

A Heart that Pleases God

Follow as I read the 51st Psalm, one that expresses David's repentance and God's forgiveness of a heart that pleases God.

- 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.*
- 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.*

My practice for years has been to find a Scripture promise or principle from my morning readings to reflect upon and apply throughout the day. About five and a half years ago, while riding my bicycle on my way home from the church office in Belgium, my arms began to tingle. I assumed it was from the morning workout at the gym and my hours of typing out my sermon that afternoon. I grew suddenly dizzy, and blacked out just as I rode my bike off the road. Passersby called an emergency ambulance that took me to the closest hospital, where I was diagnosed as having suffered a heart attack. As I lay in the emergency room, I recalled my Scripture verse prayer for the day, which was from this 51st Psalm: "A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." I had prayed for a broken heart, and I got one!

But "Heart" in Scripture rarely refers to the physical organ that pumps our blood, but rather to the seat of one's thinking and feeling, the very essence of a person. This psalm is the outpouring of David's broken heart before God and serves as a vivid example of how a heart, broken by sin, can once again become the kind of heart that pleases God. Because of the grievous nature of David's sin, this psalm becomes almost a "how much more" exhibit of God's grace and restoration of a heart that pleases him. If God can forgive, restore and be pleased with a heart that has fallen into such grievous sin, how much more will God not forgive, restore and be pleased with your heart?

This 51st Psalm, the best-known of the "penitential" Psalms, attributed to David and associated with his adultery with Bathsheba and arranged murder of her husband, is a description of a heart that finds favor with God once again. King David, who is Israel's ideal king, whose reign is prophetic of the reign of the Messiah, was chosen by the Lord, not because of his physical characteristics, but because of the quality of his heart (1 Samuel 16:7). David was a man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22).

David says "a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." We see the heart of David, as he cries out to God in brokenness over his sin. Sin is basically missing the mark of the standard of behavior God expects of his children. And certainly David failed to live up to God's standards, not only as a king and leader of God's people but simply as a child of God. In a spirit of brokenness, David shows that he is painfully aware of his sin. David said, "I know my transgressions and my sin is always before me" (3). His sinful acts continued to replay in his mind like a video. Even though he tried to keep his sin secret, he knew his sin was grievous to God, long before he confessed it to the prophet Nathan.

We are all created in God's image, and thus have a conscience which bears witness to the morality of our Creator, writes Paul in Romans (1:18-2:16). So, regardless of how much a person denies moral absolutes or even the existence of God, he or she knows inherently that there are certain absolute standards for behavior written upon the conscience, regardless of how seared that conscience

might be. In the words of Scot McKnight, God created us as his eikons, his image-bearers, but because of our sin, we have become cracked eikons. When God begins to reveal himself, even to those most steeped in a life of sin, iniquity and transgression, the conscience becomes fully awake. God makes us aware of sin through his word, which reveals his character and his standards for us, and by the Holy Spirit.

David's sins were grievous sins of the flesh, with severe consequences. But as Jesus makes clear, these overt sins of the flesh are no more egregious to God than are more covert and "respectable" sins of spirit, attitude and failure to love. In fact, the sins of religious hypocrites were the ones that most opposed and grieved Jesus, who was well received by "sinners of doubtful reputation" (Matthew 15:7; Luke 15:1ff). In fact, Jesus was angered and distressed by the loveless-ness of those who preferred keeping religious tradition to helping a crippled man (Mark 3:5). But David was keenly aware of his sin and knew that he stood condemned by sin.

In 1973 a book written by a renowned psychiatrist, Karl Menninger, shocked the world of secular psychology. In *Whatever Became of Sin*, Dr. Menninger made an appeal for the restoration of moral absolutes for the sake of mental health in a nation that was losing its moral foundation. Even though Menninger did not recognize the absolute standards of biblical morality, he called for teaching from parents, ministers and other leaders to restore a sense of right and wrong that is essential for the wellbeing of society and the mental health of individuals.

In the opening chapter of this book, Menninger tells the story "of a man standing in downtown Chicago, dressed in a rather normal way. He stood at a busy intersection at rush time and would solemnly raise his finger and point at people as they walked by and say, 'Guilty, Guilty, Guilty.' Finally, he was escorted off by the police. But while he was pointing at people and pronouncing his judgment, one man turned to his friend walking with him and said, 'How does he know?' He had been judged and convicted of something he had done" (Vestal).

Psychiatrist Karl Menninger understood that we all must live under a moral authority, and when we disregard that authority we experience real guilt. Left to our sinful condition we are condemned, as was David, by our sin and our guilt. David even expressed that he was born with a sin nature (verse 5). Like David, we are not sinners because we sin, but we sin because we are sinners.

When confronted by Nathan, David immediately confessed, "I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Samuel 12:13). And in this psalm, David says, "Against you, you only have I done what is evil in your sight" (4). Although David's sin was hurtful to other people and would have tragic consequences throughout the remainder of his life, he understood that all sin is against God. Our holy and loving God is the one who is most hurt by our sin. Sin violates his holiness and defaces his image and glory in us, bringing hurt to our lives and to the lives of

others, whom God loves more than we can comprehend. And of course, those of us this side of Calvary know that God hates sin because of the price he paid to rescue us from our guilt and sin. God hates sin because of what it did to his Son in his suffering and death for all the sin of the world.

Condemned by his sin, David was in need of God's mercy. Amazingly also, that immediately after David confessed his sin Nathan assured him, "The Lord has taken away your sin" (2 Samuel 12:13). Nathan told him he would have to suffer the horrible consequences of his sin during the remainder of his mortal life (14ff), but Nathan told him he would not die for his sin. David simply cries out for the mercy of God. We've nothing to offer God, no room to negotiate or bargain.

And we understand the glory of the gospel of the cross, which is the means by which God, the just one, could pay the penalty of our sin and also as the God of perfect love and mercy, provide the payment for our sin penalty which we could never pay. As Paul expresses it, in the cross of Christ God is both the just one and the justifier of those who have faith in Jesus (Romans 3:26). When we cry for God's mercy we know, even more than did David, the price God would have to pay in order to be merciful to spare us his judgment and gracious to forgive us and to give us a right standing with him.

And, even after we have called upon God to forgive us and have received his free gift, we who are recipients of his mercy and grace continue to live in total dependence on him, praying always, "Lord Jesus, have mercy." We need to be rid of sin, not just in our outward behavior, but to be people of inner purity and complete honesty and integrity before God (verse 6).

David has confessed his sin, and indicates that he is through with his sin and wants to clean in God's sight. He realizes that he'll need God's grace to make him acceptable before holy God. Hyssop was a plant the high priest would use to sprinkle blood as an act of ceremonial purification. David's prayer to be cleansed with hyssop (7) seems to portend the perfect sacrifice of the Son of God, which would completely cleanse us from all sin and guilt and impute to us the perfect righteousness of Christ.

When God gives Holy Spirit conviction he gives a crushing experience that leads to regret, confession and genuine repentance, i.e. turning from a life of self-centeredness and self-indulgence. But the crushing goes on, even as we grow in grace and spiritual maturity. We learn that God will continue to crush our hearts to self-will and self-centered desires. God is pleased with broken hearts that are crushed by his loving gracious hand that will lead us to find his healing and restoration. As David says, God's crushing us to self will lead to his deeper joy (verse 8).

God loves us so much he is determined to create in us hearts that are broken from our personal ambition and even prayers for other good things. God will

allow our dreams to be shattered, our prayers unanswered, and our lives apparently crushed in order to free us to love him more deeply than ever. Instead of helping us fulfill our hopes and dreams, God wants us to pursue him. And David seems to be saying that the pursuit of God, after being crushed by him, brings much greater joy than the fulfilling of our dreams or the answering of our prayers (verse 8). I'm trusting that my crushing experience will bring about some good.

David prays that God will create in him a clean heart and a new and right spirit within him (10). A heart that pleases God is one that seeks always to be God's continuing project—to grow in purity and in conformity with the character of Christ. David was praying for a heart as pure and as loving as Christ's heart, which is a work done by the Holy Spirit. David yearned to be restored to that sweet fellowship with God and to be assured of the presence of God, the Holy Spirit, his and our greatest possession (Luke 11:9-13).

Hearts that please God are broken before him, being renewed by the Holy Spirit with restored joy. Only by the fullness of the Holy Spirit can David hope once again to have the joy of God's salvation restored to him. This is the very heart of the psalm and shows us what God desires for our hearts—to be filled with his joy. The heart that pleases God is one that knows God's delight in us, and that finds its greatest joy in God alone. We'll never know the full depths of joy until we discover the joy of the Lord and the joy we find in him alone.

Our sins might not be as grievous, but you and I share with David a heart that is "devious above all else...perverse—who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9). Our sins may be less obvious and blatant, but just as grievous in the eyes of God and just as deadly to our spiritual condition and as destructive to our relationship with God and with others. Our sin may be a self-righteous or self-centered disregard of others and preoccupation with ourselves and our own needs and wants.

As we begin this Lenten Season, remember that Jesus offers us a new heart, a heart to know and to love God. It's a grace of God that we are made aware of our sin and our need of his cleansing and renewal. Our heart, to please God, must remain broken before him and must be a heart that seeks God and that seeks to love him entirely.

In a few weeks, I'll pay my routine visit to my cardiologist, who'll assess the condition of my heart, that physical organ that I try to keep ticking along. But the Lord indeed looks at my even more important heart. The question is, does your heart, does my heart, pass his examination. Do you and I have a heart that pleases God?

