

I was wrong, I am sorry, and I love you

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[0 : 0 0] This morning, I'm going to continue right along with our summer series on the book of poems or prayers that we call the Psalms. And my focus will be on Psalm 51, which is one of my favorite poems from the book of the Psalter.

This is a Psalm probably that I return to most frequently in my own prayer life. It's like a well-worn path for my soul that leads me back to God after I've gone astray.

But I want to begin this morning by looking at another one of my favorite poems. Just to be clear, it's not a Psalm. It's not in the Bible. It actually couldn't be more different from Psalm 51.

And it's written by a poet named William Carlos Williams. This poem you may have heard before is famous because it's a classic example of a non-apology apology.

As the story goes, the poem was a note that he left for his wife after he had eaten some of her plums. The poem is called This Is Just to Say. I have eaten the plums that were in the icebox and which you were probably saving for breakfast.

[1 : 1 1] Forgive me. They were delicious. So sweet and so cold. I love this poem. At first blush, it might seem like an apology, actually.

It names what he did and we see the word forgive. But if you really stop to consider it, we see that he's stating some facts. He ate her plums. But then the forgive me here is not a request.

It strikes me as a command. And then it's followed up with a justification. How could you hold this against me? The plums were so delicious. They were so sweet and so cold.

I'm not responsible for eating them. You can't blame me. But you're responsible for dealing with it. This is a non-apology apology. Now, this poem has inspired a whole sub-genre of similar type poems.

And they're funny because they're ridiculous. But of course, not being able to really and truly apologize isn't funny at all. There are a few things that are actually less funny than that.

[2 : 1 2] There is a Pascal quote that's been floating around during the pandemic. You've probably heard it. It says, All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone.

I'm sure there's lots of truth in that. But I want to remix that a little bit and ask, How many of humanity's problems, The wars, the failed marriages, broken families, fractured relationships, How many of these problems stem from our inability to do one simple and very powerful thing?

To apologize. I think regularly apologizing is a fundamental practice for anybody who considers themselves to be a Christian. But we're not always so good at it.

It's a difficult thing to do, even though it's simple. And not being good at it wreaks havoc on our relationship, not only with God, But on our relationship with one another. And so our text this morning, Psalm 51, offers us a quintessential apology.

King David teaches God's people how to offer a full-throated apology, Both to God and then to one another. And so we're going to look at three things this morning. First, we're going to look at what inspires such a profound apology.

[3 : 2 8] Then we're going to look at the instruction that the psalm provides for us. What makes for a good apology? And we'll also finally look at what this psalm invites us to do.

So first, we're going to look at what inspires this psalm. For what is David apologizing? And the subtitle of the psalm gives us the answer. It says, this is a psalm of David when Nathan the prophet went to him After he had gone in to Bathsheba.

So you can't appreciate the apology that David offers Or the forgiveness that he receives Without looking at this very dark chapter in the life of King David. And so that's exactly what we're going to do.

The story is told in 2 Samuel chapters 11 and 12. And as I recount the story, I want to look at a few paintings That I think help illuminate the story for us.

The first is a painting by Éry Medoublet. And it's from one of my favorite museums That I would frequent when Susan and I lived in Boston. This painting is kind of like a movie.

[4 : 32] It's one painting with multiple scenes from this episode in David's life. So we're zooming in on the upper right corner. We see David surveying the horizons of his kingdom.

David remained in Jerusalem while his men were waging wars abroad. In verse 2 of 2 Samuel 11, we read that it happened late one afternoon When David arose from his couch and was walking on the roof of the king's house That he saw from the roof a woman bathing.

And the woman was very beautiful. David learns her name. She's Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. Who just so happens to be one of David's oldest and closest and most loyal friends.

But David is undeterred by this news. He sends armed guards to fetch Bathsheba. And they bring her back to his bed. And the text says he lay with her.

Now, I don't want to dwell on this because I know that we have kids present. But I think it's important to name what's going on here. David abuses his power to sexually exploit one of his subjects.

[5 : 40] This is what we call rape. And as the story goes on, we learn that Bathsheba becomes pregnant with David's child. And so now there's unmistakable evidence for David's crime.

And so what David proceeds to do is to cover up his rape. He decides to murder Uriah, Bathsheba's husband. And that is represented in this scene.

That's David and Uriah there, Bathsheba's husband. You see, David recalls Uriah from battle to try to get him to sleep with his wife. So that it would seem like the baby in her womb is Uriah's.

But Uriah is an honorable man, and he refuses to avail himself of such liberties as David was asking him to do while his friends are at war.

And so what David does is he hands Uriah a letter with instructions for Uriah's commander. Uriah thwarted his plans. So David's going to have him killed. David tells the commander to put Uriah in a dangerous position in battle so that he would be killed.

[6 : 47] So Uriah returns to the front lines with the very letter that sends him to his death. This is really dark stuff. Now up until this point in time, David knows that he's done wrong, but he isn't sorry.

And so what I've done is taken the liberty to write what I would imagine to be David's version of a This Is Just to Say poem. So this is what I've written. Now David is just out of control here.

And it's not until God steps in and intervenes that David stops his rampant sinfulness. We see in 2 Samuel 12 that God finally breaks through, and God is gracious to David.

And here his grace takes a really interesting form. God's grace comes in the form of Nathan's prophetic judgment. And I call this judgment grace because it's this that leads David to repentance. So Nathan gets very creative in confronting David. He spins a story to sneak past the watchful dragons of David's defensiveness. And it's the story about a rich and powerful man who abuses his power at the expense of a poor man.

[8 : 15] He steals this poor man's beloved sheep. And this story incites David's righteous anger.

And David says that such a man deserves to die. And then comes the famous line from Nathan the prophet.

It's captured here in this painting by Jacob Backer, this line that cuts David right to the heart. I love the drama of the painting. Nathan's carrying the word of God under his right arm, and he's speaking the word of God to David.

And David is caught in his sin. He's convicted. He's looking up to heaven. Nathan says to him, You are the man. You're the man who deserves to die. And David is finally convicted of his sin.

And he confesses. And he says, I have sinned against the Lord. And right then and there, Nathan pronounces the Lord's forgiveness for his sin. Now, I want to say a couple things before we get into the content of Psalm 51.

The first thing I want to say is that this story in the Psalm illuminates the beautiful scandal of the gospel. And the gospel is a scandal. This is what it is, that sinners can be forgiven by grace.

[9 : 24] If David, a man who committed such grave sins, can receive forgiveness, then surely so can you and I. I think this story that inspired this psalm gets at the very heart of the gospel.

This is what we read about in 1 Timothy 1.15, where Paul says, This saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Grace is not for sinless people. It's for sinners. And grace for sinners overflows through the cross of Jesus Christ. And the second thing I want to say as we consider this psalm is that it's important to see that the psalm is part of a conversation.

Psalm 51 is not the first word in the conversation. God, in fact, has the first word. And that first word is spoken through Nathan the prophet. David's confession is a response to God's gracious initiative. One commentator puts it this way. Confession of sin is always already on the way to justification because it is, first of all, a response to grace.

[10:35] Now, why is this important? I think it's important because it shows us that the conviction of sin, the very desire to confess and repent, and the forgiveness of sin is all grace.

Grace goes before us and grace goes behind us. Grace surrounds us. Grace goes before us. So that's the story that inspired Psalm 51. And now I want to look at what the psalm teaches us about a real apology.

I think this psalm shows us a good apology has three elements. It has confession, contrition, and repentance. Or in plain English, an apology says three things.

An apology says, I was wrong. I'm sorry. And I love you. That's inspired by a title of one of Derek Webb's songs. So we'll look at each of these in kind.

First, we'll look at saying I was wrong. Here we're talking about confession. Confession simply means that I state the facts. I name it. I own it.

[11:39] I own it. And I take responsibility. And I affirm that the person that I've hurt is right to be angry or right to be hurt or right to be offended by what I have done.

To confess is to speak the truth about the wrong that we have committed, the hurts that we have caused. And confession is an essential step if we desire reconciliation.

Jamar Tisby, I think, hits the nail on the head in his book, *The Color of Compromise*. He writes this. History and scripture teaches us that there can be no reconciliation without repentance.

There can be no repentance without confession. And there can be no confession without truth.

Before any reconciliation is possible, whether that's racial reconciliation, reconciliation with us and God or us and other people, we first need to be honest about the wrongs that we've committed and confess them.

And we see that in David's psalm in verses 1 through 4. David says, Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love. According to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions.

[12:47] 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 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.

Note what's missing here. There's no excuse, no justification, no explaining away. There's no hedging. Unlike so many of the apologies we see, the public apologies we see by politicians or celebrities, David is not distancing himself from what he's done.

He's not saying something like, Mistakes were made or, I'm sorry if you are offended. Note, David pulls no punches here. His confession couldn't be more comprehensive.

In these first two verses, David refers to his offenses using three different words. He confesses his transgressions, his iniquities, and his sins.

And David's not just being particularly poetic here. He's using the whole range of the Old Testament vocabulary for sin. All of it, he's saying, I'm guilty of all of the things.

[14:01] He's not covering anything up. He's not justifying anything. Now, David does say something surprising that I want to talk about. In verse four, he says to God, Against you, you only have I sinned.

So what are we supposed to do with that? I don't think that David's overlooking the crimes against Bathsheba and Uriah. When we sin against people who are created in the image of God, we're sinning against them, but ultimately we're sinning against God, who created them in his image, and we're accountable to God.

In 2 Samuel 12, verse 13, when David comes clean and confesses, he says, I have sinned against the Lord. The sins committed against Bathsheba and Uriah, he understands to be the very ways in which he sinned against the Lord.

So that's the first aspect of a good apology, saying I was wrong, confessing what we've done. And the second aspect of a good apology is saying, I am sorry.

And here I'm talking about contrition. Now the word contrition comes from an old Latin word that means to be worn out or to be ground to pieces.

[15 : 11] So when we're saying we're sorry, we're saying we feel beat up about what we've done. So I'm talking about a sense of remorse, a sense of regret about our actions.

A real apology is not just confessing the wrong that we've done, but actually feeling sorry for it. The heart disposition here is everything. Now I want to illustrate this by sharing a little story about my children.

Billy and Jack, my sons, were fighting over a lint roller this past week. They have lots of other toys, but they decided that it was the lint roller that they wanted to fight over.

And Billy overpowered Jack and ended up jabbing him in the face with the lint roller, causing Jack to bleed a little bit and cry. And Billy thought it was hilarious. So I got up, went over there to try to mediate between them.

And I said, Billy, what do you need to do? You need to apologize for what you've done to Jack. And so Billy in obedience decided he was going to apologize, but did it through laughter. Laughing while you're apologizing is not an effective apology.

[16 : 15] His heart wasn't in it. He was saying sorry, but he wasn't really sorry. Now I know that part of my job as a parent is to help my children develop a sense of empathy so that they know how they ought to feel when they've hurt somebody.

And I think in a very similar way, this is what this Psalm does for us. It teaches us how to be human when we've done wrong, how we should respond. And Psalm 51 shows us that when we err, God delights not in formulaic words or rituals, but in broken and contrite hearts.

We see this in verses 16 and 17. David writes, For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it. You will not be pleased with a burnt offering.

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart. Oh God, you will not despise. Now I don't think David is giving a hard rejection of the sacrificial system.

I think the point he's making is that there should be no expectation of some sort of automatic or mechanized forgiveness by mere ritual.

[17 : 22] It's not enough to go through the motions. Forgiveness does not come through merely uttering the words of our corporate confession of sin. That confession is not some sort of magical incantation.

Our heart needs to be in it for it to be effective. What David is saying here is that God doesn't want us to do a bunch of religious things when we've done wrong to atone for our sins.

He wants us to cast ourselves upon him to receive his grace. And so in a good apology, saying sorry means that our hearts align with our heads.

Our feelings fit the things that we are confessing. Because confession without a broken heart is ultimately hollow. It's like Billy saying he's sorry through giggles.

Now this brings us to the final aspect of what a good apology includes. And that's saying, I love you. And here I'm talking about repentance. Now saying I love you is not simply the reassurance of a relationship or feelings that I have.

[18 : 25] It's not just saying I feel a certain way. Saying I love you means to say I'm committed to taking action to change. Now in the Bible, love is always a commitment to action.

We see that in John 14, for instance, when Jesus says, If you love me, you will keep my commandments. Because Jesus knows that love proves itself by action.

Christians love Jesus by seeking to follow him in faith and repentance. Because real love is not lip service. A real apology commits to repentance.

Now in our family, we have a little mantra when our kids are violent with one another, when they hurt each other. We say when this happens, hands are for helping, they're not for hurting.

And so when we say I love you, we mean to say that we're going to stop using our hands to hurt. And we're going to start using our hands to help. And we see this in verses 13 through 15.

[19 : 27] After David asks the Lord to restore to him the joy of salvation, he says this, Then I will teach transgressors your ways and sinners will return to you. Deliver me from blood guiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.

O Lord, open my lips and my mouth will declare your praise. So David is saying rather than transgress against your ways, I'm going to teach transgressors your ways. Rather than use my tongue to devise evil schemes and plans, I'll use my tongue to praise you and to worship you. So those are the three elements of a good apology that we see in Psalm 51, saying I was wrong, I'm sorry, and I love you.

So now I want to turn to what this psalm invites us to do. And I think it should be fairly obvious how we should respond to this psalm.

I think the psalm invites us to be men and women who not only know how to apologize, but make regular practice of doing so, both to God and to one another.

[20 : 38] Now, I think to be these kind of people requires that we be a part of a certain kind of community. So I have a few ideas that I want to share here as we close.

The first thing is this. I think this psalm invites us to reimagine how we point out the wrongs committed by other people. Now, I'm hoping as I've been talking about apologizing, your first thought hasn't been all of the things that other people need to apologize for.

This sermon is for you, not for them. But all the same, we need to think about how we invite other people to apologize for things that they've done.

And here, the difference, I think, is between that I want to focus on is the difference between calling out and calling in. When we call people out for things that they've done wrong, we're exposing their misdeeds.

And I think we're primarily seeking for justice and sometimes punishment. But calling out is very different from calling in. Calling in also exposes people's misdeeds.

[21 : 41] It's also confrontational, but it's seeking reconciliation, not just to expose somebody's crimes. I think so much depends on how we approach conflict and confrontation.

I think we need to confront people in a way that disarms them rather than activates their defenses.

If we want to be people who are creating a space where we can apologize well and frequently.

And the second thing I want to mention here is I think this psalm invites us to reimagine how we ourselves receive correction. I think the psalm invites us to be the kind of people who view apologies not as threats to ourselves, but as opportunities.

Apologies are not threats. They are opportunities. Apologies are not a sign of weakness. They're signs of godly humility. God wants us to be a people who never waste the opportunity to apologize. Now, as we close, I want to share a recent opportunity that I've had to apologize. About a week or so, I received a really good and really godly and a really painful email from Dedeem, one of our members here at Church of the Advent.

[22 : 59] And the email was about how I had hurt her. And I'm sharing this story with her blessing. She and I chatted about this. So as a black woman in our church, Dedeem shared with me how she was hurt that I haven't reached out to her to check in to see how she was doing during the past few months of racial unrest in our country.

In many ways, my going to protests and my organizing and helping to lead a conversation on the color of compromise that engages issues of racial injustice.

These these actions were kind of like pouring salt in the wound for Dedeem. She and I'm paraphrasing. She asked in the email how how I could really care about building bridges and seeking racial justice in our city if I'm not doing that kind of work with people in our own church. As you can imagine, this was a pretty difficult thing to read and to receive. But I did receive it. Dedeem sent it with great intention.

She was calling me in. She realized that she was becoming resentful and a root of bitterness was developing in her heart. And rather than allow that to take root, she decided to share her hurt with me and provide me with an opportunity to set things right.

[24 : 23] And I received Dedeem's words much like David received the words of Nathan, the prophet. These were God's words spoken to me in many ways. And she was absolutely right.

And so I called Dedeem and I apologized without excuses or without any justification. And the conversation that we had afterwards was really helpful for me because it exposed a tendency that I'm realizing in my heart to intellectualize things, to avoid actually having to engage with actual people.

I don't know if any of you have this kind of tendency. It's far easier and far less messy to love humanity rather than it is to love our actual neighbors, people who might say difficult things to us.

It's far easier to read a book than to have a conversation. And this is just an area that the Lord is doing some work in my life right now. And he used Dedeem in a really powerful way to expose some things so that I can apologize and make progress.

Now, I just want to be clear. I share this story not to toot my own horn because it's kind of an embarrassing one. It's not something that I'm particularly proud of. I'm sharing it as an encouragement to us.

[25 : 39] Um, I'm hoping, um, that we can see that in order for us, if we want to be the type of church that participates in the ministry of reconciliation in any way, we need to be a church that knows how to apologize.

You know, I hurt Dedeem and she provided me with the opportunity to apologize. And the fact that all of this happened, I don't think is an indication of failure on my part necessarily, or even on our community.

I think it's a sign of progress. We're making progress when we're calling one another in and we're able to apologize. Now, in a moment, we'll have the opportunity to apologize to God in prayer for the ways in which we've failed to love him with our whole heart and love our neighbors as ourselves.

But before we do that, I want us to consider our relationships with one another. Consider your relationships with your family, your friends, people in the church, your neighbors.

Are there people that we've hurt or offended or wronged? It could be last week. It could be 10 years ago. Have you done something for which you need to apologize?

[26 : 51] I want to end by giving us an opportunity to pray a prayer that will help us to inventory our hearts and our souls to think if there are certain people that we need to apologize to.

And I want us to pray this prayer together and commit to taking action. This prayer comes from Howard Thurman, a great preacher and civil rights activist in the 20th century from his book, *Meditations of the Heart*.

Let's pray this prayer together. The concern which I lay before you today is this, Lord. Whatever disaffection there is between me and those who are or have been close to me, I would seek the root or cause of such disaffection.

And with the illumination of your mind, oh God, to understand it. I give myself to your scrutiny that whatever there may be in me that is responsible for what has happened, I will acknowledge.

Where I have wronged or given offense deliberately or without intention, I seek a face-to-face forgiveness. Where I have been wronged or have taken offense deliberately or without intention, I seek a face-to-face forgiveness.

[28 : 08] What I can undo, I'm willing to try. What I cannot undo, with that I seek to make my peace. How to do these things, what techniques to use, with what spirit.

For these I need and seek your wisdom and strength, oh God. Whatever disaffection there is between me and those who are or who have been very close to me, I lay before you.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.