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Sermon 2: Relationship Restored
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Preaching 602
Dr. Miller

Text: Psalm 51:1-4: 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.

Introduction

Wednesday, as part of the Ash Wednesday service, I stood before Father Bill Blackerby and heard the words, “remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return” as he marked my forehead with ashes. I then returned to my seat, reminded of my mortality but not much bothered by it.

Then I saw Dr. Wilton Bunch go forward, receive his ashes, and hear those words — and I almost fell apart.

Suddenly, I realized my own mortality doesn't bother me very much, but the mortality of those I love troubles me more than I care to admit to you. Yet, I look around this room and see people with whom I've spent nearly 3 years; some of you mean more to me than I've probably told you. And your mortality bothers me more than my own, for our mortality means the end of our relationships.

It occurred to me Wednesday what Ash Wednesday and Lent really signify: God's effort to restore a broken relationship. Adam and Eve had it all: a perfect marital relationship, a perfect spiritual relationship. Their sin broke those relationships, with God and with one another. Ever since, no human has ever had a perfect relationship with God or with anyone else.

We read Psalm 51 immediately after the Imposition of the Ashes. Psalm 51 truly reminds us of a broken relationship. David's relationship with God was such that every king after him was measured by his obedience to God. Yet, at the beginning of Psalm 51, we find David's relationship

with God seriously impaired — not broken, but definitely on precarious ground. The verses I've read today demonstrate the efforts of both God and David to repair that relationship.

Outline

The sinner has a role in restoring the relationship. Notice that David demonstrates the existence of the relationship by recognizing that he can still pray to God. What does David do?

The sinner must pray to God for cleansing. In verses 1 and 2, David uses 3 different words to describe his actions: “transgressions”, “iniquity”, and “sin.” All of these words reflect the nature of why God hates sin so vehemently.

- The word for “transgression (פְּשָׁעִים)” is a military term for open and intentional rebellion. David realizes his sins are rebellion against God.¹
- The word for “iniquity (רָעָה)” means “to go astray.” David went astray from the Law of God.²
- The word for “sin (חַטָּאת)” means “to miss a goal.” The writer of Judges uses this word to describe the slingers of Benjamin in Judges 20:16 who could sling a stone at a hair and not “miss.”³ David clearly missed the mark in keeping God's law.

David's words in verse 3 depict the guilt overwhelming him. David knows his transgressions; he cannot forget his rebellious acts and the consequences of his rebellion. His sin is beyond the scope of the Mosaic system. There is no regular sacrifice possible for adultery or murder; only the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement would clear David, and then only if he is truly repentant. The Law is clear: David must die unless God pardons him and spares his life. No other penalty will remove the blood guiltiness from the land. Even worse, David knows his actions leave

1. Ibid.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.

him helpless before God.

The sinner must acknowledge the sin. Against whom did David sin? He has sinned against God Himself. God gave the 10 Commandments to the Israelites, and David broke at least 5 of them! David coveted Uriah's wife; he stole her and committed adultery with her; he lied to bring Uriah home to cover his sin; and, when Uriah failed to fall into David's trap, David murdered him through his letter to Joab. Think of David's state of mind as Uriah returned to the battle, carrying his very own death warrant to Joab. God was justified in His offense against David — and David knew it.

Certainly one could argue Uriah stands as the one wronged, but this only compounds David's problem. Every sacrifice David could make for sin required restitution to the one offended. Uriah was dead! David stood no chance of making restitution with Uriah.

David's hope lay in God alone; God's compassion and covenant love were all that stood between David and death.

God's covenant love leads Him to restore the relationship. In verse 1, David cries first for God's graciousness; David is guilty and does not deserve mercy, and he will receive it only if God chooses to give it. The word David uses, **יִרְחַם**, means "to be gracious; to seek favor." This word is related to the word for grace: undeserved or unmerited favor.⁴ Frankly, David did not deserve to live. The offenses David committed were capital offenses: adultery and pre-meditated murder.

David also calls on God to remember His covenant love to him and to His people, or **טוֹבָה**. In essence, David knows he has one chance: For God to remember the covenant between Himself and David and to be faithful to the covenant, overlooking David's lack of faithfulness.

4. Allen Ross, "Psalm 51: The Necessity of Full Forgiveness," Christian Leadership Center Web site. Available online: <http://www.christianleadershipcenter.org/ppsalms26.htm>.

How could David expect forgiveness? He knew God's heart, that God is truly "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness."⁵ I challenge you to go through the Old Testament looking for that phrase; you'll find no less than 9 occurrences of this beautiful phrase that reminds us of God's love for us.

Application

David begs God to "wash" him from his iniquity; literally, David is asking for God to launder the sin from his life. David then asks God to "cleanse" him from his sin, using a religious term referring to the ritual of the temple, especially the sacrificial ritual for atonement.⁶

I know David's dilemma, and I don't think I'm being judgmental by assuming you do, too. As I read this psalm on Wednesday, I was reminded anew of why I need cleansing, washing, and covenant love. As with David, "I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me."

David's identity both troubles me and comforts me. David was called a man that followed God with all his heart, and if David can fall, so can I. David stood in covenant relationship to God, as do we. Yet, David was not above sin; his covenant with God did not grant him immunity to temptation and the consequences of succumbing to it.

But David's experience reminds me that when I fall into sin, I can cry out to God in confidence, knowing He will not forget His covenant; knowing it is His nature to stand faithful even when I am faithless. Like David, I have often dwelled in the limbo between "Thou art the man" and "The LORD also hath put away thy sin." This psalm may remind me of why I need cleansing, but it

5. Exodus 34:6, ESV. Also found in Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 86:15, 103:8, 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; and Nahum 1:3.

6. Ross.

also reminds me that I can rely on God's mercy and love to receive cleansing.

Do you remember what caused Jesus the most trouble with the Pharisees? Allow me to use C.S. Lewis' words to remind you.

One part of [Jesus'] claim tends to slip past us unnoticed because we have heard it so often that we no longer see what it amounts to. I mean the claim to forgive sins: any sins.... [W]hat should we make of a man, himself unrobbed and untrodden on, who announced that he forgave you for treading on other men's toes and stealing other men's money? Asinine fatuity is the kindest description we should give of his conduct. Yet this is what Jesus did. He told people that their sins were forgiven, and never waited to consult all the other people whom their sins had undoubtedly injured. He unhesitatingly behaved as if He was the party chiefly concerned, the person chiefly offended in all offences. This makes sense only if He really was the God whose laws were broken and whose love is wounded in every sin.⁷

For, as David knew and taught us, God is the One chiefly offended in all offenses. He really is the God whose laws were broken and whose love is wounded in every sin. But God is faithful to keep His promise of forgiveness for the broken and contrite heart. Psalm 51 reminds us that we are sinners, but God will always respond to the penitent with covenant love and compassion.

In the latter years of his life, the Anglican minister and former slave trader John Newton — the author of *Amazing Grace*— is said to have stood before his congregation and said, “I am old, and my memory is almost gone, but I remember 2 things: That I am a great sinner, and that Jesus is a great Saviour.”

There is joy divine that is ever mine
Since the Lord has forgiven me;
And I work and sing for my blessed King
By His grace I have been made free.
Oh, this wondrous grace is for all the race,
It is boundless and full and free;
And I trust and cling to my blessed King
Who by grace now is keeping me.⁸

7. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), p. 51.

8. J.M. Henson, Byron L. Whitworth, “Grace for Every Need,” *Church Hymnal* (Cleveland, TN: Tennessee Music and Printing Company, 1951), p. 56.