

Sermon for March 5, 2025 – Ash Wednesday

Psalm 51:Intr–2 EHV

Theme: **Recognize our Need to Repent**

- 1) God confronts our sin and
- 2) Leads us to trust His promised mercy.

*For the choir director. A psalm by David. When Nathan the prophet came to him after he had gone to Bathsheba. <sup>1</sup> Be gracious to me, God, according to your mercy. Erase my acts of rebellion according to the greatness of your compassion. <sup>2</sup> Scrub me clean from my guilt. Purify me from my sin.*

In the book titled “The Anatomy of Peace,” the author argues that whenever we feel the need to justify our actions to ourselves, we are likely in the wrong. Why? Because doing the right thing doesn’t require justification.

The author makes a valid point. I never feel the need to justify my actions that align with God’s law, such as loving my spouse, reading my Bible, supporting my family, helping my neighbours, attending church, or praying to Jesus. No, it’s only when my conscience warns me of actions that may contradict God’s law that I try to rationalize them with thoughts like, “I had no choice given the circumstances.” “What I’ve done isn’t as bad as what so-and-so did!” “Everyone else does it, so it must not be a big deal.” “I should be able to do whatever feels right for me.”

Yes, our sinful nature loves rationalizing our sin away, convincing ourselves that we don’t need to repent. But such thinking leaves us in a perilous place. How so? Think of it this way, I can rationalize a strange lump on my body away as insignificant because I feel healthy. But no amount of self-rationalization will save me from death if that lump is terminal cancer. I need a doctor to diagnose the lump as serious and provide treatment.

Similarly, reasoning away our sins won’t prevent them from spiritually killing us. No, all sin needs to be addressed and removed if we want to continue living in God’s grace. Therefore, with the opening sentences of Psalm 51 as our guide, let us learn the importance of **recognizing our need to repent!** 1) God confronts our sins, and 2) leads us to trust in His promised mercy.

Part One: God confronts our sin.

Our devotion text begins with the heading of Psalm 51, which was part of the original Hebrew text. It reads: *For the choir director. A psalm by David. When Nathan the prophet came to him after he had gone to Bathsheba.*

You can read a detailed account of David’s sin and its aftermath in 2 Samuel 11 and 12. However, let me summarize the situation for you. One day, while King David was staying in Jerusalem instead of leading his army on the frontlines, he noticed from his palace rooftop the beautiful

Bathsheba taking a bath. Despite her being married to one of his most loyal soldiers, he committed adultery with her. I can imagine him rationalizing his sin with thoughts like, “No one will know, and she’s so beautiful. If she’s okay with it, what’s the harm?”

However, the news came that she was pregnant. So, what did David do? Did he repent and ask God for forgiveness? No, he rationalized ways to cover up his sin. He called Uriah back from the front so he could “spend time” with his wife.

But, out of loyalty to the king’s troops who couldn’t sleep with their wives, Uriah refused to sleep with his wife. I wonder if that didn’t sting David’s conscience a bit because he was supposed to be in the field too, leading his troops and not sleeping with their wives.

Instead of listening to his conscience calling him to repent, David devised a way to “get rid” of the Uriah problem. He sent a secret message to Joab, instructing him to send Uriah to the area of fiercest fighting and then withdraw from him so that he would be killed. Why would David do that? I could imagine him justifying his decision by thinking it would protect Bathsheba’s life (since adultery was punishable by death) and the kingdom from great scandal.

Not long after Uriah’s death, David took Bathsheba as his wife. I can picture David going on with life as if nothing had happened – outwardly worshipping the LORD and convincing himself that he was right with God. However, the reality was vastly different. By rationalizing away his sins instead of repenting of them, David had separated himself from God’s grace. He lost his faith and was in danger of going to hell.

God didn’t want David to die in impenitence and unbelief. That’s why He sent the prophet Nathan to confront him with his sin. Nathan’s rebuke struck David so deeply that he immediately repented. No more rationalizing, blaming, hiding, or excusing himself. Instead, he simply confessed, “I have sinned.”

In God’s place and by His command, Nathan forgave David’s sin. Even though he would have to endure some earthly consequences of his sin, David could nonetheless know that he was at peace with God.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, as I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon, we are all tempted to rationalize our sins away instead of repenting of them. When we do that, we endanger our souls. We may even go through the motions of worship and convince ourselves that we are right with God, but the truth is, we aren’t.

Impenitence always separates us from God’s grace. That’s why God sends His servants, such as pastors, elders, and concerned Christian family members and friends, to confront our sins with His law. Unfortunately, our natural reaction is to deny, deflect, or get upset with those who confront our sin. However, it’s important to remember that these individuals are God’s servants acting under His command. They are acting out of love—God’s love. He doesn’t want you to go to hell; He wants you to repent, trust in His mercy, and find peace in His forgiveness.

Recognize your need to repent. God confronts your sin to break you free from the false belief that nothing is wrong. He wants you to repent of your sins instead of rationalizing them away. Why? So that you can be restored by His grace and trust in His promised mercy to forgive you.

Part Two: Let us trust His promised mercy to forgive.

David trusted in God's mercy, despite the gravity of His sins. That is why he could pray: <sup>1</sup> *Be gracious to me, God, according to your mercy.*

Grace is undeserved kindness and love. David wanted God to show him that forgiving love. Why? Not because he felt like he was a good person who had made a minor mistake or could earn God's love in the future. No, David asked God to be gracious to him solely for His mercy's sake.

Throughout history, the Lord has shown Himself merciful to undeserving sinners. For instance, after confronting Adam and Eve with their sin, God cursed the devil and promised a Saviour. When the Lord allowed Moses to catch a glimpse of His glory after Israel worshipped the golden calf at Mount Sinai, He revealed Himself as *"The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, and overflowing with mercy and truth, <sup>7</sup>maintaining mercy for thousands, forgiving guilt and rebellion and sin."* (Exodus 34:6-7).

Even though the LORD is perfectly just and punishes sinners, as the verse I quoted from Exodus goes on to say, *"He will by no means clear the guilty,"* He nevertheless mercifully forgives all who repent. But how is this possible? How can God be both just and merciful—punishing and forgiving sin simultaneously? The answer lies in Jesus.

God the Father loved us so much that he asked His Son to win our salvation. How? By becoming like us in every way so that He could serve as our substitute. Where we failed at keeping God's law, Jesus succeeded. Even though He was tempted in every way, just as we are, He remained sinless - winning for us the righteousness we need to stand before God. Moreover, He took our sins upon Himself and went to the cross to pay for them all. He suffered and died in our place. His resurrection proves that God the Father accepted His Son's sacrifice on our behalf.

David eagerly anticipated the day when God's promised Saviour would come to atone for the sins of the world. Trusting in God's mercy, he boldly asked: *Erase my acts of rebellion according to the greatness of your compassion. <sup>2</sup> Scrub me clean from my guilt. Purify me from my sin.*

The three words David uses to describe sin add depth to his confession. He missed the mark when he coveted Bathsheba, slept with her, murdered her husband, and attempted to cover it all up. All these actions were acts of rebellion against God that he could not excuse away. He was guilty and had no power to change that. But God could.

That is why He asks God to erase his rebellion from his record, remove the guilt that stained his soul, and purify him from his sins. However, what detergent could accomplish such a task? Soap

might clean his body and bleach remove stains from his clothes, but what purifies the soul? Only the blood of Christ crucified, to which all the animals sacrificed on the temple's altar pointed.

Relying on God's promise of a Saviour, David boldly asked Him to mercifully purify him from sin, a task only God could undertake. The Lord was delighted to grant this request, as evident from Nathan's first words after David's repentance: "*The LORD himself has put away your sin. You will not die.*" (2 Samuel 12:13 EHV).

Although David and Bathsheba's sin would have earthly consequences, such as the death of their child and trouble in David's household, these consequences would not be considered punishment. Instead, they would serve as disciplinary training – moving David to cling even more tightly to God's promises in repentance and faith. God would use those earthly consequences for David's everlasting good, ensuring that he never loses the forgiveness, mercy, and peace that God graciously bestowed upon him.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, God wants you to recognize your need to repent so that, like David, you will be moved to trust in His promise to forgive. Confess to the LORD your sins, rebellion and guilt. Don't hold back, worried that God won't forgive you. He already knows the truth but wants you to confess it for your sake: so that you are not self-deceived by your sinful nature that wants to rationalize your sin away instead of repenting. Confess everything, trusting in the LORD's mercy to forgive you. And He will. Why? Because Jesus shed His blood on the cross in payment for all sin. Not only that, but God adopted you as His child through baptism, cleansing you from sins, awakening faith in your heart, and clothing you in Christ's righteousness. He sealed you with His Spirit.

Yes, do not ignore God's servants when they confront you with your sins. Repent, trusting in God's promised mercy to forgive you. Then live to His glory in the peace of His forgiving grace. Amen.