

PSALM 51—SIN, FORGIVENESS, AND WHOLENESS

INTRO: Every one of us commits moral failures. Not just “mistakes.” That’s the way we try to minimize what we’ve done: “I made a mistake” or “fell into sin.” As if, when you committed adultery, you just sort of accidentally stumbled and fell and happened to land, naked, in a bed, with someone who wasn’t your spouse.

No. We all have, and probably in future will, intentionally decide to do what we know we shouldn’t do, what we know is wrong. And we do it because we get an immediate payoff that we want. Obviously, illicit sex has a physical, pleasure payoff. If you steal something, you’ve now got the thing you wanted.

But our moral failures go way beyond these obvious, garden variety sins. For example, Francis Spufford, in his book *Unapologetic*, says, **“There are remarks that end marriage, and very often what makes them so decisively poisonous is that they’re chosen to seem perfectly innocent and ordinary when uttered in public, no big deal, deniable, yet touch deliberately on a pain which only intimacy could know.”**

And then, there are the so-called “victimless” sins. Let me give you a few statistics I recently came across. Various sources that seem to know what they are talking about say that Pornhub, the largest pornography website on the internet, had 28.5 billion visits in 2017 alone. One source says that 1 of 3 visitors to all adult websites is a woman. A Christian professor says that 47% of Christians in one study said that pornography is a major problem in the home. And according to research conducted by Proven Men Ministries, 64% of U.S. men admit to viewing porn at least monthly, with the number of *Christian* men nearly equaling the national average. Yes, it is possible to occasionally unintentionally come across pornographic images on the internet, but not 28.5 billion times.

So what happens when we sin? Is there any hope? How can we get free? **Psalm 51** directly deals with these issues. It is a psalm of David, and the introduction tells us that the context of the psalm is when Nathan the prophet confronted David after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba. You may know the story from **2 Samuel 11-12**: When David should have been leading his army in battle, he stayed home. One night, he was on the roof of his palace and saw a beautiful woman bathing. David, of course, was married, but he wanted her. He was told who she was. Bathsheba was, in fact, married to one of David’s own 37 “mighty men” listed in **2 Samuel 23** and also was the daughter of one of those “mighty men.” But that didn’t stop him. He had some men get her, bring her to the palace, and then he slept with her. She became pregnant, so he tried various schemes to try to cover up what he had done, and ultimately had Bathsheba’s husband murdered.

Not a pretty chain of events. If anyone is guilty of gross, intentional moral sins, it is David. Why this psalm is so important is that, if there is hope for David, then there is hope for us. **[Read]**

PROP: In God’s covenant love we will find complete, transforming, forgiveness.

O/S: This psalm really is quite comprehensive in its scope, so I will touch on 5 aspects of God and us, sin and forgiveness, with which **Psalm 51** deals: (1) God’s attitude toward us; (2) our own mind, heart, and nature as sinners; (3) the nature of God’s forgiveness; (4) the practical effects of God’s forgiveness; and (5) the communal aspect of our life before God.

I. God’s attitude toward us.

We see God’s attitude toward us particularly in vv. 6, 16-17 [READ]. **v.16** in essence is saying that we try to appease God if not bribe him by doing outward things. In David’s day it was making offerings and sacrifices. In our day it’s doing certain good deeds, or performing certain religious rituals, or giving money to certain charitable causes. But in **v.17** God is saying, **“I see through all that.”** Not that there’s anything wrong in doing good deeds or supporting charitable causes, but the question is: Why do we do those things? Is it to try to earn points with God? To look good? To assuage our consciences because of bad things we’ve done? There are all kinds of motives for doing good deeds, and God sees them all. **[KAMPALA BEGGER]** Remember what **1 Sam 16:7** says: **“Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”** Why is that important? It’s important because what we are talking about is: What is our real relationship with God?

God loves the world. He longs to be in a real, loving relationship with us, his creatures. He knows what is best for us, since he made us. And he came to earth in the person of Jesus Christ not only to show us how to live whole and fulfilling lives and be in real, loving relationship with Him but to enable us to do that. He is the key. That’s why it says in Romans that the whole point of our lives is to **“become conformed to the image of Jesus Christ.”** And that is why **v.6** of our psalm says, **Behold, You [God] desire truth in the innermost being**—because Jesus said, **“I am the truth (and the way and the life).”** To be in real, loving relationship with God means no pretenses. It means that we recognize who he is and love him for who he is and love his ways and values and priorities as our own.

But we have a problem. That problem is our sin. So we need to consider:

II. Our own mind, heart, and nature as sinners.

vv.3-5 give us the picture of ourselves as sinful people [READ]. Let me look at these in reverse order. **v.5** is not saying that sex is wrong or sinful. It is telling us that, from the time we were conceived, every human being has the power of indwelling sin as an inherent part of our very nature. Paul talks about this at some length in **Romans 7**. This power of sin in us warps us. It causes us to focus our whole lives on ourselves rather than on the God who made us and sustains us and loves us. And this power of indwelling sin causes us to commit all the specific moral failures and sins that we do: the lying, the cheating, the coveting, and everything else.

The result is found in v.4 which says, **“Against you, you only, have I sinned.”** When David committed adultery with Bathsheba he was of course sinning against her, against her husband, and against his own wives. But what **v.4** is telling us is that every sin, every wrong we do, ultimately is against God—because He made us; He made us for himself. Our lives are constantly lived in his presence and by his grace. The question is: Do we recognize that?

If we believe in God, then of course in some intellectual sense we understand that we are always in his presence. And if we are a Christian, then we understand that, not only are we always in his presence, but he has given us a new heart, a new life, the mind of Christ, and the Holy Spirit who is actually living inside of us. And if that was truly filling our hearts, minds, and souls all the time, how could we possibly sin against him? Yet we do! It’s incredible. It’s like recognizing how grateful we are for the tremendous favor he shows to us—and then turning around and spitting in his face. *That* is what makes all sin—particularly the sins of people who call themselves Christians—so heinous.

That’s where v.3 comes in. **v.3** says [READ]. **v.5** described our *objective* condition as people indwelt with the power of sin; **v.4** described the ultimate wronged party for every sin we commit, namely, God; but **v.3** talks about a person’s *subjective* feelings. This is very important. What David is saying is that, even though he tried to cover up his terrible sins and thought he had gotten away with it, what he had done in fact was eating him up inside. That is one reason, I think, why David is called **“a man after God’s own heart”**—because his own heart had not become so hard and callused but was still constantly torn up by his sin.

And that is key for us. When you sin, what is your response? Do you try to minimize it (“I made a mistake”). Do you try to justify it or rationalize it? If that is the case, don’t expect forgiveness. Or is your sin ever before you? Remember **v. 17** [READ]. That leads us to:

III. The nature of God’s forgiveness.

This psalm is David’s plea to God. Yet the things he is pleading for in **vv.1, 2, 7, 9,** and **11** reveal the nature of God’s forgiveness. The basis of God’s forgiveness—from which everything else flows—is found in **v.1**: **“Be gracious to me, O God, according to your lovingkindness.”** The ESV translates it as **“according to your steadfast love.”**

The word translated “lovingkindness” or “steadfast love” is the Hebrew word *hesed*. It is an extremely important idea, found about 200 times in the OT. About 3/4 of the times *hesed* is used, it applies to God’s acts toward people; but the concept also applies among people themselves. *Hesed* is based on a deep and abiding covenantal relationship—God’s covenant with mankind, or a human covenant such as marriage. *Hesed* is the expression of covenantal loyalty, faithfulness, kindness, mercy, goodness, love, and compassion. It is fundamentally an action, not an emotion (although it includes emotion). In performing *hesed*, a person voluntarily acts to relieve an urgent, essential need of someone else.

When David cries out in v.1 “be gracious to me, O God, according to your *hesed*,” he is acknowledging that God was in a special covenant relationship with Israel and that he, as an individual, was part of that special relationship. He was crying out to be restored to a right relationship with God and, for that matter, with his fellow Israelites. All the other aspects of God’s forgiveness, found in **vv.1, 2, 7, 9,** and **11**, indicate what that restoration looks like. For example:

- Sin creates a record against us, but **vv.1b** and **9** indicate that God’s forgiveness “blots out” or obliterates that record against us. It’s sort of like, in the legal system when the record of a crime you may have committed as a minor is expunged. And **v.9** goes further. It indicates that God doesn’t “hide his face” from you, the sinner, but he “hides his face” from your sins!
- Sin makes us dirty, but **vv.2** and **7** indicate that God’s forgiveness makes us clean, “whiter than snow.” It’s like the apostle John says in **1 John 1:9**: **“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”**
- Sin makes us impure, but **v.7** indicates that God’s forgiveness restores us to a state of purity.
- And in **v.11** David cried [READ]. He knew that sin fractures a relationship, but God’s forgiveness

restores that relationship.

All of those aspects of God's forgiveness and restoration apply to us today if we are in a covenantal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. In fact, in Jesus Christ all of those aspects of God's forgiveness apply with even greater force and effect than they did in David's context. Why? Because if you are connected with Jesus Christ by faith, then you are in the New Covenant, not the Old Covenant. That is why **1 John 1:9** says, **"If we confess our sins, He is faithful AND JUST to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."** IOW, in the New Covenant God does not forgive us just as a matter of mercy—but he forgives us as a matter of *justice*! Why? Because Jesus Christ already bore our sins, and paid the price for those sins, on the cross. Therefore, it would be unjust to require that those sins be paid for a second time by us. That would denigrate everything that Jesus came to do.

Additionally, in the New Covenant, Jesus said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." Therefore, if you are in Christ, you should never have the fear that David expressed in **v.11** when he cried [READ]. Jesus promised not only to give us his Spirit but to *seal* us with his Spirit **"for the day of redemption"** as it says in **Eph 4:30**. You could not be more secure than the security you have in Christ.

When you confess your sins, then believe God's Word which says that "He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Some people say, "Yes, I know that God has forgiven me, but I can't forgive myself." Really? Think about this. Yes, I know what I am like inside, and I know I don't deserve forgiveness. No one *deserves* forgiveness. We don't earn it. It's an act of loving grace. And if God has forgiven you, who do you think you are to *not* forgive yourself? That attitude may sound pious, but really, if you say that, you are putting yourself *above God* who *has* forgiven you. If anything, you are now adding the sin of pride to your other sins! But this leads us to:

IV. The practical effects of God's forgiveness.

In fact, it is the practical effects of forgiveness which both show us whether that forgiveness is real and put us on the path to a transformed life of wholeness. What do I mean?

First, we saw in v.1 that God's forgiveness is based on his covenantal relationship with his people—the concept of *hesed*. That is important because, since God's people are the recipients of God's *hesed*, God's people are therefore expected to manifest *hesed* toward others. We see this all over the Bible. Let me give just two examples. In **Gal 6:2**, Paul says, **"Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ."** The "law of Christ," as Jesus put it, is to **"Love one another, even as I have loved you; by this will all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."** Taking others' burdens onto yourself—physically, financially, investment of your time—is a practical expression of love for one another. It is the practical expression of *hesed*, namely, covenantal loyalty, faithfulness, kindness, mercy, goodness, love, and compassion.

The second example directly relates to forgiveness itself. In the Lord's prayer, it says, **"Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors."** That is the only verse from the Lord's prayer that Jesus specifically commented on. In **Matt 6:15** he said, **"If you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions."** Remember **v.17** of our psalm which says, **"A broken and a contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."** D. A. Carson explains why our forgiveness of others is so intimately linked with God's forgiveness of us. He says, **"People [who] are so hardened in their own bitterness that they cannot or will not forgive others . . . display no brokenness, no contrition, no recognition of the great value of forgiveness, no understanding of their own complicity in sin, no repentance."** IOW, to not forgive others is one of the clearest signs that we don't understand Jesus Christ at all and are not a member of his covenant community. On the other hand, to be a forgiver is one of the clearest signs that we are, in fact, becoming **"conformed to the image of Jesus Christ."**

If you have been hurt badly, forgiving the offender can be hard to do. If you go the ECLEA website—**www.eclea.net**—our ECLEA book on *Forgiveness & Reconciliation* has a lot of practical tips on how to forgive and reconcile and how to hold onto forgiveness. You can download it for free.

Experiencing forgiveness is transformative. Not only do we become forgivers ourselves and practitioners of *hesed*, we also experience the profound effects of forgiveness that this psalm also mentions. For example, **vv.8** and **12** talk about joy and gladness and rejoicing. When you have been forgiven it's like a great weight has been taken off of you. It's the same thing when you forgive others. Then, the great weight of bitterness has been taken off you. How can one *not* experience joy and gladness and rejoicing when a great weight has been taken off you?

v.10 talks about a "clean heart" and a "right spirit." I remember many years ago when I was practicing law, I blew a deadline for naming certain witnesses, and the other lawyer would not give me an extension of time to do so. I had to file a motion with the court to try to get the extension. The motion couldn't be heard for

about two weeks. During that time I was in a state of worry and depression, such that my son said that I was “dull in heart.” When the court, thankfully, gave me the extra time, it was like forgiveness. I had a “clean heart” and renewed joy.

vv.13-15 all talk about the forgiven person opening his or her mouth, praising God, and teaching others about the nature and goodness of God. Again, if what God has done for us is real to us, how can we not? Real forgiveness is truly transformational. It leads to wholeness. If we truly experience and understand forgiveness, our whole outlook on life is changed. We become forgivers. We have a restored, more vibrant relationship with God, and that naturally leads to restored, vibrant relationships with others. Which leads us to the last aspect of this psalm:

V. The communal aspect of our life before God.

vv.18-19 seem almost out of place or tacked on to the end of this psalm. But they’re not. [READ] These concluding verses are recognizing that David was part of a covenant community. So are we. Our sin does not only affect us individually along with the person we wronged and God. Our sin has ripple effects that can affect an entire community. It’s like, if I have a stomach ache, it’s not only my stomach that’s affected but my whole body. It will affect my energy level, my ability to think, my desire to be with others, everything.

It’s the same with sin and forgiveness. Just as one person’s sin can affect an entire community, so can forgiveness. That’s why the recipients of forgiveness are to be forgivers. The recipients of *hesed* are to manifest *hesed*. OT Israel was a type, a shadow, of God’s true covenant community, the church. That is why the church—more than any other community in the world—should be a community characterized by and known as a community of forgiveness, a community of *hesed*. What **vv.18-19**, in essence, are telling us is that God has done great things for us. He has done for us what we never could do for ourselves. What he has done for us should lead us to start living for and loving and forgiving others the way Jesus Christ lived for and loved and forgave us. When we do, he will take delight in everything we do, because we will be doing the right things for the right reasons; as **v.19** puts it, we will be making “*righteous sacrifices*” in which God will take delight—and people will be drawn to him because of us.

CONCL: We all sin. Many of us have done, and all of us are all capable of doing, some pretty bad things. Yet **Psalm 51** is telling us: there is hope; forgiveness is possible; restoration is possible; wholeness is possible. More than that, in God’s covenant love—in his *hesed*—we can find a forgiveness that is not limited to just dealing with the specific wrong we have done, but a forgiveness that is transformative; a forgiveness that can give us joy and make us whole; a way of life that can transform an entire community. We can become the joyful, restored agents of God’s redemptive purpose in the world. I hope, by God’s grace, that we all will both experience that kind of forgiveness and become God’s transformative agents of forgiveness to others.