

Ash Wednesday 2024

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[0 : 0 0] Lord, we ask that you will bless the reading and the proclamation of your word this evening. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. In a time when truth, personal expression, and visions of the good life are completely subjective, why and how does guilt still exist?

Have you ever thought about that? Why is guilt still a thing that everybody seems to grapple with? How can anyone feel guilty who curates their lifestyles and where choice reigns supreme?

I might have mentioned this a while back, but there's a professor, Wilfred M. Maclay. He wrote a very good, interesting essay called The Strange Persistence of Guilt.

This is his opening paragraph. Those of us living in the developed countries of the West find ourselves in the tightening grip of a paradox.

One whose shape and character have so far largely eluded our understanding. It is the strange persistence of guilt as a psychological force in modern life. If anything, the word persistence understates the matter.

[1 : 2 0] Guilt has not merely lingered. It has grown, even metastasized into an ever more powerful and pervasive element in the life of the contemporary West.

Even as the rich language formerly used to define it has withered and faded from discourse, and the means of containing its effects, let alone obtaining relief from it, have become ever more elusive.

The strange persistence of guilt in our culture. First, a few questions before we get into Psalm 51.

How do you deal with persistent guilt in your life? Sin that seems to creep up, things that you do that you know you shouldn't do, you're embarrassed about.

How do you deal with it? How do you wrestle with it? How do you either bury it away or calm your nerves? When the strong feelings come, do you push them deep down?

[2 : 2 8] Do you ignore them? Do you live in a constant state of anxiety? How do you deal with the strange persistence of guilt? We'll jump into Psalm 51, and we'll see a proper way to deal with guilt.

This is quite possibly, if not 100%, the most famous penitential writing in the entire Bible. It's King David, and just a bit of a background before we jump into it.

If you remember David, he is doing things right. His kingdom is growing. He should be off doing kingly things, namely going to war. He stays home.

He sees a beautiful woman that's not his wife. He has to have her. In fact, he does have her. It seems like it might have been, almost certainly, against her own will. It's his good friends.

It's one of his mighty men's. It's his wife. He has the man killed because he finds out that the affair he had has produced a child. And he is confronted by the prophet Nathan.

- [3 : 35] And Nathan gives this incredible story, parable, so to speak, of this poor man who has a lamb, but a rich man comes and takes the lamb and kills it.
- And David burns with anger. And he says, whoever that rich man is, he deserves to die. And the prophet Nathan looks at David. And, I mean, we read it, but you can feel it.
- He says, you are that man. Psalm 51 is the aftermath of Nathan saying to King David, you are that man. In the psalm, we'll see three brief, brief points.
- In the psalm, we'll see that freedom from guilt expresses a humble, if we're going to have freedom from guilt, that we're going to have to express a humble and honest confession coming from a heart that is truly contrite.
- The second is that if we are to see freedom from guilt, we ultimately will enjoy deep and complete forgiveness and cleansing, not from ourselves, not a mind over matter thing, but from something or someone outside of us.
- [4 : 47] And finally, when we experience freedom from guilt, we will have a restoration and healing of spirit. So look with me at verses 1 to 6 if you have a Bible.
- There's some Bibles in the back if you want to grab one. If not, just hear these words. Verses 1 to 6 of Psalm 51. Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love, according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions.
- 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.
- Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. Behold, you delight in truth, in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.
- Notice David, this grief-stricken, guilt-stricken man, expresses his great need for mercy right from the beginning. He is sinful.
- [5 : 54] He is broken. He is a murderer, a liar, adulterer, a coveter. And he has elevated his own desires above that of others. And yet, and yet, who does he say he has sinned against?
- It is God and God alone. He is ultimately saying that it is you, God, your law, your ways, your vision for goodness that I have broken.
- Of course, he would say that he is not guiltless with Bathsheba and Uriah and really the whole nation of Israel. But he is noticing where the guilt ultimately lies.
- And interestingly, he doesn't give any kind of excuse. He doesn't try to justify what he has done. He doesn't find nuance. He doesn't cite past victories.
- And he's had past victories. Good deeds that he has done for God. God, I've done this thing, but I have done well by you. Overlook it.
- [6 : 52] It's David here. You know who I am. You know what I've done. No blame shifting. No blame shifting. No excuses. David is real and raw about his sin.
- He is guilty. No ifs, ands, or buts. There is no excuse. And he appeals for mercy. And like I mentioned, he doesn't appeal on the basis of what he has done.
- But instead, he looks to the very character of God. He ultimately is saying, because you are merciful and steadfast in your love. The steadfast love, it's like a technical term in the Bible that refers to this promise-keeping, covenant-making God.
- Because of your steadfast love, because of the promises that you have made to me, because you are a God that keeps promises, please have mercy on me. David is a broken man.
- And interestingly, he is not simply saying, forgive me for the sins that I have recently done. But he is saying, listen, Lord, I am a sinner. Look at verse 5.

[8 : 05] Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. Verse 5 has been a verse long understood to support the doctrine of original sin.

That it's not just we are morally neutral people or really good people, and sometimes we mess up. It is our default, rather, that we sin. We are selfish.

And our sin might not result in murder or adultery, but it certainly results in a selfishness that always puts ourselves first, God and others second, third, fourth, tenth, twentieth, one hundredth.

David is recognizing the reality of what God has said. It is like he is getting centered back into God's word after deviating, getting off the track.

David here is not somehow having some kind of mind over matter practice to take away his guilt.

[9 : 10] It runs deep all the way from his very first moments on this earth in his mother's womb. It is a good lesson for us to remember that we cannot get clean if we are utterly dirty.

It is as if we are trying to clean ourselves up without a towel or a rag or with soap or water. You're full of mud.

You go like this. It's still there. It's on your hand. How do you clean it off? David here is recognizing that he can't clean it off. He needs help from the only one who can make him clean.

This is God. And that is why he is appealing to his mercy. This is what an honest, humble, and contrite heart looks like.

It is a non-excuse-making heart. And it is one that God readily accepts. David appeals to God because only God has the power to truly forgive.

[10 : 16] And what's the result? He experiences this deep-down forgiveness and cleansing. And it is external to himself. Look with me, verses 7 to 9. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean.

Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness. Let the bones that you have broken rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquities.

It seems like David is ordering God around, but in the original Hebrew, this is a humble confessing of sins, in a sense, while also affirming who God is.

Understanding that only God can do the cleansing. Only God can restore joy. Only God can truly blot out iniquities. David wants to be made right.

He wants to be clean. Not just to get the guilt away, but so he can enjoy God once more. When you have wronged somebody, and you've appealed to their mercy and sought their forgiveness, have you not waited, in a sense, with anticipation to hear the sweet words, I forgive you?

[11 : 31] And in a sense, until you hear those words, can joy truly come back? Now, I know sometimes when you truly seek out forgiveness from somebody and they don't grant it to you, in a sense, that's not on you.

You've truly sought out forgiveness. But when that person says, yes, I forgive you, what is the feeling that comes about in your heart? What is the weight lifted off of your shoulders?

I began the practice not too long ago, a few years ago. In the Christian calendar, there's two penitential seasons. We're in it, Lent, and then the other one is Advent, interestingly.

It's a preparatory season. Not as intense as Lent, but still understood as penitential. And the practice is to confess sins to God, but in the presence of another minister.

So I've done that. I've used the Ten Commandments. And going into it, I feel weighted down because I take time and I sit down and I take the Ten Commandments and I write out all of the things that I can remember that I've done according to the Ten Commandments.

[12 : 48] So, I mean, have I murdered somebody? No. Have I hated somebody? Have I held people in contempt? Yes. Have I committed adultery with my wife?

No. But have I been pure with my eyes and with my motives? Yes. And you kind of go through the Ten Commandments. You feel the weight of sin and then you confess it.

There's a bit of a liturgy, but really it ends with an absolution. That if you have truly repented of your sins, God has forgiven you.

And to hear the words of pardon. I tell you, you can talk to Christine about it. It's like I skip a little. I don't actually skip. I feel light. My heart is light.

The burden is removed. And it's important to confess our sins daily, weekly, monthly. You don't necessarily need seasons, but sometimes seasons work.

[13 : 48] And Lent, this is a wonderful opportunity for that. But case in point, when you are guilty and you are relieved of that guilt, do you not feel joy to some extent?

Reconciled with another person that you have been at odds with. And when that reconciliation doesn't happen, you feel the loss. The joy doesn't seem to be there.

David expresses a humble confession. He experiences a deep down forgiveness and cleansing resulting in true joy. And you think that's where this ends, but it doesn't.

For we see in verses 10 to 17 that more than forgiveness here is offered, but an experience of healing and restoration. Look with me, verses 10. We'll actually read all the way to 19.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.

[14 : 56] 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.

My tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I give it. You will not be pleased with a burnt offering.

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. Do good to Zion in your good pleasure. Build up the walls of Jerusalem.

Then you will delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings. Then bulls will be offered on your altar.

You know, only something broken can be made new. David's prayer is for God to not just forgive him, not just to restore joy, but to create and to clean and to renew.

[15 : 56] To start repairing what has been broken from sin. Because the reality is, sin will always take away. It will always damage. It will always hurt.

It will always prick. Being honest about our sin is a very vulnerable thing, but it is a beautiful thing.

Why? It will lead to healing. That's why self-justifying pride, having a spirit that is constantly self-justifying, it might push away the feelings of embarrassment, but it is drinking poison upon you.

It is making your soul dark and broken because you cannot receive the healing that comes with a humble and open and honest confession. The big difference between King David and King Saul, his predecessor, was just that.

A self-justifying spirit. For King Saul, he was blaming it on everybody except himself. And what does King David do? I have sinned against you, God. And what happens?

[17 : 08] He has healing and joy restored to him. To know God, to be in a right relationship with him in Jesus Christ, means to participate, in a sense, in the very Godhead.

To know that the love that the Father has for the Son and the Son has for the Father, and how that, in a sense, is expressed in and through and by the Holy Spirit, is something that we get to participate in because we are connected to Christ.

This is the ultimate form of restoration and deep healing, that we are united to Christ and get to enjoy his presence forever. Forgiveness results in this.

And the opposite is to run away from true freedom and light and spirit and joy. And this is why it is so important that as we, as Christians who are entering into this Lenten season, we have to remember that first and foremost, we enter into this Lenten season, on one hand, understanding that it's penitential, but more importantly, that it is a response.

It's a responsive season. That responds to the beautiful and costly gift of Christ on the cross. Because even though God extends his forgiveness to those that humbly confess their sins to him, his justice has to be satisfied.

[18 : 40] And on the cross, his justice Christ took our sin, and our brokenness, and our shame, and our guilt, and he paid the penalty for it. So how can we, in a sense, enter this Lenten season doing things that somehow would curry his favor?

We have it. And we have it in abundance. So then Lent becomes, in a sense, an expression of thankfulness to what God has already done in Christ Jesus.

And as we seek amendment of life, and we express contrition, that we, in a sense, grow ever closer to the God who has come ever closer to us.

Let's pray. Amen. Amen.