

The Anatomy of a Repentant Heart

A Sermon on Psalm 51

by

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1. Introduction

2. True Repentance Accepts Our Full Responsibility Before God (vv. 1-4).

a. Confession of sin is rooted in the covenant faithfulness and innumerable mercies of God (v. 1).

i. “Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions.”

1. David begins this psalm with a cry for God’s grace.

a. First, he asks that the Lord be gracious to him according to His lovingkindness, or *hesed*, which is an incredibly rich term referring to the unfailing covenant faithfulness of God.

b. Secondly, he asks that the Lord blot out his transgressions according to the multitude of God’s mercies.

2. Mercy, simply defined, is receiving leniency where you don’t deserve it.

a. David knows that according to God’s Law he should be stoned to death for his adultery and murder.

b. He asks instead that the Lord blot out his transgressions, or literally, wipe them from the record, all according to God’s innumerable mercies.

ii. When we confess our sins to God, we do so out of an awareness that God is a God of mercy and grace.

1. All throughout the witness of Scripture, we see God’s mercy and grace on display.

- a. We see it in the Garden with Adam and Eve, when they brought the curse upon all mankind.
 - b. We see it with Israel who immediately fell into idolatry after being delivered from Egypt, who grumbled and rebelled in the wilderness, and cowered in fear before the Promised Land.
2. And the same is true for you and I, beloved. Think of all the ways that God could have dealt with you as you deserved.
 - a. Think of all the sins you've entered into all because you so desperately wanted it—and yet God didn't punish you as harshly as you deserved.
 - b. The gospel itself is good news because God doesn't deal with us as we deserve.
- b. *Confession of sin accepts that we are ultimately guilty before God in every way (vv. 2-4).*
- i. "Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are justified when You speak and blameless when You judge" (vv. 2-4).
 1. The first thing I want to draw your attention to here is a series of terms that David uses here.
 - a. First, David uses the term "transgression" in verses 1 and 3.
 - b. Secondly, David speaks of his "iniquity" in verse 2.
 - c. Thirdly, he uses the term "sin" in verses 2 and 3.
 2. All of these terms pile on top of one-another to show that in the totality of who David is, he is a man who doesn't glorify God even when he tries his best.

- a. The revelation that David has come to see is that he is defiled by this reality we call sin.
 - b. David's sins of adultery and murder are simply the fruit born out of a greater problem that you and I all share with him.
- ii. "Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are justified when You speak and blameless when You judge." (v. 4)
- 1. The point of verse 4 is to show that the ultimate offense of our sin is always before God.
 - a. Verse four hinges off of the few previous verses, showing that David recognizes that his sins against other people were ultimately sins against his Lord.
 - b. David knows that there is no hope of blame-shifting, equivocation, or downplaying just how offensive his sin is. He owns it.
 - 2. Genuine repentance takes ownership for sin; it takes responsibility; it gives no excuses. But genuine repentance also produces something.
 - a. When David takes full responsibility for his actions, he says God is justified when he speaks and blameless when He judges.
 - b. In other words, he says that when he admits his guilt and agrees with God, the occasion for blasphemy from others is removed.

3. True Repentance is Aware of Our Utter Defilement (vv. 5-9).

- a. *Our fundamental problem is not that we sin, but that we are sinners, and therefore we sin (vv. 5-6).*
 - i. David begins by saying, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me" (v. 5).

1. When David says that he was “brought forth in iniquity,” he is referring to his birth. From the very first day he entered the world—he was already going astray.
 - a. He pinpoints that this goes well beyond simply being born into a world of iniquity.
 - b. Long before David was even a thought in the mind of his mother, he was already in a state of sin.
 2. The point that David makes here is that he was conceived and born into the realm of iniquity and sin.
 - a. Picture two states of existence. One state of existence is innocence and the other state of existence is corruption.
 - b. What this shows us is that sin is part of our nature.
- ii. “Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being, and in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom” (v. 6).
1. David says he was uniquely created by God to desire truth and to receive wisdom, and yet he acted according to his nature as a sinner.
 - a. The apostle Paul speaks of this reality in Romans 3 when he says that there is no one who is righteous, no one who understands, no one who seeks God, and no one who does good—not even one.
 - b. He likewise says in Romans 8 that the mind of the flesh, which speaks of everyone born into this realm of corruption, is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s Law, nor can it, for those in the flesh cannot please God.
 2. This is the all-encompassing power of sin. Sin’s corrupting power over every single man, woman, and child renders us incapable of pleasing God.

- a. What God desires is that we know truth and wisdom in our innermost being, yet sin's corrupting power has ruined even this.
- b. On our best days, we are utterly, morally corrupt. We are unclean. We are unfit to come before God.

b. *Confession of sin recognizes our only hope of remedy is in God Himself (vv. 7-9).*

- i. "Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow" (v. 7).

1. Pay attention to the certainty David has here. He knows he is utterly unclean and defiled by his sin nature—and yet he knows that if God acts, he *will be* clean.
2. The reality that David is communicating here is that he is a spiritual leper and his sin has defiled him.

- a. But if God acts in mercy and grace to cleanse him, he will be pure. He uses the analogy of snow to show that as white as snow may be—if God extends mercy and grace to him, David will be even whiter than snow.
- b. This is the beautiful reality of the one who has come to trust in Jesus. White as snow may be, the forgiven sinner is whiter, brighter, and purer.

- ii. "Make me to hear joy and gladness, let the bones which *You* have broken rejoice. Hide Your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquities" (vv. 8-9).

1. In these two verses, you can catch a glimpse into the heart of David as this newfound awareness of his sin washes over him.
 - a. First, David prays that the Lord would give him joy and gladness. The reason for this is simple: right now, he is feeling anything but joy.
 - b. That joy and gladness is tied to the forgiveness of the Lord, which he asks for yet again in v. 9.

2. I think of so many who live with the painful reality of sinful choices you made in the past.

- a. If you're in Christ, you're forgiven, beloved. The record has been wiped utterly clean.
- b. Perhaps you're living in a state of unrepentant sin right now and the hand of the Lord is crushing you—would you not simply admit your guilt before God and ask Him to cleanse you through the shed blood of Jesus Christ?

4. True Repentance Acknowledges Our Impure Heart (vv. 10-13).

a. *Because of this fundamental problem of sin, it is ultimately a matter of the heart's true condition (vv. 10-12).*

i. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and sustain me with a willing spirit" (vv. 10-12).

1. David fundamentally recognizes there is a perfect storm of misplaced affections, devotions, and loves in his heart, and all of this goes back to what he's already said about his true condition.

- a. He asks for a pure heart in verse 10. He recognizes that his willful sin, his waywardness from God's commands, and his missing the mark of God's standard, is all a result of an impure heart.
- b. Secondly, David asks for a renewed and steadfast spirit within him, and this is specifically in light of the fact that he has not set his heart on obedience to the Word of God.
- c. Thirdly, in verse 11, David asks that God would not cast him away from His presence, nor take His Spirit away from him. David doesn't believe

that he is in jeopardy of losing his salvation—there is something rather unique going on here that requires a little more explanation.

d. Then in verse 12, he requests that the Lord restore to him the joy of God's salvation, and for God to sustain him with a willing spirit.

2. In everything, David is asking that he not only be of one mind with God in agreement over his sinfulness—but in what God has said is right.

ii. David is uniquely aware that he is all screwed up, even down to the very core of his heart—but he is also uniquely aware that God has the power to change the heart.

1. It is incredibly interesting that in the wake of everything David has come to realize, that he doesn't ask many of the things you and I would likely ask for.

a. We would ask that God guard us from lust and keep us from committing the same sins again—but David doesn't ask for this.

b. David asks for inward transformation. He asks for an overhaul of his heart, and ultimately, a change of who he truly is.

2. At the root of genuine confession and repentance is a realization that even at the deepest level of our hearts—we are fundamentally at odds with God.

a. In a nutshell, this is the problem of all humanity. This is you, and this is me, and apart from the grace of God in Jesus Christ, this is who you will remain.

b. Yet David cries out to the Lord to change his heart, and this is ultimately where true repentance leads. True repentance leads us back to God, because God is the only One who can fix the heart.

b. *The result of God's purifying work of grace and mercy in David's heart will be an evangelistic fervor (v. 13).*

- i. David will teach transgressors God's ways.
 - 1. In light of everything thus far, the content of what David will teach them is quite clear.
 - 2. David will instruct those who are rebellious against God, both of their sin and of God's mercy.
- ii. Sinners will be converted to God.
 - 1. The transgressor will see the error of their ways, and turn in genuine faith and repentance to God.
 - 2. This is ultimately the fruit of true repentance. When you truly understand the devastating consequences of sin and just how much it affects you on every level, and God gives you grace—you can't help but tell others of it.

5. True Repentance Admits Our Improper Worship of God (vv. 14-19).

a. Because of the impurity of our hearts, our sin nature, and our impure hearts, we are prone to improper worship of God (vv. 14-17).

- i. David begins by asking the Lord to deliver him from his bloodguilt so that he will joyfully sing of God's righteousness and declare God's praise (vv. 14-15).
 - 1. He is aware of the fact that he has committed murder, and his guilt prevents him from being able to worship God properly.
 - 2. What he needs is forgiveness—and forgiveness will ultimately give way to praising God properly.
- ii. David is acutely aware that God does not desire superficiality, but a repentant heart (vv. 16-17).
 - 1. The unforgiven sinner cannot bring a sacrifice before God that will be pleasing to Him. All it will do is stir up more wrath.

- a. This is an incredible warning on superficial faith, because the reality is that nothing you bring to God will end up swaying Him in the end.
 - b. The sacrifice that God requires is much harder to come by. God requires true brokenness, guilt, and remorse over our sin, and true humility before Him.
2. What this testifies to is the reality that true repentance is never surface deep.
- a. What you and I so often try to do is come dutifully to church with a series of private sins that we have not truly repented of—and the result is that we bring forth improper worship to God.
 - b. We cannot pull the wool over God’s eyes. We cannot come to church on a Sunday and pretend as if the rest of the week doesn’t exist. God knows, beloved. God knows.
- b. *It is God’s undeserved favor that brings renewed, proper worship that He delights in (vv. 18-19).*
- i. “By Your favor, do good to Zion; build the walls of Jerusalem. Then You will delight in righteous sacrifices, in burnt offering and whole burnt offering; then your bulls will be offered on Your altar” (vv. 18-19).
- 1. The first concern that David has in verse 18 is that the favor of the Lord prospers Zion, and that the Lord build the walls of Jerusalem.
 - a. All that David is asking the Lord for is that He be gracious to His people.
 - b. He asks that the Lord do them good, according to His favor, or grace, and then He asks that the Lord protect them.
 - 2. It is a relatively simple request—but I want you to notice that his request is born out of a focus of God getting the proper glory that He is due.

- a. That is the focus of verse 19, but it takes a unique flavor to it because David ties their proper sacrifices and offerings to God's grace.
 - b. In other words: if God is not gracious and does not protect them, they won't offer proper sacrifices before God, and they won't bring Him delight.
- ii. In what way does David want God to do them good and protect them?
- 1. Perhaps it is a general statement—but it is more likely that David is praying this request in light of everything he's said in this psalm.
 - a. David knows his own spiritual condition is bad—and he knows the hearts of men well enough to know that everyone else suffers from the same plight he does.
 - b. The rest of Israel is guilty before God in every way; they are equally as defiled as he is; they all have an impure heart; and they are just as prone to improper worship as David.
 - 2. David prays that the Lord would be gracious and compassionate to His people, much like he did for himself in verse 1, by forgiving them.
 - a. It is only with God's forgiveness that the people could offer their sacrifices and offerings and please the Lord, and bring Him glory.
 - b. David ends just as he began—by appealing to God for His mercy and grace—because he knows that only the mercy and grace of God can help them—and that is the final mark of true repentance.

6. Conclusion

Small Group Questions:

1. How has this psalm shaped your understanding of what true repentance looks like?
2. What are ways we tend to avoid genuine repentance, and why is this so detrimental to our relationship with God? Be specific.
3. How has this psalm given you hope once more in the gospel of our Lord?