

Psalm 32
"Blessed Are the Penitent"
Lenten Midweek 2

February 21, 2018
First Lutheran Church, Glencoe, Minn.
Pastor Peter Adelsen

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ! Amen!

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

[Intro]

Some years ago, a couple of kids broke into a five-and-dime store in Philadelphia. They successfully entered the store, stayed long enough to do what they came to do, and escaped unnoticed. Oddly, they took nothing. Absolutely nothing! But what they did do was ridiculous.

Instead of stealing anything, they changed the cost of everything. Price tags were swapped. Values were exchanged. These clever pranksters took the tag off a \$50 radio and switched it with the tag on a \$5 box of stationery. The \$1 sticker on a paperback book was removed and traded for one on a 25-cent box of paper clips. They re-priced everything in the store!

Crazy? You bet! But the craziest part of this story took place the next morning. The store opened as usual. Employees went to work. Customers began to shop. The place functioned as normal for four hours before anyone noticed what had happened. Four hours! Some people got some great bargains. Others got fleeced. For four solid hours, no one noticed that all the values had been swapped.

Hard to believe? It shouldn't be; we see the same thing happening every day. We are deluged by a distorted value system. We see the most valuable things in our lives peddled for pennies and see the cheapest junk earning people millions.

We think bad things are good and good things are bad. We lose sight of what is sin, what's going against God's Law. We can think idolatry, profanity, dishonoring God's Word, disobeying our parents and others in authority, adultery, stealing, gossiping, and coveting are all okay.

Why do we do what we do? Why do we take what we know to be right and wrong and turn it all around?

Why are priceless values trashed, while senseless standards are obeyed? What causes us to elevate the body and degrade the soul? What causes us to pamper the skin and pollute the heart? Someone broke into the store and exchanged all the price tags on our values – and that someone is Satan.

[David & Bathsheba]

David understood how things in one's life can get all turned around. He seemed to be doing just fine, ruling the kingdom of Israel well. The Ark of the Covenant had been brought to Jerusalem. David had a fine palace built there. He led the armies of Israel in defeating the Philistines, the Moabites, and the Ammonites. He appointed officials and administered justice and equity to all his people.

But then, one spring day, while walking around on the roof of his palace, David spied a beautiful woman taking a bath on the roof of a nearby house. Instead of looking away, David watched and then inquired about the woman and then invited her to the palace. And she became pregnant. Her name was Bathsheba, and she was the wife of one of David's soldiers, Uriah the Hittite.

David tried to hide his sin by having Uriah returned from the front lines of combat so that he would sleep with his wife and then think the child she was bearing was his own. But when Uriah came home, he ended up sleeping at the door of the king's house because he felt it was bad form for him to be enjoying the comforts of hearth and home when his troops were still roughing it on the front lines.

David even tried to get Uriah drunk so he would then sleep with his wife, but that didn't work either. Finally, when Uriah returned to battle, David ordered his commanding general to put him out in front of the enemy and withdraw the rest of his own troops so that Uriah would be killed. After a time of mourning, David took Bathsheba as his own wife. All the precious commandments of God, which David had held dear, were turned upside down. He did all he could to cover his sin by engaging in even more sin (2 Sam 11).

The devil, the world, and our old sinful nature would have us believe that we'll be blessed by doing those things God does not want us to do. The allure of pleasure, wealth, fame, and power seems so enticing. They're made to seem like such great blessings when, in fact, they may be a curse.

Many try to cover their sin. Like David, this can involve more serious transgressions to cover the first trespass. It may not escalate to the level of murder, but the results are usually similar: a snowball becomes an avalanche of deception and destruction. Excuses are inevitably made in an attempt to rationalize and whitewash the ugly reality of what we've done. But this is merely a temporary smoke screen that quickly blows away and exposes who and what we really are.

We can easily get caught up in this cover-up delusion as David did. In addition to attempts at hiding our bigger sins, our more striking lapses in judgment, we can deceive ourselves by thinking we're not such bad sinners after all. We aren't as bad as David, who committed adultery and murder. We're not as bad as some of the criminals, despots, and perverts who make today's headlines. We then hold delusions about the so-called goodness of our own evil, sinful nature.

Martin Luther writes: "This evil, false, and deceitful guile seduces, above all, the outstanding, conspicuous, and spiritual people, who, because of their pious life and many good deeds, stand up boldly and do not recognize their inner, spiritual attitude. . . . Thus a man is pious out of fear of hell or hope of heaven, not because of God. But this is difficult to recognize and still more difficult to overcome. Indeed, it is impossible except through the grace of the Holy Spirit" (AE 14:148–49).

The result of covering our sin is an evil conscience. God's hand is then heavy on us. He is seen as stern Judge instead of loving Father. An evil conscience results in physical, emotional, and spiritual struggle. David described that time in his life in this way: "*For when I kept silent, my bones 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*" (vv 3–4).

So often, we engage in sin or cover sin because we somehow think this will make us happy or feel good or bring us fulfillment. But it is a delusion that only makes things worse.

[Picture of Dorian Gray]

An example of this is seen in Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. This novel tells of a young man named Dorian Gray, the subject of a painting by artist Basil Hallward. Basil is impressed by Dorian's handsomeness and becomes infatuated with him.

Dorian later meets Lord Henry Wotton, a friend of Basil's, and becomes enthralled by Lord Henry's world view, which is pursuing beauty and fulfillment of the senses.

Realizing that one day his beauty will fade, Dorian expresses a desire to sell his soul so that the portrait Basil has painted would age rather than him. Dorian's wish is fulfilled, and when he then pursues a life of debauchery, the portrait then serves as a reminder of the effect that each act has upon his soul.

Each sin is displayed as a disfigurement of his form or through a sign of aging on the painting.

Eventually, Dorian resorts to murdering artist Basil. Finally, Dorian takes the knife he used to kill Basil and stabs the painting of himself. The police find an aged and grotesquely deformed Dorian Gray lying on the floor of his living room with a knife in his heart, while the painting now appears as that of a young man.

Ultimately, an evil conscience results in death—spiritual, physical, and finally eternal death. We are born spiritually dead in trespasses and sin (Ephesians 2:1). Because of sin, we will die physically, ***“for the wages of sin is death”*** (Romans 6:23), and unless our sin is forgiven, we will die eternally, separated from God forever in hell (Matthew 10:28). Thus, David correctly observes, ***“Many are the sorrows of the wicked”*** (v 10). David knew those sorrows firsthand because of his unrepented sin.

[God is Faithful]

Yet God is faithful. He does not forsake us to our fallen state. God the Holy Spirit uses the Law and its impact on our conscience to bring us to repentance. God sent the prophet Nathan to confront David with his sin. David was convicted and responded: ***“I acknowledge my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,’ and you forgave the iniquity of my sin”*** (v 5).

King David becomes a true penitent. He feels God's anger over his sin and confesses that God is justly angry and that he cannot do anything to appease God's anger.

When David confessed his sin and utter unworthiness, God forgives David and lifts him up. David declares that God is a **“hiding place”** who preserves him from trouble and surrounds him with **“shouts of deliverance”** (v 7).

Luther writes: “I will rebuke myself; then God will praise me. I will degrade myself; then God will honor me. I will accuse myself; then God will acquit me. I will speak against myself; then God will speak for me. I will speak of my guilt; then He will speak about my merit” (AE 14:150–51).

All of this is done by God; it is the Holy Spirit’s work in us through his Word. God says to David, **“I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go”** (v 8). Luther writes that this is as if God is saying to us, “Behold, that is the way of the cross. You cannot find it, but I must lead you like a blind man. Therefore not you, not a man, not a creature, but I, through My Spirit and the Word, will teach you the way you must go. You must not follow the work which you choose, not the suffering which you devise, but that which comes to you against your choice, thoughts, and desires” (AE 14:152).

[Forgiveness & Salvation Only by Grace through Faith]

While David tried to cover up his sin, his heart was crushed, and he was filled with sorrows. But then he was confronted with God’s Word through the prophet Nathan. He confessed his sin, and Nathan assured David of God’s forgiveness. That changed everything! David could then proclaim, **“Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity”** (vv 1–2).

The Apostle Paul quotes these same words of David to show that forgiveness and salvation come not through human works, but only by grace through faith in God’s promises (Rom 4:7–8). And the promise of forgiveness and salvation comes only through the promise of the Savior Jesus Christ. Only in Christ does God forgive sin. David and all the people of the Old Testament looked to the promised Messiah for deliverance.

“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Gal 4:4–5). Through Jesus’ perfect life and through his suffering, death on a cross, and resurrection from the grave, **“God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them”** (2 Cor 5:19).

Through penitence, which includes both the confession of sin and faith in God's gracious forgiveness, Christ's atonement, his death for the sins of the world upon the cross, is applied to you and me. Jesus suffered and died for the sins of the whole world, which means that he died for you and for me. That means that our transgressions are forgiven in Christ. Our sin is covered in Christ. God has not counted our iniquity against us in Christ. That forgiveness and peace is ours through faith in Christ.

[God Blesses the Penitent]

You see, God blesses the penitent. That is why Confession and Absolution are a regular part of the Divine Service. Each Sunday, you have the opportunity to confess your sins before God and your fellow believers, and I have the privilege of standing in the stead and by the command of Christ and announcing that you are forgiven through Jesus Christ.

In penitence, God becomes our hiding place in trouble, for ***“steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the LORD”*** (v 10). In this world of sin and suffering, trouble will still be there, but we are secure in God's love. That's why the Apostle Paul could write: ***“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*** (Rom 8:38–39).

In Christ alone, the penitent has the assurance of God's steadfast love. Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.