

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Teach Us to Pray: A Clean Heart”

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Psalm 51

June 19, 2021

We continue in our series in the Psalms this month on how the Bible’s songbook teaches us to pray. If you’ve been with us, you’ll remember that this month, we’ve been exploring how the Psalms guide us in prayer, and then next month, we’ll see how the Psalms, in particular how the final five Psalms, teach us to praise, to worship. So a short word about what to look forward to, as we’ll wrap up our series on prayer next Sunday.

First, we will be blessed to welcome Rev. Buddy Sexton for the next two Sundays as our guest preacher. Many of you already know Buddy, in particular from his speaking last August at our church stay-retreat, and I’m grateful that he’ll be with us while I’m away with family for the next couple of weeks. He’ll wrap up our series on prayer next Sunday, but then the following Sunday, he’ll actually kick off our series on praise, on worship in the Psalms.

Today, as we continue our focus on prayer, we come to what is perhaps the least comfortable aspect of prayer, short of praying aloud in public: confession. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

*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 alone, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.
Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.
You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my 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 crushed rejoice.
Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.
Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right 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 in me a willing spirit.
Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.
Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.
O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be
pleased.
The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not
despise.
Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;
rebuild the walls of Jerusalem;
then you will delight in right sacrifices,
in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.*

Psalm 51

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

The stories vary, but a long time ago, a man went out into the desert and stayed there for many years. One way the story is told is that he had been a practicing lawyer, well-read and educated, and articulate in his writing and speech, but when he was about forty years old, sadly his wife died, and his life took a very different turn.

In his grief, perhaps even in guilt, he turned to a monastic life, renouncing his possessions, and as part of that turn, retreated to an isolated cell out on a desert plain at the foot of a mountain.

There his life was solitary. He focused on reflection, meditation, and prayer. He ate sparingly and lived basically. It was only at the end of each week that he, along with other monks who had adopted the same lifestyle, would come in from his cell to worship and share communion. And then back out into solitude, prayer, and confession.

Many years later, he wrote, “He who really keeps account of his actions considers as lost every day in which he does not mourn, whatever good he may have done in it.”

Now when you first hear that from this man who spent years in isolation out in the desert, it makes you wonder, I mean how much damage could he have really done? He was off by himself. But perhaps a more constructive way of hearing that would be similar to a way the Christian apologist C. S. Lewis once put it: “No man knows how bad he is till he has tried very hard to be good.” And somehow that sentiment, that need to take account of one’s actions, guided that monk’s time in solitude, guided his need for confession.

It is a sense of confession that permeates this entire psalm. Tradition holds that this is a psalm of a king named David, composed after a prophet had convicted him of his own sin. He had taken another man’s wife and then conspired to kill him to cover it up.

“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions,” he begins. He is taking a good, honest look at what he has done, realized that it was wrong, and then—and this is perhaps the most important step—confesses it. He goes to God acknowledging that he had erred and asks for mercy.

That is perhaps an impulse that runs as counter to our instincts as it could get, to confess something. Now by instinct, you could argue, or you call it conscience or an innate moral compass or whatever label you want to use, you could say that we have an innate sense of right and wrong—philosophers debate about that, I would have no disagreement with it. All too natural to recognize that we are not perfect, far from perfect.

After all, what do we see in the Book of Genesis, after Adam and Eve eat the fruit they were forbidden from eating, and their eyes were opened, and they saw that they were naked, their true selves were literally made bare, they saw that they had done wrong. But then they do about the most natural thing one might expect. They hid. They hid themselves away. *That* is our natural instinct; when there is shortcoming, when there is vulnerability, when there is brokenness, it is engrained in us to conceal it. Case in point, that’s exactly what David did at first; he tried to cover up what he had done, in turn doing more wrong, driving himself further and further away.

So to do what David then did goes decidedly against instinct, against what comes natural to us. Hear the way he puts it, starting in v. 3: “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you

alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment. Indeed I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me. You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.”

Hear the heartbreak there, in what he himself has done, what he has become. “My sin is ever before me”; he can’t get away from it. “You desire truth in the inward being”; he doesn’t want to lie to himself anymore. He may not even be getting all of it right: “Against you, you alone, [meaning against God alone] have I sinned,” he says. Well, the violated wife and murdered husband might have something to say about that. They might rightly say, “Well, you might have sinned against us too.”

But it all leads to this plea to be made whole. In what might be the more well-known verse of this psalm, v. 10: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.”

The point is, this king, this now humbled king David is coming to the Lord in heartbreak, in brokenness, in confession, and is seeking forgiveness, hoping to be made whole, and it goes against instinct to do it.

Regardless of whether it feels natural or easy to us, it remains a fundamental component of how we live as Christians, how we pray as people of faith: to acknowledge our wrongdoing, to confess. We hear it nearly every week in the way Christ himself taught us to pray, “Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us,” or “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” This act of confession in prayer, of coming before God seeking forgiveness and restoration is central to the Christian life. That’s what David is doing.

So is this something that we truly and readily do? When we’ve done something wrong, when we’ve fallen short, do we readily admit it? Do we bring it to the light? Maybe not so readily. That part doesn’t come so easily.

Sometimes it has to be taught, to be modeled. I was speaking with one of our folks this past week who preferred to remain anonymous, but he was sharing the difficulties he felt in parenting, appropriate perhaps, with today being Father’s Day. While on one hand there’s a good thing of affirmation and encouragement from a parent to a child, he saw an overcorrection at the expense of actually being a formative presence in the lives of his kids. After one instance in which his son had done wrong, he shared what he had tried to do for his kids, “I’m your father,” he would say. “I’m not trying to be your best friend, but I will try to teach you right from wrong.”

Sometimes it has to be taught, this notion that we need to admit and come clean when we’ve fallen short, because it’s not a natural instinct. And that applies not just as individuals, but also collectively. Prayer and confession are often viewed almost exclusively as private, solitary things, when they often can and should be a communal practice too. That’s why we join in shared words of confession every Sunday. There is importance in recognizing not just ways we’ve individually fallen short, but also collectively, as a people, as a church, sins of callousness, sins of prejudice, sins of indifference, sins of greed, sins of racism. I mean even today, June 19, Juneteenth, is a day observed in a sense of celebration, for emancipation, but the need for it in response to a great collective failing in this country.

Whatever the scale, confession doesn’t come easy, but it is so important.

And perhaps the reason we can be so hesitant to do it is because we don’t see it in the right light. We think of confession, and we too often imagine it to be wallowing in self-pity or self-loathing. Look how bad I am. And that’s not nothing. The church has certainly been guilty of that and encouraging that. But that’s not the point of confession, or of praying in confession. You might think it’s that way, but that’s not the purpose of it.

And if you want proof, just look at how the psalm offers it. The point of the psalm isn't how awful I am. The point is how God might make me whole. There are words of admission, of contrition, but that's not where it stops. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me." The hope is to be made new, to be lifted up. Not just to be forgiven, but to be transformed.

And even beyond that, hear how the Psalm puts it just a couple of verses later in v. 12: "Restore to me the joy of your salvation." In confession, there is hope for the joy of being redeemed. That's something that's lost when we get away from it. What joy is there in salvation if we believe in our hearts that there is nothing we need to be saved from. "Restore to me the joy of your salvation." Confession isn't about wallowing in how bad you are. It's about hope for the new work God could do through you.

Back out in that desert, that monk who had lived in isolation all those years, who had been so fixated on prayer and confession during that time, actually saw something of restoration in his own life. You see the other monks in that community, after decades of his being there, asked him to lead their community, to which he reluctantly agreed to. He was drawn back into fellowship, back into relationship.

St. John of the Ladder, as he was known, came to lead this particular monastic community at the foot of Mt. Sinai in the 7th century. And upon assuming leadership, he actually wrote what remains one of the more beloved guides of spiritual disciplines in the Eastern Orthodox traditions of the church. It's called *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*—that's why he's known as St. John of the Ladder. And it's a description of practices and prayers, even down to the physical posture we take, meant to bring us closer and closer to God. Now a quick caveat, because we have to be careful when thinking about faith in such a way. Something like a ladder of divine ascent might make it seem like it's just a matter of working our way up to the divine, but that's not what it's about. It's about how the embrace of spiritual disciplines can strengthen faith when observed properly.

And within this structure, as you might imagine, prayer features very prominently, but also in there is the practice of confession and repentance. At one point John offers this: "To repent is not to look downwards at my own shortcomings, but upwards at God's love. It is not to look backwards with self-reproach but forward with trustfulness. It is to see not what I have failed to be, but what by the grace of Christ I might yet become."

Friends, if we join in the hope of this psalm, if we embrace even what this monk did hundreds of years ago in the desert, it means first that perhaps we have gotten away from the central need to acknowledge and admit that we fall short over and over, but second that such confession isn't meant to leave us in self-loathing, not to look downwards at our own shortcomings, but upwards at God's love.

And so this week, if confession is something you're not accustomed to doing, I'd like to encourage you to embrace a simple discipline. It's actually an ancient one, one that also is prominent in the Eastern Orthodox traditions. It's called the "Jesus Prayer," and it's very simple. It says, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." And that's it. "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." And if you're keen to take another step, consider doing the following. What would happen if while you offered this simple prayer, you kneeled? You physically kneeled, and then, looked up.

Because in prayer, and in confession, as we've heard in this psalm and in the wisdom of the saints, we are not left to dwell on our sin, left in the shame of our own shortcomings, but rather blessed and restored to the joy of salvation, when we look then upon what by the grace of Christ we might yet become.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.