

Psalm 51
“The Penitent Prays for a Purified Heart”
Lenten Midweek 4

March 7, 2018
First Lutheran Church, Glencoe, MN
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]

It was just after evening prayer at sea, around 2200 hours on November 22, 1975, during night flight operations for the United States Carrier Strike Group serving in the Mediterranean Sea, when a collision took place between the guided missile cruiser USS Belknap and the aircraft carrier USS John F. Kennedy off the coast of Italy.

This terrible accident resulted in seven deaths aboard the Belknap and one death aboard the Kennedy, with several more injured onboard both ships. The cause of the collision was a breakdown of communication between the signal bridge and the Officer of the Deck aboard the Belknap.

It turns out that the accident demonstrated a terrible structural flaw within the Belknap as well, which resulted in the catastrophic meltdown of the ship's superstructure.

When the Belknap was built, the Navy wanted to make the cruiser lighter and faster, so the ship's superstructure was made largely of aluminum. As a result of the collision, the Belknap burned for more than three days and it was completely rebuilt using steel instead of aluminum.

The Belknap-Kennedy collision revealed that there were problems not only with the actions of the crew, but also with the overall structural integrity of the ship, itself.

[David's Integrity]

In today's Psalm reading, King David came to a similar realization about his integrity. After his adulterous relations with Bathsheba and his deceptive attempts to cover this up, David suffered great pangs of conscience.

You see, the Word of God through the Prophet Nathan convicted David of his sinful conduct.

However, David came to a greater realization. He realized that he was sinful and corrupt through and through and he needed to be re-created and reborn. As a contrite penitent, David prayed for a purified, or clean, heart and a new and right spirit.

[The Penitent Prays for — and from — a Purified Heart]

Psalm 51 is the best known of the Penitential Psalms. Likely, you even noticed that when we spoke Psalm 51 earlier. This is in large part because portions of it are sung as the Offertory in the Divine Service, while other parts are sung as part of the liturgy for Matins and Vespers.

Concerning this Psalm, Martin Luther writes:

“A true and penitent heart sees nothing but its sin and misery of conscience. He who still finds any counsel and help in himself cannot in all earnestness speak these words; for he is not yet altogether miserable but feels some comfort in himself, apart from God’s mercy.... These are all words of a true repentance which magnifies and multiplies the grace of God by magnifying and multiplying sin. (AE 14:166).

You see, the penitent has sorrow over actual sins, those sins of thought, word, and deed, those sins of commission and omission carried out by every one of us every day of our lives. David confesses before God: ***“For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me”*** (Psalm 51:3). He then goes on to tell God, ***“Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgement”*** (Psalm 51:4).

You see, when we sin, it is God whom you are betraying.

Now, when sin becomes known to a person, he or she must say “Amen”, “So be it”, “This is most certainly true” to the divine sentence, just as David does to the Word of God spoken by the prophet Nathan. You see, all self-justification on the part of the sinner actually accuses God of unrighteousness or injustice. Or as John writes in his First Epistle: ***“If we say we have not sinned, we make [God] a liar, and his word is not in us”*** (1 John 1:10).

Yet David not only confesses actual sins he has committed, but he also acknowledges his original sinful nature. And so the penitent has sorrow over original sin as well. The penitent recognizes that he or she is sinful through and through from birth, even conception. Paul writes to the Romans (5:12):
“Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin...so death spread to all men because all sinned.”

With the Apostle Paul, we are called to acknowledge ourselves as the chief of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). This is a matter of being totally honest without ourselves and with God.

You see, all sin is an insult to God—our original sin together with our actual sins, those committed against others or ourself. God is justified only by the one who condemns and judges himself completely and thoroughly. And so, God calls us to confess the truth about ourselves: We are sinners.

[The Need for Re-Creation]

God’s Word reveals the truth about ourselves and God. And so, the penitent recognizes his need for re-creation because he is so corrupted by sin. Like the USS *Belknap*, thorough change is required for us, we cannot effect ourselves.

You see, dealing with sin requires more than merely cleaning up one’s act. God wants a change of heart, something David, in his corrupt state, could never produce.

Now, if I was to fall over due to a sudden heart attack right now, I could not somehow raise myself. Even if my brainwaves were still working, and my brain told me I should try to get up, I couldn’t, because my heart would be stopped and I would no longer be breathing. I would need someone else to revive me through CPR. So it is with each of us because of sin.

We are spiritually dead and can do absolutely nothing to aid our situation before God. Cleansing of sin must come from God. God must do it all.

Here is Psalm 51, David is praying. He is praying that his confession is an acknowledgement of his sin. But his prayer of confession also trusts that God’s cleansing from sin is thorough and complete. Sin is blotted out. Sin is washed away. Sin is completely wiped away.

This cleansing of sin is based on God's gracious work in Jesus Christ. Cleansing with hyssop was part of the Old Testament purification rituals from those who were considered unclean, including lepers and those exposed to the dead. Blood and water were sprinkled and applied. The application of blood and water with hyssop in the Old Testament foreshadows our cleansing by the application of the blood of Christ through faith.

God's forgiveness is also described by David as God hiding His face from sin so that He no longer sees it. Here, God blotting out sin from His record book is washing us and making us whiter than snow. All of these point to redemption and complete cleansing that came through Christ, for ***"the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from sin"*** (1 John 1:7).

Because Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, God hides His face from our sin; God blots out our sin from His record; God washes us whiter than snow.

The words that we are so familiar with as part of the Offertory, ***"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me"*** are David's plea and are the plea of a true penitent.

You see, David has recognized his total unworthiness and total corruption. Thus, he prays for the miracle of a new creation, performed by the Creator alone. The Spirit present at creation, who hovered over the face of the deep—He alone works this new creation that involves repentance, faith, and willing service. Renewal is the work of the Holy Spirit through the Means of Grace.

The Old Adam in us must daily be drowned and the new man in Christ brought forth. The Holy Spirit works through God's Word and the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, together with Confession and Absolution.

In Holy Baptism, the old man is drowned, faith in Christ is created, and the Holy Spirit is given (Acts 2:38). There, we are connected to Jesus' death and resurrection and walk in newness of life (Rom 6:3-4). Through God's Word of Law, the Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin and brings us to repentance. Through God's Word of Gospel, the Holy Spirit assures us of God's forgiveness and love in Jesus Christ, which strengthens our faith.

In Confession and Absolution we all confess our total unworthiness to God, and it is Jesus Christ through the pastor who announces His forgiveness to you personally.

In the Lord's Supper, Christ gives you His very body and blood in, with, and under bread and wine for the forgiveness of your sins.

[Christ Renews the Penitent]

Because this renewal is never perfect in this life, David prays that the Spirit will keep him steadfast and sustain him so that he will not fall again. This prayer is also an expression of confidence that God will answer David's prayers, since David says with assurance; ***'Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you...O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise'*** (Psalm 51:13, 15). This Psalm is also an expression of confidence that God will answer David's prayer because David promises what he will do when his prayer is answered.

Genuine repentance produces a renewal for services, service that involves avoiding sin, praising God, telling others God's Word of truth, and praying for the renewal of all God's people.

Through repentance the penitent desires to avoid sin.

As penitents, we desire to serve and praise God.

As penitents, we desire to tell others God's Word of truth.

In all of this, the penitent prays that God would do this work, for it is only God who can do it. That is David's attitude throughout Psalm 51.

David concludes his penitential prayer asking God to do good to Zion and build up the walls of Jerusalem (v.18). As penitents we are to pray for the renewal of all God's people—the Church.

You see, as penitents we are to pray regularly for the building up of Christ's Church and to invite friends who may be unbelievers and doubters in, so the Holy Spirit can purify their hearts to penitent faith, because penitent faith leads to the grace of God, which freely gives us forgiveness of sins, salvation and life everlasting.

Now, each time we sing the canticle “*Create in Me a Clean Heart,*” the penitent prays that God would create within him or her a clean heart and a new and right spirit. In so praying, the penitent also knows, believes, and trusts that through Christ Jesus and the working of the Holy Spirit, God does just that—God hides His face from our sin; He blots out our sin from His record; He washes us whiter than snow. Amen!

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