

## **“FORGIVE ME”**

Lenten series – 1 (Confession)

Psalm 32:1-5 (p. 543)

Psalm 51:7-17 (p. 556)

During Lent we’ll be looking at some of those spiritual disciplines that, over the centuries, have helped many grow stronger in their walk with God. We’ll look at confession, simplicity, hospitality, prayer, study and service. And since most of us, I’d wager, from time to time have a problem with guilt, it seemed appropriate that we begin this season of soul-searching with the spiritual discipline of confession. So today I want to engage you in a little theology by recalling a story.

In the Bible, God often uses the real-life stories of people to shed light on common problems. Rarely, it seems, do we get our answers to life’s most critical questions from textbooks. No, the deepest insights tend to come from personal experience. Frederick Buechner put it well. He said, “*Most theology, like most fiction, is essentially autobiography.*” Well, it’s true. We tend to talk about spiritual matters most clearly when we speak in very personal terms.

Of all the prayers recorded in the Book of Psalms, you probably won’t find more powerful autobiography than the so-called “penitential psalms.” Two Psalms in particular, 32 and 51, stand out because of the transparent way that David wrestles with his guilt. “*Guilt,*” you may ask? “*I thought David was the man after God’s own heart. What did he have to feel guilty about?*” The answer is, “*Plenty!*” You can read all about the scandal behind those psalms (especially Psalm 51) in chapter 11 of 2 Samuel. It reads like the script for a soap opera. You may know the story.

David, the winsome shepherd king of Israel, was seduced! That’s right – but not by Bathsheba. Much as some would like to blame the girl for her wily behavior, the fact is that David had already been seduced; seduced by an idea nearly as old as the human race. That idea was this: People on top (i.e., those who make the rules) can come to believe that, since they’re the ones who make the rules, they don’t have to live by them.

Well, one day David saw Bathsheba sunbathing and decided that he wanted her. After all, he was the king – the undisputed C.E.O. – and his word was law. Nobody could stop him (more to the point, no one would stop him) and he knew it. So he went ahead and satisfied his urge. Then he sent Bathsheba home. And quite possibly David could have carried on afterward as if nothing had happened, except for one thing: David’s incredibly bad timing – or God’s perfect timing – or

nature's periodic timing (depending on how you look at it). Bathsheba had ovulated and soon she discovered that she was pregnant!

It didn't take a genius to figure out who was the father; especially since her husband was away on active military duty. David didn't need another wife (especially one who was already married to someone else). So he called her husband home on a special three-day conjugal leave. David figured that if he could arrange for this soldier to have intercourse with his wife, this "unwanted pregnancy" might be seen as the couple's own "blessed event." It was a shrewd plan. But David hadn't counted on Uriah being such a devoted soldier that he wouldn't think of enjoying his wife's company while his platoon was out there on the front lines.

Have you noticed how when you sin, and then try to cover your tracks, things have a way of getting more and more complicated? By the time David realized his cover-up plan wasn't going to work, he was so desperate he had Uriah sent on a suicide mission. What a twist of a life! David was the same king, with the same power he always had. But in a matter of days he went from being in control to murderously desperate.

The record indicates that David received the news of Uriah's heroic death with cold indifference. He showed no regret. Then after a proper period of mourning, Bathsheba moved in with David and became his wife. I can imagine how David thought he had put one over on his unsuspecting public. People would probably see him as this benevolent commander in chief who had taken pity on the poor pregnant widow of one of his finest soldiers.

The Bible, however, makes this telling point: "*But the thing David had done displeased the Lord.*" There's an interesting understatement! Covetousness, adultery, murder, perjury... David had broken four of the Big Ten, and the Lord was "displeased." You'd better believe it. But who would convey the Lord's displeasure to this paranoid monarch who held the power of life and death in his hands?

Enter the prophet Nathan. Do you know the story? Nathan told the king a pointed little parable. And David got so emotionally wrapped up in the story that he unwittingly exposed his heart and in the process condemned his own behavior with Bathsheba and Uriah. Then Nathan nailed him with the one-liner: "*You are the man.*" It was an incisive piece of open-heart surgery – and the effect was every bit as dramatic. David's hardened heart and twisted soul were laid bare. And only then could the healing begin.

For some reason it seems to take a trauma like that to begin the healing of a guilty heart. And when you're confronted that way, it can really hurt – I know from personal experience. And yet, in spite of the hurt, I've found those confrontations to be strangely welcome. I think I know why. It's because I know

they mark the end of something really bad, and the beginning of some deep spiritual healing.

Well, that's the story. And later in his prayers (the ones we call Psalm 51 and Psalm 32) David talked about what happened to him as a result of that painful encounter with Nathan. Lord willing, we just might learn something from the *three critical steps* David took in dealing with his guilt. First came *confession*, then *supplication*, and then *dedication*.

1. How do you handle guilt? David teaches us that the first thing you have to do is *confess* it. It's a truism we seem to have to learn over and over again: until you confess that you have a problem, there is precious little that can be done to solve it. It's true in the field of medicine, and it is just as true in dealing with sin and the guilt that goes with it.

But it is just as true that if you are physically ill and yet deny that you're sick, you're still going to suffer the symptoms of that illness. If you repress them in one area, they'll come out in another. The same is true of the symptoms of spiritual sickness. Those symptoms of sin and guilt are going to find a way to come out. Until Nathan confronted him, David seemed to have been doing a good job of covering up his spiritual problems. He may have appeared unruffled. Perhaps he was a bit more irritable than usual. He may not have been able to sleep so peacefully and soundly. But that could be explained away.

It wasn't until after his encounter with Nathan that David finally admitted that he had been a total wreck on the inside. Do you want a word picture of repressed guilt? Listen again to David's admission in Psalm 32:3-4. "*When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.*"

I appreciate how Leslie Brandt paraphrased those words: "*Every time I attempt to handle my own guilt by ignoring it, rationalizing it, or just running away from it – some unseen power or pressure from the depth of my being squeezes my life dry and leaves me empty and inadequate. But when I face up with my failures and acknowledge them, when I open my guilt-ridden heart to you, O God, then I realize the blessed meaning of forgiveness.*" It is absolutely necessary to open up in confession of sin and guilt in order to be able to deal with it. There is no other way. But it is also not enough.

2. The second essential step in the process is *supplication*. Don't turn that word off. "Supplication" is just a theological way of saying, "*God, I need some serious help!*" Notice the words David uses in Psalm 51, verse 7. "*Cleanse me,*" he says. "*Wash me,*" he cries to God. Keep in mind that there were no Maytags in David's time. When David cried out to God, "*Cleanse me!*" he wasn't asking God

to use Woolite, run his soul through the “delicate” cycle, and then fluff-dry his sweet-smelling spirit on “gentle heat.”

No, David was talking about being run through a 9<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. washing machine. Do you know how things got washed in those days? They were drenched and then slapped against stones. They were beaten and scrubbed and wrung out and then beaten and scrubbed again until all the dirt was gone. That is the kind of cleansing that David was asking of God.

David was acknowledging in a rather picturesque way that simply confessing that we have a problem with personal dirt is not enough. In order to be effective, confession has to be coupled with a request for serious help in order to clean up your act. For example, you can confess infidelity. But the fact remains that, even though the sin is confessed, and may even be forgiven, there is still broken trust that needs mending. And frankly, that can be a slow process requiring heavy-duty help.

Sad to say, there is such a character as the chronic confessor who regularly and contritely confesses his/her guilt. Their confession to God may be sincere. When it is over, they may experience a genuine sense of relief and forgiveness. But then within a matter of days (maybe even hours) they’re back at the same old sin. It’s not a question of their sincerity or of their loving the Lord. They may express deep, genuine feelings of remorse followed by a wonderful sense of gratitude for God’s forgiving love. But that doesn’t necessarily mean they have made any substantial change in their behavior. (And if I sound rather cynical at this point, it’s only because I speak from personal experience.)

There are those who can sincerely love the Lord, who confess their sins openly, but they’ve not moved beyond confession to supplication, from saying, “*I’m sorry*” to saying, “*I’m trapped in this vicious cycle and I need help!*”

That is not to minimize the importance of confession. God knows there is a moment of indescribable tenderness and deep communion when a transparent confession is met by total forgiveness. That’s what Jesus offers you anytime you’re ready to own up to your guilt. But in order for your confession to grow to its full stature and beauty, it needs to be coupled with supplication – with a request for help to move beyond being forgiven to living a changed life.

3. There’s one more step in dealing with the problem of guilt in our lives. You can confess your sin and receive God’s forgiveness. Then, in supplication, you can ask God’s help in making changes in your life. But eventually there comes a point when you have to *dedicate* yourself to God again. That is, you have to pick up the pieces of your life and go on. But what struck me in studying these Psalms is that the *dedication* of which David speaks is different from what we usually mean by it.

Can you remember back to when you were a new Christian? I can remember the day I dedicated myself to the Lord as a young man. I was on fire! I

was hot to go out and save the world. When you're a young Christian nothing seems impossible. After all, isn't that what dedication meant – believing “I can do all things through Christ?” The problem is that it's tempting to put the emphasis on the “I” in that statement.

At first reading that seems to be what David was suggesting in Psalm 51, beginning at verse 12. *“Lord, restore my joy, renew my inner spiritual strength – and then look out, world, ‘cause here I come – Super Christian! I am going to teach transgressors your way. When I finish preaching, those sinners are going to return to you in droves. When I stagger them with my personal testimony about being saved from the depth of sin and degradation, I’m going to be ten times more effective for you that I ever was before. And I’ll do all that because I’m willing to sacrifice everything for you!”* Doesn't that sound like – dedication?

But then at verse 16 it's almost as though David caught himself at the height of his enthusiasm. It's as though he stopped himself and said, *“What am I saying? That's not what you want from me, is it, Lord? If you wanted high-pressure, hard-sell religion I'd give it to you. But I really don't believe you want me to prove what a great saint you've made out of this old sinner. No, I suspect what you want most from me right now is to give you my brokenness, to humble myself, so you can use me in my weakness as a willing cup to hold your grace and your power. Lord, that's hard for me to do. But I'll try.”* That, I think, is the kind of dedication that David was talking about there. *“It's not about me, Lord. It's all about you.”*

In his book, ***You Gotta Keep Dancin'***, Tim Hansel said something that hit me where I live: *“Most of my life, my energy and strength has been based on talent, effort, pushing and striving. I have spent much if not most of my Christian life thinking about what **I** could do for Jesus, rather than what **he** could do in me.”* That hit close to my heart. I have no particular problem with confession. My sins seem to me too obvious to deny. And I'm pretty good at supplication. I can admit I need help to behave the way I should. It's this business of dedication that I have a rough time with. It's really hard for me to give God my brokenness – my weakness – my inadequacy, and trust him use that and nothing else to achieve what he wants through me. I'm afraid of failure.

But in spite of my apprehension, I'm tantalized by the irrepressible notion that, if I let go of the control of my life, if I stop trying to be a “worthy” Christian, an “adequate” Christian, God just might begin doing some remarkable things through me. So I ask you, please, to pray for me – and I'll pray for you – that we would release to God the control of our lives so that his power could be made perfect in our weakness. That, I think, is what this business of confession is all about.