

We are continuing our series entitled Lent: Psalms in the Shadows. One of the many reasons it is good for us to sit on this topic of confession for multiple weeks is because we have to start to develop a richer vocabulary on how to understand and develop the experience of repentance.

I was listening to something earlier this week that reminded me of a story in Augustine's book *Confessions* in which he was reflecting on his adolescent years and an incident in which he and some friends robbed a pear orchard. The story goes that he and some friends broke into a pear orchard and stole some pears.

During his retelling of the story, he questions where this behavior came from. He admits he didn't need pears. He also admits that he doesn't even like pears. So, where did this devious behavior and impulse come from? Listen to what Augustine writes in *Confessions, Book II*,

I was under no compulsion of need unless a lack of moral sense can count as need, and a loathing for justice, and a greedy, full-fed love of sin. Yet I wanted to steal, and steal I did...I simply wanted to enjoy the theft for its own sake, and the sin...The malice was loathsome, and I loved it. I was in love with my own ruin, in love with decay: not with the thing for which I was falling into decay but with decay itself, for I was depraved in soul, and I lept down from your strong support into destruction, hungering not for some advantage to be gained by the foul deed, but for the foulness of it.

What Augustine understands, or came to understand, is that there was something deeper within him that was motivating his sin. It was an issue of loves and longings. He "hungered for the foulness," he "loved his malice," he simply wanted to "enjoy the theft." This necessitates a rich confession because it is the realization of the deep sinful core that permeates our center.

And it is one thing to confess this sin. That is a needed important part of repentance, but this distortion of love must be confessed and renounced. What Augustine came to realize is that his love was aimed at the sin; he hadn't found change because he hadn't learned to renounce the sin because of a profound hatred of the sin. This is where David goes next in his Psalm.

You see, what is lacking in our secular confession is an understanding of renunciation of sin. Because it is in a renunciation of sin that we recognize not simply that we "made a mistake," but rather that our mistakes are ruggedly consistent with our character, they are in line with something much deeper, and

therefore, we must call out the sin as something that is both wrong in action and indicative of a deeper illness of sin.

Because the reality is that secular or Christian, believer or not, all of us understand the need for confession. Whether it be a flattened secular understanding of confession as a primarily therapeutic process or the far richer Christian understanding of confession, it is the recognition that there are things in our world that are flat wrong, and whether we call it sin or not, sin pervades the human experience.

What sets the Christian confession apart from the secular confession is the added step of renunciation. Christian confession is followed by renunciation of sin, and in those two steps together (confession and renunciation), we find the process of repentance.

This is the process we will see in the text, and if there is one thing I want you to take home with you, it is this: Confession leads to forgiveness, and renunciation leads to change. So turn in your Bibles to Psalm 51. Let me set the context of this particular prayer. Because as many of you may know, this Psalm has infamous origins.

The argument could be made that this is one of the most famous, if not the most famous, prayer of confession in the entire Bible. And the context in which it arose is also one of the most famous circumstances and stories in the scriptures as well. This story came up from the life of King David, who is a towering figure in the scriptures

It can be found in 2 Samuel 11. But as the story goes, David sent his armies off to war and should have gone alongside them. Rather than heading off with the armies, he remained back. One evening he walked around on the top of his palace and saw a woman bathing. He was attracted to her, and sent a servant of his to bring her back to him. This attraction grew into a full-blown affair—although, given the power dynamics, I'm not sure Bathsheba had any choice, and affair is probably not the right word for it.

Her name was Bathsheba, and she was married to one of David's top warriors, Uriah. After she told David that she had conceived and was pregnant, in order to cover up the affair, David devises a plan to bring back Uriah from the war to allow him to sleep with Bathsheba; then, everyone would assume the child was from their time together.

He called for Uriah to come home, but he refused to sleep with his wife while his soldiers were on the battlefield. This enraged David, so he decided to get him drunk and then send him home, but Uriah still refused. So David finally sent Uriah back to the battlefield with a sealed note that said Uriah should go to the front of the battle where the fighting was the fiercest, and then everyone else would pull back and isolate Uriah in the front of the battle so he would be killed. The plan worked, Uriah was killed in battle, and David assumed that his sin and murder will be covered up and concealed.

So he had an affair, had the man killed, and then married Bathsheba thinking that all was well now. He had covered his tracks. Well, eventually, a prophet of God named Nathan, comes to David to confront him of his sin. Nathan comes; he tells David a story about a rich man with a bunch of sheep and a poor man who had one little lamb. The poor man loved his little lamb. When the time came for the rich man to provide a meal to a traveler, he didn't want to kill one of his own lambs, so he went and took the one lamb from the poor man and killed it, and prepared it for the meal. Nathan then asked what David thought of the rich man; David was enraged!

Then with conviction and boldness, Nathan looked King David right in the face and said, "David, you are that man!" Following this encounter, David's life fell apart. He was exposed; his sin was exposed, and the fallout of his actions was severe.

What do we do when our own failure and sin destroys our lives? What do we do when our sin catches up with us, and the fallout and consequences of our sin destroys everything we know about our life? What if there was a process that could help put your life back together after the fallout of sin?

This is what Lent, and particularly Psalm 51, is all about. It is about watching David, a man after God's own heart, put his life back together after the severe fall out of all that took place. The process is what the Bible calls "repentance." And this process of repentance is far more than simply saying you are sorry. It is the process by which we reorient ourselves through confession of guilt and the pursuit and assurance of forgiveness.

The practice of confession and repentance offers a way out of the cycles of brokenness that we find ourselves stuck in. But what we will see today is that confession—the prayer of repentance—offers a way toward life change.

Confession Leads to Forgiveness

"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin" (Psalm 51:1-2). As was the case last week in Psalm 32, all three words for sin in the Hebrew language are present here in the first two verses.

Transgressions – *pesha* - rebellious action

Iniquity - *avah* - to act wrongly

Sin - *chatah* - to miss the mark, to go astray

I make reference to these words used here by David not to impress but rather to demonstrate that David, in the very first breath of this Psalm, uses every word available to him to talk about his sin. This is a comprehensive confession. It is a confession that looks directly into the face of the fallout of his actions. It is not a flippant response to a problem; it is a comprehensive, concrete prayer of confession that is seeking healing from his rebellion.

Now, this comprehensive confession is laid out beautifully before God in response to David's understanding of the very character of God:

"according to your unfailing love..."

"according to your great compassion..."

"wash away all my iniquity..."

There is a confidence in David to confess his sins to God because he is confident in the character of God. In this way, he is able to bring the fullness of his confession and his story to God. Let's read on as the confession takes greater shape.

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. vv. 3-5

David begins his confession with just that, an admittance of his own guilt. Notice here that we see David give a full confession without the trapping of blame-shifting. Nowhere in this confession do we see David say, "Well, she was enticing me." Or "He had it coming" or "This is just what we do." Or "I deserve this, I give and give, I deserve to do this." No, there is no justification, only true full confession with the admittance of guilt and personal culpability.

I can imagine earlier on in the story of David and Bathsheba, he did blame circumstances, and rationalized, and justified, but until he got to this place where he finally offered a full confession with the admittance of guilt, he was not able to change.

This direct acceptance and confession of sin on no other basis than his own culpability took David a while to get to, but once he got there, he didn't try to skirt his responsibility. David doesn't minimize, doesn't relativize, doesn't trivialize.

Minimize - "Well, it's not that big a deal."

Relativize - "If you were married to him or her, you would have done the same."

Trivialize - "It's only a small thing. There's nothing wrong with a little of this or that."

Until we stop blame-shifting, we will not begin the process of true confession. When we blame-shift, we are not actually repenting but complaining about the fallout of our sin. Blame-shifting, in

many ways, is a coping mechanism to avoid experiencing the full weight of our failure. And if we never take on the full weight of our culpability, we will never be able to off-load the fullness of sin.

It must also be noted that the reference to the word “only” is a troubling one because David had not just sinned against God alone. But rather, his sin was also certainly against Bathsheba; it was against Uriah, it was against his people, as their king, and it was certainly against God. The ramifications of his sin were wide and profound.

Most scholars say that the reference is hyperbolic. David’s heart is pouring into the text here. It is a statement of hyperbole mentioned to express the intensity of his failure and his recognition of his failure. So too, here David says, “against you, you only have I sinned.” In the ancient languages, when you double the subject, “You, you only...” or “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,” It is a tool used to magnify the intensity of the moment and the request.

It is as if David is saying, “Of course, I sinned against all these others, but the foundational sin at its core is against you.” Without that sin, the rest would not have flowed because beneath all sin is a foundational sin against God.

Here is what we must resist, and what the Christian understanding of the person asserts is that we must not be in denial of our capacity for sin. “*Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me*” (v. 5). Be sure to read verse 5 carefully; this is a verse that can often be misread. The translation here is strong, but just note that it isn’t the mother who sinned in conception, and that is why David is now sinful. It is far more profound here. It is communicating that the sin that David committed in the episode of Bathsheba stemmed from a condition from which David had always lived. Sin is the condition of David’s soul. It is not simply a one-off event but is ruggedly consistent with the very character of David’s life.

Derek Kinder, a commentator on the Psalms, makes note that in this verse, David connects the crime and sin of murder that he commits against Uriah, Bathsheba, and the entire episode is ruggedly consistent with his character. Meaning, this sin is not “out of character” but rather very much in line with who David was his entire life. Sin was “crouching at his door, waiting to pounce when the conditions were right.” And at this moment, the conditions were ripe for David to sin.

One of the most challenging realizations about the story of David and Bathsheba is that anyone of us is so prone to deep and profound sin that we would never see coming if the conditions were just right. Our hearts are so bent and distorted that if the right circumstances and opportunities presented themselves, we would be far more vulnerable to doing things we would never expect. For us as modern listeners, this will sound incredulously

harsh. I would just want to suggest that, yes, it may be harsh, but it is real.

David recognizes the consistency in his own experience from a child to his current status.

We have a tendency to rationalize our sin away by trying to explain it as an anomaly, an intrusion on who we truly are. The problem with that is the failure to recognize that the desire for the sinful act is buried deeper within us. Without the recognition of the sin’s origins at its depth, it becomes nearly impossible to root out the problem and seek change.

Here in these few verses, David has found the resemblance between the sins of his youth and the murder he committed against Uriah. This is not out of character; it is very much in character. They stem from the same origin. The question behind the question is, where does sin originate within the human person?

I would imagine that every one of us has surprised ourselves with the capacity for sin. Whether it is bursts of anger or abusive language, lustful thoughts, and acts of impropriety, whatever it is, we have all at times experienced the dissonance of seeing how utterly sinful we can act. And it is in those moments; if you don’t press deeper and try to get at the origins of where that misplaced desire stems from, you will have greater problems.

What David connects together, and what the Christian story and understanding of humanity understand is within each individual is the potential for tremendous good and evil. The recognition that David comes to, we too must arrive at—that the capacity of the human soul, our very soul, for cruelty or grace, for hatred or love is far more muddied and extreme than we want to admit.

If the right circumstances, the right tending, the proper conditions arise, we will find that we are far more capable of evil than we would like to admit, and David says, “I was sinful from my earliest days. It is just now; the conditions had arisen in which murder was what I was capable of” A strikingly terrible thought. In this way, David is not minimizing his sin, “Ahhh, this is something I’ve always done, it just the way things are...” No, not in any way. It is a deep and profound recognition of how wrought through our sinful condition is. “He is saying that I was always this sinful, always this capable of murder; I just never saw it. But the deception is no longer.”

Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb; you taught me wisdom in that secret place. Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. vv. 6-9

Be sure to notice how deeply intimate the language is that David is using here. The language all moves toward a direct relationship and connection between God and David. Remember the context of this Psalm, David had felt remorse prior to Nathan’s

confrontation. But he hadn't yet gotten to the place of repentance. It wasn't until his heart was engaged and David recognized the pain that was caused to God, the fracture of relationship, that David understood what was necessary in his repentance.

At this point, David has gone all-in on his confession. But he didn't do so at first. It wasn't, until he was confronted directly that he started to admit and confess his failure. Many of us, myself included, never actually repent and confess our sins until we are confronted. More often than not, when we finally confess, particularly only in response to confrontation, our first move is to repent only in response to the effects that are taking place against our life. There is a difference between heart-felt conviction and confession and self-pity at the fallout of our lives because of the consequences of our sin.

Self-Pity vs. Repentance

I once heard Tim Keller make this incredibly important distinction between self-pity and repentance. In self-pity, you are loving yourself. You are saying this sin got me into trouble, and now I am really sorry because it is impacting me. It is rooted in self-love and not in love of others. In self-pity, you are upset and sad about the effects of sin and the consequences of sin, but not over the sin itself. And that is a major problem. In self-pity, you cannot be sorry for the sin because that requires love, and one caught in self-pity does not have love.

When you enter into genuine repentance, it is because you see the sin as the affront and offense to the loved one; when we recognize that our sins are committed against God and hurt and break the very heart of God. If your heart is truly engaged with God's, you will begin to recognize the manner in which your sin is breaking the heart of God, and in turn, you either grow cold or find genuine remorse.

This ultimately leads to the second part of the process of repentance. The first, confession leads to forgiveness. But the second stage is that of renunciation. You can only renounce sin when you recognize the affront that is caused and left in its wake. Let's continue on, and you will see David respond with a renunciation of sin through the request for change.

Renunciation Leads to Change

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to you. Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, you who are God my Savior, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness. Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise.
vv. 10-15

Up until this point, David has focused the majority of his prayer on the removal of his sin, but he now moves into the renunciation of sin by longing and desiring for new life.

You cannot bring about change if you cannot renounce your sin. And the implication of David's prayer here in Psalm 51 is that a pure heart he doesn't have, so he is requesting a change. David's recognition is that this new disposition of renouncing sin is the only posture that will bring about genuine change. Built into the request is also the assumption that he cannot bring about that change on his own and will, therefore, need God to bring about that change. He is not capable of the transformation of character that is needed; only God can bring that transformation to his life.

At the beginning of his request is the word create. "*Create in me a pure heart, O God...*" In the Hebrew, the word is *bara* and is the same word that is used right there in Genesis 1:1, "*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*" It evokes images of the need for new creation, for something altogether new to happen within the life of the sinner in order to generate new life. I'm reminded of Paul's words in Corinthians when he talks about one who has been baptized in Christ that born in them is "New Creation." There is something new, then and there.

There is a genuine fear that God will abandon the Psalmist because of his sin, "Do not cast me from your presence, or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of my salvation..." This is so essential to understand to the process of repentance. You see, what happens with sin is something takes the position of God in terms of where we find our joy and our fulfillment. So when David requests of God to restore the joy of his salvation, he is making note that his loves had shifted and something had taken the place of that love.

David is saying, "I remember what it was like when I first believed. I remember what it was like when my joy was originally found in you." He remembers when Saul was trying to kill him, and he was saved by God. When he was taking down Goliath, God saved him. David remembered that there were so many times that God had saved him, and that was the source of his joy. But somewhere along the way, that joy was lost. Somewhere along the way, he lost the zeal and the joy that is in the Lord. Why did he commit adultery? Because he had already, somewhere along the way, committed adultery against God. He had given his love away to something else.

David was perplexed and saddened by the manner in which his heart had been led away to things other than God. What have you exchanged for the joy of your salvation? Where have you lost your joy in the Lord? Where are you finding your satisfaction? Rather than participating in sin, David will progress to teaching others the way of God in order to avoid those catastrophic failures he has perpetuated. It is a beautiful full reversal of posture.

"You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise" (16-17). You could define a "broken and contrite heart" as a heart that is saddened by sin and ready to disown it and turn away from it. Or, in the language we have been using this morning, a broken and contrite heart is one that confesses and renounces sin; a repentant heart.

This is profound. God is interested in the complexities of the inward life and a heart and spirit that is contrite and humbled before God. It is a spirit and a heart where pride has been broken, and humility has filled the void. It is a seriousness to which we take the effects of our sins. It is a spirit and a heart that is pliable to the leading of God and sensitive to God's spirit. It is to freely recognize one's failures, one's sins, one's limitations.

The reality is, meditation on the effects of sin on God, ourselves, and those around us brings about a natural response of repentance. As Spurgeon once said, "A broken heart cannot keep secrets...When broken hearts groan, they do groan. Broken hearts never play at repenting, nor play at believing."

One must grow from a contrite heart to a renunciation of sin, to the point of hatred for the sin to the point of despising the sin so that they can learn to dismiss the sin; this is what is needed if repentance is finally going to take root in the life of the believer.

May it please you to prosper Zion, to build up the walls of Jerusalem. Then you will delight in the sacrifices of the righteous, in burnt offerings offered whole; then bulls will be offered on your altar. vv. 18-19

The prayer closes with these two final verses that provide the intensely personal account of all that came before in 1-17, a corporate dimension to close.

The Psalm moves from the personal to the corporate. There is significance in this that can't be overlooked. The presence of these two verses presents an apt reminder that sin is never merely a matter of individual decisions; it is also a matter of corporate, institutionalized evil. The sin had metastasized throughout the community and was now embedded into the corporate body. The mention of sacrifice in verse 19 seems to indicate that the justification of the individual sinner does not remove the necessity of participation within the worshipping community. It is the reminder here that there is a personal responsibility but there is also a corporate recognition of our own sin as a corporate group and we confess corporately to God.

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

The reality of Lent and the reality of Psalm 32 and Psalm 51 is that they demonstrate the perennial feature of the human situation: sin. It was Whitney Brown who wrote, "Any good history book is mainly just a long list of mistakes, complete with names and dates. It's very embarrassing." History is the long list of sin exceedingly pervasive throughout all generations. And Psalm 51 is about this situation. It is about David and Israel, but it is also about you and me, about our churches and our situation.

But Psalm 51 is also about the possibility of redemption. It is filled with good news, news that there is a way out of cycles of brokenness and sin. There have been more times than I like to admit when I personally had to walk the road of confession and renunciation. At some depth, this is a layer I walk daily. Recognizing my particular bent toward brokenness. But there are many, many moments in my life when they were confessions of much larger stature, like the episode of David here.

C. S. Lewis once wrote about repentance in his book *Mere Christianity*,

Now repentance is no fun at all. It is something much harder than merely eating humble pie. It means unlearning all the self-conceit and self-will that we have been training ourselves into for thousands of years. It means...undergoing a kind of death.

It takes years and years of unlearning all the self-conceit and self-will. This is so frequently the work of discipleship in our lives. But church, change is available, and change is possible! Remember our big idea from this morning: Confession leads to forgiveness, and renunciation leads to change.

We can say this prayer of confession as an opportunity to admit the many ways we have fallen short and desire to be renewed by the work of Jesus.

Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from your ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against your holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done; and apart from your grace, there is no health in us. O Lord, have mercy upon us. Spare all those who confess their faults. Restore all those who are penitent, according to your promises declared to all people in Christ Jesus our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake, that we may now live a godly, righteous, and sober life, to the glory of your holy name. Amen.

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