

March 18th 2012 “Forgiving Yourself” Psalm 51

Dr John White in his book “The Masks of Melancholy” writes about a psychiatric patient he once had. This man was a 40 year old bachelor who, against all medical evidence, was convinced that he was dying of cancer. When Dr White started to talk to the man he discovered that the man had two past sins that he was extremely troubled about. The first was that he had drunk a bottle of beer many years before when his doctor had told him not to. The second, and more significant, was that he had avoided enlisting in World War 2 and felt bad that some of his friends had died in the conflict.

Knowing this man was a believer White asked him whether he believed in forgiveness. Oh Yes, he replied, because Christ died. He shed blood. So, what about your sins? White said. But I’m too bad he responded. I don’t deserve ever to be forgiven.

At this point in the interview White writes that he found himself becoming quite angry. He turned to the man and said, p16.....

This man’s refusal to forgive himself had hampered his whole existence and sent him to the very edge of insanity. It was only when he repented of the arrogance of believing that Christ’s death was not big enough to cover his sins, was he able to accept Christ’s forgiveness and to forgive himself, and from that moment onwards he was a changed man.

Before he recognized the power of Christ’s forgiveness and was able to forgive himself, he carried those sins around like a mighty chain around his neck. Expecting terminal cancer to be his portion because he expected to be punished.

I have met Christians who carry past sins around with them like burdens of guilt. They steal from them, the joy of the Lord and prevent them having an effective ministry for Him. Every bad thing that happens they feel is a result of wrongs done in the past.

I think of one person who as a Christian, committed the sin of having sex before marriage. From that time on that person has not allowed themselves to settle into a church because they feel that they are not pure enough to ever perform any ministry for Christ. Not pure enough to stay around long

enough to get involved. They can't seem to forgive themselves and move on.

And perhaps in the past we too have used the phrase, "I can't forgive myself" with regard to a particular sin, or heard others use it, and yet, what I think we really mean by such a phrase or thought is that we can't let ourselves off the hook. Can't give ourselves permission to be free of guilt. Free to try again.

That could so easily have been the case with King David after the incident with Bathsheba. He was known as the greatest king Israel ever had, yet he slept with another man's wife and then, when the woman became pregnant, he had her husband killed in order to cover up his wrongdoing. After that he continued to act in his kingly role as though nothing had happened until God's prophet Nathan challenged him about his sin. Only then was he repentant, confessed his sins, accepted the consequences, and was reconciled to God.

Psalm 51 is an account of the process David went through in dealing with his sin. A process that would have taken a fair amount of time—days, weeks, maybe months. He begins with a cry for mercy and forgiveness in v1-2

***¹ Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.
² Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.***

This cry for forgiveness is a heartfelt one. He doesn't ask on the basis of past good deeds or because he is God's chosen king. He recognizes the gravity of his wrongdoing and that he is unworthy to even seek the cleansing he needs, so his plea is on the basis of God's unfailing love and great compassion alone.

But then we come to verses 3 & 4 and it is here that we see just how easy it would have been for David to think that he was too bad to be forgiven. How close he seems to have come to walking away from his ministry before

God. A man too wretched for God to forgive and therefore too wretched to forgive himself.

**³ For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.**

**⁴ Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are proved right when you speak
and justified when you judge.**

There are two things we need to note here from what David writes. He mentions that his sin is always before him. The immensity of the wrongs he had committed was always there in his mind. He had no doubt repatriated the family of the man he had killed and confessed before the people, but the guilt was a mighty and daily burden. It is here we see the danger he faced at that point of being stuck in his sin and never being able to release himself from that burden.

The second thing is that he knew it was against God. Before God he stood as guilty of breaking at least four of the covenantal ten commandments and he knew that without God's forgiveness there was absolutely no hope for him. He was evil in God's sight. I like the way the CEV presents these two verses:-

**³ I know about my sins,
and I cannot forget
my terrible guilt.**

**⁴ You are really the one
I have sinned against;
I have disobeyed you
and have done wrong.
So it is right and fair for you
to correct and punish me.**

Now at this point David is in the same position as the man who was the patient of Dr White. He knew he should be punished for his sin and that his guilt was so terrible that he could not continue to act before God or others as though he had done no wrong. The past had to be dealt with before he could move on. Either by him receiving the just punishment, or somehow, by God in His great mercy declaring him forgiven.

But what David had and what Dr White's patient at first lacked, was the belief that God would be willing and able to completely cleanse, forgive, and renew his heart if he asked Him to. So in v7-10 we read:-

- 7 Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.***
- 8 Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.***
- 9 Hide your face from my sins
and blot out all my iniquity.***
- 10 Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.***

When you think of the extent of David's sin, then, the faith he has in God to cleanse him, blot out his iniquity, and give him a pure heart is immense. Note the words that reveal that confidence:-

You cleanse me and I **will** be clean. You wash me and I **will** be whiter than snow. David was able to forgive himself and move on because he knew God had first forgiven him. No doubt the devil attacked him with the memories of his sin and was quick to point out the consequences of his past deeds, but each time we can imagine David responding with the words, but God has forgiven me.

In this regard v11-12 are very informative:-

- 11 Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.***
- 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.***

In the context of Israel then, the bestowing of God's Holy Spirit upon someone was the equivalent of God's ordination of them into high office. So when God rejected Saul as king He took from him His Spirit. David is therefore asking God not to take from him, his ordination as king. And God didn't. That's how David knew he had been forgiven.

And his service for God would from then on have had an extra emphasis to it. A ministry to sinners like him. Look at v13

**¹³ Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will turn back to you.**

Because David has sinned greatly yet has been forgiven and restored, he will be able to help other sinners to seek after and receive the same glorious forgiveness he has received. Help other sinners forgive themselves as they too experience God's most gracious forgiveness, and move on in their relationship with their God.

There's a story about a manager of an IBM project that had lost \$10 million before it was scrapped, being called into a meeting at the corporate office. I suppose you want my resignation he asked. Resignation nothing! Replied his boss. We've just spent \$10 million educating you.

Through the forgiveness he received, God educated David for the task of helping others. A task he never would have been able to do if he had not accepted that forgiveness in totality, and because of it forgiven himself.

As I suggested at the beginning, when we refuse to forgive ourselves we are in reality refusing to give ourselves permission to be free of the guilt of past sins. And that is the same as saying that the forgiveness Christ purchased on the cross is not enough to forgive us completely. Not enough to blot out our transgression. Not enough to create a clean heart in us.

If you have confessed your sin before God then 1 John 1:9 says:-

He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

It was Corrie Ten Boom who said that when God forgives He takes our sins and buries them in the depths of the sea, and puts up a sign saying, "No fishing."

Do you believe that? Or are you carrying around a burden that is stealing your joy? Some sin that fills you with shame still, and stops you from being all that the Lord wants you to be. Stops you from doing the task that He has set before you.

In Christ God forgives you if you seek His forgiveness and there is no limit. The evil one will tell you otherwise but God has cleansed you through the offering of His Son.

In his book, 'How to be born again', Billy Graham refers to a story of a little girl that broke one of her mother's treasured cups. The little girl came to her mother sobbing, 'Oh mama, I'm so sorry I broke your pretty cup.'

The mother replied, I know you are sorry and I forgive you. Now don't cry any more. The mother then swept up the pieces of the broken cup and placed them in the trash can. But the little girl enjoyed the guilty feeling. She went to the trash can, picked out the broken pieces of the cup, brought them to her mother and sobbed, Mother I'm so sorry I broke your pretty cup.

This time her mother spoke firmly to her. Take those pieces and put them back in the trash can and don't be silly enough to take them out again. I told you I forgave you so don't cry any more, and don't pick up the broken pieces anymore."

If you are struggling with some past sin in your life that you won't let go of despite the fact that many times you have sought God's forgiveness, then today God speaks quite sternly and says. My forgiveness is sufficient. Put the pieces back in the trash, and begin today to live out that forgiven life I died to make possible. A life that proclaims to others the amazing and complete forgiveness that there is to be found in me.