

July 22, 2018
National Presbyterian Church
Relationship Repair 101
Psalm 51, Matthew 5:21-26
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In our sermons in July, we're looking together at a small selection of Psalms. The Psalms are a compilation of 150 hymns and prayers in the Bible gathered from the faith and worship life of ancient Israel.

Some of those Psalms are joyful and vibrant, and lift up our souls to praise God in every aspect of our being. Over the last two weeks, for example, we looked at Psalms 8 and 139 which lift us up to the majesty of God our creator: to the God who sees straight through us; who knows us to the core of our being; knows us, and loves us, and treats us as royalty: think of these great words from Psalm 8 – “God crowns us with glory and honor!”

So these are two joyful “Psalms of praise” But many of the Psalms are not like that. Many of the Psalms are sad. In fact one third of the Psalms are what scholars would call “laments”: sad songs (over 60 of the 150 psalms).

Some of these are sad because they reflect the everyday difficulties of life

- Difficulties with people
- Difficulties with circumstances
- Difficulties with health
- Difficulties with understanding the ways of God!
- and then sometimes just the Difficulty of living with ourselves.

Especially when we mess up – which is the topic of today's Psalm, Psalm 51.

Hear these opening words from Psalm 51 again:

Have mercy on me, O God, According to Thy steadfast love.
According to Thy abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me.

Ever felt that way?

Of course – not everyone has a conscience as sensitive as the Psalmist's. Sometimes people dismiss sin and guilt easily, treating the very ideas of sin and guilt with disdain: as if they were nothing; as if there was no accountability to a higher power; as if there was no such thing as “an ultimate moral standard of right and wrong.”

But sooner or later, whether people believe in God, or in a moral law, or not, the fact is that feelings of guilt catch up with almost everyone.

Last year, there was an article in The Guardian (3 Oct.2017) by Devorah Braun entitled, “Why Do We Feel So Guilty All the Time?” Ms. Braun says that “guilt” is one of the most common of human experiences, and she begins her article like this:

I feel guilty about everything. Already today I've felt guilty about having said the wrong thing to a friend.

Then I felt guilty about avoiding that friend – because of the wrong thing I'd said.

Plus, I haven't called my mother yet today: guilty.

And I really should have organized something special for my husband's birthday: guilty.

I gave the wrong kind of food to my child: guilty.

I've been cutting corners at work lately: guilty.

I skipped breakfast: guilty. I snacked instead: double guilty.

I'm taking up all this space in a world with not enough space in it:
guilty, guilty, guilty.

And surely at some time in our lives, all of us have felt this way: we've done something evil, or just stupid – or nothing much in particular, but we just can't get it out of our mind.

Of course, in the case of the writer of Psalm 51, something really had been done that was reprehensible. The Psalm reflects the guilty feelings of King David of Israel after he'd committed adultery with a woman called Bathsheba. By itself, the adultery was bad enough: like the revelations from the "Me Too" movement, it involved the massive abuse of male power. But in David's case, it didn't end there. The book of II Samuel (11ff), tells us that David wanted Bathsheba so badly that he also used his power to make sure that her husband, Uriah would die in battle – which he did.

So David was guilty not only of adultery, but of murder as well (one thing almost always leads to another). And while, in the end, he gets what he wants, in other way, he doesn't! Like The Rolling Stones, for David "there ain't no satisfaction!" Just guilt: crippling, paralyzing guilt; not to begin with – to begin with he was blind to what he was doing, but when his "pastor," Nathan the prophet told him the truth, the horror of what laid him low – until he came to his senses and acknowledged his wrongdoing, and named it, and spat it out to God, with NO "ifs, ands or buts"; with NO excuses – just the truth. Leading to an enormous sense of mercy and relief – and forgiveness.

Psalm 32:1, 3-5 says it best:

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven.

While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.

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

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.

So David does it: he prays this prayer – this unadorned confession of the truth in Psalm 51 – saying to God:

Against you: you only have I sinned,
and done that which is evil in your sight.
So that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.

BUT this can be hard! Speaking the truth like this, can be hard.

About 20 years ago

I was in West Virginia, with the Youth Group of the church I was serving at the time. We were rafting on the New River, and it was great couple of days

And on top of that, my son was there, and I was able to spend some quality time with him. In fact we had a chance to be in the car together and chat. And I was feeling good about being a good parent when there were some flashing lights behind me: I was doing 70 in a zone that had dropped the limit to 55 and it was the State Police!

I can still feel the moment: the pride and embarrassment!!

- I'd never had a speeding ticket in my life
- and my son was there in the car with me
- and I didn't mean to do it
- and the youth group would hear about it
- and Dear Lord: you know I was doing the right thing – being with my son and the other kids

And so, when the officer walked up to the car and I rolled down the windows I was bursting with excuses! And do you think the officer cared? NOPE: he just casually wrote me the ticket and went away!

And then, a little more recently, here in DC I had another small incident! I didn't quite stop at a "stop sign." It was a rolling stop. I emphasized the "stop" but apparently to the police officer whose lights began to flash behind me, the emphasis should have been on the "rolling!" This time, when the Police Officer asked if I knew what I'd done, I said, "Yup: I didn't stop, did I? Sir, I'm sorry." And you could see his attitude change: he expected all kinds of excuses, and when he didn't get them, he gave me a warning, and left.

Honest confession. Brutally honest: It's hard. But before God, that's what's needed: genuine remorse! "A broken and a contrite heart" the psalmist calls it. ***That's what's needed to deal with, and to be set free, from our sin and guilt.***

BUT having said that, when we sin, or mess up we need to realize that there's more to it than our personal guilt. In other words, what's at stake is not just our personal guilt and need for forgiveness; nor even, our need of a truly deep sense of remorse.

When we sin, more often than not, the real issue is that relationships are broken with God and others, AND what God wants more than anything is not merely to forgive us, and for us to know forgiveness, but for us to play our part in restoring and repairing those relationships – making them right – wherever we can.

There's a great verse in 2 Corinthians (5:19) that says

God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself,
not counting their trespasses against them,
and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

In other words, if God is in the "forgiveness business," then it's not just so we can deal with our guilt – real or imaginary. Rather, it's so that he – and we – can get on with the business of "reconciliation" – healing broken relationships. This is God's passion.

Think for a moment about the Ten Commandments – the Commandments given to ancient Israel when they escaped from slavery in Egypt and began building a new life as a nation.

The commandments not only showed them (and us) clearly what's right and wrong, and what we should or should not feel guilty about. But more than that, the commandments also show us indirectly – that what God wants is not just for us to be "good people," but that we maintain healthy relationships "vertically" and "horizontally": with God and each other.

So that, like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (in Genesis 3): when we ignore God's Laws, or break them, we leave behind us "a string of broken relationships" all the way down the line!

So, for example:

The first commandment says, "**You shall have no other God before me.**"

And why? Because that's the truth! There is no one greater than or more important than God.

Turn your spouse or best friend – into your "2nd best friend" and what happens? The relationship is destroyed in a flash!

Same with God: God is our spouse, and the whole thing falls apart if we get our priorities wrong.

OR

Commandment number two: "Make no graven images."

We may not make literal images of other gods, this day. But whenever we tell God "who we would like God to be," instead of letting GOD tell US, "who God is," then we're making an idol or image out of God.

So tell me: What happens to your relationship with someone else when they try to tell you to be someone you are not?

At the least, it's uncomfortable, right? And at the worst, the relationship is over!

And then

Commandment number three "Don't take my name in vain."

This is way more than just a matter of NOT swearing here or there; of NOT using God's name lightly on our lips.

To "take God's name" is to say "I belong to God's family. In baptism, e.g., we publicly take "God's name" as our family name. The good name of God; the good name of God's family is at stake because of the way we live. And when we forget that, and act inappropriately, we're "taking God's name upon us" in vain – and bringing pain to God, and maybe the rest of the family too.

And then

Commandment Number four: the Sabbath commandment.

“Make time for God!” If you don’t make time for God, it’s no different than not making time for any of your relationships:

What happens when there’s no time? Well, the relationships wither away and die.

AND THEN THERE ARE OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS

SO **the fifth commandment** calls us to “**honor father and mother.**” Mess that up, and your relationships in your family are all at sea.

Then

Number Six. “**Do not murder**”? Of course, murder breaks a relationship, permanently, right there and then!

And **number seven “Adultery”** – by definition, clearly, breaks up a relationship.

And so, too, breaking **numbers eight (“Stealing”)** and **nine (“false witness” / lying!! Fake News).** BOTH are ways of treating others with contempt, and of destroying relationships and society

Which brings us to **number ten, “covetousness.”** This, to begin with, seems like a mere “internal personality defect,” an internal weakness that is nobody’s business but our own. BUT the truth is – that what we think on the inside” often has a massive ramification for our relationship with others on the outside. People can smell something wrong a mile off even when the façade is kept up.

So sin – at least in terms of breaking the Commandments – breaks relationships. And God’s passion is not merely that we experience grace and mercy and forgiveness so powerfully that it leads to freedom from guilt, through honest – brutally honest – confession.

BUT that we do everything in our power to restore whatever relationships are broken in our lives: with God – and others.

It’s clear in Psalm 51, that David wants his relationship ***with God*** to be restored

Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

The relationship repair in Psalm 51 clearly focuses on the relationship with God. But what Jesus emphasizes (especially in the Sermon on the Mount) is that healing our relationships with others – not just with God, is equally important. In Matthew Chapter 5, Jesus is speaking to his disciples and says this:

“When you are offering your gift at the altar (when you come to worship), if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you (if there’s a rift in a relationship, whether it’ your fault or not; it really doesn’t matter who’s to blame, or who’s guilty), leave your gift there before the altar and go: first, first be reconciled to your brother or sister, then (and only then) come and offer your gift.”

In other words: if you have a ruptured relationship in life with someone DON'T come to worship! Do not assume that your relationship with God is okay, until you've taken the first step to bring healing and reconciliation with your brother or sister. That's how important the healing of relationships is to Jesus. Not only our relationship with God, but with others – taking the first step in healing the breach.

Is this something you know? And practice?

On various occasions I've tried to follow Jesus in this way.

- Sometimes the results are wonderful.
- But sometimes nothing beneficial seems to happen at all.

On one occasion when I went to see somebody, and apologized for what I'd done, this was clearly the case.

The situation was this. I had not done my homework on the church schedule, and had double-booked a time in which I was holding a class, and a member of the church was also planning on holding a class – and had prepared diligently for it. It was my fault, but when I discovered the error, it was too late to change.

I went and apologized to the person involved in the second event, but there was no give, there was no sense of forgiveness not then, nor in the years that followed. Indeed, it's not impossible that that person is still upset with me to this very day.

I'm still glad I went though. Because JESUS CAME TO US, not only to give us forgiveness and deliver us from guilt (a great start: life gets messy! Happens to all of us), but to bring us back into a relationship with God and one another – in his Kingdom.

Remember

God was in Christ, Reconciling the world to himself.

1. Not counting their trespasses against them; and
2. entrusting to us the ministry of reconciliation

Let's read the words of Psalm 51 again together, beginning at the words "Create in me a clean heart"

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.
The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God,
you will not despise

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