

The Great Gift of Confessional Prayer
September 14, 2008 - Psalm 51

He sat in stunned silence. Nathan's words still rang in his ears.

"You are the man!" David's court advisors shuffled their feet uncomfortably. The guards struggled to keep standing at attention. As Nathan went on, David knew that he was right. But he couldn't believe it had come to this.

David was king of Israel. But it hadn't been an easy ascent to the throne. After he killed Goliath, David endured years of persecution from Israel's King Saul who felt threatened by him. Upon King Saul's death, Israel anointed David as king over the land. He consolidated and strengthened Israel. He defeated the Philistines, their long time enemy. He led Israel to be a great power in the Middle East of that time. He also had wives and children and wealth.

But he was getting a little older and decided not to go out with the army one spring. Maybe he got bored. Maybe he got distracted. Then one late afternoon, from the roof of his palace he saw a beautiful woman bathing. He was attracted to her. Even though she was married to one of his soldiers, he sent for her and lay with her. "I have every right," he may have thought. After all he was David, king over

all Israel. Kings took any woman they wanted in those times. He may have thought nothing of it over the next few days until a messenger arrived.

The messenger delivered a note from this woman Bath-Sheba. "I am pregnant." This complicated things. David sent for her husband Uriah, to be brought home from the battlefield. He hoped that in his visit home, Uriah would lay with his wife. Then the pregnancy could be covered up and he would claim the child as his own. But Uriah did not end up near his home during those days. So David had Uriah carry his own death warrant back to the commanding officer. The note from David read, "Send Uriah into the thick of the fight so he will be killed." David's general, Joab, was puzzled by these orders. But he had seen David win many victories and show great discernment. There must be a reason.

So he commanded Uriah to lead a charge on the front gate of the city they were attacking. Uriah was killed. Joab sent word back. David was pleased. Uriah's wife mourned maybe 7 days for her husband. Then David sent for her and she became his wife. Everyone was so excited about another royal wedding. Before you knew it, a

new baby boy was born to the couple. David maybe thought he got away with it.

Until the prophet Nathan showed up that day. Nathan told of a troubling situation in the kingdom. A rich man had many flocks and herds. A poor man had one sheep. When the rich man had guests, he took the poor man's one sheep to slaughter it for supper instead of taking the abundance of his own flocks. David was furious. He pronounced severe sentence on whoever had done this.

That's when Nathan turned and pointed at him pronouncing those four heart stabbing words; "You are the man." Nathan went on to list all the blessings God had lavished upon David. Yet David chose to commit adultery, murder Bath-Sheba's husband and go on as if nothing happened. To his credit, David responded with these words: "I have sinned against the Lord." Nathan pronounced that David was forgiven but there would be many consequences including the baby boy's death.

Somewhere in the midst of this great time of trouble, David went to the Lord in prayer with his sin. The preservation of this prayer

gives us a most thorough insight into something called confessional prayer.

Today we continue our series on prayer. Last week we looked at a simple prayer – humbling ourselves before God and embracing our role as His dependants. Today we're going to look at a prayer that we don't want to pray. In fact, if we were brought up with a version of Christianity focused on good feelings and prosperity, this prayer sounds depressing. But though we might not *want* to pray this prayer, we need to pray to this prayer because we are all sinners. Sin is any thought, word or action contrary to God's law. When we sin, we offend the Holy God, grieve the Holy Spirit and experience a deep interruption in our relationship with God.

This does not mean we are no longer Christians. We are still God's children. Our sin does not change the status of our relationship with God. But sin affects the state of our relationship with God. Instead of a relationship of harmony, closeness and oneness, we experience disharmony, distance and separation from our Loving God. It's like a child who has disobeyed their parents. We don't disown our

kids when they disobey, though we might want to. But the state of the relationship requires repair.

Yet a natural human response to sin is to run from or hide from the one we've sinned against. That's what a child does who has their hand in the cookie jar but suddenly hears Mom coming down the stairs. A student who goes through their teacher's desk to try and retrieve the game boy immediately hides when the door to the class opens. We naturally run and hide when the one we've sinned against comes near. Adam and Eve hid from God in the garden. **But when we grasp God's great character, we soon discover that we must run to Him not from Him when we sin.** God has paved the way to repair our relationship with Him when damaged by our sin. Our part in traveling down that path involves confessional prayer. So the central truth for today's message is this: **Because of God's character, we can return to Him through confessional prayer.**

Through the confessional prayer David wrote, we are going to see David appeal to several attributes of the Lord. By the end of our time together my hope is you will know how to engage in confessional prayer. But perhaps more importantly, we will see God's great

character that invites us to return to the One we need most as we recover from sin.

Psalm 51¹ (ESV)

Create in Me a Clean Heart, O God

To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

51:1 Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.

2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin!

3 For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.

4 Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you may be justified in your words
and blameless in your judgment.

5 Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
and in sin did my mother conceive me.

6 Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being,
and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.

¹ This is the best known of the seven traditional penitential psalms (6; 32; 38; 51; 102; 130; 143).

7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

8 Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have broken rejoice.

9 Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.

10 Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.

11 Cast me not away from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.

12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and uphold me with a willing spirit.

13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.

14 Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.

15 O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.

16 For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;
you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.

17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

18 Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;
build up the walls of Jerusalem;

19 then will you delight in right sacrifices,

in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.

What character traits of God enable us to return to Him through confessional prayer?

- **His steadfast love and abundant mercy.**

David starts this prayer by crying out to God. Have mercy on me. Blot out my transgressions.” But he realizes he has no right to demand anything of God based on his own behavior. David brings nothing before God except his sin. So David makes His appeal based on God’s character, not his own. “Have mercy on me, *according to your steadfast love. According to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions.*”

The phrase translated “steadfast love” is *hesed* in Hebrew. It occurs 240 times in the Old Testament. It contains three basic meanings which constantly interact; strength; steadfastness and love. Any understanding of the word that fails to suggest all three loses some of its richness. “Love” by itself can become sentimental. Steadfastness without love is a strong force with no compassion. But

love, strength and steadfastness together describe one committed in relationship AND generous. It describes one loyal and merciful.

Our English translations struggle to communicate the force of this word. ESV says “steadfast love” and NIV says “great love.” But these fall far short of the depth of this word which describes the magnitude of God’s commitment to His people. And it is to this that David first appeals. Have mercy on me, O God according to your “hesed,” that unimaginable strength, mercy, loyalty and commitment to our relationship.

But David does not only appeal to God’s steadfast love. In the second half of verse 1 he states “according to your abundant mercy,” blot out my transgression. He doesn’t just appeal to God’s mercy but to God’s abundance or literally multitude of mercy. It’s like God has this huge pile of mercy in His heart. David knows it is far greater than anyone could imagine. So he appeals to that overflowing mercy crying out to God to blot out his transgressions. God is a God who loves to show mercy. Blot out means to wipe away, destroy or erase. This is an incredible request considering the magnitude of David’s sin. Yet David has gotten to know that God has this multitude of mercy in

His character. This is where the prayer of confession starts. We return to God from sin not based on what we can bring but on the basis of God’s steadfast, loving, merciful character.

David continues his initial approach to God by calling on the Lord to wash him and cleanse him from his sin. David’s words in verse 2 wash me thoroughly from my iniquity are like - a washer woman paying special attention to a piece of soiled clothing. She applies the soaps, washes, scrubs and then inspects carefully. Then she washes again and scrubs even harder until that dirty shirt comes out looking sparkling clean. Already, we see David’s confidence not only in God’s merciful character to receive Him but also God’s ability to cleanse him from this sin.

This is the prayer of the empty handed person. He completely forfeits his self dependence and throws himself in desperate trust upon God. This is where the prayer of confession begins for us too. But it is not yet time for restoration. In coming close to the God of mercy and cleansing, we discover more of God’s character.

What character traits of God enable us to return to Him through confessional prayer?

- **His holy character and flawless judgment.**

The closer we get to God, the more we realize His holiness and the perfection of His judgment. When we get close to God's holiness, our own impurity and sin comes into much clearer focus. We humans have a tendency to compare ourselves with other humans to determine where we rank on the goodness scale. Criminals are a favorite measuring standard. They've done something serious enough to land them in jail. If we're not in jail and haven't done what they've done, we can convince our selves that we're pretty okay. But when we glimpse the Holiness of God, all our self-justification is stripped away. Humans come apart in the presence of the Holy God. Isaiah glimpsed God's holiness in the temple and cried out "Woe is me, I am undone." When Jesus delivered the miraculous catch of fish to the disciples, Peter cries out "Go away from me Lord for I am a sinful man!"

David has recognized God's holy character and flawless judgment. This moves David into the next essential phase of confessional prayer. He confesses his sins. Verse 3 and 4. "For I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me." He does not specifically identify the sin. But he acknowledges the multiple numbers of his sins.

Confession means to admit wrongdoing and agree with God's assessment of our behavior. David offers no excuses. He makes no attempt to justify himself. He has woken up to the true verdict upon his actions. His sins are "ever before him."

But then David makes that statement that always bothered me in verse 4. "Against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight." You only? Didn't David sin against Bath-Sheba by inviting her into sin? Didn't David sin against Uriah by committing adultery with his wife, deceiving him and ultimately commanding the environment for murder? Didn't David sin against his people by covering it up and not confessing it for over a year? Yes. But David realized that the greatest sin committed was against God himself. Sin is rebellion against our Creator. David forgot God's gift, harmed God's people and disturbed God's social order. Regardless of who we hurt when we sin, the greatest hurt is against God. So instead of seeing the phrase "you only" as narrowing the impact of his offense to "only God", "you only" shows that David expands the impact of sin out from not only Bath-Sheba and Uriah to the great God Himself. David holds himself to a much higher standard here.

In this confession, he acknowledges that God's judgment is right. God is justified in his judgment of sin. Then in verses 5, David goes on to comment on the human condition. Perhaps in reflecting on the magnitude of sin he committed, he realizes how sin soaked he really is. In fact, he was born into sin. This does not mean that the act of David's conception was sinful but that humans are born with this universal deformity. We are born with a sin nature. When stripped bare, like he was, David realizes his true capability for sin when he lets his sinful nature run unchecked.

He realizes in verse 6, that God desires the exact opposite in David. God desires truth in his innermost being. David desires God's wisdom in the innermost part of his heart. So coming close to God's holy character and righteous judgment have led David to confess his specific sin and the reality of his sinful nature. This is one of the great benefits of confessional prayer. When we enter into it at this level, all the façade and self-delusion we've engaged in is stripped away. Then we are much more willing and open to receive from God what only He can give. Sadly, it often takes something huge to wake some people up. Only when they hit bottom, or their lives blow apart or they've

destroyed almost everything will they come before the Lord to confess. **So we must confess our sin to Him and express a "Godly" sorrow.** We must do it regularly, daily, hourly to prevent something little growing into something huge. C.S. Lewis notes "the true Christian's nostril is to be continually attentive to inner cesspool." We need each other to sometimes give each other smelling salts to wake up to the destructive choices we're making.

So David has approached God in confessional prayer by first appealing to the steadfast love and abundant mercy of God. Then David's recognition of God's holiness and right judgment leads him to confess his sins and sinfulness. Now we get to the good stuff.

What character traits of God enable us to return to Him through confessional prayer? Verses 7-12 reveal God's **cleansing power and restorative spirit.** David is forgiven for his sin entering verse 7. But the consequence of his sin remains. His baby boy will die. The sword or violence will afflict his family. He will endure great shame at the hands of his sons. Not only would David suffer these consequences, he suffered from the effects of sin on his life; twisted

thinking; deceptive behavior; overwhelming burden of guilt. So in verses 7-12 he calls on the Lord to do what only he can do.

I can count 11 appeals David makes to the Lord to bring change in his life. We don't have time to dig into all 11 today. But I'll comment on just a few.

Appeal #1 – Verse 7 – Cleanse me with hyssop and I will be clean (not hiccup, hyssop) ☺. Old Testament priests used hyssop, a leafy plant, to sprinkle blood or water on a person ceremonially cleansed from defilements such as leprosy or touching a dead body. Here hyssop is a figure for David's longing to be spiritually cleansed from his moral defilement.

Appeal #2 – Second half of verse 7 – Wash me and I will be whiter than snow. Again we have the image of washing. But this time David adds color and texture to the washing. Snow did fall very infrequently in Palestine. But David remembers it and that pristine appearance the morning after a snowfall. His desire is for God to wash the darkness of his heart so that it will become not white like snow but whiter than that snow.

Appeal #3 – Verse 8 – Let me hear joy and gladness. Let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Sin saps our ability to enjoy God. Sin can carry with it destructive physical consequences. I remember talking to a person whose sin had just become public. They held up their hand to me to show me their watch. It just hung there with a huge gap between her watch band and wrist. They had lost many pounds because of the stress of that sin. Let me hear joy and gladness again Lord.

Appeal #4 – Verse 9 – Hide your face from my sins. When God hides his face or turns his face from someone in the Old Testament, it usually means huge trouble. Some of you may have heard the prayer of blessing from Numbers 6. May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make his face shine upon you. May the Lord lift up his face upon you and give you peace.” But here David appeals to the Lord to turn his face from his sin. It is a graphic picture of God forgiving.

Appeal #5 – Second half of verse 9 – Blot out all my iniquities. We saw that back in verse 2.

Appeal #6 – verse 10 – Create in me a clean heart, O God. The word create is the same one used in Genesis 1:1. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Only God could create the heavens and the earth. Heart in Hebrew was the seat of thinking not emotion. Only God can create in us a clean heart. David asked God to renew, restore and transform his heart. One paraphrase of Psalm 51 verse 10 goes like this: “Looking back, I realize that the trouble all started in my mind. My thought life was polluted. I entertained evil thoughts until I at last committed the sins. So now I ask that you create in me a clean mind. I know that if the fountain is clean, the stream flowing from it will be clean as well.

Appeal #7 – Second half of verse 10 – Renew a right or steadfast spirit in me. Just like David appeals to God’s steadfast love in verse 1, he asks God to give him a steadfast spirit here. It is an appeal for a strong, loyal, loving commitment to God that David realizes he cannot manufacture himself.

Appeal #8 – Verse 11 – **Cast me not away** from your presence. David fears falling out of permanent fellowship with the Lord. He

recognizes that only in God’s presence will he discover and experience true life in relationship with God.

Appeal #9 – Second half of verse 11 – **Take not your Holy Spirit** from me. We must remember this is the Old Testament and is not presenting the full blown New Testament Holy Spirit here. Likely David saw God’s Holy Spirit as his awe-inspiring, joy provoking and empowering presence of God, so he’s saying don’t take your presence away. As Christians, we can’t lose the Holy Spirit. But we can grieve him and quench him so that our spiritual life is cold.

Appeal #10 – Verse 12 - Restore to me the joy of your salvation. When we sin, our salvation means little or is taken for granted. We’re pursuing joy in sin instead of joy in our salvation. We get so twisted that we think that sin can satisfy us more than Christ. So when we come back from sin, we pray, “God restore in me that wonder and joy in the salvation you have given me.”

Appeal #11 – Second half of verse 12 – **Uphold me** with a willing spirit. Hold me up God with a desire to enter again into a life walking with you.

Talk about a comprehensive restoration plan. It all comes from God. David appeals to God's restoring power to bring him back to close fellowship with the Lord. Not just forgiveness, but cleansing and restoration. So we've seen confessional prayer involves trusting in God's character. We start by appealing to His steadfast love and piles of mercies for mercy. Our sense of His holiness leads us to confess our sins and sinfulness. Upon receiving His forgiveness, we then appeal to His restoring power to restore us to close fellowship. The final part of the confessional prayer is proclamation of God's saving work.

In verses 13-16, a restored David wants to proclaim all God has done for him. So in verse 13, he says he will teach transgressors God's ways so sinners will turn back to him. In verses 15 he asks the Lord to open his lips to declare the Lord's praises instead of the lips closed by the shame of sin. But in verse 14, it's like David suddenly realizes there is one more thing he must trust the Lord for. What character trait of God enables us to return to Him through confessional prayer? **Verse 14 reveals God's saving atoning work.**

"Deliver me from blood guiltiness, O God." According to the Law,

David was guilty for Uriah's blood. Uriah's relatives could have come and killed David to atone for this murder. The murderer could not be ransomed except by his or her own blood. David's only recourse was to flee to a city of refuge and live there for the rest of his days. But instead, he will continue to rule from Jerusalem calling on the Lord to save him from this blood guilt.

You and I may not have committed murder. But we still owed a debt of blood. God's law declares that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. We too must trust the blood a perfect and sinless savior to deliver us from our blood guiltiness. God sent Jesus to pay for our guilt with His blood. God accepted that payment on our behalf. So then without compromising His justice, God can forgive our sins when we put our trust in Christ and confess our sins to the Lord. "If we confess our sins, He (God) is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

The Psalm ends with David completely transformed. We started with a man who committed adultery, deception and murder, and then he covered it up for over a year. There must have been many times during that year when he went to offer sacrifices at the temple. But

they were meaningless because of the insincerity in his heart. Now look at his heart in verses 16 and 17. “For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

As we approach the Lord and His table this morning, we have a tremendous opportunity but we are in danger of going through the motions. We are in danger of participating in something external that is not accompanied by a sincere heart. Let us come clean before the Lord through confession today prior to our participation in the Lord’s Supper. Maybe you want to silently pray Psalm 51. Maybe you already know what needs to be prayed. But let us enter into a time of coming close and coming clean before Almighty God and the Lord Jesus Christ. Then we will meet at His Table.