

Psalm 51 - Confessions, Part I: The Nature of Sin

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[0 : 0 0] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Those great words are from Psalm 51, David's psalm of confession that we sang earlier, as God be merciful to me. And the same psalm that we're going to be looking at together for the next three Sundays. It's going to be a short break from our study through the Gospel of Luke over these next three weeks to talk together about confession. We'll talk about the nature of sin, the heart of repentance, and the God of forgiveness as well over the next three weeks.

We're doing this for several reasons. One is that Luke is not the only book in the Bible, and we don't want you to forget that. That the Old Testament is also God's Word, and sometimes when you study through a particularly long book of the Bible, it's helpful along the way to take some breaks and expose your heart to other parts of God's Word. So this will be helpful in that. Another reason is that this is a time in the church calendar where we often spend some time considering our sin, our weakness, our need for Jesus' life and death and resurrection for us.

We're preparing to celebrate that at Easter, and so we consider our need for it as we lead up to that celebration. And to be honest, any time is a good time to consider sin and repentance and forgiveness because those are to be regular parts of all of our lives as followers of Christ.

One final reason that we're doing this now is that your session, the group of elders that you elected to lead, to shepherd this flock, has been wrestling for the last year and a half or so with our hearts before God. He's been showing us more of our own sin, more of his grace and forgiveness and teaching us what repentance looks like. Most of you know that several years ago, Southwood experienced a particularly difficult season of church conflict. One of the primary things that made that such a difficult season for us is that we as church leaders sinned deeply. We as church leaders failed to love God as we should. We failed to love our neighbor as God commands us to. Your church session failed to love others and failed to pursue reconciliation in a manner that was biblical and God dishonoring. As a result of those sins being a group that was called by God to represent him to his people and to this entire community. Instead, in many ways, we brought dishonor to his name. And as you can imagine, when godly leadership fails like that, and as we did, there are many people who are impacted by that. Many people who are hurt by that sin. Some of those dear brothers and sisters that we love are no longer a part of this congregation. Others of you are sitting right here this morning looking at me and you were hurt by our sin as well.

[4 : 0 6] And so we wanted all of you, whether you were here during that season or not, we wanted all of you to know that as a group, God has broken and continues to break our hearts over our sin. We've been as a group for some time in many different ways, confessing our sin to God and clinging to his forgiveness. You've heard previously, if you've been here several years, you've heard different people confess in different contexts, individuals confess sin from that season. But this confession is a corporate one from the session of Southwood.

We wanted all of you here during that time or not to know how sorry we are for our sin and to know that it's a chapter in the story of this church. And if you're a part of it, then a chapter in your story, it's not our favorite chapter. It's not one that you perhaps hear a lot of discussion about on a regular basis. And it's not one that defines who we are as a church. But it is a chapter in our story. And it's one that can show us more of God's glorious grace and faithfulness and teach us to depend more desperately on Jesus than we naturally do. It's something he's been teaching us.

We want you to have the opportunity to learn that along with us. It's also our heart in sharing this that anyone who is still confused, hurting, lacking resolution from this season in the life of the church would hear from us a warm invitation to talk more, to talk with us personally, that we could be in any way we possibly could a help, a part of the healing wherever we can. Now I'm sensitive to the fact that that's a weighty thing to throw at you during a sermon introduction. It's a weighty thing for me to say. It's been a weighty thing for us to wrestle with. But I want you to know some of our heart. I also want you to understand some of the context for what we're talking about here in this sermon series right up at the front as we look to God and His Word to teach us. We want to share with you some of what God's been teaching us, some of what He's been doing in our hearts. So we'll talk a little bit more about our confession and what we mean by that a little bit later. But for now let's pray. Let's ask God to teach us from His Word. Father, it's natural for there to be in our minds questions, confusion, noise in our heads that might prevent us from hearing well from You that would hinder our hearing of Your Word.

Father, there is sin in all of our hearts that this morning would distract us from hearing and hinder us from hearing Your Word. And so Father, what we all need is to hear from You. And we ask that You would speak clearly to us. Speak to our hearts. Holy Spirit, we're in different places. We come from different weeks. We come from different experiences of our own sin and of Your grace. And we need You to speak to our hearts through Your Word. We ask that You would do it for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Psalm 51. We'll read the first five verses. This is the Word of God. Psalm 51.

[9 : 05] Psalm 51.

Psalm 51.

Psalm 51.

comes before God. He thinks about His sins. He thinks about His sins, the specific ways in which He has violated God's holy law. And He uses even several different words for them. You may have noticed in this particular psalm alone. We translate them things like sin, transgressions, iniquities, doing evil.

Here in verse 3. Here in verse 3. David is what he's talking about the words he's using here. He's confessing these particular thoughts and actions. And the pictures, the words he's using here. And the pictures, the words he gives are that his sin has built up a great debt for him in the ledger, so to speak, of his account.

[11 : 17] Another word references that his sin is dirt that clings to him really tightly and is very difficult to wash off. He's dirty from his sin. And David feels this, doesn't he?

I know my sin. I know my sin. I know my sin. I know my sin. I know my sin is ever before me. This is how I feel before you, God. He's begun to see his sin for what it really is. But it's important for us to ask, has David just become dirty or indebted because of his mistakes?

Or was he dirty and in debt and so made some mistakes? In other words, is David a sinner because he committed sin?

Or does he commit sin because he is a sinner? He answers these questions clearly in verse 5. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity. And in sin did my mother conceive me. Sinful from birth. Sinful even from conception.

Not only is David a person at conception, he's a sinner. From the moment he was conceived, David says, this is my nature.

[12 : 42] I was born self-focused with a heart, mind, and will broken and bent against God. We call that original sin. That's the theological term. Original sin that all of us descended from Adam, David included, you included, me included.

All of us have a sinful nature. We're not born perfect the way God originally created. So the question of, am I a sinner because I commit sin? Or do I commit sin because I am a sinner?

Is not just some silly chicken or egg kind of question that really makes no difference. It matters deeply. It matters not because David is trying to excuse his sin, to blame it on that old sinful nature, so it's not really his fault.

That's just the way that I am. No, that's not the point. Rather, it matters because we often try to excuse our sin, our sinful words or actions, by saying, well, that's really not the way I am.

That's not really me. I know that sounded very prideful, but I'm not really like that. I know it looked like I have an anger problem, but really I'm quite a good person.

[14 : 17] That was an aberration. That's not like me. I'm a very good person when you get to know me. Except that we're not. We're not naturally good people.

But we often function that way, don't we? To my shame, I have spent a lot of time trying to convince my wife that I'm a really good husband who just did something totally inexplicable.

When the reality is I'm a broken husband who just did something inexcusable, but not entirely unexpected.

I need to deal with my heart, not merely just clean up my out-of-character actions that happen occasionally. In his first inauguration address, former President Bill Clinton said, there is nothing wrong with America that cannot be cured by what is right with America.

That's a nice sentiment. A nice, hopeful, positive thing to say about your country. And my point is not at all a social or political one this morning.

[15 : 31] But rather, I know I tend to feel that way about myself personally. That really, if you just get to know me, there's nothing wrong with Will that can't be cured by what's right with Will.

Just hang around long enough, you'll see what a great guy I am. I'll fix it. I'll balance the scales. I'll make up for it. It was just a little mistake after all, and I'm good enough to clean it up.

I'm quite sure. I'll do it differently next time. That's no problem. I'm capable of that. God's Word is reminding us this morning that that is not the case at all.

We need outside help. We are so deeply sinful at our core. When we sin, that's not so shocking as it is us being exactly who we are broken by nature.

David sees the depth of his sin. That his sins are not merely outward violations of God's law, although they are that. But that the sinful actions flow from a sinful man with a sinful heart.

[16 : 42] Do you see why that difference matters when we begin to face the depth of our sin, when we're actually dealing with the things that we've done? It pushes us to see what truly needs to be repented of, what needs to be forgiven.

It's not merely a surface issue, something that is easy to see. In fact, the iceberg underneath is probably a much bigger issue. For instance, in regard to this particular confession we're communicating to you about today, it means you don't have a pastor who messed up.

You have a messed up pastor. And I say that not to be cute or funny, but rather because it's true.

And because we've got to remember that reality of who we are, who I am. We as a church must remember that's true. If that's true, I need to repent, not merely of missteps and mistakes I've made, but of my heart attitudes beyond my actions.

If that's true, then your session is capable of sinning deeply again. And you need to be praying that God would protect us from that.

[18 : 03] Because we're not just really great guys 99% of the time who messed up once a few years ago. But rather broken people. If that's true, then we are married to sinners.

We work with sinners. We parent sinners. We worship with other sinners. And so we need to expect that we need God a lot.

We must trust Him more than we trust our pastor. More than we trust anyone in any of our relationships. We have to trust Him as wholly reliable.

Our sinful nature is not just active from birth. It also loves to keep fighting against us, doesn't it? Even after Jesus rescues us, it loves to fight back.

So that's the first thing about the nature of sin here. Sinful actions flow from sinful hearts. But the other thing that's so important for us to see here is that our sinful nature that we have stands in stark contrast to God's holy nature.

[19 : 16] And this is the real issue with our sin. This is the problem. Look at verse 4. David says, Now, stop and think for a second.

Can you make a pretty good list of the people impacted by David's sin? Remember the context of this psalm, right? Who all has been hurt by David's sin?

I mean, you can start with Bathsheba herself who's been violated deeply. You can add Uriah who's now dead as a result of David's sin.

Think about David's family that is thrown into tumult and suffers the effects of this for years and for generations. The entire nation of Israel who's looking to their king to be godly leadership that points them to follow after God.

And what are they finding from their king? And yet, with all of that being true, David says to God, Against you, you only, have I sinned.

[20 : 38] What is he thinking? Could he really be right? What he's teaching us is the nature of sin is that all sin is first and foremost against God.

And it's against God in a completely different way than it is against anyone else. You see how David looks to God's holy character? That you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.

God's utter righteousness, his perfect justice are highlighted. David says he's holy, holy, holy. And we're not.

And this is the glorious God against whom our seemingly smallest sin because of his holiness is an odious, treasonous offense.

One of my favorite prayers from the Valley of Vision includes this section. Let me never forget that the heinousness of sin, how awful it is, how terrible my sin is, lies not so much in the nature of the sin committed as in the greatness of the person sinned against.

[21 : 59] How bad my sin is, the level to which its offense rises is measured by God's greatness, his holiness and perfection.

It makes our little white lies and momentary lusts and careless words loom a lot bigger all of a sudden, doesn't it?

You see, we forget this so easily. We so easily engage with our sin merely in terms of others harmed or in how others are going to think of us.

How badly is it going to reflect on me when someone knows about this? If they find out, what will they think? And we miss the real issue that's going on and even the smallest sin that our heart is rebelling against the King, the one who created us, the one who loves us, the one who designed us and we're rejecting his good design.

This is probably the aspect of our sin that God has most deeply impressed upon the hearts of the session in the last several months. If you're a people pleaser at all like me, then when you have sinned and other people have been deeply hurt, when people you love deeply have been impacted by your sin, it's very difficult to consider the weight of your sin without seeing faces and stories when you think of how awful your sin is.

[23 : 44] You immediately think of his angst and her tears and their relationship. And your sin feels heavy.

And we as a session focused a lot there because as I said, many people we love were hurt by our sin. But it was only when we realized this, the nature of our sin against God that the true weight of it really began to settle in when we considered first and foremost on a unique level our sin was against the name of Christ and the glory of God.

He was the great one against whom we had sinned. So, Will, are you saying you just stopped caring about those people and how they felt when you realized that?

Is that what David is saying? Is that what this means? No. Actually, understanding this part of the nature of sin increases the gravity of my sin against another person.

Not diminishes it. Let me see if I can explain what I mean. when I sin thought word deed whatever it is it is the law of God that I am first and foremost violating.

[25 : 13] The way He has created me to live reflecting His image in true holiness. And then when others are involved when they're impacted my sin against someone else is always grievous first and foremost because of how I'm mistreating the image of God in them.

So when you run someone down behind her back the size of your sin the weight of your sin the seriousness of your sin is measured not so much by whether she finds out or by how hurt she is and how much damage you've done to her reputation rather the severity of it is measured by the image of God in her that you defamed when you violated God's law.

when an elder neglects or misleads one of Christ's sheep a precious lamb created in His image and purchased with the blood of His Son it is that reality that makes the sin so awful that drives us to desperate confession temptation oh we care about the one who's been hurt because of God's care for them you see you're still heartbroken over the harm you did to another but it's not just sad that they caught you or sorry that they feel frustrated with you but rather grieved that you did violence to the image of God in them or that you denigrated someone that God values and treasures that's where our sin gets weighty

John Calvin said what David meant in verse 4 against you and you only have I sinned is that God Himself was the holy and righteous judge David was facing Calvin wrote the voice of man could administer no relief to him however much that man might be disposed to forgive or to excuse or to flatter he stood guilty before the one ultimately in charge the one who created and owned him regardless of what men knew about or felt about it against you you only have I sinned I don't know if you can see or feel it this morning but maybe as you reflect you'll begin to see how that reality can turn your stomach at sins that you otherwise might have only given a passing thought because because you haven't seen much damage but all of a sudden you see a holy

God against whom you have sinned David knew well that he could not walk into the presence of this holy God without a sacrifice for his sins even on a good day for King David that the sacrificial system in the nation of Israel reminded him that by nature he could not get near the place where God lived in the holiest part of the temple where God had taken up residence among his people David couldn't get near there even on a good day he certainly could not approach without a sacrifice right much less after adultery and murder and that's the reality that brings him to his knees so to speak in this prayer of confession have mercy on me oh God my sinfulness and my sins are utterly repugnant to your holiness you are righteous you are just nothing you could do to me would be an overreaction in response to my sin that's what

[29 : 33] David's saying in these words God you couldn't possibly be unfair no matter what you did to me and this is David's problem right God is the only one who can truly forgive him for who he is and what he's done the one owed the debt is the only one who can forgive it right we know this if I owe Peter a hundred dollars you can't come walking up to me right now and say don't worry about anymore let me forgive that debt for you if I punch James in the face you can't come running up here and say well I forgive you for that don't worry about it no he must forgive the one who's owed the debt must be the one who forgives it and when I transgress God's law when I mar his image when I mistreat someone or something that he made he is the only one who can forgive me and so

I'm stuck David's stuck why what do we both know about God God's just David says it God must punish sin even if it carries to the third or fourth generation in order to see the debt repaid right God's told him that about himself when he introduced himself to his people so David has a problem and you and I have a problem and God has a solution we'll talk about it more the next couple of weeks but here's the heart of it Romans chapter 3 God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of his blood to be received by faith he did this why was it that God had to send his son he did this to demonstrate his righteousness that he's righteous and just because in his forbearance he left sins committed beforehand unpunished and God can't do that forever he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in

Jesus my sins rightly deserve death my blood deserved to be shed the just God had to meet out the death penalty that my sins had deserved but Jesus shed his blood in my place so that God could remain just and punish sin and at the same time and this is amazing the just and holy God could stay just and I could stand before him justified embraced by him how because my sin had been given to another a sinner by nature and by action finds himself covered by the blood of another by the sacrifice of the son of God covered in his shed blood and his perfect righteousness

God is both just and the one who justifies those who hide themselves in Jesus who have faith in Jesus so in his day David would place his hands on a lamb confess his sins watch it die in his place as a picture of the lamb of God who would come to be the full and final sacrifice for sins and just as David placed his hands on that lamb we now lay hold of Jesus sacrificed on the cross for us and we find as we do that the only one who can truly and fully forgive us has already done so he's forgiven messed up pastors sinful sessions and struggling sinners because that's who he is and that's how great his love is let's pray father that there is any hope for us is a miracle of your grace and kindness to us and we thank you for it we are grateful that that hope allows us to look at our sin honestly so even as we confess our sin this morning even as we grieve over it we look to you and we depend upon you and we even rejoice through tears that you love us because of

Jesus we thank you for that in his name amen as some of our elders come forward and two of our ruling elders Skeet Simonis and Alan Judge are going to speak to you just briefly this morning good morning I am Skeet Simonis and I do serve as one of your elders here at Southwood and I've been asked on behalf of the session to come and speak to you for a few minutes I'd like to begin my remarks by reading a statement from your Southwood session a few years ago our church endured a season of conflict that impacted many people both in our own congregation and in the broader Huntsville community during this season in particular we corporately as church leaders failed to love as God has called us to and sinned against the name of

[35 : 57] God the church in general and many brothers and sisters we care for deeply rather than focusing on the glory of God and our own sin we focused on our own agendas and others sin in our zeal for being right and defending ourselves in our positions we neglected to love well spoke harshly to some overlooked the concern of others and so wounded many we are sorrowful over our sins and in particular we grieve the dishonor they cause to the name of Christ and then the pain they cause to others we desire to humbly repent to and be a part of healing for anyone still struggling with the consequences of our sin we acknowledge that we do not know all the ways that our sin hurt and continues to hurt some but the heart of our session is to listen to to learn from and to aid in the healing process for everyone we can we are grateful for God's continued mercy upon us and upon

Southwood as well as for his faithfulness to work through and in spite of us to see his kingdom advance you may be asking yourself so why is the session doing this our answer is that God has moved in the hearts of the elders who currently serve on the session and convicted us of the need to repent even though it's been about five years since so many left our church as a result of conflict we know that there are some here at Southwood and some in other places who are still struggling with the consequences of our sin as a result as Will mentioned earlier we began to discuss this about a year and a half ago since that time God has used our discussions his word prayer fasting and his Holy Spirit to bring us to this conclusion but before we communicated anything publicly we wanted God to deal with our own hearts as individuals on the session although that certainly is an ongoing process we feel like we have reached the point to publicly confess our sin and humbly we ask the forgiveness of those who we've sinned against you also may be asking yourself why communicate about this publicly it is typically appropriate that the repentance over sin be as public as the sin committed our corporate sin impacted not only the congregation of Southwood but also the broader

Huntsville community we want others to know of the repentance that God has worked in our own hearts and for him to be praised because of that work we also want those who are impacted by our sin to know that we desire healing and reconciliation so as I read in the statement from the session we as your church leaders fail to love as God has called us to love thus we sinned against God himself the church in general and our brothers and sisters who are in our church please understand that we are repenting over our attitudes and our actions we are not trying to make any kind of statement for or against either side on any issue in the conflict that our church experienced we are seeking to follow God's leading as we trust him to continue to bring healing in our own hearts and in the hearts of those who we love and care for so we wanted to share our heart as a session with you the members of our congregation first since our church split is part of the story of God's work here at Southwood this week we will begin meeting with some of those who were here during the conflict and who are no longer part of our congregation we want you to know that we are eager to speak with anyone about the nature of our sin the pain it caused to others and our desire for reconciliation so please contact us with your questions and feedback feel free to call any one of your elders or send us an email our email addresses are listed on the

Southwood tower and several of your elders are seated down here in the front rows and we would be glad to talk with you about this after today's service now my brother Alan Judge will pray for us before I pray I'm going to pray I want you to pray with me but I want to address a couple of things one there are many sitting here who have no idea really what we're even talking about or you know this is you came since that time and only have vague references of it and there are others who are sitting here saying I didn't do anything wrong why would I confess or why would I be a part of this as I pray I want to encourage you if you're sitting here this morning and you know that you have been wronged and you know that you feel in your heart that you didn't do anything to justify that wrong but because of that you have allowed yourself you have justified in your own mind of treating someone not like you should treat them of not loving them

I'm treating them the way you think the wrong deserves to be treated then this confession is for you too so as I pray pray with me oh most merciful loving God our Lord Savior and Father we have sinned against you and done what is evil in your sight we who were dead in our sin who formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind who were by nature children of wrath but you oh merciful God because of your great love with which you loved us even when we were dead in our transgressions made us alive together with

[42 : 56] Christ and raised us up with him seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus all of this being a gift of God for by grace we have been saved so that we have no reason to boast in anything that we have done indeed our only boast is in the life death and resurrection of Christ Jesus the author and finisher of our faith having been thus called and saved by the grace because of the great love of God toward us sinners we have been called to set our mind on things above and not on earthly things to die to ourselves to be alive to Christ and thus live in the same grace and love toward one another that we have been shown we have been called to put aside anger wrath malice slander and abusive speech from our mouths and put on a heart of compassion kindness humility gentleness and patience bearing with one another and forgiving each other just as the

Lord in Christ forgave us and beyond these things we are to put on love which is the perfect bond of unity oh Lord we have failed in every regard to do what you have called us to do but most importantly we have failed to put on love even though Jesus told us that the law and the prophets are summed up in this that we are to love God and love our neighbor and then demonstrated for us that we show our love for God by loving our neighbor yet we have failed we have sinned against you oh dear Lord hear us have mercy on us and forgive us save us from ourselves again and even despite our failures glorify your name give us the grace to love and fully surrender to you that you would love through us with the same love with which you have loved us we pray this knowing your faithful in

Christ's name amen amen thank for more information visit us online at southwood.org I go I not ■ I have seen me