

The Divine Pattern of Confession

Psalm 51

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If you've been at our church any time at all, you know that my favorite subject - the one that brings me I think the greatest source of joy and that I love to teach you about - is the wonderful truth of justification. I find great joy in the fact that we who were and are sinners have been declared forever righteous in the courtroom of God's justice. The guilt for every sin that I have ever committed or will ever commit is gone. And that verdict in the courtroom of God's justice is eternal. Thank God there can be no appealing, there can be no overturning of that verdict on appeal.

And yet as Christians, every one of us without exception - even though we have been declared righteous by God, even though we enjoy that standing before Him, that status, we are nonetheless sinners, and we still sin. No longer do we sin against God as our Judge. We have been forever declared righteous in the courtroom of His justice. Romans 8:1 says, "There is therefore now no condemnation to those that are in Christ Jesus." But now, when we sin, we no longer sin against God as our Judge; instead, we sin against Him as our Father. We sin against the very One who loves us and who cares for us, the One who has rescued from His own wrath against our sins, the One who accomplished our rescue at the most incalculable cost to Himself, the death of His own Son.

And so, as Christians, although justified, once and for all declared righteous before God, we still sin. And what are we supposed to do about that sin? Well, the familiar answer comes from 1 John 1:9, which says, "If we confess our sin, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." That's a wonderful passage and it's a great encouragement to us. We are, as Christians, to confess our sin to God.

But what does that mean? How are we to confess our sins? The answer is found in one of the most familiar passages in all of Scripture and the passage I'd like for us to turn to this morning as we prepare our hearts for the Lord's Table, and it's Psalm 51, Psalm 51. Psalm 51 is one of the psalms that, that has titles. The titles of the psalms, by the way, are ancient; they may even have

been original. But we know that two hundred years before Christ when the Septuagint was translated - that's when the Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek - some of the Hebrew terms in the titles to the psalms were already unknown. Our Lord quotes from, (in Matthew 12), quotes from one of the titles of the psalms authoritatively as do the apostles in their sermons in the book of Acts so those titles can be received as part of the inspired text.

This title, if you'll notice Psalm 51, tells us the use of this psalm. It is "for the choir director." Fifty-five psalms are so delineated. That means that this psalm was intended to be sung by the choir of Israel in the corporate worship of God's people. We also learn from the title the occasion on which it was written, "when Nathan the prophet came to David, after he had gone in to Bathsheba." The author, of course, is David. The occasion is when Nathan confronted him. You'll find that recorded in 2 Samuel 11 and 12, David's sin and Nathan's confrontation.

Now the title here gives us very important details because together they help us discern the purpose for which this psalm was written. Think about this title with me for just a moment. It's clearly the record of David's confession of his sin after Nathan confronted him for his adultery with Bathsheba, for arranging to have her husband Uriah killed. But it's not just a confession. It's a carefully prepared confession because (as you can tell in English so in Hebrew), it is a poem carefully constructed. And it's not just David's private poem of confession. He intended for it to be used publicly by the people of God. It is for the choir director, to be sung in the corporate worship of God's people. Now when you put all of that together, it means that this psalm is a divinely intended pattern of the confession of sin. It's a divinely intended pattern for the people of God to use in confessing their sins to God.

It's so important for us to have this pattern because if we're honest with ourselves, our own confession of sin tends to be so trite and so shallow. So, we desperately need to learn from David, the man whom God said was a man after His own heart, how it is that we are to confess our sins as believers unto God as our Father.

Now David's confession here is hard to outline, but there are five discernible movements as you flow through this psalm. And each movement teaches us, I believe, a key principle of confession.

So, we could say then that there are five great principles of confession of sin in this magnificent poem prayer of David's. Before we're done this morning, I will give you all five of them, but I will probably just, in fact I will just briefly, summarize the last three because I want to concentrate our time together this morning on the first two principles. And that's because the first two principles here really describe the heart of confession. As we look toward the Lord's Table this morning, it's so important that we confess our sins and David will teach us how.

The first great principle in the pattern of confession that we learn here from David's pen is this. It's found in verses 1 and 2 – appeal to God's character, appeal to God's character. Verse 1 says,

Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; According to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.”

True confession begins with this basic understanding: we deserve nothing from a holy God but for Him to strike us down and end our rebellion. When we come to God in confession, we are coming to Him as a beggar. We have no spiritual resources, only needs. We have no spiritual merits, only demerits. We have no rights; we only have violated responsibilities and privileges. So, we must begin where David begins - pleading with God to give us the forgiveness that we do not deserve. We are asking God to do good to us when we deserve only evil from His hand. That's grace. And so, David begins in verse 1, “Be gracious to me, O God....” David is reminding God of how God Himself revealed Himself back in Exodus to Moses, you remember? He said, “I am gracious” and David's saying, “God, be consistent with Yourself. You revealed Yourself to Moses as being gracious. Be gracious to me. Show me grace.”

On what basis does he appeal for grace? Notice the next expression, “according to Your lovingkindness.” The *New American Standard* is a very good, literal translation of both the Hebrew text in the Old Testament and the Greek text in the New, but the word ‘lovingkindness’ that they've used to translate this Hebrew word with and throughout the Old Testament may be the most unfortunate choice in all of the *New American Standard* translation. The Hebrew word that is translated “lovingkindness” is “hesed”. It is a powerful, beautiful word in Hebrew. It

contains two equal concepts. One of them is a profound love born in the deepest of relationships. The other side of the word is a tenacious, stubborn commitment to that love and relationship. That's why some translations in combining these concepts of love and loyalty translate it as "steadfast love" or "unfailing love". Those are really good translations of this Hebrew concept. Whenever you see the word "lovingkindness" or "lovingkindnesses" in our *New American Standard*, that's the concept you are to understand. It's "chesed". It's loving loyalty. It is steadfast, unfailing love.

David is saying, "God, be gracious to me in keeping with Your deep commitment to love me because God, it's not like You to give up on relationships that You have initiated. You are characterized by steadfast love, by a love for Your children that cannot be shaken, that cannot be changed." You see what David is doing here? As he comes for forgiveness, he's saying, "God, I'm appealing to Your character, to Your grace, to the greatness of Your compassion (verse 1), to Your 'chesed', Your lovingkindness, Your unfailing, steadfast love." And that's how we must begin our confession as well. We must come as beggars pleading God's character.

You'll notice that even in this introduction as he begins this appeal to God's character, David shows a profound understanding of the nature of his sin. In fact, in the first two verses, he uses three word-pictures that illustrate just how sinful his sin really is and give us a word picture for us to understand our sins as well. Notice verse 1, "blot out my transgressions." Transgressions are acts of rebellion. They are criminal acts. And the Hebrew for "blot out" is a word which means "to erase", to wipe writing off of the page of a book. David is saying that because of our sin, it's as if we have accumulated a criminal record before God. God has written our offenses in His book. And David says, "God, blot it out. Wipe it away. Erase the record." We must ask God to erase the divine record that we have accumulated of sins against His holy character.

There's another word picture here in verse 2, "wash me thoroughly from my iniquity." The Hebrew word for "wash" here is a word which has to do with laundering clothes. It's used that way in other places in the Old Testament. "Iniquity" views sin as being morally twisted. So, you get the picture. The word "to wash" means to beat or tread clothes. So, here David is viewing sin as this stain on us, as a stain on a garment except the stain isn't on our clothes; it's on our souls.

There's an interesting Hebrew expression here by the way. The word that's translated "thoroughly" literally, the Hebrew text says this, "multiply washing me", multiply washing me or "multiply to wash me" is literally what it says. In other words, wash me over and over and over again. The picture is that stain, the stain of sin has so stained my soul that, God, You're going to have to do it again and again and again to get me clean.

Recently, I had a pair of slacks that had a stain on them. I used a little stain stick thinking that would help, and it did to some degree, but it didn't remove it. So, I took them to the laundry. And I got them back, and (they were,) they looked like they'd been carefully laundered. They were nicely creased and pressed. And I went to put them on and noticed the stain was still there - so back again to the laundry. That's the picture behind this expression. God, multiply to wash me! I'm so stained. You're going to have to work hard to get the stain out. We must ask God to thoroughly wash out the stain of sin on our souls.

The third picture is in verse 2, "cleans me from my sin." You see, to worship in the temple, you had to be ceremonially cleansed or clean. You had to be pronounced clean to enter God's presence, to serve Him as a priest or even to worship Him as one of God's people. You couldn't come to the temple if you weren't clean.

There were a number of things in ancient Israel that could render a worshipper unclean. One of the most common were various skin diseases, particularly the common skin disease of leprosy in the ancient world. In Leviticus 13, it's described that one infected with this disease was considered unclean and was not allowed to worship God until the priest had seen that he was in fact clean and had pronounced him clean. And then, he could reenter to worship with God's people.

David is saying that his sin and ours makes us unclean before God. It renders it impossible for us to fellowship and to serve God. It's like we have the terrible disease that keeps us from worship, and we must ask God to make us clean and then to pronounce us clean so that we can enter again into His presence.

And our appeal for grace, our appeal for God to erase the record of sins against us, to blot it out, to wash out the stain of sin, to pronounce us clean – all of those things are not founded on our own personal merit, but like David, they’re founded on the character of God. When you come to confession, come appealing the character of God. God, forgive me not because of who I am, but solely because of who You are.

The second principle in this divine pattern of confession comes in verses 3 – 5: accept full responsibility, accept full responsibility. Verse 3,

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. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me.

In verse 3, the Hebrew expression, the “I” is emphatic. Your marginal reading may even say, “I myself know my acts of rebellion.”

You see, God had always known the disgusting character of David’s sin from the very first moment he committed it. But for somewhere between nine months and a year, the time had passed between David’s sin and Nathan’s confrontation. For somewhere between nine months and a year, David had lived in a pattern of unrepentant sin. Oh, I’m sure he carried on as normal. I’m sure he had offered his prayers as he normally did. I’m sure he came to the, to the temple and worshipped with God’s people as if everything were right. And I’m sure, as we do, he had tended to justify somehow his actions and continued to act as if yes, there was one part of his life that was in need, but the rest of him was okay. For nine months to a year, that went on. For those nine months, David had labored under the guilt of his sin.

In fact, if you want to read what it felt like to David, go back to Psalm 32. Here he describes that period of time. Psalm 32:3, “When I kept silent *about my sin* [he’s talking about that time period], my body wasted away Through my groaning all day long. For day and night Your hand

was heavy upon me (I love this next expression. It's so vivid); my vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer."

Now we live in Texas. We understand a little bit of summer heat, when you walk outside, and it's so hot that it just zaps your energy. You feel that you can do nothing. Your energy is completely gone. You just want to sit down or go back inside. David said that's how sin was in my life. The guilt of my sin took my energy completely away.

For nine months, that's how it had been. Only after Nathan had confronted David and by the way, here's a wonderful testimony to the power of following the pattern our Lord established for church discipline. David, the man after God's own heart, didn't respond in repentance until someone came to him privately and confronted him. Nathan comes and confronts him. And only then did David really come clean with God. And as he contemplates the enormity of what he has done, notice what he says, "my sin is ever before me." I can't run from it. I can't get away from it. I feel the guilt of it. It pursues me like the hound of heaven.

What David says in the next two verses, verses 4 and 5, are so important or is so important I should say. It distinguishes genuine remorse and Biblical confession from worldly sorrow and selfish regret. They're two different things and here is what distinguishes them. Here is the heart of confession. In verses 4 and 5, David takes full responsibility for his sin in three ways and they're the same three ways that we must take responsibility for our sin as well. If we're going to come before God in true confession, if we're going to take responsibility, here's how we take responsibility.

Number one: we must come to the conviction that every sin we commit is a personal affront to God. Every sin we commit is a personal affront to God. Verse 4, "Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight." Now, of course David had sinned against others. He had sinned against Bathsheba. He had sinned against her husband Uriah, his general Joab by ordering him to be a part of the plot to get Uriah killed. He had sinned against his family, and the years ahead would show just how horribly he had done that. And David had even sinned against the entire nation because, like the sin of Achan, David's actions had put the entire nation at risk.

But when David comes to confess his sins, he says that he has sinned only against God. In 2 Samuel 12:13, David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the Lord.” Why does David express it like this? Well, an old commentator, an old British commentator Stewart Perone puts it like this. He says,

The words are to be explained by David’s deep conviction of sin as sin. Face to face with God, he sees nothing else, can think of nothing else but God’s presence forgotten, His holiness outraged, His love scorned. All sin as sin is and must be against God. All wrong done to our neighbor is wrong done to one created in the image of God.

So, to sin against someone else is in reality to sin against God. Even the New Testament makes this point. Paul in 1 Corinthians 8:12 says that “by sinning against the brethren ... you sin against Christ.” You and I need to take full responsibility by seeing every sin as an affront to God.

But there’s a second way we take full responsibility as David does here. We must acknowledge God’s verdict against our sin is just. We must acknowledge that God’s verdict against our sin is just. Verse 4 continues, “... So that (with this result) You are justified when You speak and blameless when You judge.” You know what David is saying? He’s saying, “God, You were right, and I was wrong. My sin was sin, and it deserves all that Your Law declares it to deserve. And whatever sentence you come up with, God, it’ll be just, it’ll be fair, it’ll be right.”

And you know, in David’s case, that wasn’t an easy thing to say. You remember the sentence God gave him? Yes, He forgave His sin, but there were consequences. And in his case, as the leader of the nation, a child would die and David’s family would be, become an absolute example of David’s sin. Absalom, Tamar - the whole sorted mess was to stem from David’s sin. But David says, “God, Your verdict against my sin is right and whatever sentence You come up with will be just.”

It's interesting that in Greek, the word for "confess" means to say the same thing ("homologeo" to say the same). So, in 1 John 1:9, to confess our sins is to say the same thing about our sin that God says, to agree with His verdict. If we're going to take full responsibility, we must agree that God's verdict and His sentence are just.

There's a third way we take full responsibility as David does here in Psalm 51. We must recognize that our sin is not an accident, but is an expression of who we are. Our sin is not an accident, but is an expression of who we are. Look at verse 5, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me." This is not a comment on his mother and her morality or her decisions. David is talking about himself here. And he starts by saying that at the moment of his birth, he was morally twisted. And then he goes back nine months before that, and he says that sin was even a part of his being at the moment he was conceived.

Now this is very important that you not misunderstand what David is saying here. David is not using his mother or his family as an excuse for his behavior and choices the way so many do today. In reality, he's saying exactly the opposite. He's saying, God, nothing outside of me caused me to commit these sins. It wasn't my father. It wasn't my mother. It wasn't my dysfunctional family. It wasn't being stuck out in the fields all day everyday by myself keeping those few sheep. It wasn't the fame and fortune that I quickly arrived at by the killing of Goliath. It wasn't Bathsheba's fault, if only she had been more careful.

And if David were living today, he wouldn't blame his job or his computer or the internet. David was saying that his sins were not an aberration of who he really was. It's not that he was a basically good guy who just happened to have this little sin struggle, who happened to make some bad decisions. That's how we tend to think of ourselves. In verse 5, David is owning up to his sin. He's saying, "My sins are completely mine. They are a reflection of the man I am. The reason I sinned is because of who I am. I didn't commit adultery. I am an adulterer," David says. "I didn't kill someone. I am a murderer. It's my nature. It's what I was born like."

And folks, your confession and mine will never be what God wants it to be until we begin to understand this principle. I sin because I am a sinner. And I commit the specific sins I commit

because of nothing outside of me, but solely because of my wretched, sinful heart. In other words, we have to give up all excuses. And this is hard for us. We want to blame something other than ourselves.

Derek Kidner writes, “This crime David now sees was no freak event. It was in character, an extreme expression of the warped creature he had always been.” John Calvin writes, “We do not thoroughly acknowledge our sins unless we condemn our whole nature as corrupt.”

Let me make this very personal. Think for a moment about the specific sins that you struggle with again and again in your own life. Do you really understand? Do you truly acknowledge that no one else or nothing else outside of you is responsible for that sin in your life? That you make those choices because that is who you are? If we’re going to deal with our sin, we must take full responsibility as David does.

Now let me briefly summarize the other two, the other three principles. Not only are we to embrace or I should say appeal to God’s character. Not only are we to accept full responsibility. But the third great principle of confession is to hope in God alone. This is in verses 6 - 9. Hope in God alone. In this section, David acknowledges that only God can do for him what he needs. Only God can make him to know true wisdom that’ll keep him from making the same choices again. Only God can make him clean. Only God can wash his soul as white as snow. Only God can restore to him the joy and gladness of the corporate worship among God’s people. And notice that David’s faith is in God to do that, “You will make me know wisdom,” if You’ll purge me, “I will be clean,” “I will be whiter than snow.” His hope was in God and God alone.

The fourth principle is in verses 10 - 12. Seek radical renewal. Seek radical renewal. You see, David is not just content with forgiveness. He realizes that his sins have had spiritual consequences, and he prays not for the physical consequences to be removed. He does until God shows him otherwise, you remember with the death of the son? But he prays specifically here for the spiritual consequences to be undone. He prays for a radical miracle of recreation. Verse 10, “Create in me a clean heart, O God...” It’s like, “I am in such desperate situation, God, that You must start over, You must start from scratch.”

You see, David is not content with forgiveness alone. He wants sanctification. He wants a clean heart. He wants a steadfast spirit – that is, a spirit that is loyal to God and to His Word. He wants the influence of the Spirit to continue in his life. He wants to know the joy that he once experienced of God’s salvation. And he wants a willing spirit to do all that God has commanded him to do. He doesn’t want just forgiveness. He wants to be different. And if you and I are ever going to experience true confession and true forgiveness, it’ll be when we come like David to this place where we want more than just forgiveness; we want to be changed, we want to be different. That’s repentance.

The final principle is in verses 13 - 19. It’s recommit to worship. Recommit to worship. In verses 13 - 19, David essentially makes a number of spiritual resolutions or vows. The key to this section is noting what David says he will do or what he will offer God as a result of God’s forgiveness and God’s renewal. And if you work your way carefully through this final section, you will see that it’s all about worship. The final principle of confession is that true confession of sin eventually turns into praise and worship.

This morning, we’re going to celebrate communion or, as Scripture calls it, the Lord’s Table. And Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 11 that before we eat the bread and drink the cup, we have to prepare our hearts. How? Well, Paul says the only right way to prepare our hearts is to judge ourselves (1 Corinthians 11). That is, we are to sit in judgment on our sin before God. Or to put it another way, we are to confess our sin and to seek God’s forgiveness. And this morning, David has taught us how. Appeal to God’s character. Take full responsibility. Hope in God alone. Seek radical renewal. And recommit yourself to worship. Worship always follows true confession and forgiveness.

Folks, there’s hope in this story. There’s hope in this psalm that we too will find true forgiveness and renewal. Listen to Franz Delitzsch, the German commentator,

History scarcely records a grander instance of the change of blood red sin into dazzling whiteness than this. That out of the subsequent marriage of David and

Bathsheba sprang Solomon, the most richly blessed of all kings (and I could add and out of Solomon eventually came Jesus the Messiah).

You want to know if God forgives sins? Look at David. Out of the marriage of David and Bathsheba came the One who would someday live and die to purchase the forgiveness that David pleads for in Psalm 51. There is forgiveness in our God. He is a forgiving God if we will come to Him in this spirit and in this way seeking forgiveness for our sins. And it's found, as David's was, only in His greater Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let's pray together. Our Father, we thank You for the blood of Christ, for the perfect sacrifice that He was.

Father, help us to be faithful in confessing our sins to you. May we not treat them lightly. May we not treat confession lightly, but may we follow the divine pattern that we have seen and heard from the pen of David this morning. O God, may You forgive our sins for Christ's sake and may You help us to live a life of holiness with a steadfast spirit and a willing spirit.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.