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## Eastminster Worship Services

Sunday, June 6, 2010

### Never the Same: When the Word Changes You

#### *Mea Culpa*

Psalm 51

Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh, Senior Pastor

What makes a person a Christian is not that he doesn't sin. What makes a person a Christian is the connection that he has with Jesus Christ. That relationship then, shapes how the Christian thinks and feels about his sin.

The Psalms were the main songbook of the early church and they were designed by God to awaken, express and shape the thoughts and feelings of Jesus' disciples. We learn from the Psalms how to think and feel about sin.

Psalm 51 is one of the few psalms that pinpoints its historical origin. The heading of the Psalm goes like this: "For the director of music. A Psalm of David. When the prophet came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba." What happened with Bathsheba is well known.<sup>1</sup> Late one afternoon, when David arose from his couch and was walking on the roof of the king's house, he saw from the roof a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful. David inquired about the woman and had her brought to him. Bathsheba and David had sex. She conceived and told David. David tried to cover his sin by bringing her husband Uriah home from battle so he could have sex with her and think it was his baby. Uriah was too noble to have sex with his wife while his comrades were in battle. David arranged to have him killed so that he could quickly marry Bathsheba and cover the sin that way.

David committed adultery. He ordered murder. He lied. Yet, God "took away [his] sin."<sup>2</sup> What kind of a righteous judge is God? You don't just pass over adultery, murder and lying. Righteous judges don't do that. Yet, God can be both righteous and the one who justifies murderers and adulterers and liars.

Listen to what Paul writes in Romans 3:25-26. This is one of the most important sentences in the Bible for understanding how Jesus Christ relates to the Psalms and to the Old Testament in general: "God presented him as a

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<sup>1</sup>2 Samuel 11:2-5

<sup>2</sup>2 Samuel 12:13

sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished; he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.” God passed over David’s sin in order to show his righteousness, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

In other words, the outrage that we feel when God seems to simply pass over David’s sin would be good outrage if God were simply sweeping David’s sin under the rug. He is not. God sees from the time of David down the centuries to the death of his Son, Jesus Christ, who would die in David’s place, so that David’s faith in God’s mercy and God’s future redeeming work unites David with Christ. And in God’s all-knowing mind, David’s sins are counted as Christ’s sins and Christ’s righteousness is counted as his righteousness, and God justly passes over David’s sin. The death of the Son of God is outrageous enough and the glory of God that it upholds is great enough that God is vindicated in passing over David’s adultery and murder and lying.

What Psalm 51 describes is what David felt and thought as he laid hold on God’s mercy. It describes how God’s people should think and feel about the horrors of their own sin. *Mea culpa* means an acknowledgement of one’s fault or error. David demonstrates four responses in his acknowledgement his fault; his error; his sin.

First, David turns to God. He turns to his only hope, the mercy and love of God. Verse 1: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.” Psalm 51 is David’s way of laying hold on that mystery of mercy. We know more of the mystery of this redemption than David did. We know Jesus Christ. But we lay hold of the mercy in the same way he did. The first thing he does is turn helpless to the mercy of God. Today that means turning helpless to Jesus Christ.

Second, David prays for cleansing. He prays for cleansing from his sin. Verse 2: “Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.” Verse 7: “Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.” Hyssop was the branch used by the priests to sprinkle blood on a house that had a disease in it to declare it clean.<sup>3</sup> David is crying out to God as his ultimate priest that he would forgive him and count him clean from his sin. It is fitting that Christians ask God to do this.<sup>4</sup> Christ has purchased our forgiveness. He has paid the full price for it. That does not replace our asking. It is the basis for our asking. It is the reason we are confident that the answer will be yes. David prays that God would forgive him and make him clean.

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<sup>3</sup>Leviticus 14:51

<sup>4</sup>1 John 1:7-9

Third, David confesses the seriousness of his sin. He confesses at least four ways that his sin is extremely serious. First, David says that he can't get the sin out of his mind. It is blazoned on his conscience. Notice verse 3: "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me." Second, David says that the exceeding sinfulness of his sin is only against God. Notice verse 4: "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight." This doesn't mean Bathsheba and Uriah and the baby weren't hurt. It means that what makes sin to be sin is that it is against God. Hurting man is bad. But that's not the horror of sin. Sin is an attack on God. Third, David vindicates God, not himself. There is no self-justification. Notice verse 4: ". . . so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge." God is blameless. If God casts David into hell, God will be innocent. This is the way saved people think and feel. God would be just to damn me. And that I am still breathing is sheer mercy. Fourth, David intensifies his guilt by drawing attention to his inborn corruption. Notice verse 5: "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." Some people use their inborn corruption to diminish their personal guilt. David does the opposite. For him the fact that he committed adultery and murdered and lied are expressions of something worse. He is by nature that way. If God does not rescue him, he will do more and more evil.

Finally, David pleads for renewal. He is passionately committed to being changed by God. David pleads for renewal by asking God to confirm his election, ignite the joy of his salvation and mobilize him to a life of effective evangelism.<sup>5</sup> David is not content to be elect. He is not content to be joyful in God by himself. He will not be content until his broken life serves the healing of others.

Nowhere in this Psalm does David pray directly about sex. Why isn't David crying out for sexual restraint, men to hold him accountable and protected eyes and sex-free thoughts? The reason is that he knows that sexual sin is a symptom, not the disease.

The disease is our sin nature, a nature that is common to all humans at birth. Our sin nature is that original guilt and original pollution in which we are created. It is only in and through Jesus Christ that we are justified by faith and begin that process called sanctification which is becoming more like Jesus. People give way to the sin nature in any number of its symptoms including sexual sin, because they are not steadfast, firm and established in Jesus Christ. We waver. We are enticed and give way. Sin is that innate wiring which causes us to fail in conforming to the moral law of God in nature, attitude and act.

David knew this about himself. It's true about us too. David is showing us, by the way he prays, what the real need is for those who sin sexually; for those who act out their sin nature in any attitude or behavior. Not a word in this psalm about sex. Instead: "Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice; Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me."<sup>6</sup> This is profound wisdom for us.

Being a Christian means being broken and contrite. Don't make the mistake of thinking you get beyond this in this life. It marks the life of God's children until they die. Being broken and contrite is the flavor of Christian joy, praise and witness. Quoting Jonathan Edwards,

All gracious affections [feelings, emotions] that are a sweet [aroma] to Christ . . . are brokenhearted affections. A truly Christian love, either to God or men, is a humble brokenhearted love. The desires of the saints, however earnest, are humble desires: their hope is a humble hope; and their joy, even when it is unspeakable, and full of glory, is a humble brokenhearted joy.<sup>7</sup>

God's Word tells us what we discover in confession. As Christians, we discover mercy and newness of life in Jesus Christ. Jesus, once for all, by his life and death, purchased our forgiveness and provided our righteousness. We can add nothing to the purchase or the provision. We share in the forgiveness and the righteousness by faith alone. Living in the reality of a purchased and provided for life is what Paul means when he states in Ephesians 4:1, "...live a life worthy of the calling you have received."

In view of the holiness of God and the evil of sin, it is fitting that we appropriate and apply what Jesus bought for us by confessing every day. "...forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."<sup>8</sup> We make a daily request for the appropriation of forgiveness, because it is fully purchased and secured for us by the death of Jesus. Like the tax collector in Luke 18:9-14, let us say with him, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

What makes you a Christian is your connection with Jesus. That relationship then, shapes how you think and feel about sin. Acknowledge your sin and that God has taken it away in Jesus Christ. When you present your mea culpa before God, turn to him, pray for cleansing from your sin, confess the seriousness of your sin and plead for renewal. Never the Same: When the Word Changes You. Amen!

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<sup>5</sup>Psalm 51:8-17

<sup>6</sup>Psalm 51:8, 12

<sup>7</sup>Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 339.

<sup>8</sup>Matthew 6:11-12

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