



Central
Peninsula
Church

...to make and mature more followers of Christ

A Plea for Pardon & Renewal

Psalm 51:1–13

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series: Prayers Of Our Fathers

We all long for spiritual renewal, don't we? This is one of the reasons we come to church, go to retreats and conferences; this is what we ask of God in the quietness of our prayer life. We want His living water to flow through the arid deserts of our hearts. But there is one obstacle. For renewal to happen it has to begin with true confession – to remove the covering of our soul and be known for who and what we are. Before we can ask God to move us into a deeper relationship with Him we have to start with where we are. That's a pretty threatening thought. It's threatening because our fear is always greatest when our soul is exposed and naked before a holy God. When the floodlights of an awakened conscience reveal the depth of our sin, our knee-jerk response is to move away and not towards the God of our salvation. This tendency is one we all have to contend with.

But it also appears that we're only willing to disclose our sin when we are assured, beyond reservation, that forgiveness will be granted. Sebastian Moore writes, "Confession of sin is the most generous, secure, adventurous expression of the human heart. It is the risk that is only taken in the certainty of being acceptable and accepted. It is the full and final expression of that confidence. Only to your lover do you expose your worst. To an amazed world, Jesus presents a God who calls for this confession only so that He may reveal himself in a person's depths as his lover. This confession in a context of divine acceptance releases the deepest energies of the human spirit."

This morning we are going to look at one of the most beautiful expressions of true confession in all of the Scripture. Psalm 51 is one of the few where we are given the historical background from which it arose. The inscription reads, "A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba." This identifies clearly the incident out of which this confession was expressed, when David involved himself in the sins of adultery and murder. This is not to say that David was not a man of great virtue. Throughout the Scripture he's regarded as "a man after God's own heart." He had a reputation as a prophet, as one who understood the deep mysteries of God. He was the established spiritual leader of his people. The Messiah, Himself, would come from his seed. And yet, toward the end of his reign, David gave in to unbridled passion and fell into unparalleled sin.

You may remember the account. David was lounging on his patio one evening and observed a beautiful woman bathing herself. So he sent messengers to Bathsheba to bring her into the palace

grounds. David then entered into an adulterous affair with her, for Bathsheba was a married woman. Ironically, her husband Uriah was away fighting a battle for his king while his king was sleeping with his wife. Ouch! Later, when David learned she was expecting a child, he panicked and tried to cover himself up. He ordered Uriah home from battle in the hope that he would sleep with his wife and the child would then be accepted as his own. But, Uriah refused and chose instead to stay with the soldiers that night to return to battle the next day. David became concerned that his sin would be exposed, so he concocted another plan. This is always what sin does - it leads us deeper into deception, further than we ever intended to go. He ordered Uriah to be put in the forefront of the battle where he would surely be killed. And when the news of Uriah's death reached the palace grounds, David thought he had safely covered his tracks.

But, as the story records, God sent the prophet Nathan to David. Nathan was wise enough to know he would need to approach the king subtly. So he told him a bedside story, which served as a mirror to David's own wrongdoing. And when David responded with righteous anger towards the perpetrator of the story, Nathan charged him with having committed the same sin he had just condemned. David had been exposed! He fell on his face before God and out of that experience comes this beautiful psalm, which models for us, today, the meaning of true confession.

This psalm opens with a cry for forgiveness. David prays, "***Be gracious to me O God, according to Your loving-kindness; according to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.***" What a great understanding of the nature of sin is found in these verses. First, David understands that sin is like a crime. If a criminal needs to be pardoned from the consequences of his crime, it's not justice he needs but mercy. So David prays, "***Lord, blot out***" or erase from your book, "***my transgressions,***" acknowledging that sin is also like a debt. David's spiritual account had accumulating some extra expenses, some debits that needed to be reconciled. Secondly, he views his sin as an ugly stain, a defilement of the soul that needed to be washed out and cleansed. The Hebrew word for "wash" means to knead or pound, and has to do with working over a garment in order to get the deeply ingrained stain out. Rinsing is not enough.

Early in our marriage, Laura and I were looking for a nice piece of furniture for our living room. While talking to her mom one day,

Laura discovered that she had a sofa she was willing to give to us. It was a white sofa . . . a very white sofa . . . a very white designer sofa that was worth more than we could afford at the time. Her mom told us how to care for it, so we strapped it in the back of a pickup truck and took it home. Our daughter, Jessica, was really young in those days, and so the Number One Rule in the house from that day on was, "Don't play on the white sofa! Don't eat around the white sofa! Don't breathe on the white sofa! Don't even think about the white sofa! On any other piece of furniture, you may freely sit, but on this sofa you may not sit, for the day you do you will surely die!"

Then came the "fall." Jessica had her friend Sara over for a play date. And there appeared on the white sofa a stain. It was a red stain, a red jelly stain. My wife called her mother, who told her it was impossible to get the stain out. So Laura got the kids together and said, "Children, do you see that? That's a stain. That's a red stain. That's a red jelly stain. And grandma says it's not coming out, not for all eternity. Do you know how long eternity is? Eternity is how long we're going to sit here until one of you tells me who put the red jelly stain on the white designer sofa." For a long time they just sat there until Jessica finally cracked. I knew she would. She said, "Sara did it." Sara said, "No! It was the dog." Then it was dead silent for the longest time. Now I knew they wouldn't confess putting the stain on the sofa, because they had never seen my wife so angry. I knew they wouldn't confess putting the stain on the sofa, because they knew if they did, they would spend all of eternity in the "Time Out Chair." I knew they wouldn't confess putting the stain on the sofa because, in fact, I was the one who put the stain on the sofa, but I wasn't saying a word!

Now, here's the truth about us. We've all stained the sofa. And there is only one thing strong enough to wash that stain away. The truth of the gospel is that, before God, all of us are on the same playing field. We all need what only He can offer. How difficult it is to admit, "I've sinned, O Lord. Have mercy on my soul." How conveniently we avoid taking responsibility and blame another person, or our circumstances or, even, God Himself for allowing the dumb sofa to be where I was eating a jelly sandwich in the first place.

Do you know why God is so insistent that we face the truth and admit our sin to Him? It's because once we've done that, He is able to do what only He can do. This is the first step towards the grace of God being released in our lives. And this is where we find David. He's asking God to cleanse the stain of sin within his heart. But notice the basis by which David makes this plea. He says, "Lord, I pray you would do this according to Your loving-kindness and the greatness of Your compassion." David knew he had nothing to bargain with. So he comes to God completely empty-handed. His only hope is in God's intimate mercies and

faithfulness. He realizes it's only on the basis of His love that we can come to God at all.

David goes on to point out that the way to lay hold of forgiveness is through true confession. "*For I know my transgressions,*" he tells God, "*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 are justified when You speak, and blameless when You judge.*" Here is a straightforward and full acknowledgment of sin. David is saying, "I know my sin, I'm not covering it up." He's not minimizing his actions nor blaming God for them. There are no extenuating circumstances in his mind. And here is one reason why some of us never find forgiveness. We suffer guilt vainly because we won't call sin what it is. We water it down, rationalize it so it appears more acceptable than it is.

Anger has been this kind of slippery slope for me. I grew up in a culture that used anger as a means to gain respect. It was such a normal and acceptable expression that, as a young Christian, I had difficulty seeing when it was not. So it took me awhile to place God-honoring boundaries in this area. Now I recognize that when anger is being expressed, it's usually a defensive ploy to cover up some other emotion – like fear or guilt, shame or insecurity – that I would prefer to keep hidden.

What David is modeling for us here is that before we can deal honestly with our sin we must first name it, take ownership for it and know that it has breached and brought sorrow to the heart of God. He says, "*Against You, You only, have I sinned and done what was evil in your sight.*" David's not saying that the pain and injustice created for others was insignificant. Certainly, Bathsheba's reputation was damaged and her husband murdered. Then there is Uriah whose life was brought to a premature end at David's hand. But David sees sin, ultimately, as an insult and an injury to God. In true confession our heart breaks not because it discredits our social image or ruins a friendship, but because it violates our relationship with God. We may wrong our neighbor, which will certainly require that we do some repair work on that side of the ledger as well, but we sin against God. It's His love that's been wounded. And when we have this attitude God's forgiveness is always available.

However, the problem for David is not yet over. Have you ever been troubled by the possibility, after having experienced painful consequences for some harmful action, of repeating the same act with the same consequences? When you see how easily you were deceived, do you ever wonder about the future? What's to stop it from happening again? In verses 5-6 David strikes a deeper chord by acknowledging he's in the grip of a diseased nature that is far bigger than he. He says, "*Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity and in sin my mother conceived me. Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being, and in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom.*" David sees his problem as far

deeper than isolated instances of sin. Now, don't misunderstand. He's not blaming his mother. Nor is he saying that there is something wrong with the process of conception or birth. Nowhere in the Scripture is that stated. What he's saying is that the act of conception introduced him into a fallen humanity in which sin was already deeply embedded. We are all born with a spiritual disease, a sin nature.

Years ago the Minnesota Crime Commission did a study, intending to draw some conclusions about the origins of crime. Here is a summary of what they found. "Every baby starts life as a little savage. He is completely selfish and self-centered. He wants what he wants when he wants it: his bottle, his mother's attention, his playmate's toys or his uncle's watch. Deny him these things and he seethes with rage and aggressiveness, which would be murderous were he not so helpless. He has no morals, no knowledge and no skills. This means that all children, not just certain children, are born delinquent. And if permitted to continue in the self-centered world of his infancy, given free reign to his impulsive actions, every child would grow up a criminal, a thief, a killer, a rapist." Interesting comment!

Now, every parent knows there's a rebellious strain that's present in the tiniest infant from birth. My daughter Jessica, as wonderful as she is, didn't need me to teach her to shade the truth or be self-seeking. I may have added to her repertoire in some ways unbeknownst to me, but she's a "natural" as all kids are. This is what David is coming to grips with. This is why he says "Behold," a word that means, "I see now." David sees, beyond the intellectual, that sin is not just a surface problem that can be handled lightly.

This is so important because until we realize that we actually have a warped and self-centered nature, we're never really able to deal with the real problem, are we? Cancer and AIDS patients often suffer with pneumonia. But that's not the real issue. The real problem is the disease which gives rise to the symptoms of pneumonia. It's that deeper disease that needs to be treated. This is what David is recognizing here, "Lord, I have a disease. And unless I find some solution for this polluted nature, I will never keep from falling back into sin again."

In verses 7-9 David begins to pray for help in the inward life, which is where God wants His truth to be found. "*Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me to hear joy and gladness, let the bones which You have broken rejoice. Hide Your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.*" David has been emphasizing coming to grips with the horrible reality of sin as a prerequisite of spiritual renewal. And in these verses he starts picking himself back up. He's now confident in God's willingness to cleanse him and make him "*whiter than snow.*" How much whiter can we get?

But notice how David views this cleansing as taking place. He says "*purify me with hyssop.*" Hyssop was a plant found in Palestine that was used to apply the blood of the offering to the altar. To be purified with hyssop is a figurative expression that declares the need for a blood sacrifice. The Scripture claims that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins. David is looking forward to that sacrifice. We know that in doing so he was pointing toward the one blood sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Roy Lessin writes, "The shed blood of Jesus Christ has accomplished our justification before God - it signifies the washing away of our sin. Because of Christ's shed blood, God can look at our lives no matter how dark, how sinful or how unclean and declare us guilt-free! Our debts are not only canceled, they are wiped clean; our sins are not only forgiven, they are remembered against us no more. Christ's blood has justified us because we were guilty, and He took our judgment for us. He is the spotless lamb offered up for the transgressor . . . the obedient Son taking the place of the rebellious child . . . the caring Creator yielding His life for His fallen creation."

Do you see the emphasis here? We need not despair of forgiveness, for it really has little to do with what we can or can't do, but rather hinges on what God has already done for us in Christ. And to the extent that we despair, we are seeing the blood of Jesus as somehow deficient. We are saying that the cross is not enough.

Now some of you may be thinking, "But you don't know where I've been or what I've done. Why would God want to forgive someone like me." Let me just say, you're absolutely right. No one knows what's between you and the Lord. But we can all see what David did. His life is held up in the Scripture as something we can learn from. Was he self-centered, inconsiderate, dishonest, manipulative, fearful of exposure, full of justification, pomp and pride? Did he take advantage of another man's wife and then murder her husband to cover himself up? Yes, he did. And yes, David was all of these things. Regardless of where we've been, it doesn't get much worse than that! Our experience is not that unique to God. David is called "*a man after God's own heart*" not because he walked in perfect adherence to God's will, but because he brought himself - time and time again - before God to be cleansed and renewed. He didn't despair of forgiveness, so neither should we.

David then petitions God for inner renewal in verses 10-12. "*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast 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 me with a willing spirit.*" David is asking God to do a deep work within him, to treat the disease. The treatment he is asking for, and confident of receiving, is nothing short of a radical replacement of his old nature with a new one. Listen to what he says: "*Create in me a clean heart.*" This word "create" is used for what only God can do. He alone is Creator. When He

creates, God does so out of nothing. He breathes light into the darkness, raises life from the dead. David is saying, "Lord, if this old heart naturally inclines me toward evil, and I, doing what comes naturally, do that which is wrong, then I desperately need a new heart which naturally does good." That is what he's asking for.

He's also praying for the assurance of the Holy Spirit's presence. This is the cry of one who knows, as he never knew before, the weakness of his own nature and subsequent need of divine help.

And the last thing he prays for is a willing spirit. David needs God to create and sustain in him a desire that's free to serve righteousness rather than sin. He's, in effect, saying, "Lord, change me. I can't even desire Your will in myself, but need You to provide the willingness within me." You see, in these requests David is modeling that he's incapable of reckoning with sin. He realizes that no amount of self-effort can renew a self-centered and fallen heart and unless God does a work, he will act out again the moment he observes a beautiful woman taking a bath by moonlight. David has come to the end of himself - needing not a lesson on morality but a renewal of the heart.

But so confident is he of receiving this blessing that he rededicates himself to God's service in verse 13. He says, "***Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners will be converted to You.***" Do you know that the effectiveness of our ministry before God is predicated on how we apply His treatment to ourselves? If David was still in the habit of denying or covering up his sin what could he possibly teach others in regards to dealing with their own?

One thing I've learned is that when I reveal my own struggles it encourages others to do the same. Confession of sin has to be one of the foundational stones of our teaching and example to others. I'm not saying all the intimate details of our lives need to be everyone's business. But I am saying that we are better equipped to make an impact for the Kingdom when transparency is a priority and confession of sin is practiced. There is no room for spiritual one-upmanship when we come before the cross for forgiveness. It's only at that place that we are able to share with any authenticity the power of God's redemptive activity. It's of little use for me to tell someone, "Go to the cross with your sin." I've got to be able to say, "Come to the cross. I'll be there with you." There are only two voices that can offer that invitation. One is the voice of the sinless Redeemer, with which we cannot speak, and the other is the voice of the forgiven sinner who knows himself forgiven. So what can we learn from this?

What strikes me most about this psalm of David is the transparency of his disclosure. His heart is absolutely humbled and exposed before God. Oftentimes we are like little children who think no one can see us because our hands are covering our

faces. In vain we build barriers to keep God out, ignoring the fact that God looks on the heart where no person can see. God alone knows the selfish motives behind every act, the entanglements of our lust and ambition, the unhealed wounds that cause us to appear more whole than we truly are. He desires authenticity in our innermost being and delights in a heart that's wide open to Him, regardless of how sin stained it may be.

But there is a terrible cost that comes from a life of secrecy and concealment. And I would be negligent if I didn't remind you of that. In Psalm 32, David, in referring to this incident, writes, "***When I kept silent my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me; my vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer.***" David's experience is also our experience. He wasn't relaxing, sipping lemonade on his patio after his sin. Nor did that event go unnoticed by God. David had sleepless nights, terrible dreams. He could see his sin written on the ceiling of his room as he tossed and turned in the night. He became a miserable husband, an irritable father, an inept minister and a song-less composer. Though David had resigned himself to living a lie, he couldn't escape the truth. And neither can we. Confession of sin, as humbling and as risky as it may be, is far better than its alternative. This doesn't mean that we escape the consequences of our actions through confession. But at least we face them with God on our side.

God wants access to those parts that we would prefer to keep hidden. The Hebrew word for "hidden part" in verse 6 was commonly used in the Old Testament to describe the "plugging up" of available water sources to prevent their use by another party. But in Psalm 51 the use of that term is referring to the willful holding back of one's true self from God and others. By hiding, we protect ourselves from the vulnerability of being truly known at our worst. But the confessing nature of Psalm 51 runs counter to this kind of self-protective secrecy. Here David "unplugs" the inner barriers and allows the streams of honest self-revelation to flow again.

Why is this important? Well, think about what happens in human relationships when we remain shallow and detached. With casual friends we may discuss the weather or sports, upcoming concerts or movies, all the while steering clear of what's troubling our spirit most: a repressed pain perhaps, a hidden jealousy, a resentment towards a co-worker or a nagging concern regarding our family's welfare. As a result, the relationship goes nowhere because we're not allowing others into our confidence.

On the other hand, relationships deepen when we trust our friends with the real issues. Likewise with God! Unless we level with Him, that relationship too, will go nowhere. We may continue to attend church, go to spiritual retreats and conferences. We may even address God through formal prayers, but we will

never break through the intimacy barrier unless we get real with Him. C.S. Lewis once said, "We must lay before Him what is in us, not what ought to be in us." To put it another way, we must trust God with what He already knows. When we do so we learn a valuable lesson, that underneath the layers of dirt and grime lays a damaged work of art that God longs to restore. In the Father's heart there is always a place for our blemishes to go.

So let me ask you – do you trust God with all that you are? I know this is difficult. We may conceal our sin out of fear that God will be displeased though, in fact, the hiding may be what displeases Him most. From our side, the wall seems like self-protection. From God's side it looks like lack of trust. In either case, the wall

will keep us apart until we acknowledge our need and accept God's desire to meet us there. When we approach God on that basis, as David does in this psalm, we find not an unapproachable tyrant but the lover of our soul patiently waiting, one who not only hears our pleas for mercy, but erases the debt from the book of remembrance, purifies us through His own blood, renews us to a steadfast and holy spirit and prepares our hearts to teach fellow sinners in His ways. These are the petitions we must lay at God's feet through our willingness to unplug the barriers and reveal to Him what's true of us all.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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