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The Confession God Hears

Psalm 51

2014 Summer in Psalms Series

Pastor Bryan Clark

[Reader]:

Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness;
According to the greatness of Your compassion 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, I have sinned
And done what is evil in Your sight,
So that You are justified when You speak,
And blameless when You judge.
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.
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.
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.
***Then* I will teach transgressors Your ways,**
And sinners will be converted to You.
Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, the God of my salvation;
***Then* my tongue will joyfully sing of Your righteousness.**
O Lord, open my lips,
That my mouth may declare Your praise.
For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it;
You are not pleased with burnt offering.
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.
Then You will delight in righteous sacrifices,
In burnt offering and whole burnt offering;
Then young bulls will be offered on Your altar. (*NASB, Psalm 51)

It seems to me that within the Christian community there is a lot of confusion around the topic of confession. The Catholics have their view with the priests and the confessional and we'll just let them define their own view, but within Protestantism there seems to be quite a wide range of opinions. Maybe one end of the scale would be those who believe that Jesus died for our sins—past, present and future—and when you trust Christ all sins are forgiven and, therefore, confession is really irrelevant; it's minimized. At the other end might be those who believe that every time they sin they have to confess the sin—in essence, you keep losing your salvation until you confess and you regain it back—and then there are views all the way in between those two extremes.

The question, of course, would be, "What does the Bible say about confession?" I would suggest what the Bible says is kind of in the middle there. I do believe the Bible teaches that Jesus died for our sins—past, present, and future. The moment you trust Christ as Savior all our sins are forgiven—past, present, and future. So I don't believe confession has anything to do with salvation. What I think it *does* have to do with is living out the Christian life. To use last week's language, it's about staying on the path and experiencing the life that God desires for us. The word *confession* literally means *to agree with*. I find that actually very helpful. The very heartbeat, the essence of confession, is I am saying to God, "I agree with You that this particular behavior or attitude, whatever it is, is sin." Confession is closely linked with repentance because if I'm going to say with sincerity to God, "Yes, I agree with You; this is sin," then what's implied in that is: *then it must stop*! There is repentance—there's a change of mind—something has to change.

Now I mentioned last week my conclusion would be over the years that the overwhelming majority of Christians really want to do this right. They don't really want to play games with God. They want to walk the walk. They want to experience the life that God offers, so I would suggest to you that confession, rightly understood, would be a necessary requirement to face sin, to stay on the path and not drift off and find yourself in the weeds again and again and again. This raises the question then, "What does confession look like?"

Psalm 51 is very helpful in understanding that. If you have a Bible, turn with us this morning to Psalm 51. Psalm 51 is a *Psalm of David*. The superscription, the little writing under the number of the psalm, tells us the background. This was David's confession after his sin with Bathsheba. As a matter of fact, the superscription, the little words there, are a play on words. Literally it says, "Nathan went *in to* David because David had gone *in to* Bathsheba." So Nathan is confronting David because of his sin with Bathsheba.

If you don't know the story—2 Samuel 11 & 12—David is the King of Israel. He's on kind of a high. Everything's going his way; he gets reckless, has an affair with Bathsheba, a married woman. She becomes pregnant; he tries to cover it up, and when that doesn't work he has her husband killed in battle, takes her as his own wife in hopes he can cover all this up.

Psalm 32 and Psalm 51 are the two psalms written about David's confession. Psalm 32 covers a little bit more of David's year. We can tell from that psalm that it's about a year later that David

finally confesses his sin and the year has been miserable physically, emotionally, spiritually, psychologically—he's been in the tanker. Now David does not come clean without confrontation. Nathan has to go into the presence of the king and confront David over his sin.

I find that helpful to remember. Over the years there are those people who, because of their guilt and shame, just on their own come clean with sin. There are others who need to get caught; there are others who need to be confronted. Often I have heard people say, "Well, so-and-so didn't come forth on his own; you know, he was caught or he was confronted," and usually when we are saying that we are dismissing or diminishing somebody's confession as it's not sincere or it's not real just because they got caught. So, it's helpful to remember that probably the most impressive confession in the Bible came out of someone who did not come forth on their own. It was someone who was busted, somebody who was confronted, and then, and only then, was there confession. But it was real and it was true and it was life-changing. I think verses 1 and 2 set the tone for the psalm:

Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness;
According to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity
And cleanse me from my sin.

It's worth noting that David, as King of Israel, does not come before God with an attitude of entitlement. It's not like, "God, I'm the *King*; You owe me," or, "I've done this; I've won all these battles," or, "I've led Your people." As a matter of fact, David comes before God, not on the basis of anything related to himself but on the basis of the character of God. "God, I am coming to You because You are **gracious**." That Hebrew word could be translated *merciful*. "You are compassionate; You are kind; You are loving, and on the basis of *Your* character I come to you."

Now this is really helpful to think about. There are those of us—many of us—as Christians, who struggle to really live in the forgiveness of God. We continue to carry our guilt and shame. We tend to lock ourselves in the dark room; we have a habit of beating ourselves up over and over again even after we've acknowledged our sin before God. And the reason we do that is because we want God to know how truly sorry we are. "So, God, if I beat myself up for a while, if I live with this shame and guilt, if I lock myself in the dark room, then I can convince You how truly sorry I am." But this is where we get into trouble. "God, I will show You how truly sorry I am in order that I might, in some way, *deserve* Your forgiveness." This represents the very same attitude that got us off the path in the first place. *It's rooted in human pride*. It was pride that got us off the path in the first place. "I can do this myself"—and now I've made a mess of things, so now I'm thinking if I beat myself up enough, if I carry enough shame and guilt, if I spend enough time in the dark room, somehow I can earn this forgiveness from God. It's helpful to understand: that attitude is actually offensive to God. *You cannot earn God's forgiveness; that's the whole point*. We come to God confessing sin on the basis of God's character. God is merciful; God is kind; He is loving; He is compassionate, and He promises to forgive. The only thing He is asking is, "Would you believe Me and take Me at My word, and then get on with your life?"

So, verses 1 & 2 kind of set the tone. In my opinion, verses three and four are the most important verses in the psalm. Verse 3:

For I know my transgressions,
And my sin is ever before me.

The word **know** is the Hebrew word *yada*. It's the word used to describe the sexual relations between a husband and a wife. It is a term of great intimacy. Some of your translations translate that word *acknowledge;* "I acknowledge my sin." In my opinion that term is way too mild. The Hebrew is not, "I'm acknowledging it." The Hebrew is, "I am deeply, intimately acquainted with my sin; my sin is ever before me." He is saying basically for the last year he has been miserable; he has been carrying this burden; his life has become emotionally and socially and spiritually and psychologically a disaster, and there's this sense in which this confession is saying, *"I get it."* It is critical to understand this. There is a huge difference between *being sorry* and *confessing sin*. Being sorry is kind of an emotional reaction. Usually there is kind of a momentary meltdown. There is a level of embarrassment and shame and guilt, but quickly we move on and don't really face it. There is not really an acknowledgement, "This is sin and it's offensive to God". Consequently, there is not a real serious understanding that this must stop. As a matter of fact I would go so far as to say, "If there is sin that just keeps repeating itself over and over again, you may be sorry, but you are not understanding confession. With confession comes a sense that: *this is wrong; it must stop*! He goes on in verse 4 and says:

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.

Sin is always, ultimately, against God. God sets the standard. God *is* the standard. Therefore sin, ultimately, is always sin against God. We have a habit, I think sometimes, of thinking of certain sins as *little* sins. Maybe we would never say that, but we think that, and consequently we excuse them. But, it's helpful to remember that *little* sin is a sin that cost Jesus His life and I doubt that Jesus sees it as a *little* sin.

The second part of verse 4 David is essentially saying, "Sin has consequences," and David was well aware that there would be consequences to his sin because Nathan laid them out for him. So what was ahead would be the consequences of David's sin and what he is saying is, "God, as I go through this, I want the nation to know that You are justified, that You are right, that You are blameless, that You are holy." In other words what he is saying is, "I have this coming. I sinned and sin has consequences and now I have to live with those consequences." I think we have a tendency to think that once we confess our sin, God should push the *clear* button and all consequences go away. Then we seem somewhat shocked by the fact that there are actually real consequences that we have to deal with—as if God didn't keep His promise.

Over the years I would say I have become pretty good—and I would say most of our ministry staff has become pretty good—at sorting out the difference between those people who are *sorry* and those people who *get it*. As a matter of fact, it takes about five minutes to start to see the difference. When I'm sorry, there is kind of this emotional meltdown. I'm embarrassed; there's shame and guilt; I kind of move in to damage control: Who knows? Who doesn't know? I'm trying to control all that. There is a sense in which I start to point fingers; I start to blame other people; I start to analyze the process: "You know, technically, yes, so-and-so confronted me but they didn't follow the steps of Matthew 18 and they shouldn't have done it that way, and so it's their fault and it's *his* fault and it's *her* fault and it's my *past's* fault," and all of a sudden you start to realize that there is this deflection away from facing the reality that, "I agree with God; I have sinned and the sin must stop and I understand that there will be consequences to sin and that's my fault."

For someone who truly *gets it,* there's a sense of brokenness. There is a sense in which I am no longer doing damage control; I'm no longer trying to hide this; I'm not blaming anybody; I'm not blaming a process; I'm not trying to deflect the discussion onto anybody else. This is ME and this is MY fault and this is what I did before God, and even though that is extremely difficult, it is the first step back. It's the first step of restoration. The whole idea in verse 4 of acknowledging that God is *just* and He is *blameless* as I go through these consequences is very important to understand because here's what often plays out when somebody is sorry, when somebody is embarrassed, when somebody is exposed. It kind of goes like this:

Let's say this sin is against my wife, and so finally something happens and it's exposed and I say, "I'm sorry...I'm sorry; I was wrong," and my expectation is that she is required by God to forgive me and part of the mindset is: she just needs to forgive me and pretend like it never happened and let's move on. So that's kind of how it lays out. "I'm sorry; I was wrong," and my expectation is, "You should forgive me," and we move on with no consequences. We move on as if it didn't happen. But the person who has been deeply wounded—she has a check in her spirit — "I'm not sure he gets it; I'm not sure he understands what he did. I don't know that he understands the pain, that this is really deep; I don't know that he *really gets it,*" and the fear is that if he doesn't *get it,* it is almost guaranteed to be repeated again. So there is the sense in which: I don't think you get it. You are just wanting this simple, "I'm sorry; I admitted it; let's forget it and let's move on." But the person I've wounded can't just move on, and so now here's where it gets interesting. It's as if everything turns upside down because now I, as the one who committed the sin, start presenting it this way, "Hey, I said I was sorry; I don't know what else I can do. I was wrong," and what is implied in that is: "You are supposed to forgive me. As a matter of fact, if you don't forgive me and let us just move on, then it seems to me *you* are the one who is now disobedient." So now it turns upside down and now suddenly *I* am taking the high road and *you* are the one that is wrong. I have seen that happen over and over and over again. For confession to be real and true there has to be a sense in which, *"I get it.* I did it; I blew it; it's sin before God, and I have to face that and there are consequences. I've hurt people I deeply care about, and it may be a long, difficult road back, and it's all my fault." There is a very different spirit among those who genuinely confess sin. Verse 5:

> **Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,**
> **And in sin my mother conceived me.**

He is not saying that somehow the sexual act was sinful. He is saying that this is deep to the core. He is referring to original sin. We are all sinners. This wasn't just some little mistake, some little blip on the screen, but this is deep and powerful, which is evident by verse 6:

> **Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being,**
> **And in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom.**

Last week we defined temptation as *the invitation to meet a legitimate need through illegitimate means*. In other words: I have a legitimate need, a legitimate desire, but I didn't trust God to meet that desire. So I decided to be my own god and I would do it my own way, and that's what's now got me in this mess. What is at the core of that is not behavior modification. What's at the core of that is that I believed a lie; I failed to believe the truth. The truth is God will be faithful to meet that need His own way but I didn't believe that, so I decided to do it myself. So that is why David is saying, "What's necessary to correct this is at the core of my being—to get back to truth—and the truth is God is God and God is faithful and God must be trusted, and I no longer can function as my

own god and seek to meet my own needs. I need wisdom at the deepest part of my being. I need to change at the core, not just at the level of my behavior." Verse 7:

Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Yes, it is true; occasionally in the ancient Near East, in the higher elevations they did get snow. Now think about this: In an ancient world where everything was brown and dirty and, on rare occasions, they would get snow. In those moments everything becomes white and has this unimaginably clean look, and that is the imagery here—that it would be like that—everything just clean and **white as snow**. The idea of the **hyssop** is a branch off a tree that had kind of this feathery stuff on the branch, on the bark, that made it actually a very good paintbrush. So, for example, when the Hebrew people were to paint the blood of the lamb on the doorposts on the first Passover, it was with a hyssop branch. It made an effective paintbrush. So when you read through the Old Testament, it was used for a lot of different religious rituals and ceremonies.

I think specifically the one David is probably alluding to here is when someone had leprosy, they were removed from the life of the community. You literally had to live outside the city in a leper colony. It was a place of ultimate despair and loneliness. If someone reached a point of healing to where they might be allowed back in, they had to go the priest and the priest would examine the person, and if that person was truly healed, they would take the branch of the hyssop tree and use ceremonially clean water and basically identify that this person has been cleansed, which meant they now had permission to return to the life of the community. Why I think that is because of verse 8:

Make me to hear joy and gladness,
Let the bones which You have broken rejoice.

That word **rejoice** is the Hebrew word that literally means *to dance*. In Psalm 32 David talks about his broken bones; he just basically means physically becoming so ill. What he is saying is, "God, cleanse me; wash me clean; make me as clean as snow in order that I might once again enter in to the life of the community. I might experience the joy of life, the joy of relationships, that these dead bones might dance again." *It's worth noting that you stand no chance for verse 8 if you don't get verses 3 & 4*. Until you genuinely face your stuff with a determination that, "It must stop!" you are never really going to experience again the freedom, the joy of relationships, of your salvation, of the life that God has called you to. You will never really experience those broken bones dancing again. Verse 9, I think, is kind of a summary:

Hide Your face from my sins
And blot out all my iniquities.

Verse 10 begins the restoration process:

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And renew a steadfast spirit within me.

Only God **can create in me a clean heart**. The idea of a **steadfast spirit**, small "s", is basically saying, "God, I want to get back on the path again. I want to once again be going down the path. I

want my life to matter. I don't want to be sidelined; I don't want to be disqualified. I want to be useful to you again." He keeps going with that theme in verse 11:

Do not cast me away from Your presence
And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.

Again, my opinion would be that the words **cast away** are just too mild. The Hebrew phrase means to *violently fling*. It is the idea of picking up something that is just disgusting and, when we pick it up, it is so disgusting that we fling it away. He is imagining himself—this is how he feels about himself—"God, I am so disgusting that I feel like You should just pick me up and fling me away. But I am asking You, "Do not do that!" It was required to have the Holy Spirit to accomplish something for God. So in David's language he is saying, "God, **don't take Your Holy Spirit away from me.**" In other words he is saying, "God, I still want to matter; I still want to be useful. I don't want to be disqualified. I want to believe that I can still accomplish great things for You, even though I've made a mess of things." (Vs. 12-13)

Restore to me the joy of Your salvation
And sustain me with a willing spirit.
***Then* I will teach transgressors Your ways,**
And sinners will be converted to You.

Verse 13 is a very interesting verse to think about it. All of us that have made a mess of things—which is probably pretty much all of us in the room—we look back to those moments and we say, "I wish I wouldn't have done that. I wish I would've made a different decision. I wish I wouldn't have made that choice." We look back with regret and wish it was different but the fact is, it's not different. That is part of what now defines your story. But what David is saying is if we understand it this way, it may be that that part of our story is the thing that God may use the most to bear witness to the forgiveness and grace of God. In essence what David is saying is, "God, if you would restore me, if you would use me again, if, once again, Your Spirit would empower me to help change the world, it would bear witness to my people that even though I blew it, even though I sinned greatly, that You are a God of mercy and grace and forgiveness and You have restored me and You have loved me and You have forgiven me and You have once again empowered me and that witness would tell others who are hiding their sin that you can come clean. You can confess your sin. You can trust this with God and God will wipe your sin clean, that God will restore to you the joy of your salvation, that God will once again use you to accomplish great things, that you would know that even though you have blown it, failure is never final. If you just come clean, God begins a process where He will once again use you to accomplish great things for His glory." That is the essence of what that verse is saying. If we would see it that way, we could understand that even our failures become great opportunities for God to use us to invite others to come and also experience His forgiveness.

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

David is saying, "God, I understand what You want from me is not a bunch of religious activity." It is entirely possible that through this miserable year David tried some of that, trying to get rid of the shame and the guilt and the burden of this sin but his conclusion is, "God, You don't want a bunch of religious activity. You don't want me running around trying to do so much good that it somehow hides the sin. What You want is **a broken and contrite heart**." **Contrite** means *crushed*. What God wants is that I would face my sin in brokenness, that I would be crushed with the offensiveness of my sin, that I would agree with God, "This is sin and it is wrong and it is offensive to You." And what comes with that is the understanding, if that sincerely is true, *"It must stop*!" With true confession is the understanding, "*Whatever it takes, I need to do that; it must stop*!" That is what God wants.

Only God could know how much Christian activity is motivated by people trying to somehow deal with their shame and their guilt, with this burden of sin, with this secret life that remains in the shadows, and they are doing all kinds of things, hoping, somehow, that will make it go away. When all the time God is saying, "I don't want that. I don't want a bunch of religious activity. I don't want you pretending to be good. I want you to be broken and crushed over your sin. I want you to deal with it and I want you to once again experience the joy of your salvation. I want you to get back on the path. I want to restore you back, that your broken bones might dance again." But it will never happen until we are serious about our sin.

There is a lot of debate about whether verses 18 & 19 were part of the original psalm or if they were added later by an editor. It's really hard to tell, but it doesn't change the meaning either way.

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

Simply stated, those 2 verses say, "As the king goes, so goes the nation." The sobering reality is that thousands and thousands of Hebrew people died because of David's sin, and it was a long, long road back, which poses the question, "How many people—people that you love, people that you care about, people around you—how many of them will need to be wounded before you decide to get serious about your sin?" *As the king goes, so goes the nation*.

This morning there are some of you, maybe many of you, for the last thirty minutes you have been squirming. You don't have to search your heart and, *"See if there be any sin in me."* You know exactly what it is. You have known exactly what it is from the moment we started this conversation. The question is not, "Are you sorry?" Maybe you've been sorry again and again and again; maybe you feel the shame and the guilt; maybe you feel the weight of this thing, but maybe it's time to *confess* this sin. Confession means that I say to God, "I agree with You. This is sin." What is implied in that is that it must stop! Whatever it takes, it's time to get serious and confess sin, and to trust that God is merciful. He is loving; He is kind; He is compassionate. He stands waiting to forgive you, to restore to you the joy of your salvation, to make those broken bones dance again. But it has to start with you being honest about your sin!

Our Father, this morning we come to You as broken people, desperately in need of a Savior. God, I pray that You would search our hearts, that You would reveal our sin, that, Lord, this morning might be the morning that we'd begin the process of restoration, back to the joy of our salvation. This we pray in Jesus' name.

*Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE
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Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
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