

Proper 16A: Psalm 32
Church of the Good Shepherd
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Create in me a clean heart, O God:
The Penitential Psalms

Huston Smith, the renowned scholar of world religions, gave a lecture once in which he sought to articulate what he saw as the most notable aspect of each religion. For Islam, he said, it is submission, for Judaism, the family. And for Christianity? What makes Christianity distinctive is forgiveness, the forgiveness of sins, the sins of others and our own sins.

I reckon few Christians would disagree about the importance of forgiveness, even as some of us would rather not talk much about the need for it. For, to speak of the need for forgiveness is to acknowledge the reality of sin, a word that is considered by many today as outdated, judgmental and exclusionary. We have no problem talking about personal growth, spiritual journeys, and improving ourselves, but we prefer to not mention such things as being convicted by the Spirit, acknowledging guilt, or confessing our sins. When we fail morally, we say we committed a misstep, blunder or oversight, made an oopsy or booboo. But the simple fact is, there is no forgiveness without sin, no grace without failure. Indeed, to ignore sin is to reject the power of the cross to overcome it.

But even without raising it to that level, the denial of sin leaves us at a disadvantage, handicapped, for without the word and the concept of sin we have no way to understand and address it. Banning the word doesn't make the experience go away. And without acknowledging the pervasiveness of sin, we are shocked when people disappoint us and act viciously towards others, and are horrified and confused when we ourselves act shamefully. We are left feeling stained, polluted, defeated, or utterly ashamed, but don't know why we feel this way or what to do about it. We may try to deny the existence of sin, in order to deny these feelings, but it doesn't do anything about them. It just buries them deeper and deeper until we aren't even aware of them.

The Bible, and the psalms in particular, do not take that tact. The psalms speak of sin directly, and what it is like to live under the guilt of our sins and more importantly what to do about them. Indeed, the psalms acknowledge the reality of sin, while at the same time insisting on God's desire to save us from them, to forgive us, not in order to make us feel worse about ourselves, but to unburden us of guilt.

There are seven prayers for forgiveness in the Psalter, seven "Penitential Psalms"-- 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143. Yet several others--Psalms 14, 15, 25, 31, 39, 40, 41, for example—could be classified as "penitential" too, for they help lead us into the total depth of the recognition of sin before God. Given the universality of sin, you may be surprised that there are not more penitential psalms. Fact is, though, most psalms don't discuss sin but rather *presuppose* complete assurance of sin's forgiveness. The psalms arise out of a history with God, out of a relationship with him, in which God has repeatedly promised to forgive our sins when we admit them.

Now, as with other kinds of psalms, we rarely know what event precipitated the psalmists' prayers, but they do make it clear how they feel about it. In Psalms 32 and 51, for example, it is an overbearing sense of guilt that leads them to appeal to God, while in Psalms 38 and 102 it is physical suffering that drives the psalmists to repentance. In both cases, these psalms witness to an all-too-common pattern in human nature: we ignore our sin until its consequences become too much to bear and we are pushed toward God in desperation, knowing that only God can fix it. We instinctively know, sin even if committed against another person is in the end an offense against God, a rupture in our relationship with Him. And so it's up to God, as the offended party, to address it.

What's striking to readers of these psalms is that there is little if any preamble to these prayers, next to nothing in the way of praise or glorifying of God, that is, no attempt to butter Him up or bribe Him. Nor does the pray-er of these prayers have any self-consciousness about asking God, the one whom they have wronged, for assistance. The psalmist is honest and straightforward—I messed up, I'm sorry, I can't live like this, at odds with you, O God, help me. As I said a few weeks ago, it's striking that the ancient Jews believed that God would care about our plight, especially when our suffering is of our own making, the result of our going against God's designs. It's hard to believe that God wouldn't just ignore us, turn a deaf ear to us sinners. But the psalmists are confident God will heed their pleas, and what's more, they didn't need to pay a penalty to get back into God's good graces. What this shows is that this is not a transactional exchange, but rather an appeal to restore a relationship that has been ruptured.

Indeed, even the words the psalms use for sin express its relational nature. They speak of sin not as "breaking the rules," but as "transgressions" (*peshah*), as in taking what is not rightfully ours, a usurping, and by extension rebelling against legitimate authority, usually against God. We also hear of "sin" (*hatta*) as a failed endeavor often described metaphorically as "missing the mark." It's as though we've aimed at a target and either fallen short or overshot it, by either taking more and giving less than is just. And whether this is done deliberately or not, either way it injures relationships. The psalmists also speak of "iniquity" (*awon*), which refers to a crooked, bent, or malformed action, as well as the effects of the action, such as "guilt". Each of these terms—*peshah*, *hatta* and *awon*—refer to "sin," but with slightly different connotations.

Let's turn to two psalms to see how these sin-words are used. First, let's look at Psalm 32, on the back of your bulletin insert. In Psalm 32 a loved and forgiven sinner thanks God after-the-fact for guidance and forgiveness of sin. This is the only penitential psalm which is not a lament; the gratitude expressed suggests that God has already responded to the psalmist's cry for mercy. Listen to what God saved the psalmist from:

- 1 Happy are those whose transgression (*peshah*) is forgiven,
whose sin (*hatta*) is covered.
- 2 Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity (*awon*),
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.
- 3 While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
- 4 For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.
- 5 Then I acknowledged my sin (*hatta*) to you, and I did not hide my iniquity (*awon*);

I said, "I will confess my transgressions (*pesha*) to the LORD,"
and you forgave the guilt (*awon*) of my sin (*hatta*).

The psalm not only offers a terminology for sin but also describes feelings associated with it: wasting away, groaning, a heavy hand bearing down, withering of strength.

Now, consider, Psalm 51, the psalm we just read together. Psalm 51 presents a range of words for sin, including those used in Psalms 32.

- 1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving-kindness;
in your great compassion, blot out my transgressions (*pesha*).
- 2 Wash me through and through from my iniquity (*awon*),
and cleanse me from my sin (*hatta*).
- 3 For I know my transgressions (*pesha*),
and my sin (*hatta*) is ever before me.
- 4 Against you, you alone, have I sinned (*hatta*), and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence and upright in your judgment.
- 5 Indeed, I have been wicked (*awon*) from my birth.
a sinner from my mother's womb.

Awon, *pesha*, *hatta* all show up again. Together they translate into an understanding of sin as the fundamental spoiling of a person. A distortion, a disharmony, a rebellion, a will to something other than, and opposed to, the designs of God. Perhaps the goal of these different words for sin is not precision but a more inclusive view, to help us better understand the nature and consequences of our sins against God, by describing what it's like experientially to live at odds with Him.

More important than our experience of sin is, however, is how God responds to it. The author of Psalm 51 begins not with an account of sin but with an address to God, begging mercy. And the ways that the psalmist calls on God to respond mirror the rich variety of terms for sin: *have mercy*, *blot out*, *wash thoroughly*, *cleanse*. These are evocative words, just like *awon*, *pesha*, and *hatta*. "Cleanse" usually refers to the removal of ceremonial impurity, and so the goal of cleansing is to remove that which should not be there and to prevent its spread. To "wash thoroughly" suggests vigorous action, like scrubbing clothes in a river or stream on rocks. "Blot out" seems to have the nuance of erasing from view; its objects are the psalmist's rebellious transgressions, which may be the most serious type of sin.

In each of these petitions, the psalmist focuses on God and God's character, his *hesed* or "loving-kindness" in verse 1 and his *rachamim* or "abundant compassion" in verse 2. What these appeals teach us, what they remind us, is that prior to the confession of sin, we stand before a lovingly merciful God, and after all the hand-wringing and soul-searching, God is asked not just to fix the relationship, but to fix us, so we don't repeat our mistakes. The psalmists ask God to fill them with truth, wisdom, joy, and gladness, a clean heart, and a spirit of holiness.

The request in v11, "Create in me a clean heart," is particularly significant, for that word "create" (*bara* in Hebrew) is theologically charged. You see, in the Old Testament, only God creates (no other being is ever the subject of this verb, *bara*). So the psalmist is here acknowledging that we humans do

not have it in our power to cleanse our hearts, to renew our lives. Confession of sin by itself will not bring health or a clean heart, nor will any of the spiritual or psychological things that humans typically do to make us feel better. Forgiveness of sins occurs only when a merciful God acts to recreate the bond of love with His creation.

When the one who prays for forgiveness receives it, then public praise of God is the natural outcome: "My tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance" (v14). In this way, Psalm 32 which we just looked at, is a fitting sequel to Psalm 51, a psalm of thanksgiving in response to God's graciousness and forgiveness. These two penitential psalms, one a lament and the other a thanksgiving, thus offer rich fare for us to dine on in our meditation and prayer.

Fact is, sin is a difficult and confusing reality to talk and pray about. Many people avoid reflecting on their sins, banishing them from their consciousness. Others ignore personal sin but dwell on the sinfulness of humankind. Still others, probably many more than we realize, find that guilt over their sin or humankind's sinful condition hovers constantly at the edges of their consciousness. And yet, both those who deny their sinfulness and those who are consumed by it suffer from the same malady—they are unable to experience the joy and freedom that comes with God's forgiveness.

Regular prayer with the penitential psalms can address just this reality. The penitential psalms provide us a way to talk about our sin, leading neither to self-centered attack on ourselves nor to evasion of our responsibilities. These psalms beckon us into energetic dialogue with God, with God who names our sin, forgives our sin, and through it all continues to love us. The penitential psalms constitute earnest petitions to God—for healing, for forgiveness—and grateful responses for God's intervention. And they allow God to teach us, to remind us that we are truly loved sinners in God's eyes. Even when a psalm notes that God has promised something the psalmist has not yet experienced, there is always the sense that God *will* be faithful. God's mercy and compassion are everlasting to those who love God. God's love is stronger than sin or any of sin's effects in our lives.

Jesus reminds us of the same message in his parable of the lost sheep: "I tell you there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (Luke 15:7). Our sin and our sinful condition draw us back again into the arms of the committed, compassionate God, a God who not only can but who delights to restore us. Thanks be to God!