

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Series:	The Psalms		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	16		Mason Depew
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CREATE IN ME A CLEAN HEART

1. The background of this psalm is, of course, David's infamous sins against Bathsheba and Uriah in 2 Samuel 11.¹
 - a. Psalm 51 is David's public confession of his great crimes, but also a model for any believing Israelite to follow in confessing sin. When sung together by the assembly of God's people for worship, this psalm has the effect of a public confession of their accumulated sins, much like when we read the Law and pray the prayer of confession each week.
 - b. These notes focus heavily on the first 5 verses of the psalm, because the rest falls into place much more easily once you have understood the beginning.
2. Verses 1-4: David begs for mercy on the basis of the Lord's character and acknowledges his own great sin.
 - a. Verses 1-2: In the first couple of verses of this psalm, David asks the Lord to forgive him and wash him of his sin.
 - i. Notice how bold David's request is! He speaks in the imperative form, like he is giving commands to a soldier: "*Have mercy... blot out... wash me... cleanse me...*" This is not the way people ordinarily speak to those in authority over them. You would expect something more like the way people speak to Ahasuerus in the book of Esther.²
 1. Why can David be so bold? Only because the Lord has bound himself to Israel in general,³ and David in particular,⁴ in covenant. The Lord had promised to be merciful to his people when they confessed and repented of their sins, and David is calling on the Lord to keep that promise.

¹ There is much debate these days about whether what David did in that chapter qualifies as rape. It seems to me that if the author of 2 Samuel wanted to give us an answer to that question, he would have indicated whether Bathsheba cried out for help or not. That is the key test in Israel's law for whether a sexual act is considered rape, found in Deuteronomy 22:23-27. Regardless, the text of both 2 Samuel 11 and Psalm 51 focuses the guilt entirely on David. This could be either because 1) he raped her or 2) he abused the tremendous legal, moral, and political power of his office as King, making his sin far more egregious than hers. David's sin is, of course, all the more shocking because he is the king who completed the conquest of the promised land and the father of the Messiah's dynasty. It is highly likely that other kings of Israel and Judah committed similar sins, since this kind of thing was fairly common for pagan kings of the time, but Scripture focuses on David's sin because of his importance in God's plan of redemption.

² For example, Esther 5:4 is an excellent model of politely suggesting, rather than commanding the king to do what you want. "If it please the king, let the king and Haman come today to a feast that I have prepared for the king."

³ When the Lord revealed his glory to Moses in Exodus 34 as a prelude to renewing the covenant with Israel, he emphasized the exact same character traits which David appeals to in Psalm 51: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness," (v. 6).

⁴ God made his covenant with David in 2 Samuel 7, before his sins against Bathsheba and Uriah in 2 Samuel 11. God could not very well keep his promise to establish David's house forever if he destroyed David's household for David's sin.

2. The knowledge of God's covenantal promises gives believers in every age boldness to call on him in their distress. "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).
 - ii. David begins to show his awareness of the seriousness of his sin already with the dramatic desperation of his request. In verse 2, David asks the Lord to wash him *thoroughly*, foreshadowing just how deeply he feels the stain of sin. He feels not just superficially dirty, but deeply filthy and in desperate need of cleansing to save his life.⁵
- b. Verses 3-4 focus on the seriousness of David's sin which he is now confessing.
- i. David uses three of the most common words to describe sin in the Old Testament. "Transgression," "sin," "evil," and then in verse 5 he uses "iniquity," applying all the main categories of offenses to himself. We can see very clearly therefore that David is *not* downplaying his crimes in the slightest. Perhaps the only more severe word for sin which he does not apply to himself is "abomination."⁶
 - ii. David's confession appears to be surprisingly generic, given the very specific sins which were the occasion for the psalm's composition.
 1. This is one reason it is important to remember that we are reading a psalm, intended for use in public worship. David makes the wording more general so that all believing Israelites may use it to confess their own particular sins. When praying and confessing your sins to the Lord privately, it is still advisable to confess your sins more specifically than this psalm does.
 2. There are, of course, psalms which focus very specifically on the events of David's life, but these are Messianic, foreshadowing the kingship and suffering of Jesus. A psalm which is all about confessing sins obviously *cannot* be Messianic in that way, since our Messiah thankfully never sinned like David did! So in order that it might be appropriate for *public* confession, it could not just focus on David's particular situation.
 - iii. The biggest question most people have when they read verse 4 is why David appears to ignore the others whom his sin affected.
 1. One plausible explanation is that all sins against other human beings are sins against God because men and women are made in God's image.⁷ In a worldview without God and without God's image-bearers, there would be no firm foundation for moral absolutes. We would only be relying on subjective morality, either from individual sources (our consciences) or collective sources (received traditions). Therefore, there is a real sense in which all sins are offensive only because they are ultimately sins against God.
 2. Calvin's explanation is similar, though he does not refer to the image of God. In his view, David is emphasizing that God's court, as it were, is the only one which really matters. As the king, David really only had to report to the King of Kings, and no one else around David was realistically going to bring charges against him.⁸

⁵ As Calvin says in his commentary, "This is a truth which should both commend the grace of God to us and fill us with a detestation of sin. Insensible, indeed, must be the heart which is not affected by it!" (pg 284).

⁶ This is likely because "abomination" in Hebrew is reserved primarily for idolatry, as well as sexual acts which are in and of themselves perverse, no matter the context. For example, incest, homosexuality, and cult prostitution are all called abominations at various points in the Old Testament. Even "marriage" could not make these acts permissible.

⁷ In James 3:9, for example, James points out a contradiction between blessing God and cursing image-bearers with the same tongue, implying that cursing God's image-bearers is really cursing God.

⁸ Pg 286.

3. Verses 5-13: The roots of sin are so deep that only God can tear them out.
 - a. Verse 5 traces the particular sins being confessed in this psalm all the way back to the sinful nature which all people are born with after the Fall.
 - i. Some might think that David is talking about a sinful way in which his mother conceived him. There are certainly sinful ways in which to conceive a child, such as the sin with Bathsheba which is the background of this psalm's composition. But there are at least two good reasons to reject this interpretation.
 1. The first line of this verse says he was actually *brought forth* or *born* in iniquity, not just conceived in sin. It's more difficult to imagine what especially egregious sin David's mother might have committed while giving birth to him. More importantly, that would be irrelevant to David's confession here. The poetry flows much more naturally if David is saying, "Not only have I sinned horrendously now, but I have been a sinner my whole life, since I was born. What is more, since the moment I was conceived!"
 2. Once again, we ought to remember that David has kept the details of his situation relatively vague so that Psalm 51 can work for all Israelites as a collective confession when they sing it. If he is describing some extremely specific circumstances around his birth and conception here, it would not apply to most others singing this psalm.
 - ii. Notice that David says *he* was brought forth and conceived, not someone or something else that *became* him. This reveals a vital difference between the way the Bible talks about personhood in contrast to our culture today.
 1. Today in the US people generally assume that what makes you yourself is some combination of your experiences, your desires, and your choices. These are all part of your *subjectivity*. For example, sometimes people talk about a toddler "becoming a person" since he now points at things he wants and says a few words, expressing his individual will and desires. If this is what you think it means to be human, then you are unlikely to view a newly-conceived child as more than a "clump of cells." The child's mother, according to this view, is much more of a "person" because she has hopes and desires that must be fulfilled, whereas the child has no consciousness at this point.
 2. Related to this, people rarely use the phrase "human nature" anymore, and instead talk about the "human condition." This reflects the belief that there is no human essence that we all share in common, but instead that we are shaped by circumstances around us and/or our own individual choices. Cliches like, "You are who you choose to be!" come from this way of thinking. The popularity of the "coming of age story" is likewise founded on these same cultural trends.
 3. This also helps explain several common errors that have cropped up recently concerning the Trinity and the person of Christ. If you think the most important part of your personhood is your *consciousness* or your *will*, then it is impossible to accept the teaching that God is three persons with one will, or that Christ is one person with two wills.⁹ Then you will read a

⁹ The Swiss Reformed theologian Johannes Wollebius said each of the three divine persons is "the essence of God, with a certain manner of subsisting" (*Christianae theologiae compendium*, pg 20-21). This definition seems unhelpfully vague at first, but it is really just trying not to go beyond what we know from Scripture. The Son subsists differently from the Father (he is begotten and the Father is

passage like Matthew 26:39 and think Jesus is saying that God the Son eternally submits his will to God the Father.

4. Psalm 51:5 clearly teaches, in contrast to these modern views, that there is an essential human nature, and it is deeply sick with sin. Remember again that while the occasion for this psalm's composition is David's peculiar sins, it is designed to be heartily sung by all God's people. That includes the Israelites, and it includes Christians today. You and I did not get to choose who we are. Adam did, and he chose poorly.¹⁰
- b. Verse 6 shows both why this sin nature is such a fundamental problem and also why God alone can fix us.
 - i. The Lord delights in what is true and wise in all things, even those which are hidden and inaccessible to human observers. David himself knows this personally because God has taught him a significant measure of truth and wisdom over the course of his life.
 - ii. The problem is that this also means the deep perversity of human nature after the Fall is completely exposed to God at all times *and* diametrically opposed to his own holiness. There can be no easy reconciliation while this problem persists; God cannot simply look the other way.
 - c. Verse 7 calls on God to act alone, without David's cooperation.
 - i. Given the extreme depth and far-reaching consequences of the problem as David has described it thus far, it is perfectly clear why only the power of God can resolve the issue.
 - ii. Ironically, the word for "purging" here in verse 7 is the very same root that means "sin" in verses 2, 3, 4, and 5. This further highlights the poetic fittingness of the response David is calling for. David cannot wash himself of these stains, but if God does it, it will be perfectly thorough. God can make a sinner cleaner than anything in this world, even snow!
 - iii. David refers to the purification rituals of the priests using hyssop as a sign of spiritual cleansing. This reminds us that the sign is only effective if the Lord himself does the work which it signifies. Hyssop, like baptism or the Lord's Supper, has no value if it is merely a man performing the sign.
 - d. If the Lord does this wondrous work, verses 8 and 12-15 show what David's response will be.
 - i. Joy and gladness, as if he had broken bones which were suddenly healed, pouring forth in specific actions: testifying about what the Lord has done for him and singing his praises.
 - ii. These two responses, worship and witness, should be our first instincts when we feel grateful for the Lord's gracious salvation.
 - e. As David keeps emphasizing again and again, however, this must be the Lord's work and his alone.
 - i. If God does not renew David's heart and spirit (vv. 10, 12) through the continuing work of the Holy Spirit's sanctification (v. 11), David cannot be purified and joyfully

not), but beyond that we really can't say much about how they are different from each other. If we start attributing distinct wills or consciousnesses to each person, the oneness of the godhead quickly dissolves into nothingness and Deuteronomy 6:4 becomes a lie on our lips.

¹⁰ If you think this is unfair, it is because you are imagining a merely human judge who did not graciously give you every good thing you have, and therefore does not have the right to take them away from you. If you are truly thinking of the God who made all things and governs them according to the counsel of his will, then you realize that he *did* give you everything you have, and he *does* have the right to take it from you on the basis of Adam's sin, because he never owed it to you to begin with.

testify and sing praises to the Lord. David needs both objective forgiveness (justification) and transformation of his inner person (sanctification).

- ii. We must pay careful attention to the fact that David does not ask for spiritual progress on the basis of his fruit so far. He asks for the Lord to work powerfully in him on the basis of the Lord's own character and promises.
4. As he brings the psalm to a close in verses 16-19, David recognizes that all we can bring when we come to the Lord requesting greater sanctification is a broken spirit.
 - a. We cannot come proudly, bringing goods that God needs as if we were equals and could bargain with him. We must come, humbled to the point of despairing of ourselves, so that we are ready to trust in God's power alone to save us from ourselves.
 - b. In this way, God actually brings the good of sanctification out of the evil of our sin! When we sin and feel ourselves losing ground, the Holy Spirit uses that guilt to drive us once again to the Cross, knowing there is no help to be found anywhere else. As we grow in faith by habitually confessing our sins and resting in Christ for forgiveness, the fruits of the Spirit gradually follow more and more. As you know better and better just how much you have been forgiven, you will love God and love your neighbor more and more, which is the core of the whole Law.
 - c. The final two verses of Psalm 51 show us that God draws out from his people the sacrifices that he wants by pouring out his grace and mercy upon them. Reconciling himself to sinners, and drawing out beautiful, joyful worship from us is the Lord's great pleasure. There is no other work of God which better shows forth his majesty and his infinite power, because there is no one else who could accomplish it!