

Spring Cleaning

Psalm 51

It was the spring of the year in Jerusalem about 1000 years before the time of Jesus Christ, and it looked like life just could not get any better for King David. He had a little time to sit back and relax and enjoy the great spring weather and think how far he had come. He had been pulled out of the sheep fields to do battle with the giant Goliath – now that would be a story to tell the grandkids. Safety lesson there: one little rock in the wrong place will kill you, so be careful with that slingshot. There had been some hard battles and some lonely nights out in the countryside in the process of becoming king, and defeating all the enemies around had been tough. But now here he was, king of the most powerful kingdom in the region. He had control of a territory that covered what we would know as Israel and large parts of Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Iraq. The nation was prosperous, at least partly because of the forced labor from all the people they had conquered. They were at peace for the most part, though there always seemed to be those pesky Ammonites causing trouble on the border. There was even a bit of religious revival going on, especially in Jerusalem since they had been able to bring the Ark of the Covenant into the city. David had wanted to build a Temple, but that was not what God wanted from him. The Temple-building would be Solomon's job; David's job was to build the nation. The historians would record this as the high point in the history of the political kingdom of Israel. It was hard to imagine how it could get any better.

But it sure could get a lot worse.

Just when it looked like David had it all, he took his eyes off the prize. As this story is told in 2 Samuel 11 and 12, it sounds like a modern soap opera. I'm not going to read the whole thing, but it goes something like this.

David was out talking a walk on the roof of the palace one evening, and he looked across the way and saw a woman taking a bath. Presumably she expected some privacy for this, but he was up on the roof. And this was not just any woman – this was a really beautiful woman. David found out who she was, and in spite of being told she was Uriah's wife, he sent for her anyway. Now if you are reading this story, the alarm bells

should start going off about here. Not for David. The inevitable happened between David and Bathsheba, and she became pregnant.

For David, those pesky Ammonites were about to come in handy, because Uriah was off with the army fighting them. How convenient. David immediately sent for Uriah to give him a little R & R back home with Bathsheba, figuring they would spend some quality time together, and David would be off the hook, at least as far as anyone else was concerned. But Uriah was more dedicated to his soldiering than David had given him credit for, and Uriah refused to go home. David was out of options. He sent Uriah back to the front, and then set up the battle so he would be killed. After a suitable time of mourning, Bathsheba moves into the palace and becomes David's wife. David begins to think he has literally gotten away with murder, not to mention coveting and adultery.

But David had a conscience – a man of God, a prophet named Nathan. Nathan went to David and told him a story about an abuse of power that victimized a poor man, and David was furious... until Nathan looked David in the eye and said “You are the man.” Try to imagine the look on David's face as he said “I have sinned against the Lord.”

That was the condition of David's heart when he wrote this:

READ Psalm 51

This psalm tells us some great truths about the nature of repentance and forgiveness that are just as true for us as they were for David. These are truths that apply to the forgiveness we need from God that cleanses us from our sin and makes us presentable before Him. These are also truths that apply to the forgiveness we need from each other to restore and reconcile relationships. And these are truths that apply to the forgiveness we have to grant ourselves, which is sometimes harder for us to accept than forgiveness from God. But all of that is necessary for us to be freed from the weight of the load of sin that we carry around – to be freed from that burden so that we can live the abundant life that God has promised to all His people. Where do we start?

First – forgiveness starts with our acknowledgment and confession of our sin. David knew he had sinned, long before Nathan confronted him. First in his own heart, then with Bathsheba, then with Uriah – it was like he was in a contest to see how many commandments he could break in one event. His guilt led him to try to cover it all up, and things just snowballed on him. But when Nathan confronted him, David didn't try to make excuses or weasel out of it or blame somebody else – he just accepted the responsibility and began to seek forgiveness.

I think it was that spirit of confession and of always returning to God that had led God to describe David as a man after God's own heart. It certainly wasn't because David was perfect or because David had earned his way into God's good graces. I think it was just that David always knew God, always knew that God loved him, and always recognized that when he messed up, he should return to God.

Aren't we right there, too? I don't know about all of you, but I'm not perfect – I'll still be messing up with some regularity, and I will always need God to return to. David knew what we should all always know – that no matter what, no matter how badly we mess things up, God is always there for us. We may be tempted to look at David's story and say "Well, at least I haven't had anybody killed." I sure hope not. But we don't have to be murderers to find ourselves in this spot – we just have to be sinners, and we are all sinners.

No matter what the nature of our sin and no matter whether it is against God or another person, the cleansing of that sin from our hearts through forgiveness must start the same way: it must start with acknowledgment and confession. Admitting our sin is an act of honesty, with ourselves, with other people, and with God.

We need to understand that confession is a step on the path to forgiveness. If we just confess our sin without going the next step and claiming God's forgiveness, all we've done is add that sin to the load of guilt that we carry around like a sack of bricks. If we don't get rid of that load by claiming – really claiming – God's forgiveness and living like forgiven people, that sack of bricks will eventually bury us.

The second great truth here is that forgiveness is a product of God's grace, freely given, not earned, not deserved. That is true whether the forgiveness is offered from God or from us to each other. It is not real forgiveness if we have to earn it – it's just another bargain.

David's first appeal in the psalm is to God's mercy. Not to God's justice, not to God's response to some act of penance that David was offering to do, just to God's mercy. Look at what David says toward the end of the psalm. He is not counting on God giving him some kind of credit for a sacrifice or an offering as a condition for the forgiveness David so desperately cries out for. He is counting on God seeing a broken and contrite heart – a heart that needs the healing that only God's forgiveness can bring.

Traditional rabbinical teaching on the nature of forgiveness said that an offended person should not forgive the other unless and until the other person was found to deserve it – that the other person had repented or done something specific to make things right. If this was the way that God dealt with us and our sin, we would never be forgiven because we would never deserve forgiveness.

The way of grace is the way God really deals with us, extending His offer of mercy and forgiveness before we ask, before we even acknowledge and confess our sin. That is the way God means for us to deal with each other, too. We are called as God's children to be people of forgiveness and instruments of God's grace. God can handle the justice and judgment stuff on His own time. That's not our job. Our job is to be models and instruments of grace.

This past Friday was the official first day of spring. For many people, that is a prompt for spring cleaning – for opening up the windows and airing our places that have been closed up for the winter and pulling the weeds out of the garden and enjoying the freshness of the new green leaves and flowers. It is a great time for renewal, and it fits so well with our time of expectation and anticipation in Lent and Easter. All that is wasted on us if our view of it is blocked by a black cloud of unforgiven sin. Claiming the salvation of Jesus Christ that we find in His death and resurrection has to include claiming our own forgiveness, offered to us freely and without condition. It also has to

include us offering that same forgiveness, freely and without condition, to each other. We need spring cleaning – and summer cleaning and fall cleaning and winter cleaning – to clear out the cobwebs and dust and grime and mold of unforgiveness and come to God again and again with a renewed and refreshed spirit.

God's desire and God's delight is to see in us a humble and contrite heart – a heart and a spirit that is desperate for oneness with God – a heart that knows its deepest needs cannot be satisfied without right relationship with God – a heart that knows that there is not now and never will be anything we can do to deserve God's forgiveness – a heart that knows that God's love and grace are greater than any sin.

Romans 5:8: "...God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven. Glory to God. Amen.