



Week 5

Penitence – Confession, Forgiveness, Restoration

Week 5, Day 1: As a Father has Compassion

Psalm 103:8-14

*The Lord is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
9 He will not always accuse,
nor will he keep his anger forever.
10 He does not deal with us according to our sins
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
11 For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
12 as far as the east is from the west,
so far he removes our transgressions from us.
13 As a father has compassion for his children,
so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.
14 For he knows how we were made;
he remembers that we are dust.*

Understanding the Passage:

Psalm 103 is a hymn celebrating the character of God. Throughout the whole psalm, the poet draws a contrast between the goodness and steadfast nature of God and the weakness and fragility of the human being. "As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more." (v15) But the steadfast love of the Lord never fades. We can trust him. His love never wavers. It seems that this psalm is written out of a personal experience of God's forgiveness and compassion. The psalmist has been in the pit, experienced the darkness of guilt and sin, and knows the weight of his failings. And even

more, he has experienced the joy of God's forgiveness. More importantly, the psalmist's focus is not on that feeling of forgiveness, but on the character of the one who forgives.

Many years ago, one of my daughters had a small accident in our family car, denting one of the fenders and scratching the paint. She did not tell me about it. When I discovered it, I wondered aloud to her why she had chosen to keep it a secret. I told her that I was hurt that she chose not to confess voluntarily, not because it said something about her lack of courage, but because it reflected her understanding of my character. Am I not someone who would be understanding and compassionate about something like that? Perhaps I am not, but God certainly is. Our willingness to seek forgiveness from God is rooted in our knowledge of the character of God. We can come to God because we know he is gracious and merciful, abounding in steadfast love.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. How do you picture God's understanding of you and your sin? Disappointed? Angry? Worried?
2. The psalmist says that God has compassion on those "who fear him." What does it mean to fear God, and how does that fit with the nature of God as described in this psalm?

Week 5, Day 2: I Know My Transgressions

Psalm 51:1-9

*Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy,
blot out my transgressions.*
² *Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.*
³ *For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.*
⁴ *Against you, you alone, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.*
⁵ *Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.*
⁶ *You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.*
⁷ *Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.*
⁸ *Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.*
⁹ *Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.*

Understanding the Passage:

Psalm 51 is probably the most important of the seven penitential psalms in the Bible. Psalms of penitence are psalms that ask God to move the psalmist through a process of confession, forgiveness, and restoration. The superscription of this psalm, which has been added subsequent to its composition, says that it is "a Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba." This was the sin in David's life in which he sent Bathsheba's husband Uriah to the front lines of battle to be killed in order to cover up his coercive sex with Bathsheba and her

subsequent pregnancy. The psalm is sometimes referred to as “the sinner’s guide” by some preachers and Bible scholars.

The first six verses introduce the theme of forgiveness of sins and then lay out the truth of and severity of this sin before God. In the first five verses, the psalmist uses every word in the Hebrew language to describe his sin: transgressions, iniquity, evil, sin, guilty. And he doesn’t sugarcoat it at all – not only has he done evil things; he also recognizes that they come out of an evil inside him. This isn’t simply a mistake he made; it reflects his nature and being. He owns it fully.

Verses 7-9 are an actual request for forgiveness, with the psalmist proclaiming his desire to be set free from the weight of his sin. He begs to be cleansed, to be healed (let the bones you have crushed rejoice) and asks God to ignore his sin. One very interesting image is the request for God to blot out iniquity. An ink blotter absorbs errant ink on a page, so the implication is that God absorbs the sin. Reading the Psalms through a New Testament lens points us to the Christ, who takes the sin of each one of us onto himself on the cross.

These verses remind us that confession is not simply acknowledging sin, but owning it fully, and experiencing deep and profound remorse. Mom says “tell your brother you are sorry.” You say, “I’m sorry.” Mom says, “tell your brother you are sorry and mean it this time.” Too often, we move quickly through confession, without the profound sense of anguish that comes from the realization of our own broken character.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. What do you think it means to say “I was born guilty” in verse 5? Do you think our sins result from an inherently broken character, or do good people do bad things?
2. How do you practice confession in your own prayer life? Do you often feel real remorse when you confess?

Week 5, Day 3: Restore Me to the Joy of Your Salvation

Psalm 51:10-17

- ¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.*
- ¹¹ Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.*
- ¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.*
- ¹³ Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.*
- ¹⁴ Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.*
- ¹⁵ O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.*
- ¹⁶ For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.*
- ¹⁷ The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

Understanding the Passage:

The process of confession and forgiveness does not end with a request for pardon. In verses 10-12, as a sign of his true remorse, the psalmist asks God to change not just his behavior, but to change his heart. Because the psalmist recognizes that his sin grows out of an inner brokenness, he asks for a clean heart, a renewal at the core of his being, and an altogether new spirit. Something fundamental needs to change. Moreover, the psalmist realizes that he cannot make such a change by the sheer strength of his own will. He needs God's presence and spirit to bring about this renewal and restoration. He begs not only for a moment of joy, the delight that comes from that time of reconciliation, but also that God would *sustain* a willing spirit to *continue* in right relationship. An ongoing, continuous change is required, and such change can only come with the help of God. Verses 13-15 detail the poet's promise that from that point on, he has made a commitment to do better and to give God all the credit. He knows that going through the motions of making offerings won't do the trick. He needs to really change.

Consider an example in which the husband and wife have been continually arguing and distant, but neither of them wants to remain at odds. The husband knows that his behavior has been deeply hurtful and begs for forgiveness. He often takes out his pent-up frustration and stress on his wife, using words that are intended to cause pain. Nonetheless, she loves him, and knowing that his remorse is authentic, she forgives him. The reconciliation is beautiful. As the days go by, however, the old behavior returns, until he finally recognizes that there is something deeper that must be addressed, something he can only fix by surrendering himself fully to God.

The passage closes with a summary statement about both the requirements and possibilities of a restored relationship with God. If we authentically come to God, recognizing our sin and asking for reconciliation, God will restore us to right relationship and renew us from the inside out.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Have you ever had an experience in which you have forgiven someone but his or her behavior does not change?
2. Are there sins in your life that you wish you could stop doing, but can't seem to shake? Do they reflect the need for a deeper change to take place?

Week 5, Day 4: Your Hand Was Heavy Upon Me

Psalm 32:1-5

*Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.*

²*Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.*

³*While I kept silent, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.*

⁴*For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah*

⁵*Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;*

*I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,"
and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah*

Understanding the Passage:

Psalm 32 is the second of the seven penitential Psalms. It was a favorite of Augustine in the fourth century and is among those most often used in Christian worship. While it functions as a penitential psalm, it is actually a psalm of thanksgiving. The psalmist does not write as one in the midst of confession and restoration, as is the case in Psalm 51, but rather in past tense, as one looking back at a journey in life. It is often the case that we can only see the power and meaning in an experience with the perspective of time, retrospectively viewing our own history and seeing God's hand at work in it.

As a beacon of hope, the psalm begins with two verses sharing the happiness that comes with forgiveness, a restored relationship with God, and the inner transformation that follows. What a significant contrast the psalm draws between that happiness and the anguish of guilt we hear about in the following two verses. The references in verses 3 and 4 point us to the physical manifestations of psychological pain and remorse – A heavy hand upon him, bones wasting away, strength dried up. Living with sins, especially secret ones, is debilitating. It isolates a person from neighbors and friends. Trying to pretend all is well depletes all one's energy. It can feel a whole lot like physical pain.

As the psalm moves into verses 4-7, the psalmist addresses God directly. He is demonstrating with his approach the very thing he is proclaiming in the psalm – you can be open and honest with God! You can acknowledge your sin! You can stop the inner turmoil of trying to justify your actions to yourself and your God! Stop hiding and just tell God the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. God wants to hear from you. God wants to lift that burden from your shoulders and set you free. Just as Adam's sin sent him hiding from God in the garden of Eden, our sin leads us to hold back the parts of ourselves from the God whose deepest desire is to have an intimate relationship with us. It is not just the sin that separates us from God. Rather, it is our propensity to cover it up.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. In what ways can you see the goodness of God when you look back on your life that you did not see when you were in the midst of it?
2. Is there some part of your life that you try to withhold from God's view, perhaps out of shame or an unwillingness to change?

Week 5, Day 5: You Are a Hiding Place

Psalm 32:6-11

*⁶ Therefore let all who are faithful
offer prayer to you;
at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters
shall not reach them.
⁷ You are a hiding place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. Selah
⁸ I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.
⁹ Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,
else it will not stay near you.
¹⁰ Many are the torments of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord.*

*¹¹ Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous,
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.*

Understanding the Passage:

As the psalmist continues in verses 6 and 7, we discover yet another benefit to transparency and honesty with God. God becomes a place of refuge, a safe place, a sanctuary from trouble. Note that the psalmist has now moved back into the present tense. It may be that the sins he speaks of in verses 3 and 4 led him into trouble and God delivered him. Or it may be that he remains in a situation in which he faces tribulations and troubles. Either way, God is no longer one from whom to hide but is now the psalmist's hiding place from troubles of the world. Quite a turnaround! Finally, the poet moves from thanksgiving to pedagogy, from a direct address to God to offering practical wisdom to the pupil/reader/listener. When we look back on our lives, what have we learned from our sins and our failures and God's forgiveness, and how can we use those lessons to teach others? The scholars point out that the psalmist uses the techniques of the Old Testament wisdom teachers to make his points - a parable about a stubborn mule who has to be trained the hard way to stay close to the master, and a proverb about the torments of the wicked. And then, again, he returns to the joy of those who live upright lives in the presence of the Lord.

Despite the wisdom teaching of this psalm, seldom do we learn much from the mistakes and sin of others. Instead, we generally think "that's not me; that is him (or her)!" Perhaps instead, this psalm can give us the language to learn from our own story of sin, forgiveness, and restoration. As we offer it as a prayer in private or public worship, it can remind us of what God's forgiveness has done for us personally to restore us to gladness in his presence.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. What does it mean to you to say God is a hiding place? Does God protect us from trouble? If not, in what way is God a hiding place?
2. What lessons have you learned from your own mistakes that you would want others to heed?

Video Discussion Questions:

1. Do you experience physical symptoms when you recognize your sin?
2. Do you regularly practice confession? Why or why not?
3. When you do confess your sin to God and others, how does it feel?
4. Colin said that he recognizes his need to confess when his character and actions collide with Jesus' character and actions. Using that framework, are you able to identify things for which you need to confess?
5. Is it hard for you to feel forgiven after you have confessed your sin to God?
6. Do you identify more with retributive or restorative justice?
7. How does God's love draw you to repentance (to changing/to turning away from your sin)?
8. What is your biggest takeaway this week?

Prayer requests and other notes: