

“HAVE MERCY ON ME, O GOD”

Psalm 51 (also read 2 Samuel 11:1-12:13)

Key Verses: Psalm 51:1-2, “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.”

We are in a 6-week Prayer series in our church. Six staff members chose to preach on 3 passages from the Old Testament and 3 from the New. Pastor Ron chose Daniel chapter 6, which we prayerfully studied last week as the first message. I was led to preach on the topic of Repentance in our prayer. Confessing and repenting of sin is an important part of Christian prayer. Our Lord Jesus Christ taught us to pray in the Lord’s Prayer: “Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us” (Lk 11:4a), or, “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Mt 6:12).

King David wrote a well-known heart-felt prayer of repentance in Psalm 51. We will consider the circumstances of his sin and the depth and basis of his repentance. May we all more fully understand the importance and power of repentance. May we accept that those who confess and repent of their sins and trust in Jesus find mercy and forgiveness. May God give us the spirit of repentance, as we come to God in our prayers. This message has 3 parts: (1) The seriousness of sin before a holy God; (2) The spirit of repentance; and (3) Christian repentance through Jesus Christ.

Part 1: The Seriousness of Sin before a Holy God

King David wrote Psalm 51 in the context of great sin in his life. It was after he had committed the sin of adultery with Bathsheba, who was another man’s wife. David tried several times to cover it up. But his attempts to cover it up didn’t work. Rather, it only made things worse. His sins kept snowballing into something bigger.

It started when David stayed home from battle. One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of his palace. From the roof he saw a beautiful woman bathing. It wasn’t completely David’s fault that he saw a woman bathing. We sometimes see things that we didn’t intend to see, or that we were not seeking out. Of course, people who have an addiction to pornography are not so innocent; they are not stumbling upon it. David was not in battle mode. Let this be a spiritual lesson to us: we should not drop our guard as spiritual soldiers. We will be attacked by the devil, by the world, and by our own sinful desires daily. We live in a spiritual war zone. If you don’t realize this, your defeat is guaranteed.

David should’ve turned his eyes away. He should’ve remembered that he already had a wife, actually several wives. But he indulged the sight of a bathing woman. His next mistake was that he investigated who she was. He found out that she was a married woman, to his loyal general

Uriah the Hittite. So, at that point, David needed to remember two commands of God: "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife...You shall not commit adultery." But David decided to ignore God's commands. His sinful desire overpowered his knowledge and his Jewish conscience about what is right and wrong in the sight of God. Maybe David thought he had the right to sleep with her thinking, "She was the one who was bathing in public. What do you expect? I'm a man with normal sexual desires. Besides, I'm a king, and lots of kings sleep around."

Bathsheba was also responsible for this great sin. We could say that David was a king with power and authority, so how could she say no to him. We could excuse her somewhat on that basis. But that doesn't justify her sin of adultery.

What complicated matters even more in this sin was that Bathsheba got pregnant. Now, David's sin was getting more obvious. So what did he do? What should he have done? He should've confessed his sin to God and also to Bathsheba's husband, Uriah. But instead, David tried to cover it up. He called Uriah from battle, hoping that Uriah would have relations with his wife and then make it seem that her husband actually got her pregnant. It didn't work. Uriah was too loyal; he didn't spend time with his wife, since all the soldiers were out fighting and his conscience wouldn't allow it. Again, David should've realized what a faithful man of integrity Uriah was. It was another chance for David to confess his sin. But David thought that if he got Uriah drunk, then he would spend time with his wife and David's sin would be covered up. That also didn't work.

Finally, David made an evil scheme to cover up his sin of adultery by having Uriah killed in battle. David schemed a man's murder, even if it was by the enemy's hand in battle. Maybe David justified himself thinking: "It's not my hand or my sword that killed him. God just let him die in battle. Maybe he deserved it." David covered up his sin of adultery with an even greater sin of murder.

A question we should ask ourselves is: Why do I sin? Why do I not avoid sin? Moreover, why do I not confess it? James 1:14 gives one reason: "but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed." Recently, the cast of a new movie called, "Don't Look Up," was interviewed. The movie is a comedy about an impending comet disaster that will destroy the earth. The interviewer asked the cast what they would do if they knew they had only 1 day to live. The interviewer suggested, "Would you pray?" One actress said she wanted to experience pushing someone to their death. What? Why would she want to murder someone? I wonder if she hates someone. Apparently, she doesn't think that we will be accountable to God after we die.

So why do we sin? Another reason is we think no one will find out. And often times, no one does find out. But God sees and God knows. No one can hide their sins from God. Years ago I heard I heard a radio sermon based on Proverbs 28:13. It says, "Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy." The preacher said, "We call it playing around. But God calls it adultery." We call our sin this or that, but sin is sin to God.

Another reason we sin is that it is pleasurable in the moment, even if it carries later regret or bad consequences, as in David's case. Hebrews 11:25 tells us of an amazing decision that Moses made coming from a right perspective and value system: "He [Moses] chose to be mistreated

along with the people of God [who were slaves in Egypt] rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin [in the place as a prince in Egypt].” Moses gave up the palace life to suffer with God’s people. He did what everyone should do. In contrast, Esau sold his birthright inheritance for a single bowl of stew. He gave up something valuable for instant, fleeting gratification. This is what we often do when we sin. We are so easily blind to the dire effects of sin. Sin is more serious than we often realize.

Part 2: The Spirit of Repentance

What David did displeased the Lord. He must’ve known in his conscience. Surely his sin and guilty conscience dogged him like stink on dung. Maybe he tried to laugh at people’s jokes with plastic smiles. But he had no peace or rest in his soul. God did not leave David in his sin. God sent the prophet Nathan, with a moving story to lead him to repentance. Let me paraphrase it: There was a poor man who had a sheep that he loved like a child. It even slept in his arms. There was also a rich man who had many sheep. One day, the rich man had a visitor. The rich man took the poor man’s sheep, slaughtered it, and fed it to his guest. When David heard that story, he was furious. Remember that David had been a shepherd boy, so he understood the man’s love for his sheep. David said, “That rich man deserves to die! He must pay back four times the amount!” Then the prophet Nathan said to David, “You are the man!” Those words must’ve shocked David to the core. What?! How is it possible?

Nathan told David how much God had blessed him: God anointed David as king. God delivered David from Saul’s murderous plots. God gave David wives. God united Israel and Judah under David. Let me add another: God gave David victory over the giant Goliath. God said, “I would’ve given you even more, if this was too little.” The prophet Nathan rebuked David for his sins of adultery and murder. Actually, David broke at least 4 more of the Ten Commandments in this single episode: idolatry, coveting, lying, and stealing.

After being rebuked, David could’ve gone even deeper into sin by ignoring the prophet, or worse, punishing him. But David was done with his sin. He could bear it no longer. God, in his mercy, led David to repentance through the man of God and the word of God.

David confessed, “I have sinned against the Lord.” David’s repentance was not shallow or superficial. He wrote Psalm 51 as his prayer of deep repentance. I will not expound this psalm verse by verse. Rather, I want to address four points in this beautiful psalm: mercy, love, testimony, and intercession.

First, have mercy on me, O God. Psalm 51:1-2 are the key verses of this message. “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.” David pleaded earnestly for mercy from God. Mercy is to not receive the punishment that we deserve. To ask for mercy acknowledges that we’ve done wrong and that God’s judgment is right, and his holiness and power are absolute. No one can stand before the holy, almighty, righteous God. We all deserve God’s righteous wrath, judgment and condemnation. When we come to God, we must know that we are sinners, deserving of his wrath, undeserving of his grace. If we don’t realize that, we are blind to our real condition before God.

Jesus told a parable: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ Jesus concluded: “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Lk 18:10-14).

According to Jesus, unacceptable prayer to God is prayer that looks down on others and boasts about ourselves or our own righteousness. Acceptable prayer to God is to acknowledge of our sinfulness, wretchedness and unworthiness before God. In a word, it is a right view of myself and a right view of God. In our pride, we think we are not so bad. We compare ourselves with others, especially criminals, like killers and rapists. We think, “At least I’m not that bad!”

But when we compare ourselves with others, we are not looking at God, who is holy. No one can stand before the holy God. When we enter the throne room of God, no one can say, “I’m pretty good, aren’t I?” The prophet Isaiah said, “Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty” (Is 6:5). When Peter the fishermen saw the glory of Jesus after a great catch of fish he fell before Jesus and cried out, “Go away from me, Lord! I’m a sinful man!” (Lk 5:8)

David felt dirty and unclean before the holy God. So he prayed: “Blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin... Cleanse me... and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow... Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Deliver me from...guilt...O God.” David also knew that more precious to God than burnt offerings or bull sacrifices are a broken spirit and a humble, contrite heart. Have mercy on us, O God. Give us the spirit of repentance.

Second, God’s unfailing love. Look at verse 1 again. “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.” David knew that he couldn’t approach God based on his own righteousness or anything he had done. He did not appeal to God saying, “Remember God, all that I’ve done for you.” Rather, David knew he could approach God only according to God’s unfailing love and great compassion. Perhaps David remembered Exodus 34:6-7 as the Lord passed in front of Moses saying, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.” David appealed to God based on God’s unfailing love and great compassion. If not for God’s unfailing love and great compassion, we would have no hope or chance of forgiveness. We give praise to our God who is so loving, so gracious and so merciful!

Third, a testimony of God’s grace. David prayed for pure heart and for a steadfast, willing spirit and for the joy of salvation to be restored to him. He prayed to be close to God again, not cast from God’s presence. He prayed that the Holy Spirit would not be taken from him. And a result of all this, he promised, “Then I will teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back

to you” (13). When we know God’s grace of forgiveness, we are moved to tell others of the grace, goodness and love of God. We have a testimony of God’s mercy to us to share with others to lead them to God.

Fourth, intercessory prayer. God’s mercy to David would not only bless David. It would bless his nation. David prayed that God would bless Jerusalem, the capital of God’s people, Israel. David’s prayer was not just for himself, but for his people to be blessed and accepted by God.

Part 3: Christian Repentance through Jesus Christ

This message has mostly focused on David’s great sins of adultery and murder. If you’ve ever killed someone, then confess it to God and confess it to the police. I’m not joking. Murderers will stand before God’s judgment seat, just as we all must. Regarding adultery, it is not a crime in our nation. That is, if you’ve had sexual relations with someone else’s spouse, you will not go to jail. Our society is very permissive in terms of sexual immorality. But God is not so permissive. So confess adultery to God and to those you’ve offended.

You might be breathing a sigh of relief: “Whew! At least I’m not an adulterer or a murderer, like David! My sins aren’t that bad!” Not so fast. Let’s see what Jesus has to say about it. Listen to Jesus. “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment” (Mt 5:21). Jesus goes on to say that even calling someone a name like “Fool!” is a serious sin. Jesus’ point is that murder begins with anger and hatred in our hearts. So if you hate someone, in spirit, you are a murderer. Why do we hate people? We hate others for something they did or said, usually to us, that was hurtful. So we easily judge them, and want them to be punished or even destroyed. That makes us a spiritual murderer.

How about adultery? What did Jesus say? Listen to Jesus: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a person lustfully has already committed adultery with them in their heart (Mt 5:27-28). So, according to Jesus, you are guilty of spiritual adultery, if you just entertain sexual thoughts toward anyone you are not married to. What is a lustful look? It is not a passing glance but a willful, calculated stare that arouses sexual desire. In other words, adulterous eyes see others as potential sexual partners. This is very commonplace in our society. So we may think: it’s no big deal. Everybody does that. However, that doesn’t make it right in the sight of God.

One of the aims of this message, has been to bring us all under conviction that we are sinners in need of God’s mercy. If we don’t realize that, we have no need to pray, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” If you recognize your sins, don’t excuse them. Don’t justify them. Confess them and repent of them before God. If you don’t see your sins, pray that God may show you your sins and his holiness. It might just break you and give you a powerful encounter with God.

Jim Woodford, a Canadian pilot, died of a pain medication overdose. Just before he died, he prayed, “God, forgive me,” since he knew he had wasted his life. He had often wondered, “Is this all there is?” regarding his emptiness of life. He had not given much thought to God in his life. Rather, he was focused on money, nice cars, and horses. But his Christian wife was

praying for him. While he was clinically dead, he had a vision of heaven and hell. He saw a hateful creature coming after him. He prayed, "God, help me." Angels delivered him. Later, he saw Jesus who said to him, "James, my son, this is not yet your time. Go back and tell your brothers and sisters of the wonders we have shown you." Then he woke up in the hospital, 11 hours after he was found dead. I mention this story because Jim recognized he was a sinner who needed God's forgiveness. He admits his greatest sin was his arrogance. Even with a painful disease, in his arrogance, he did not ask God's help. Now, according to his wife, he is more gentle and he cares about others. He wrote a book, "Heaven: An Unexpected Journey." The book royalties go to a non-profit ministry, Partnership for Revival.¹

David ended Psalm 51 speaking of acceptable sacrifices of the righteous. As Christians, we have confidence that our sins are forgiven when we confess and repent of them and trust in Jesus, the perfect sacrifice for our sins. Hebrews 9:13-14 compares the blood of bulls with the blood of Jesus Christ: "The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!"

1 John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." Jesus shed his blood on the cross to redeem and save all who repent and believe in him and live for him, rather than for their own pleasure or pride. What sins do you need to confess and repent of? Have you heard of the seven deadly sins? Prayerfully consider how you may be guilty of any or all of them: lust, anger, pride, envy, greed, gluttony, and sloth.

In my case, I've often been able to relate to the self-righteous Pharisee: "I'm so much better than people who drink, smoke, take drugs, or sleep around." At the same time, though I haven't slept around, sins of lust often made me unclean. Recently, I was in quarantine for 2 weeks at home due to contracting covid. It was a perfect time for me to dive into prayer and God's word. But I spent more time in silly phone word games, justifying myself: it's not hurting anyone; its not immoral; I work hard enough; I need a break; it's good to exercise my mind. Actually, in my heart I know it's indulging in procrastination, laziness and sloth. When I got on my knees and prayed, I felt so ashamed of my immaturity, though I am 57 years old. As I prayed, I found I was guilty of all 7 deadly sins in varying degrees. I could only confess and repent my sins with tears before my Lord Jesus: God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Help me to grow in the character of Jesus, my Lord and Savior.

I encourage you to get on your knees in private and confess all your sins to God, crying out for his mercy through Jesus Christ, our Redeemer, Savior and King. Thank God who forgives and cleanses our sins when we confess and repent of them and trust in Jesus' atoning blood. May God give us the spirit of repentance in our prayers.

¹ https://lancasteronline.com/features/faith_values/airline-pilot-jim-woodford-was-clinically-dead-when-he-awoke-he-told-of-his-time/article_b36e0478-d3d5-11e8-ac13-0f9f4915cda4.html, accessed 1/29/22.

