

Create in Me a Clean Heart

Psalm 51:1-12

Some of you already know that my mother's family name is St. Peter. So, I'm always open to a good St. Peter story and here is one I found as I was researching today's message. It goes like this:

St. Peter is seated at the pearly gates when a woman approaches. "Tell me why I should let you in", Peter asks. "I've gone to church my whole life," she responds. Then Peter reminds her that she had been unkind to some of the members of the church. "Well," she replies defensively, "I brought groceries every week to my elderly neighbor!" Peter points out that while it is true, she did shop for her neighbor, she often used her neighbor's money to buy a few things for herself as well and did not pay back that money. The conversation continues in this way with the woman becoming more and more defensive and distraught, clearly beginning to panic at the thought that she might not be allowed to enter heaven. Finally, the woman falls to her knees in tears and desperation and says, "Forgive me, Lord, for I have sinned." With that, the pearly gates immediately swing wide open, and St. Peter says, "Welcome home, my child."

Just how aware are any of us of the sins we are guilty of committing, either overtly or covertly? I'm often reminded of the woman from a Sunday school class years ago who asked why she had to say a prayer of confession before taking communion since she hadn't committed any sins that week. I so wanted to point out that she had just convicted herself of sin with a prideful attitude, but I kept my mouth shut – probably because she was the teacher!

Psalm 51 is David's prayer of confession and contrition to God after Nathan confronts him with his sin in the matter of his relationship with Bathsheba. A little backstory here: King David, the most powerful person in the nation, abuses that power to fulfill his own lusts. This leads to an unexpected pregnancy, which he then tries to cover up and, when he fails to do so, he has the husband of the woman killed, then takes the woman as his wife. We have heard that David was known as a man after God's own heart, so you have to wonder how he could have done such a thing! It makes me think of this saying attributed to Lord Acton:

“Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.”

Wait! Was David really a bad man? From the Bible stories we have that tell us about David, we tend to see him as a good man – faithful son

tending his father's flocks, heroic young man facing down the enemy's champion, Goliath, and even as a long-suffering subject to the murderous King Saul. All these things point to a good person. But something happens along the way.

After Saul's death David becomes king over Israel. He inherits a nation, a palace, a king's harem (in addition to his own wives gathered over the years) and he has the adoration of his countrymen. The life of David looks surprisingly good! After years of war and struggle his kingdom is more or less at peace, so at the time when most kings go to war, David is found idling in Jerusalem. We all remember the adage that "idle hands are the Devil's workshop", don't we? This proves true in David's case because as he is idling in Jerusalem, he spies Bathsheba taking her purification bath and with that the whole sordid story starts to unfold. In a moment of weakness, a good man goes bad.

Which brings to mind this quote from Thomas Macaulay:

The measure of a man's real character is what he would do if he knew he would never be found out.

In the Biblical story, David is the hero, the good guy. Yet in a moment when he felt he would not be found out, David does something unbelievably bad. Perhaps he felt that as the leader of the nation, he

didn't **need** to worry if anyone found out. After all, he WAS the king. Even if others knew, like those he called to bring Bathsheba to him, and his commander Joab, who sent Uriah to the front line for certain death, none of them would dare speak a word against the king.

But God found out and sent Nathan to confront David with the knowledge that his sin was not hidden and that God had a word for him. God said, I have given you the kingdom and all the king's wives. I have united the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah under you. And if that wasn't enough, I would have given you even more. But this thing you have done is abominable in my sight. And because of this you will see trouble in your own household.

Okay, good story, but what does that have to do with us today?

Although David was the most powerful man in the land, and he worked diligently to hide his misdeeds, they were not hidden from God. Even though he was considered a "man after God's own heart", his sin would not escape God's notice. God sent Nathan to convict David of his error. Notice that Nathan doesn't just come out and say, "David, you have sinned and earned God's wrath." No, he tells a story to gain David's sympathy for the poor man who lost his only lamb. David convicts himself by his response to Nathan's story. We are no different from

David. Our errors are clearly seen by God and we are to be convicted of those errors, often by our own consciences.

In response to being confronted with his sin, David pens the words we find in Psalm 51. He cries out to God confessing his error and asking God's forgiveness. He acknowledges that God's judgment against him is just. David realizes that even though God will forgive him of his sin, there will be consequences to be paid. For David, the consequences will be the death of the child conceived in sin, intrigue and violence in his family, and his royal courts, all the remaining days of his life. He will remain king and Israel will prosper, but personally he will experience strife. Even so, David looks forward to the return of joy and gladness, although his bones have been "crushed" by the weight of his sin. His only hope of the return of joy comes from his faith in the Lord's forgiveness.

How often do we hope that God will not only forgive us of our sins but *also* relieve us of the consequences of those sins? If even King David had to bear the consequences of his actions, shouldn't we also expect to bear the consequences of our own actions? Now I doubt that any of us will have children try to wrest a kingdom from us, or have our most trusted military leaders betray us, but we still will face consequences for things we have done. If we are honest with ourselves, we would have to

admit that in our lives we have done things that we are not proud of, things that were not well thought out, or things that were unkind – whether intentionally or not, and that we have had to bear the consequences for those actions.

In those instances, were we able to confess our sins before God and yet praise him for his just judgment of us, like David did? Personally, I don't know too many people who will say, "Yes, Lord, bring on those consequences!" Let's face it, the consequences of the bad things we've done in our lives tend to be unpleasant at best and downright terrible at the worst. But these consequences are essential to our faith walk. Because you see, the goal of God's judgment is not to break us, or to inflict pain, but to bring us to repentance.

David's prayer in Psalm 51 is a beautiful and oft quoted prayer of repentance. He acknowledges his sin and the consequences he must face, but he also reaffirms his desired relationship with God. This is what God seeks when he pronounces His judgment- that we turn away from our sins and return to Him. Even though we have fallen short, God will forgive us and restore us to a right relationship with Him, as we are reminded by the prophets:

Isaiah 43:25 (NIV2011)

²⁵ “I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.

Micah 7:18 (NIV2011)

¹⁸ Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy.

And in **1 John 1:9 (NIV2011)**

⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

We can take comfort in the fact that even after this episode in his life, King David is still considered the greatest king of Israel. He remains a man after God’s own heart, because his deepest wish, repeated often in the Psalms he wrote – was to dwell in the house of the Lord forever. How fortunate we are to have such a loving and forgiving God, a God who will not count our sins against us forever but instead delights to show mercy to His fallen children.

What this episode teaches us is that even the most powerful people must live by the word of God. While we may not be world leaders, each of us will sin in our own ways. And in each instance, nothing is hidden from God. Even though our sin will be found out by God, His deepest desire

is for us to repent and return to Him. He wants us to dwell in his house forever, too.

In this season of Lent, we are called to self-assess the state of our hearts. Are they truly broken by the error of our sin? Can we approach the throne of God with contrition, seeking forgiveness for his erring children both individually and collectively? Are we truly aware that God alone has the ability to “create in us a clean heart”? Are we prepared to accept both God’s judgment and forgiveness, then go forward in the newness of life only he can provide? I pray that each of you hearing this message today are able to humble yourselves before God, asking his forgiveness for errors you have committed, whether intentional or not, and then truly accepting the forgiveness he offers that has been secured for us in the death and resurrection of his son, Jesus Christ.

We know God’s mercies are new each day, so now is as good a time as any to ask his forgiveness and to turn from our error. David hit the nail on the head when he closed Psalm 51 with these words:

“The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

Prayer

Dear Lord,

With David we pray these words,

¹⁰ Create in us pure hearts, O God, and renew steadfast spirits within us.

¹¹ Do not cast us from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from us.

¹² Restore to us the joy of your salvation and grant us willing spirits, to sustain us.

We ask this in the name of your precious Son, Jesus Christ. AMEN

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