

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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The Christian's Armor: All Prayer (Part 6) David's Prayer of Confession

Accountability is something that our society increasingly avoids. The reason that this is so is quite simple—we resent authority. We reluctantly are forced to acknowledge that we need it, but it goes against the grain of our inbred individualism. We see this, for example, in much of popular advertising. The early pioneers were Nike's "Just Do It!" (in other words, don't think about it and don't let anything stand in the way to your doing it) and Burger King's "Sometimes, you gotta break the rules." And the imitators have been numerous. Bacardi Black rum, which advertises itself as "the taste of the night," goes on to say, "Some people embrace the night because rules of the day do not apply." Easy Spirit shoes even latched onto this theme, promising a shoe that "conforms to your foot so you don't have to conform to anything." Ralph Lauren's Safari celebrates "living without boundaries"; even stayed and reliable Merrill Lynch declares that "Your world should know no boundaries"; and Nieman Marcus encourages its customers to relax because, it says, there are "No rules here." These are only a few—there are, if you take time to think about it, many other examples. "Accountability," says David F. Wells, "dies when the self is thought to be accountable only to itself, and in its place there has arisen an ethic that resolves everything into a simple proposition: What's right is what feels good."¹ This, in turn, leads inevitably to the evasion of moral responsibility. We are constantly shifting responsibility (and blame) to other people or circumstances. "The ethos of victimization," writes Charles Sykes, "has an endless capacity not only for exculpating one's self from blame, washing away responsibility in a torrent of explanation—racism, sexism, rotten parents, addiction, and illness—but also for projecting guilt onto others."² Once again David Wells perceptibly pinpoints the issue and the shocking results of what happens when we lose the sense of accountability. "This loss of moral categories, the loss of a transcendent sense of Good and Evil, does not, however, rid the world of those who are evil; it simply blinds us to the real nature of their actions. For now, evil becomes ordinary, routine, a part of life as natural and inevitable as cats killing mice.

It was this loss that so struck Hannah Arendt, who attended the trial in Jerusalem of Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi bureaucrat who became such an important cog in the Nazi killing machine. Her account of the trial takes the reader through the thicket of legal complexities with a sure touch, but it focuses upon the strange contradiction that became so clear during the trial. The prosecution struggled to depict Eichmann as a monster, the epitome of vicious, callous brutality. In actual fact, Eichmann appeared as nothing of the kind. Psychiatrists who examined him found no mental illness, and throughout the trial he conducted himself with dignity and restraint. One of the only moments when his outward calm became a little ruffled, another observer noted, was when, at the very end, he was asked to stand and hear the verdict that he had been found guilty. The 'only signs of his inner terror,' this observer wrote, 'were a sucking of the lips and the claspings and unclaspings of the hands.' This aside, he was in full control of himself, and he seemed so ordinary. He was not a monster, but a gray, conscientious bureaucrat who was just going about his work as he was expected to do. He gave no evidence that he had had to endure any self-reproach for his actions in working to ensure that millions would go to their deaths. It was very matter-of-factness of his account of himself, that it had been emptied of moral considerations, which made his evil seem rather banal, mundane, and routine."³

What the church desperately needs to recover is a biblical understanding of SIN. "A scriptural view of sin," wrote J. C. Ryle, "is one of the best antidotes to that vague, dim, misty, hazy kind of theology which is so painfully current in the present age. It is vain to shut our eyes to the fact that there is a vast quantity of so-called Christianity nowadays which you cannot declare positively unsound, but which, nevertheless, is not full measure, good weight and sixteen ounces to the pound. It is a Christianity in which there is undeniably 'something about Christ and something about grace and something about faith and something about repentance and something about holiness,' but it is not the real 'thing as it is' in the Bible. Things are out of place and out of proportion. As old Latimer would have said, it is a kind of 'mingle-mangle,' and does no good. It neither exercises influence on daily conduct, nor comforts in life, nor gives peace in death; and those who hold it often wake too late to find that they have got nothing solid under their feet. Now I believe that the likeliest way to cure and mend this defective kind of religion is to bring forward more prominently the old scriptural truth about the sinfulness of sin."⁴

Psalm 51 is the fourth of the seven penitential psalms, and surely the best known. It reveals the agony of David's blackest moment of self-realization. *Felt* needs have totally disappeared into *real* needs—the need for God's forgiveness. Blaise Pascal, the noted French polymath, was also a serious Christian who knew personally this reality. "As soon as we venture out along the pathway of self-knowledge, what we discover is that man is desperately trying to avoid self-knowledge. The need to escape oneself explains why many people are miserable when they are not preoccupied with work, or amusement, or vices. They are afraid to be alone lest they get a glimpse of their own emptiness. . . . For if we could face ourselves, with all our faults, we would then be so shaken out of complacency, triviality, indifference, and pretense that a deep longing for strength and truth would be aroused within us. Not until man is aware of his deepest need is he ready to discern and grasp what can meet his deepest need."⁵

I. THE SCANDAL OF SIN

Sin is abominable to God. He hates it (cf. Deut. 12:31). His eyes "are too pure to approve evil, and [He cannot] look on wickedness with favor" (Hab. 1:13). Sin is contrary to His very nature (Isa. 6:3; 1 Jn. 1:5). The ultimate penalty—death—is exacted for every infraction against the divine law (Ezek. 18:4, 20; Rom. 6:23). Even the very smallest transgression is worthy of the same severe penalty: "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all" (Jas. 2:10).

Sin stains the soul. It degrades a person's nobility. It darkens the mind. It makes us worse than animals, for animals cannot sin. Sin pollutes, defiles, stains. All sin is gross, disgusting, loathsome, revolting in God's sight. Scripture calls it "filthiness" (Prov. 30:12; Ezek. 24:13; Jas. 1:21). Sin is compared to vomit, and sinners are the dogs who lick it up (Prov. 26:11; 2 Pet. 2:22). Sin is called mire, and sinners are the swine who love to wallow in it (Ps. 69:2; 2 Pet. 2:22). Sin likened to a putrefying corpse, and sinners are the tombs that contain the stench and foulness (Matt. 23:27). "Sin," declared John MacArthur, "has turned humanity into a polluted, befouled race."⁶ What stands out in David's confession is his excruciating discovery of what was really in his heart. There were layers of sin in his soul, or, to change the metaphor, peaks of evil, which rose one beyond the other, another becoming visible only when one had been scaled. He ransacks the Old Testament vocabulary as he explores his soul and provides a series of vivid word pictures to describe his need.

A. My Transgressions

Verse 1 suggests rebellion and self-assertiveness. He makes himself the center of the universe and his heart is antagonistic to any rival for its throne—even when that rival is a loving Creator.

B. My Iniquity

Verse 2 conveys the idea of a twisted waywardness that vitiates our lives; the fatal flaw that destroys everything. Paul speaks about sinful man "exchanging" the glory of God (Rom. 1:22). That is the fatal mistake. Go wrong here and everything about me is wrong. Made to glorify God and enjoy him forever, I seek to glorify myself, twist and pervert my purpose, and in the end enjoy nothing forever.

C. My Sin

Verses 2 and 3 denote his failure. David has missed the mark, deviated from the goal for which he was created. Not only was he made to live for God's glory but to reflect that glory. He has squandered his destiny.

D. My Evil

Verse 4. Here is the shocking truth he has discovered about himself: he has done evil, and that evil is the fruit of an evil heart. "Nothing is more characteristic of us than the easy assumption that we are by nature basically good; that we sin despite ourselves. A covetous, hateful or immoral thought? We see them as aberrations. But David has been confronted (and confronts us) with the ego-shaking truth: that is what he is really like."⁷

II. THE EFFECTS OF SIN

A. Sin is not restricted to overt acts

Sinful attitudes, sinful dispositions, sinful desires, and a sinful state of heart are just as reprehensible as the actions they produce. Jesus said anger is as sinful as murder, and lust is tantamount to adultery (Matt. 5:21-28).

B. Sin is deceitful in a way that hardens the sinner against its own enormity

(Heb. 3:13) We naturally want to minimize our sin, as if it were not really any big deal. After all, we tell ourselves, God is merciful and loving, is He not? He understands our sin and can't be so hard on us, can He? But to reason that way is to be deceived by sin's cunning.

C. Sin brings guilt

We need to recognize the important difference between *guilt* and *guilty feelings*. We may be guilty of some serious offense and be totally indifferent. David does not seek to simply feel better about himself when he confesses his sin.

NOTE: What is guilt? In order for there to be guilt there must be an objective standard of right and wrong. The Bible tells us that the Law of God is that standard (1 John 3:4). David alludes to God's standard of behaviour by the words he uses for his sin. He calls it "transgression" (Ps. 32:1), which indicates the stepping over a known boundary. He calls it "sin" (v. 1), which refers to missing a mark or a target. He calls it "iniquity" (v. 2), which carries the idea of twisting something. In each case, the thought is the same—namely, failing to live up to a standard. There is a boundary, a target, something that is straight and true, but sin steps over the boundary, misses the target and twists what is straight. This brings us to the glaring contradiction running right through the middle of our society. On one hand, we have heroically tried to eliminate the idea of an objective standard of right and wrong, opting for relativism that says it all depends on the individual and his situation. On the other hand, guilt is running amok. How are we to explain this contradiction? It should be obvious that eliminating the standard of right and wrong is not an easy matter. It is written inside us. We all innately, intuitively know that there is a God, that he has given us certain laws by which to live and that we have fallen far short of those laws.

Roger Ellsworth perceptively asks, "But how does this understanding of guilt help us? In this way: it tells us we can avoid guilt by doing what God wants us to do. Here is where the rub comes in: we want it both ways. We want to break God's laws and not feel guilty about it, but it does not work that way."⁸

D. Sin creates defilement

David's language underscores how deeply sin has penetrated his soul. The enormity of his sin overwhelmed him. "He sees the guilt of his sin as a deep, virtually indelible dye on his character. *Wash away all my iniquity*, he pleads. He uses an intensive expression. He needs multiple washings to be clean."⁹

E. Sin produces spiritual helplessness

Note the earnest plea for God to create in David *a pure heart* (v. 10). The Psalmist's sense of hopelessness and helplessness at the thought of being left to his own resources is echoed in Augustus Toplady's hymn "Rock of Ages." *Guilty, vile and helpless we . . . Nothing in my hands I bring . . . Naked come to Thee for dress; Helpless look to Thee for grace . . . Thou must save, and Thou alone.*

III. **THE GLORIOUS NATURE OF GOD'S GRACE**

The triumphant certainty of the experience of God's grace is captured in the words, *You forgave the iniquity of my sin* (v. 5). This is rooted in God's *great compassion* and *unfailing love*. These are expressions that point to God's covenantal faithfulness.

CONCLUSION: Sin cannot be dismissed as merely a cultural and social blunder or breach of etiquette. Sin is committed against God. Sin, in the words of the old Puritan Ralph Venning, "goes about to ungod God, and is by some of the ancients called *Deicidium*, God-murder or God-killing."¹⁰ It is our deep-seated reluctance to face up to the seriousness of sin that leads us to equally low opinions of forgiveness and the need for God's grace. Evangelicals are not immune to this mentality.¹¹ We too tend to minimize the seriousness of sin. We too seek to portray the Gospel as something that brings personal satisfaction and fulfillment. Our evangelistic schemes focus on the inner experience as something that will bring an added dimension to peoples' lives. But this is not the biblical emphasis. If we would re-capture the Scriptural understanding of sin and forgiveness, let us ponder these themes as they relate to the Cross of Christ. Sinclair Ferguson offers this helpful meditation on Psalm 51.

"In asking for 'mercy,' David, you are asking that God will show it to you, but withdraw it from Jesus.

In asking to experience God's 'unfailing love,' you are asking that Jesus will feel it has been removed.

In asking to taste God's 'great compassion,' you are asking him to refuse it to Jesus as he dies on the cross.

In asking God to 'blot out' your transgressions, you are asking that they will be obliterated by the blood of Jesus.

In asking to be washed, you are asking that the filth of your sin will overwhelm Jesus like a flood.

In asking to know the joy of salvation, you are asking that Jesus will be a Man of Sorrows, familiar with grief.

In asking to be saved from bloodguilt, you are asking that in your place Jesus will be treated as though he were guilty.

In asking that your lips will be opened in praise, you are asking that Jesus will be silenced, as a sheep before her shearers is dumb.

In asking that the sacrifice of a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart be acceptable, you are asking that Jesus' heart and spirit will be broken.

In asking that God will hide his face from your sins, you are asking that he will hide his face from Jesus.

In asking that you will not be cast out of God's presence, you are asking that Jesus will be cast out into outer darkness instead."¹²

ENDNOTES

¹ D. F. Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology* (Eerdmans, 1993), 148.

² C. J. Sykes, *A Nation of Victims: The Decay of the American Character* (St. Martin's, 1992), 11.

³ D.F. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue: Why The Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Eerdmans, 1998), p. 74.

⁴ J. C. Ryle, *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots* (rpt. James Clark & Co. Ltd., 1956), 11.

⁵ As cited by Don Matzat, "Guiltless Good News: The Deformed Theology of Seeker Sensitivity," in *Modern Reformation* 6, no. 6 (Nov/Dec, 1997): 19.

⁶ J. F. MacArthur, *The Vanishing Conscience* (Word, 1994), 107.

⁷ Sinclair Ferguson, *Deserted by God* (Baker Books, 1993), 77.

⁸ Roger Ellsworth, *How to Live in a Dangerous World: Biblical Pictures of Modern Perils* (Evangelical Press, 1998), 152.

⁹ Ferguson, 81.

¹⁰ R. Venning, *The Plague of Plagues* (rpt. The Banner of Truth, 1965), 80.

¹¹ Ray Anderson, a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary (a self-proclaimed evangelical institution), reflects the shift that has occurred across the evangelical spectrum in this egregious statement, "If our sin is viewed as causing the death of Jesus on the cross, then we ourselves become victims of a 'psychological battering' produced by the cross. When I am led to feel that the pain and torment of Jesus' death on the cross is due to *Happiness*, LaHaye's *Transformed Temperaments*, Osborne's *The Art of Understanding Yourself*, Bustanby's *You Can Change Your Personality*, and Ahlem's *Do I Have to Be Me?* Second, there was a category of books dealing with emotional and psychological problems such as a guilt, depression, tension, and anxiety. Included here were Adolph's *Release from Tension*, Narramore's *This Way to Happiness*, Caldwell's *You Can Prevent a Nervous Breakdown*, Eggum's *Feeling Good about Feeling Bad*, and Brandt's *I Want Happiness, Now!* Third, there was a category of what he called hedonistic books such as Schuller's *Self-Love* and *You Can Become the Person You Want to Be*, Larson's *Dare to Live Now*, and Grime's *How to Become Your Own Best Self*. See Hunter, *American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity* (Rutgers University Press, 1983), 94-98. The Christian self movement, insofar as it seeks biblical warrant, has turned to the second great commandment, to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:39). Self-love, it is argued, is here being held up as something that is not only possible but expected and desired. John Stott, however, has rightly countered that this is incorrect for three reasons. First, self-love is not a virtue commended but a reality of human life that is recognized: we should at least try to love others as much as we love ourselves. Second, agape love always entails sacrifice and service, and what sense does it make to speak of sacrificing ourselves to ourselves? Third, self-love is, from a biblical point of view, synonymous with pride, and as such it is roundly condemned (e.g., in 2 Tim. 3:2, 4). See J. R. W. Stott, "Must I Really Love Myself?" *Christianity Today*, 5 May 1978, 34-35. Stott later expanded this initial critique in *The Cross of Christ* (InterVarsity Press, 1986), 274-94, 327-37. Here he relates the issues of self-love to the nature of Christ's work on the Cross and the nature of God as sufferer. For an incisive study of the psychological aspects of this issue, see David G. Myers, *The Inflated Self: Human Illusions and the Biblical Call to Hope* (Seabury Press, 1981). See also Henry Fairlie's excellent analysis of pride in *The Seven Deadly Sins Today*, 37-58. Cf. Wells, *No Place for Truth*, 179.

¹² Ferguson, 85.