At one time in his life he was asked, he was invited by the *Times of London*, a prominent newspaper in London, to write an essay. A number of notable figures in London society were asked to answer this question: What is wrong with the world today?

² Psalm 51:1-19.

And these prominent figures were called upon to explain from their point of view how they interpreted what was wrong with the society as they knew it, as they experienced in their own day.

Do you know what Chesterton wrote in response? He wrote not an essay, he wrote a very short letter. He said, "Dear sirs, I am. Yours sincerely, G K Chesterton."

Very clever, isn't it?

What's wrong with the world today? Chesterton said, "I am."

It is clever, but it is also profound. It is a sobering thought for us tonight.

What is wrong with society is not, first, a matter of something we look at outside of ourselves or outside of our communities. Chesterton said, "If you want to get to the real core of the problem, you understand evil in terms of its very essence, you need look no further than the human heart."

This is what Psalm 51 reminds us of this evening, this beautiful penitential psalm. There are seven penitential psalms. I was thinking about that this past week. What a wonderful question to ask Drew in his examination this week, not only how many penitential psalms are there, but can you recite them or state which ones are the penitential psalms: Psalm 6, Psalm 32, Psalm 38, 51, 102, 130 and 143. So Drew is all set now for Monday night and Tuesday.

These penitential psalms expressing not only the depth of confession and acknowledgement of sin, sorrow and overwhelming sense of having offended God, but also the glory and the heights of divine forgiveness. The two go hand in hand, do they not?

We preach about sin, about its ugliness, about its pervasiveness, only that we might underscore the beauty and the glory and the power of the grace of God. The apostle Paul begins his gospel message to the Romans by underscoring the rebellious heart of mankind in the world. His heart is not set upon the will of the Lord. His heart does not love his Creator. His heart rebels against his Creator and the wrath of God is justly poured out upon him. But he does that in order to underscore, to emphasize, to highlight the glory of Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord who has rescued us, who has delivered us from the tyranny of our sin.

This penitential psalm of David, Psalm 51, reminds us that even the best of men are men at best, are they not?

This is David, the great hero of the Old Testament, boys and girls. This is the man after God's own heart, singled out by the prophet, by the judge Samuel to be the king anointed by God. He was a man mighty in battle, fearless, killing a giant of the enemy, a man with

great poetic gifts who could compose beautiful psalms, a man who seemed to revel in the praise of God.

And yet even the best of men are men at best.

And the story begins, of course, in this episode with David simply looking, just a glance. That is all it took. That is all it ever takes, just a glance on the roof top and he sees a beautiful woman. And he lusts after her in his heart and one thing leads to another until he has to cover his tracks. He has to try to hide the fact that he has committed adultery. So he plots. He finds some ways to, first of all, bring Uriah home to be with his wife so that at least the public might think that no adultery has been committed. But when that fails he arranges the battlefield so that Uriah the Hittite is killed.

And David feels very smug about his situation until the prophet Nathan comes. And isn't it true? It only takes a few words from Nathan and David is indignant.

How could this wealthy man with large herds at his disposal, how could he single out this ewe lamb from his neighbor? How could he steal it like a member of their household, he just plucked it from their house and he sacrificed it for his own selfish purposes.

He is indignant. And at that point Nathan says, "That man that you are so ready to put to death, that man against whom you are so angry, King David, don't you understand, that is you."

And David, guided by the Spirit, composes this song extolling the forgiveness of the Lord.

David lays bare his heart.

Notice with me tonight, first of all, the necessity of divine forgiveness.

"Have mercy on me, O God."³

He knows, he recognizes at the very outset that he has no basis in himself to call upon God to blot this out. There is nothing in him to merit the Lord's forgiveness. It is all of grace. It is all of God's mercy. And so he pleads. He pleads. But it is not merely wishful thinking.

Do you notice what David does?

"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant."⁴

³ Psalm 51:1.

⁴ Ibid.

This is the language of the covenants. David is aware already here centuries before the coming of Jesus Christ. He is aware that God has made a covenant with his people and God has promised to take these sinful, stained people and purify them, forgive their sins.

Why will God forgive? Catherine the Great, the Russian leader has said, “It is God’s business to forgive.” Now there is a person that has no awareness of the heinousness of sin, the ugliness of sin, the utter rebellion of sin. She says, “It is God’s business to forgive.”

And so many of us treat sin glibly, casually, as though it is simply a matter to be swept under the rug. David does not do so.

David says, “Lord, I have nothing in myself to commend to you. I call upon your mercy and, Lord, I pray that for the sake of your covenant faithfulness, for the sake of your steadfast love that never fails, forgive me.”

“Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!”⁵

David understands that his sin is not like some dust that you brush off the sleeve. His sin has penetrated deeply. And the only thing that will cleanse that sin, that stain is a thorough washing where the garment is kneaded and pushed into the water, rubbed and scrubbed hard. That is the only way for this guilt to be removed, he says.

“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.”⁶

There are many things that we can look at in this psalm and we don’t have time to explore all the different avenues of inquiry here. I simply want you to know the progression from pleading to assurance. Notice that, will you, when you hear this psalm, when you sing it as we sang it before and then again after the sermon tonight. Notice the progression and the transition.

David, who begins by begging, by calling upon God for his mercy ends with confidence, with the affirmation, with the assurance that his sins are forgiven.

But in between those two points there is this marvelous work of God’s grace, the work of the Spirit in the life of a sinner.

David, who formerly had tried to cover his tracks, David, who had tried to make excuses, David, who would not acknowledge his sin says to the Lord, “Lord, my sins are before me. My sins stand in stark contrast to the obedience that you desire of my heart.”

We try to deflect and excuse, avoid, suppress it. Guilt makes him unfit to come before God’s presence. Sin is an accusing presence, confronting, never letting him go.

⁵ Psalm 51:2.

⁶ Psalm 51:2-3.

And he says, “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.”⁷

Now that seems very odd, does it not? I mean, he not only sinned against God, but didn't he sin against Bathsheba? Didn't he sin against Uriah? Didn't he sin against the people over whom he ruled? Yes the answer is. He sinned against all of those. He is guilty on all of those scores. And yet ultimately he realizes by the work of his spirit he realizes that when it is all said and done, it is, first of all, primarily a matter of his relationship to his God, because Bathsheba is made in the image of God and his sin against Uriah is also against one who is made in the image of God and that he is accountable not simply to the people over whom he rules. He is accountable to his Creator and to his Redeemer.

“So that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.”⁸

What is the beginning of true forgiveness? It comes with the awareness, first of all, that we are guilty and that we have no excuse, that we have nowhere to run to. Every option has been explored and they are all found lacking. No matter what excuse, no matter what extenuating circumstance you may appeal to, no matter what you may say in comparison to someone else, it will not forgive the sin. And David knows that.

But how serious is this problem?

Think of how glibly people treat sin even in the Church, even when we pray. Sometimes we ask the Lord to forgive our sins so casually, as though it is an afterthought. We are just about ready to finish our prayer and then we tack it on.

David knows the problem is far more serious, far more deeply engrained than that.

Notice what he says.

“Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.”⁹

What is he saying there?

He is saying, brother and sisters, that our sin is not merely some freak event. It is not simply a momentary lapse in judgment. It is something deeply rooted in his nature, in his character. It is part of his DNA as it were. This is why we emphasize the fact that we are conceived and born in sin.

We do this not because we love to lay this guilt trip on people, not because we love to bring people down. Oh, so many people when they hear this, the message of our sinfulness in the face of a holy and righteous God, they say, “We don't want to hear that. We don't want to be told that. We want something more uplifting.” And so there are

⁷ Psalm 51:4.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Psalm 51:5.

plenty of preachers, plenty of peddlers of the gospel who will say nothing about that, who will speak only of what God is going to bless them with, that God is going to give them great abundance, God is going to make their life easy.

The Psalms are a good remedy to that kind of distortion of the Bible's message because the Psalms and especially these penitential psalms teach us to wrestle through these things, that sin is not to be taken lightly. It is not to be dismissed easily.

But, as David says, "When I look at my own life I realize that it wasn't just a momentary lapse of judgment, it wasn't a freak incident. It was part of who I am. And the only way I will be delivered, the only way you will be delivered is by a radical transformation that only God can perform."

And only God can perform this through the work of the Son whom he has promised.

There is need here for divine forgiveness.

"Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me."¹⁰

There you have the need for divine forgiveness, but, secondly, there is the expression of divine forgiveness, six through 12.

"Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart."¹¹

What is interesting about this is this is centuries before the coming of Jesus Christ.

How can David be so sure? How can he be so sure that his sins will be forgiven?

After all, what does the catechism say?

What is the basis for our forgiveness? How can we be assured that when we come here, gather here together and confess our sins or at home in our prayers when we confess our sins, when we acknowledge our wrong doing against God, how can we be assured that our sins are forgiven?

Boys and girls, does God simply look the other way? Does God simply dismiss these things as being not so serious? Or does God treat these things with the utmost seriousness? The Bible says he treats them with utmost seriousness.

You think, for example, of how David describes his wrong doing, his sin. He describes it as transgression, first of all, which is a way of speaking of rebellion.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Psalm 51:6.

My heart is rebellious. My heart is at war with God, my Creator, the God who designed me for covenant fellowship. I am, by nature, a rebel. I am, by nature, someone who despises the Word.

David says, "That is who I am." And it is that recognition that leads, ultimately, to forgiveness.

David speaks of iniquity which has the nuance of being bent or warped, something twisted, something that is out of shape from what it should be.

David says, "That is who I am. It is not just a minor flaw, a speck in the ointment. It is my nature that has been so distorted by my sin, that the only way it will be straightened out and made as it should is through a miracle of divine grace."

And he speaks of sin being the act of missing the mark.

We have all fallen short of the glory of God and the apostle Paul picks it up as well as he lays open the gospel message.

You see, congregation, boys and girls, especially, teenagers, you in particular. We have been talking in the interviews of profession of faith about how we choose a church, if I may put it that way, how do we discern if a church is being true to the calling that God has given it?

"Why this church?" we say.

And the young people will say, one way or another, because I believe with what this church teaches.

And I say, "Well, what is it? What distinguishes this church from other churches?"

I mean, you have your choice in this area. You can pick any number of churches, why this church?

It is because this church preaches and teaches the gospel of sovereign grace. Sin, salvation, service as the catechism puts it. That is what we are all about. God is glorified. Jesus Christ is magnified.

When we understand that out of the depth of our depravity we have been saved and we soar to the heights of salvation, David understands the effect of this as well already centuries before, because the Lord has given his tools, his means of teaching the people of Israel that sin costs blood. Blood must be shed. And in a picture book way the Lord says, "Don't you understand that when you transgress my law, when you cross the line, someone has to pay?"

And as the catechism so beautifully spells it out, not by another animal, although sacrificial animals were part of the worship of ancient Israel, David's worship as well. But David understood that ultimately that animal would not take away his sin. It was only a precursor. It was only a preparation for the ultimate sacrifice, the ultimate Lamb of God.

And so he says, "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow."¹²

He speaks here of the ceremonial washing of the Old Testament.

When a person had come into contact with a leprous body or a dead body and they were unclean, unfit to come into the presence of God, David says, "I need to be cleansed. It is not simply pulling myself up by my own bootstraps. It is not simply my effort at making myself walk in the straight and narrow. It is only by the work of God's cleansing.

But then notice also:

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.¹³

Blot them out. Break the tablets. Clear the screen so that I may rejoice.

And I wonder sometimes do we really rejoice?

"Restore to me," says David, "the joy of your salvation."¹⁴

"Restore to me that joy."

That is expressed in song, but it is also expressed in the life of joy, a life of gratitude.

"Hide your face from my sins."¹⁵

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.¹⁶

¹² Psalm 51:7.

¹³ Psalm 51:8-9.

¹⁴ Psalm 51:12.

¹⁵ Psalm 51:9.

¹⁶ Psalm 51:10-11.

Why are we forgiven? We are forgiven because the work of Jesus Christ as the Father, rather than living sin unpunished, has punished our sin, your rebellion, in the suffering and death of Jesus Christ.

But then, finally, notice the results of this forgiveness.

He says, “Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.”¹⁷

A couple of things to notice here about David. You notice how the response of forgiveness, the overflow of God’s grace in his life is to do what? To sing.

Have you ever noticed in the course of Church history at great moments of revival and renewal in the Church, at great moment like the Reformation or the Great Awakening, do you know what often accompanies that? A revival, a renewal of music where people sing and they express the delights, the joy of salvation.

The great revival movements here in America as well produce some of the most beautiful gospel songs that the Church has known to express the utter joy that wells up within them, that overflows and results, also, in teaching a heart that can’t keep this to itself. The news is so magnificent, so wonderful that it must be shared with others. It must be told to others.

Reverend [?] is here with his family. We asked him to come to the council meeting Wednesday night to give a brief report of his work. We asked him also to tell us about some of the things that we need to pray for regarding his ministry. And as I told him tonight before the service, I must confess that in some ways realizing, of course, how difficult that work is and I think there are very few of us know how difficult it is to do the work of foreign missions, I confessed to him that I was envious of him describing the work of the Holy Spirit in Thailand. He described a trip he had made to the north and the work of the Holy Spirit bringing about renewal and revival where people were meeting six, five times on a given Lord’s Day and then coming to him and saying, “Can you preach for us Monday morning?”

And when Dave said that I said to myself, “Why aren’t we seeing that in our own nation?”

We are seeing just the opposite in America where people are saying, “I have had enough. I have had enough. I have had enough”

And we organize our schedule so that the Word is not inconvenient for our schedules, for our recreation, or our time of family.

Compare that to the kind of hunger and appetites, the kind of fervor for the gospel truth where people just can’t get enough of it. And a person who has experienced the

¹⁷ Psalm 51:13.

forgiveness of God does not remain passive or apathetic. He has to spread that Word elsewhere.

Do you know of this forgiveness, David says, can I explain it to you? Can I sing about it? Can I compose this song so that you will sing about it as well and know that?

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.¹⁸

There it is. The heart that has been transformed by the grace of God, the heart that has been tainted by sin, corrupted by rebellion and has been forgiven by God's grace can't help but sing.

"For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering."¹⁹

It is not as though David is dismissing these practices of sacrifice and worship as God had ordained it. It is not that at all. But as we saw this morning from James chapter one, if it is merely ritual, if it is merely routine, if it is merely religion for religion's sake, it is worthless and we deceive our own hearts as James says.

No, true worship originates from a heart that has been touched by grace.

"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."²⁰

It is a heart that longs to express and enjoy that grace in the congregation. And so whether David composed these last two verses or whether they were added on later we can't be absolutely sure, but there is an awareness that the gospel proceeds and builds up the Church and this community of the saints is a communion not simply of like minded people who get along with each other. It is the community of the forgiven. It is the community that professes, "I believe the forgiveness of sins. I have known the grace of God in my own life."

And we vow, we pledge that as we have been forgiven, so we will forgive others. It is a beautiful thought tonight. What a beautiful thought.

I want to encourage you tonight to take heart from David's psalm of confession, forgiveness.

¹⁸ Psalm 51:14-15.

¹⁹ Psalm 51:16.

²⁰ Psalm 51:17.

Perhaps there are some among you this evening who are simply not convinced that this is for you. I have known people like that in the ministry. I have known people who think that their sin is so awful, so hideous that, yes, there is an intellectual understanding of what forgiveness is, but when all is said and done this forgiveness can't apply to them.

I want to remind you. This is David, David the adulterer, David the deceiver, David the liar, David the murderer. And the Lord restores him to his office.

David could have walked away and said, "Oh, considering the horrible things I have done, there is no future for me. I will be banished. I will be put away forever."

The Lord had every right to put David to death, but he spared his life.

Maybe for some of you there has been something awful, horrible in your own life in your past that even though you have heard and you have sung about God's forgiveness, you are just not quite sure that forgiveness is for you. I want to assure you that the blood of Jesus Christ was shed for your sins. That is what we commemorate. That is what we glory in the Lord's Supper. This body was broken for you. This blood was shed for your sins, these horrible, awful sins.

Perhaps our love for God has grown cold because we have not acknowledged our guilt. Perhaps there are some here tonight who haven't even reached that point, who continually dally in their sin, who enjoy their sin just a little too much to let it go. And day after day you live with the knowledge that you have offended God, but you are not quite ready to confess it.

David says, "Do you want to know the joy of the Lord's salvation? Do you want to know the joy of forgiveness? Then confess your sin."

Perhaps we have been unwilling to forgive. Perhaps we have been reluctant to extend the grace of God because we have never fully experienced it. How strange, how very odd it is in the Church of Jesus Christ for people who sing of God's grace, "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me." And yet we can be some of the most ungracious people on the face of the earth. We harbor grudges. We nurse the bitterness. We will not relieve people of their burdens. We will not forgive them because it is just too enjoyable for us to hang it over their heads.

"Forgive," says Paul, "as you have been forgiven. Forgive even as you have been forgiven in Christ Jesus."

And perhaps our worship, perhaps our congregational life is not quite what it should be because we have not known the joy of God's forgiveness. Could that be true, do you think? Do you think that if we had a greater appreciation, a greater savoring, a greater rustling as David did with his transition from guilt to gratitude, that it would transform our worship as well? It would make us the most loving, receptive people, tender hearted,

merciful, ready to restore, ready to put to rest wrong doings in the past? It would make us those kind of people.

There is only one to whom you may go. There is only one thing you can say. There is only one solution to be found. David says there is a need for forgiveness because of who I am. There is the expression of forgiveness. It is God who in Christ Jesus has covered our sins and there is response of gratitude, joy, of praise, of witnessing.

May God make us the forgiving and the forgiven community.

Let's pray.

Father in heaven, we pray that we may take the words of David the sinner restored by your grace. May we take these words of his to heart and live as those that have gone from being forgiven to those who truly forgive, from those who have known themselves to be sinful and rebellious to those who have exalted in the joy of salvation. Father, make us those kind of people for the glory of your name and for the building up fo your kingdom. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.