

Series: "Psalms in the Summer"  
Part 4: "I'm Sorry"

We are looking at some of the psalms this summer. Today we'll look at one of the so-called "penitential psalms" – psalms of confession and penitence (or remorse over wrongdoing). Psalm 51 is perhaps the most eloquent of these confessional psalms. It begins: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me" (Psalm 51:1-3).

This psalm is traditionally attributed to King David, after his sin with Bathsheba. That incident is an ugly blotch on the brilliant life of Israel's greatest king. Walking one afternoon on the roof of his palace, David spots a beautiful woman bathing. He lusts after her, although she is married. He gets her pregnant, then arranges to have her soldier husband killed in battle so he can marry her. By the time the dust settles, David has broken at least 6 of the Ten Commandments: adultery, lying, stealing, coveting, worshiping another god, and murder.

David *could* have written this psalm, for the Bible says after the prophet Nathan confronted David about his sin, David said, "I have sinned against the Lord". If King David wrote Psalm 51, it is an intimate look into the soul of this brokenhearted champion of God. And the words of this psalm express what many people feel when they are truly sorry for their sins.

So let's look at this magnificent psalm. ***It is certainly an honest, heartfelt expression of guilt.*** No making excuses. No rationalizing bad behavior. No trying to shift the blame onto somebody else. David says, "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me" (Psalm 51:3). David didn't blame God, or Bathsheba, or anyone else. He didn't say, "God, if you had just kept me from walking there that day I wouldn't have seen her." "If she hadn't been bathing out in the open – I mean, any red-blooded Hebrew guy would have done the same if he had the chance." No. David said, "I'm guilty. I take responsibility for what I've done. *I'm sorry.*"

We can be good at rationalizing, shifting the blame, making excuses, can't we? "Not my fault." "If you were married to the jerk I'm married to, you'd cheat too." "If you were under the same stress I am, you'd be just as grouchy and hateful." Children learn this early on, don't they? Making excuses, claiming someone else did what they themselves did! Unfortunately, we don't outgrow this. We only perfect it!

A man named Dan White murdered the mayor of San Francisco and a supervisor in 1978. His lawyers blamed the crime on White's depression. They claimed his depression worsened when he turned from eating healthy foods to eating Twinkies and other sugary foods! Even though he killed 2 men in cold blood, the court only sentenced him to 7 years in prison for *manslaughter*, not premeditated murder. He was released after serving only 5 years and 1 month. This led to the popular phrase "Twinkie defense". A lot of people go through life claiming the "Twinkie defense". Not my fault. Don't blame me. *King David, in this psalm, says, "It is my fault. I'm guilty. I'm sorry."*

I often wonder whether our culture has not lost a healthy sense of guilt. We don't feel guilty anymore over things people 40, 50 years ago would have. Yet, one Christian psychologist and author, Gary Collins, maintains that guilt is a lot more prevalent today than we might suspect, and that it plays a part in such things as marital problems, addictions, grief, depression.

Now I am not saying we should feel guilty over things where there is no reason to feel guilty. Psychologists talk about "false guilt" or "pathological guilt", where we feel guilty even though we've done nothing wrong – like feeling guilty that we're a bad parent, when we are doing all we can, or believing that we could have prevented someone from hurting themselves or doing something foolish when we had no control over that person.

I'm sorry to say that Christians and the church sometimes lay unnecessary guilt trips on people. For instance, in days gone by, some Christians preached against playing cards or dancing, and people felt guilty if they did. Or today in some Christian circles, a "perfectionism" is preached that sets up *impossible* rules or standards, and people feel guilty when they can't measure up.

But on the other hand, when we actually do wrong (or fail to do what we should or could have done), a very proper response is to feel guilty. In fact, *guilt can be a gift of God!* It's a warning sign that something is wrong in our life that needs attention. Guilt can be God's way to stimulate us to change, or to correct something in our life that is unhealthy or destructive. *David's sense of guilt was an appropriate response to the evil he had done*

***Then too, David realizes that his sin was ultimately against God.*** "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" (verse 4). Even though he sinned against Bathsheba and her husband in a horrible, ruthless way, David realized that ultimately he sinned against *God*. This is something to remember. When I hurt somebody else, when I do wrong against someone in my family or a neighbor, I am doing this against the God who created that person, and the Christ who commanded us to love one another.

***Also, we see in this psalm not only David's remorse for what he's done, but his desire to change.*** Check out verse 10: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me." It's possible to be sorry, but not sorry enough to change. Or, we can be sorry that *we got caught* – but not really grieve over what we've done.

*Being sorry isn't enough!* I counseled a couple where the husband had a habit of putting his wife down in front of their children. By the time they agreed to get counseling, the woman carried so much hurt and so many scars and wounds that she wasn't sure she wanted to continue in the marriage. Prior to one session, the husband had recently put her down again. He told her in front of the children to "go to hell". Afterwards, he said he was sorry – but she said, "Being sorry isn't enough. What...am I just supposed to overlook that and say I forgive you just because you say 'I'm sorry'?" She needed him to *stop doing that!* *David was not only sorry. He sincerely wanted to change.*

***In this psalm, David recognizes the negative effects of unconfessed sin and unrelieved guilt.***

It robs us of *joy* in the Christian life, the joy of salvation. “Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice,” he cries out. “Restore to me the joy of your salvation” (verses 8, 12a). Covering over our sins, and not confessing them to God, squeezes the joy out of our life in Christ. Having unconfessed sin in our life also alienates us from God and distances us from God: “Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me”, David prays (verse 11). Do we want to stay close to God? Do we want to allow the Spirit to work in our life? Don’t try to deny your guilt or hide your sins. And then, unconfessed sin and guilt hinders us from being useful to God. If only God will forgive him and relieve his guilt, “then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you” (verse 13).

In this psalm, we see David, a great man of God, kneeling before God in brokenness and heartfelt contrition, saying from the depths of his being, “*I’m sorry!*” The film *Simon Birch* tells the story of a young boy with stunted growth, and his friend Joe Wentworth, both of whom are sort of outcasts in a small New England town. Joe is the illegitimate son of the town beauty (played by Ashley Judd), and Simon is picked on because he’s so small. Emotionally rejected by his own parents, Simon has a special bond with Joe’s mother – he adores this lovely, vivacious woman. One day, at one of Simon’s baseball games, something happens.....(*play the clip from the film*).

I’m sorry! Where do we go when we feel the crushing weight of guilt? What do we do when, like David, we realize, “I blew it! I’ve messed up so bad”!

I remember a lady in one of the congregations I served, a church leader, who one day wept as she shared with me that she had had an abortion years before, and was still feeling grief and guilt over that. Certainly there have been many times in my life when I’ve felt the grief David felt. Many times, when my heart has been heavy because of some sin, when I know I failed the Lord, I’ve gotten down on my knees, taken a Bible in my hand, and read this Psalm and made it my own prayer of confession.

***There is good news when we come to that place of penitence: God is willing to forgive and restore us!*** God has made forgiveness possible through His Son Jesus – His sacrifice on the cross bought us a chance to have our guilt and our sin removed. What God needs from us is a brokenness, a willingness to say from the bottom of our heart, “I’m sorry! Please change me!” “The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (verse 17). Someone has said, “You need to be broken before you can be fixed.”

If you have never given your life to Christ, I urge you to do so. Come to Christ with a broken and penitent spirit. He will forgive all your past wrongs, and He will give you new life and new strength to live right. Maybe you’re a Christian, but there’s stuff in your life you know shouldn’t be there. Maybe there’s some sin or failure in the past that you’ve managed to hide, but you know God knows and it’s tearing you apart. Admit it and turn it over to God. In verse 10, where David prays, “Create in me a clean heart, O God...”, the verb used here for the Hebrew word

“create” is the same verb used in Genesis 1:1 for when God *creates* the heavens and earth. The same Power at work in the creation of the universe is at work in the re-creation of a heart and life!

A distinguished professor of medicine from one of the best known medical clinics in the world called a noted pastor and author and asked if could come for counseling, even though it meant traveling a long distance. This distinguished, immaculately dressed doctor came into the room, his face baring signs of trouble and anguish. He said to the pastor, “I’ve come quite a distance to ask for your help. May I now propose one or two questions? Is it possible for a sense of guilt produced by actual wrongdoing to have an adverse effect on one physically and mentally so that one may become unable effectively to do his work?” The pastor assured him that in his counseling he had seen a number of instances where this was true. “And now for my second question”, the man said. “Is it possible to gain an assurance of God’s forgiveness, so that the burden of guilt will be lifted from one’s conscience, with a resultant healing of body, mind and spirit?” Again, the pastor said he had known this to happen many times. “Then let us kneel in prayer together,” the professor of medicine said. He prayed a humble and moving prayer, pleading for God’s forgiveness and pledging his life to God in a new devotion and humble service. The doctor got up from his knees with his face radiant!

They talked about the Bible’s promise of forgiveness through Christ and how He can give a penitent person new life and healing. And there is a sequel to this story: On each anniversary of that date, this professor of medicine returned hundreds of miles to the city where that encounter took place to thank God for the forgiveness he had found in Christ! *This, my friend, is the Good News of the gospel: We have a God who will forgive us!*

*I’m sorry! The power of those words, when spoken from the heart! When’s the last time you’ve said that to God and meant it? When’s the last time you said those words to someone you’ve hurt or wronged?*

***Think what might happen if we learned to say “I’m sorry,” and mean it!*** *In the family, for instance.* Sometimes things happen and family members don’t speak to each other for weeks, months, years! If we would go to that family member and say, “You know, for whatever part I’ve played in separating us, *I’m sorry.*” Or, if we know we’ve hurt someone in our family, to go to that person and say from the heart, “*I am so sorry*”. *And in our churches.* We’ve said a thoughtless, or unkind word to someone and hurt them. Or we’ve disagreed with someone on an issue. The relationship with that person cooled. If we can go to the person and say, “I’m sorry. I know what I said must have hurt you.” Or, “We may still not believe the same about this issue, but I don’t like this bad feeling between us. I’m sorry for my part in letting this happen.”

Imagine if *Republicans and Democrats in Washington* would be willing to say “I’m sorry”, and really mean it, instead of minimizing their own mistakes, or blaming the other party! “We voted for this bill which we thought was a good idea, but now we see it isn’t working. Or a party leader or cabinet member, instead of making excuses would say, “We made a mistake. We take responsibility. *I’m sorry*”

There have been times when I've had to say that to someone. There was a young lady in one of the churches I served who was scheduled for surgery. She called the church and left a message with the secretary. She was afraid, and wanted to talk with me if possible before her operation. I left the note on my desk. Somehow it got stuck under a pile of mail and notes. One day when I was cleaning off my desk, I came across her message – but she already had her surgery. I felt so bad! What could I do – but call her. I didn't make excuses. I did apologize. She said, "Oh, that's OK", but I said, "It's not OK. *I am so sorry!*" Fortunately, she didn't hold it against me. She didn't leave the church, or trash me as her pastor.

There are times in our life when our heart cries out, "I'm sorry"! We see that in Psalm 51 – in David's plea for forgiveness and relief from his guilt.

One of my favorite Scriptures is 1 John 1:8-9 "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

There is a Place we can go with our guilt to find relief!

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