Heart Health Series:
Cleanse My Heart (Psalm 141:4)

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At A Glance:

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These sermon study notes are designed to be a tool used after listening to the sermon. This resource is a guide to help deepen understanding regarding the Scriptures and ideas presented in the sermon. Those who use these study notes are encouraged to look up, read through, and think about Scripture references in this guide. There is more information in these notes than what is presented in the sermon. These study notes are designed to be used as an independent study tool to help the formation of Biblical convictions, character, and conduct.

Cleanse My Heart

I. Introduction

A. Illustration: Cleaning a Newborn Baby

1. Some of the best memories I have in life are the births of each of our kids. These events are some of the sweetest highlights of life. As many parents will tell you, there is something unique and special about the birth of their children, especially the first one. Becoming a first-time parent is a treasured experience.
2. Caleb was born on a Monday night. I jokingly said that he wanted to be born so we could start watching football together because the labor process started a few hours before the Monday Night Football broadcast was going to begin. In my mind, I can still picture the look and layout of the room.
3. As Caleb was our first child, I didn't know what to expect or the process of the medical profession for the care of newborn babies. Of all of our children's births, Caleb's took the most effort and energy.
4. Eventually, the labor was done, and we had a crying baby. The doctor immediately passed Caleb to the nurse so the nurse could start cleaning him. He was purple, bloody, covered in goo, and had chunks on him. As the nurses continued to examine Caleb, they laid him in a warmer. Throughout the process, Caleb was crying. I went to the warmer, talked to Caleb, and gave him my finger to hold. He grabbed tightly, held on, and instantly stopped crying—I assume he heard a familiar voice. That moment is unforgettable. All the while, he was only partially clean.
5. Once all the tests were done, the medical staff finished cleaning Caleb. They wiped him down from head to toe. They put a diaper on him and wrapped him in a blanket and hat. Then, they gave him to us to hold. After the labor, we got to hold a clean baby. I was very grateful the nurses cleaned our kids up before handing them to us.

B. What is true of babies physically is also true of us spiritually. We are born spiritually dirty, in need of being cleaned (Ezek. 16:4). All human life, whether physical or spiritual, begins in a condition of dirtiness. We don't' start life clean. We need someone else to clean us. The process of being spiritually cleaned is called cleansing in the Bible. Physical washing is a symbolic act and image of spiritual purity. Jesus symbolically washed the disciples' feet as a way of physically demonstrating the spiritual cleansing He provided them (Jn. 13:12-14).

C. It is this spiritual cleaning that is the core of David's next prayer. Those who live in pursuit of the heart of God will be praying for God's spiritual cleaning in their lives. They understand how important moral and spiritual purity is to God. Much of God's time and effort is spent raising up people who will worship and serve Him in sincerity and purity. We can learn how to pray for God's spiritual cleansing from what David writes in Psalm 141:4.

II. Cleanse Me on the Inside

A. As people who aspire to be like David and become a person who lives in pursuit of the heart of God, we can pattern our prayer life after David's. Being transformed by the presence and power of the Spirit of God living in us begins as we acknowledge and pray for God to create a

morally good heart in us so that goodness grows at the deepest levels of our innermost being. We pursue a righteousness that comes from trust in Jesus. As God is working this in us, He searches us with His perfect and exhaustive knowledge. We ask God to use that knowledge to improve how we think, stop hurtful habits that remain in us, and teach us how to live in a way that is good for us. We also ask God to provide us with an understanding heart that possesses and uses a God-given perception into the true nature of reality as we spend time learning from the word of God. Now, we're going to learn a fourth prayer that will help us continue to be a person after God's own heart.

B. Psalm 141 is clearly identified as a prayer that is being prayed, possibly in the evening (Ps. 141:1-2, 5). As this prayer is prayed, the author has his attention and thoughts focused on God, looking for His help (Ps. 141:8). Psalm 141 is filled with different requests for God to act. One of the critically important requests is found in verse four where David is asking God to fix him at the source of wrongful words and actions.

C. A person who is passionate about pursuing the heart of God will pray:

> [4] Do not incline my heart to *any* evil thing, (Ps. 141:4)

D. Earlier in this series, we observed that David prayed, asking God to cleanse his heart (Ps. 51:2, 7), now we see more of the specific details as to what David meant by this cleansing work of the Spirit of God in him ("Do not incline my heart to any evil thing", v. 4).[1] David doesn't want anything that is morally bad to be appealing to him.[2] He doesn't want his internal attitude and posture to be receptive or willing to be drawn to a thought, attitude, or action that is wrong.[3] David is asking God to watch over him so that his internal impulses will not be drawn to anything that is morally bad. David is demonstrating the same principle of prayer taught by Jesus: "do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil" (Mt. 6:13).

E. The Holy Spirit works in us to produce and encourage a desire to comply with the word of God. David wants character qualities that he does not yet possess—at least not as fully as he would like. David is asking for deeper and more progressive personal transformation from God. He is asking for God's help to remove any remaining heart attachments to anything that is bad. This is the same prayer request taught, encouraged, and promoted repeatedly by Jesus (Mt. 6:13, 26:41, Mk. 14:38, Lk. 11:4, 22:40, 22:46).

F. David is asking God to work in Him to change his attitudes, desires, motivations, preferences, passions, and feelings. Everything that influences and motivates David's actions needs to be washed clean by the Spirit of God. He is petitioning God to use His power to transform David's innermost feelings and impulses.[4] In this request, David is making the same plea as the apostle Paul (Rm. 7:21-24). David is asking God to rescue him from himself. He wants God's strength to guard and keep him from sin so he can be morally pure in all areas of life.[5] David had a strong desire for purity—to be morally clean before God.

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[1] This is the negative work of God's cleansing—removing what is bad. There is also a positive element of cleansing—building what is good (1 Kgs. 8:58, Ps. 119:36, 119:112).
[2] Logos 10 Bible Study Software Exegetical Guide on Psalm 141:4 "evil"
[3] Logos 10 Bible Study Software Exegetical Guide on Psalm 141:4 "Do not incline"
[4] Hans-Joachim Kraus, *A Continental Commentary: Psalms 60–150* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 527.
[5] James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 107–150: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 1224.

G. The source of and power for an effective and consistent personal discipline is the influence of God on a person, not an individual's character or willpower. This prayer looks to God as the source of personal discipline and the ability to do what is good while avoiding what is wrong.[6] All our efforts to try harder, to be a better person, and to obey the word of God more effectively in the future will fail if our effort is not connected to our dependence on God. The more we realize our lack of ability and goodness, the more we can be filled with God's power and character. Once filled with the nature of God through the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:3-4), only then will we be capable of acting the way we should (Phil. 2:13). God provides; we pursue.

H. The goal and intended outcome of this prayer is beautifully articulated by Paul:

> [1] Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let's cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God. (2 Cor. 7:1)

I. Any and every action by which we become sullied or dirty needs to be fixed ("let's cleanse ourselves from all defilement", v. 1). The strong desire of every true disciple is to be purged of evil.[7] The evil actions we produce have negative impacts on our soul and how we use our physical body ("of flesh and spirit", v. 1). The cleansing of God results in advanced holiness ("perfecting holiness in the fear of God", v. 1). To be spiritually cleansed is to be cleaned from defilement and sin in a way that results in a morally cleansed personal experience and life. Those being transformed by God don't pretend to be someone they are not; they actually become the person God describes in His word. This spiritual cleaning sets the direction of the entire Christian life (Eph. 5:27, Col. 1:22, 1 Thess. 5:23, 1 Tim. 6:14, Tit. 2:14, 2 Pet. 3:14).

J. Do you recognize your need for God's help to develop a cleansed heart? Those with spiritual insight will realize the source of all their moral failures comes from what is happening inside them—in their soul. Why does a person lust? Because of a defect in their innermost being. Why does a person get inappropriately angry? Because of a defect in their innermost being. Why is a person greedy? Because of a defect in their innermost being. Why is there so much conflict in relationships? Because of a defect in their innermost being. Why does a person use hurtful and manipulative words? Because of a defect in their innermost being. Since we are the source of the problem, we can't be the source of the solution.

K. The most foundational and destructive problem facing humanity is our heart's tendency to be drawn to doing wrong. Immoral thoughts, desires, and actions are appealing to our morally broken human nature—called the flesh. There are desires, motivations, and impulses inside us that draw us toward wanting to do wrong. The internal pull is such a significant problem to solve that only Jesus fixed it. David knows only God can cleanse his spiritually sick heart, which is why he is asking for God's help in prayer. We should be like David and approach God the same way. We pray, as Jesus instructed us, for God to help us avoid temptation and evil by spiritually cleaning us on the inside.

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[6] Robert L. Jr. Hubbard and Robert K. Johnston, "Foreword," in *Psalms*, ed. W. Ward Gasque, Robert L. Hubbard Jr., and Robert K. Johnston, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), 493.

[7] Logos 10 Bible Study Software Exegetical Guide on 2 Corinthians 7:1 "let's cleanse"

IV. Cleanse Me on the Outside

A. David doesn't want his internal flaws to be expressed externally:

> [4] To practice deeds of wickedness (Ps. 141:4)

B. Notice how deeply David understands human nature; our conduct is a direct result of what is happening in our heart ("To practice deeds of wickedness" v. 4).[8] David knows that when he desires something that is morally wrong, he tends to act on those desires. That which is going on inside us is the source of what occurs on the outside, including our actions and our words (v. 3).[9] The origin of human acts and the process of planning is done in the heart leading to the intent of words and the carrying out of a deed.[10] Once again, David (as a man after God's own heart) is in agreement with Jesus. Jesus said our words flow from that which fills the heart (Mt. 12:34, Lk. 6:45). Jesus also rightly observed that our actions come from that which fills the heart (Mt. 15:15-20, Mk. 7:17-23). David is asking God to make him morally clean in his words, heart, actions, and relationships. In every area of life, David wants God's influence to be present.

C. David's understanding of how spiritual cleansing and purity works is in total agreement with Jesus. God cares about what is happening in our internal world because it is the source of what we do (Lk. 11:40-41). Our heart should be offered to God as a gift. Only when we are cleaned on the inside are we capable of becoming clean on the outside:

> [25] Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. [26] You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may also become clean. [27] Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. [28] So you too, outwardly appear righteous to people, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. (Mt. 23:25-28)

D. Jesus points out a common spiritual problem: people trying to present themselves as spiritually clean to others by controlling what is happening on the outside, all while ignoring the internal cleansing of the Spirit ("outwardly appear righteous to people, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness", v. 28). Those without spiritual understanding primarily focus on avoiding immoral behavior and engage in behavior modification, all while neglecting or completely ignoring the source of behavior—the heart.[11] Their main goal in their pursuit of God is to look good on the outside. Secondary issues become primary (Lk. 11:42).

E. The process of true spiritual cleansing and the only way we can become the type of person that is pleasing to God is to have the inside cleaned by God before even looking at our conduct. Only then will the outside, our actions, become clean ("first clean the inside of the cup and of the

[8] Tremper Longman III, *Psalms: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. David G. Firth, vol. 15–16, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2014), 458.
[9] Once again, in this understanding of the spiritual life, David is in full agreement with Jesus (Lk. 6:45).
[10] Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 3: A Commentary on Psalms 101–150*, ed. Klaus Baltzer, trans. Linda M. Maloney, Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 559.
[11] The heart should be cleansed of greed, wickedness, robbery, self-indulgence, hypocrisy, lawlessness and be filled with justice and love for God (Mt. 15:25, 28, Lk. 11:39, 42).

dish, so that the outside of it may also become clean", v. 26).[12] First the heart gets clean. This internal cleansing then provides the opportunity for our actions to become clean—the outside. This point is so strong in Jesus' thinking that He simply assumes and takes for granted that the outside will be clean if the inside is clean ("give that which is within…and then all things are clean for you", Lk. 11:41). When our heart is given to God and properly ordered, our actions will take care of themselves. Those who are being spiritually cleaned by God move from love of self to love of God. Those who aren't being cleaned continue to remain focused on themselves and their own desires rather than God and His desires, but they will do actions that they think are required or pleasing to God.

F. Jesus said we must set our heart on and give it to God as a gift if we are going to be cleaned spiritually (Lk. 11:40-41). Have you ever given your heart to God with a willingness to let Him clean it? Those who trust God will open themselves up and surrender to God because they know the work God is going to do in them is good and beneficial. They don't fear or fight against God having His way in their life. If a person is ever going to be spiritually cleansed by Jesus, they must surrender their internal desires to Him. Self-indulgence must stop. We must learn to love God more than ourselves.

G. Disciples who are in the process of God's spiritual cleansing regularly think about and trace their actions back to the heart causes of those actions. They will thoughtfully reflect on the movements of their heart and attempt to figure out why they act the way they did. What internal motivations are driving the remaining wrong behavior in your life? Have you ever asked God to clean out and change those desires? The actions and entrenched behavior are the symptoms of the spiritual problem. The cause of the spiritual problem is what is happening in our heart. Are you focused on getting clean on the inside so your actions will please God?

V. Clean My Preferences

A. David feels the internal pull toward doing wrong as the sin still active in him. He desires the benefits and advantages of sin, but he also feels pressure from the outside as well:

> [4] With people who do wrong; And may I not taste their delicacies. (Ps. 141:4)

B. David is facing temptation to do wrong from the social influence—the impact of other people around him. Part of the reason he is struggling to prevent himself from doing wrong is because of social pressure ("With people who do wrong", v. 4).[13] David's heart tends to be drawn toward going along with what others around him are doing. Going with the flow, not resisting the structure or system, and conforming to everyone else is a much easier and safer path.[14] Standing out and being different requires courage. It is likely the people David has in mind are powerful and influential (Ps. 141:6). David seems to be experiencing real negative effects from these people who are doing wrong (Ps. 141:9). David is struggling to consistently do what is morally good because of external social pressures.

[12] Notice how Jesus implies that even if the heart attitudes are clean it may take some time for the actions to catch up.
[13] 1 Kgs. 11:2, Ps. 26:4, 50:18, 119:63, Pr. 20:19, 1 Cor. 5:9-11, 2 Thess. 3:14
[14] This is an example of being squeezed into the mold or pattern of the world (Rm. 12:2).

C. Despite all this, David wants to have relational distance from those who act wrongly ("And may I not…, v. 4).[15] He doesn't want to do wrong with those who do wrong. What do righteousness and lawlessness share together, or light with darkness (2 Cor. 6:14)? David's desire to be cleansed by God puts him at odds with those who want to indulge immoral desires by acting in ways that have the moral quality of being wicked.[16] Those who do wrong are many. They surround the people of God who are on a different path in their desire to please God. The whole world is under the influence of the evil one (Satan) and he rewards those who are aligned with him (1 Jn. 5:19, Mt. 4:8-9). This is one reason why those who do wrong tend to prosper and benefit from their immoral actions.

D. David doesn't want the tendency of acting wrongly to appeal to him anymore ("And may I not taste their delicacies", v. 4). David wants to be different for God. Instead of tasting the benefits of wrongdoing, David desires to "taste" how good God is (Ps. 34:8). David wants God to influence his personal preferences—what he likes and dislikes. That which appeals to David and that which he has an aversion for needs to be changed by the Holy Spirit. David is asking for God's help to reject and keep himself away from the attractive elements of evil.[17]

E. David acknowledges the fact that there is an appeal and advantages to doing wrong.[18] It is possible to prosper in your own personal situation by harming others and doing wrong. Wrong actions can produce positive personal benefits. This is why the results of those who practice wrong are called delicacies—desirable and rare food. The enjoyment of a tasty food choice is the image being used to describe sin. David is using the language of an enjoyable luxury resulting from wrong actions (Pr. 23:6-8). In the New Testament, a similar idea is referred to as the "pleasures of sin" (Heb. 11:25). David is asking God to change his "tastebuds" so that doing wrong tastes bad to him and doing good tastes good to him.

F. Sin can provide practical advantages to our lives. Stealing can put more money in our pocket. Unethical business can produce profit. Lying can secure a desired outcome. Adultery can create an enjoyable sexual experience. Getting drunk can help us unplug from our problems. Political power can be used for personal benefit to the harm of others. These are the types of delicacies David is talking about.

G. Pay attention to how other people influence your behavior. If we aren't careful, who we are friends with and who we spend time with will influence how we act, with the tendency of this influence to be negative (1 Cor. 15:33-34). Even someone as wise and powerful as King Solomon fell victim to this dynamic (1 Kgs 11:3-4). Family members, including parents, spouses, and siblings, will influence our actions. Don't let the actions of people who do not know God negatively influence you to do what God says is wrong. Have the same desire as David and pray for the same protection against this temptation. Guard your heart and actions against being negatively influenced by those around you encouraging you to do wrong.

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[15] Pr. 1:10-15

[16] Logos 10 Bible Study Software Exegetical Guide on Psalm 141:4 "wickedness"

[17] Tremper Longman III, *Psalms: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. David G. Firth, vol. 15–16, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2014), 458.

[18] Asaph, another author in the Psalms agrees and extensively explained this appeal (Ps. 73).

H. Heed David's second warning by also guarding yourself against the enticements and appeals of wrongdoing. Avoid the delicacies of those who do wrong. Disobeying God can look good. It may feel like following others in doing wrong will lead to a better life filled with more resources or pleasure. Wrongdoing will appeal to desires within us, and it will make relationships easier. Instead of doing what God says is good, if we go along with the wrong other people are doing, our relationships can be more "peaceful". Other people would like us (Jn. 15:19). We will be one of them. Don't seek what they seek in life (Lk. 12:29-30). Have the courage to be different, because your heart is set on pleasing God and doing what He says is right.

VI. Conclusion

A. Our prayer life puts our priorities on display. The requests we ask of God and the frequent focus and topics of our prayers demonstrate what is important to us. David, as a man after God's own heart, prays for God's cleansing work to be done in all areas of his life, but especially in his inner person (his heart). David wants his words, character, conduct, and relationships to be spiritually cleaned by the presence and influence of God.

B. David prays this prayer of personal transformation with confidence, knowing God will positively answer his prayer because it is aligned with the desires and priorities of God. Here is David's prayer request summarized:

> [2] Wash me thoroughly from my guilt and cleanse me from my sin. (Ps. 51:2)