

The Psalms as a School of Prayer – Part 3 – Confession

A Sermon Preached by Zac Klassen at Bloomingdale Mennonite Church, October 24th, 2021

Good morning. Today we continue our 8-week worship series on prayer as communication with God. For the last two Sunday's, we have been looking to the book of Hebrew poetry called The Psalms as a resource or even as a 'school' of prayer—a place we can go to learn and be taught how to pray. Last week we explored lament Psalms; psalms that express with stark honesty our experiences of pain, sorrow, loss, and disorientation. We learned that when the Psalmist laments and when we lament, we cry out to God, seeking help when life does not seem to make much sense. We also learned that lament Psalms can even go so far as to *question* God's faithfulness to God's covenant promises to maintain a world of order and well-being; a world where God walks with us as a gentle and caring shepherd, a loving mother or father, a mighty protector; a world where the good prospers and evil is defeated. "God," the Psalmist asks, "why are you not living up to your end of this relationship?"

If prayers of lament call into question God's faithfulness to the relationship God has made with us, today prayers of confession help give voice to our awareness of *our* failure to keep up our end of the relationship between us and God and with each other. Prayers of confession help us name those times that we have sinned, those times that we have "missed the mark" God has set for us or forsaken the path that God has called us to walk. Prayers of confession help give us a language to acknowledge our sins, take responsibility for them, and walk in repentance. It is thus for good reason that every week in our worship we pray a prayer of confession together.

Our text for today from Psalm 51 is a helpful example of a prayer of confession.

Traditionally, this Psalm has been attributed to David. The description that precedes the Psalm says “A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone to bed with Bathsheba.”¹ This is a reference to the incident in 2 Samuel 12, where Nathan proclaims God’s judgment against David’s evil act to have Uriah murdered and Bathsheba taken to be his wife, with no evidence of her consent in the matter (2 Samuel 12:9). Scholars debate whether Psalm 51 actually originates from the time of David’s evil deed described in 2 Samuel. Some, even go so far as to suggest that this Psalm may actually serve as a kind of critique of David’s “inadequate repentance” in 2 Samuel 12.² Bible scholar J. Richard Middleton notes, for example, that there seem to be some notable differences in the depiction of David’s confession in 2 Samuel and the confession offered in Psalm 51: In 2 Samuel, after Nathan calls him out on his actions, David seems to repent on the spot (2 Sam. 12:13a), Nathan offers absolution on the spot (2 Sam. 12:13b), God’s judgment falls through the death of David’s son (2 Sam. 12:14-22) soon thereafter, and then the in many ways tragic story of David’s life moves on, with all the trials that he faces in his later years as King.³

In the Psalm, however, we have a depiction of a person who is engaging in an ongoing process of self-examination, confession, and repentance. The Psalmist does not assume their sin has been dealt with, but instead pleads that God would “wash” and “cleanse” them (v.2). The Psalmist also asks to be “taught wisdom” (v.6), and for God to “create in them a clean

¹ This is Robert Alter’s translation.

² See Richard J. Middleton’s “A Psalm Against David?: A Canonical Reading of Psalm 51 as a Critique of David’s Inadequate Repentance in 2 Samuel 12,” in *Explorations in Interdisciplinary Reading: Theological, Exegetical, and Historical-Critical Perspectives*, pp.26-45.

³ While David certainly fasts and prays during 2 Sam. 12:16-22, there the prayer seems to be centered around pleading for his Son’s life, something absent from the Psalm.

heart,” and to “put a new and right spirit within” them (v.10). The Psalmist also employs the great prophetic emphasis on what an “acceptable sacrifice” is to God (v.17). The ritual of apology, you might say, is not enough, for this Psalmist. What God asks for is a spirit and a heart that truly is “broken and contrite” (v.17), ready to start the hard work of change, and not hardened and self-assured in its self-righteousness. In an age where we hear a lot about apologies on the news—apologies by powerful, rich men seeking absolution from histories of serial abuse, apologies by governments and churches seeking to confess sins of colonialism and reconcile with Indigenous peoples—we know just how empty the ritual of apology and confession can be at times; too often it is an empty token used to avoid the difficult work of fully *recognizing* the offense and to avoid *taking responsibility* for wrongful actions.

Here, again, we can learn from the Psalmist. The Psalmist “knows” their transgressions and their “sin is ever before” them (v.3). There is no hiding or denying or even minimizing fault here, for the Psalmist. The Psalmist also accepts responsibility for their actions saying to God “you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.”⁴ Whether or not this Psalm was written as a critique of David’s inadequate repentance in 2 Samuel or an actual prayer of confession penned by David himself, there is much that we can learn from it, even as we might struggle with portions of this Psalm and just with prayers of confession in general. It is natural for us to struggle with confession. Even though many of us might generally agree that it is a good thing to confess our sins to God and to each other, learning to pray in the mode of

⁴ Here it is a good reminder that this “judgment” is not a reference to the afterlife but to the natural consequences that follow sin.

confession is nonetheless a difficult discipline to grow into. I suspect that this difficulty arises for many of us for a couple of reasons.

First and most basically, confession is difficult because it is hard to admit when we mess up. We like doing well by others and by God. We also like to feel in control of ourselves, competent and wise; we like to feel that we make good decisions. Confessing sin is difficult because it means owning up to messing up. So first, and most basically, confession is difficult for us because it is not fun to face our own failures, even if they are not as morally repugnant as King David's. On the other hand, however, I also suspect that confessing our sins is difficult for many of us because the church has not always had a very healthy understanding of and response to sin. Let's tackle the first part first, namely, the church's understanding of sin.

There have been a variety of ways used to name and identify sin in the Christian tradition. The church has looked to scripture as a guide, of course. The ten commandments and their "thou shalt not's" have been used as a basis upon which to determine if an action or inaction is sinful. Jesus' command to love your neighbour as yourself is another (Matt. 19:19). In the New Testament there are whole lists given by the Apostle Paul in his letters that identify all manner of activities that would keep one out of the kingdom of God (eg. 1 Corinthians 6:9-10). And then of course throughout history theologians have devised lists of sins such as those infamous seven deadly sins: gluttony, lust, greed, envy, wrath, sloth, and pride. To be sure, these scriptural and traditional ways of naming sin can sometimes be helpful. There are also, however, ways that these lists have been used to present sins in unhelpful and, dare I say, even sinful ways. Lists like these, perhaps especially the seven deadly sins, have been used, for example, to make people feel shame, especially about the body they inhabit. The church has

often struggled to talk about the goodness and beauty of human desire when it is well ordered. The result has been sometimes that the church has depicted living in the body as itself sinful. As the church has become more aware of the role that distorted understanding of the body has played through history, it has been important to recover the biblical affirmation that God has created our bodies and their desires as good, and not sinful in themselves. This positive view of the body, however, is no less naïve to the fact that our human desires can nonetheless be disordered and that we can misuse our bodies and the bodies of others. But what a positive view of the body does not do, is to equate everything related to bodily desire with sin. Another problem with these traditional lists is that they are sometimes perceived as listing individual sins rather than also naming and identifying systemic socio-cultural sins like racism, economic inequality, sexism, and the like. Sin, in scripture, clearly names much more than just individual moral failures.

It shouldn't surprise us that if the church has had some distorted understandings of sin that the church would also struggle with and at times have unhealthy responses or approaches to dealing with sin in the community. Many of you may remember and be familiar with different approaches to public confession of sin in the Mennonite church. In the past, where there was a moral failure in the community, it was common in Mennonite communities to have the individual or individuals come before the church to confess, to commit to a life of repentance, and (in theory) to receive the grace and support of the community in walking that path of repentance. I also suspect that some of us have seen ways that such public modes of confession have gone wrong. I wonder whether instances where public confession went wrong

happened because the sin being confessed was not addressed with *both truth and love*.⁵ While public confession can be a helpful opportunity to tell the truth in a community of grace, I suspect that sometimes the church has not always provided an environment of love and mercy within which to tell that truth. As a result, confession has too often been an occasion to shame and humiliate, rather than to seek to support a person or persons in the path of genuine repentance.⁶ On the other hand, however, sometimes the responses of members in the church to sin are unhealthy because there is no response at all, no confession or accountability where a situation requires just that! Sometimes under the guise of loving the sinner, the church has ignored truth-telling in favor of hiding or concealing sin that should be named for the well-being of individuals and the community.

Given the many ways that the church has struggled to understand and respond to sin, it is not surprising then that we might confession a difficult discipline to practice both individually and corporately. Difficult though practicing confession might be, here we are today, encouraged to confess our sins before God. By the end of today's service, I hope that we can have discovered or rediscovered or deepened a prayer language that arises out of *both* a deep confidence that we are loved by God and out of an *honest acknowledgment* of the reality of our human weakness and brokenness.

⁵ There are many scriptural texts that hold "truth" and "love" together. Perhaps some of the more well known are: Ephesians 4:15; 1 John 3:18.

⁶ While I want to be cautious here, personally, in certain instances of sin, I do think that there can be a constructive role or place for shame as a natural consequence of sinful actions. Here I am thinking specifically of cases where the heinous sins of very influential figures are exposed after years of hiding them. There is a natural consequence of "shame" that comes with being exposed in this way and even a positive social function, namely, the offender is not permitted by society to have their reputation unscathed by their sin. I have for some time now been wanting to read Te-Li Lau's book *Defending Shame: Its Formative Power in Paul's Letters* which makes a positive case for the function of shame in Paul's letters.

The first three verses from our text for today from Psalm 51 already help us hold together truth and love as we confess our sins. “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.” From the very outset of praying in the mode of confession, we learn that we bring our weakness and our brokenness not to a God who stands apart from us judging and waving a condemning finger—a God that heaps shame upon us—but rather we bring our weakness and our brokenness to a God of steadfast *love* and abundant mercy. In confessing our sins, however, we also truly “know our transgressions” and our “sin is...before us.” Confessing to God in prayer is about facing the full *truth* of our humanity under the gaze of the God whose very life is truth and love. In her book *Soul Feast*, Marjorie Thompson describes how by practicing confession, we can

find the courage to look honestly at who we are. Bathed in god’s love, we can see clearly and nondefensively all the destructive patters of our false self: the facades we have hidden behind, the excuses we have relied on to avoid taking responsibility, our habits of deception and control, our failure to love God, others, or ourselves adequately.⁷

Facing this is hard work, of course, and it carries with it a commitment to make concrete changes in our lives. Confession is not a ritual meant to absolve us from the work of change, rather, it is a necessary step in the life-long work of change.

What we will now do this morning as we seek to learn to pray in the mode of confession, is use some of the basic movements of Psalm 51 as a guide for us during a time of personal examination. In just a moment, we will hear a recording of a song from *Voices*

⁷ Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast*, 91.

Together #693, "Have Mercy on Us, Lord." These words, which come from the opening of Psalm 51, will move us into a time of self-examination and confession. During that time, I will lead us in inviting God to show us those places in our lives where we are called to confess, repent, and live into the life of God's newness for us. Then, we will close our time of confession with VT#808, "Between Darkness and Light." As we confess, may we all be held by the God whose very life is truth and love.

EXAMEN⁸

- I want to begin by inviting you to get comfortable in your seat, close your eyes, take a deep breath in and breathe out (as much as you can wearing a mask), and speak either silently or quietly to yourself the words: **I am held by the God of Love and Mercy (x2).**
- As we rest in God's love and mercy, we now **1. Ask God to show us our sin** (Ps. 51: 10 & 6). Help us, O God, to be truthful in our inward being about those "destructive patterns of our false self" that prevent us from living into Your intention for us.
- Having been shown the truth by the God who holds us in love and mercy, I invite us to silently **2. Confess our sin** (Ps. 51: 4). "We know our transgressions, O Lord," and we now confess.
- Having been honest with God and with ourselves, I now invite us to **3. Receive God's forgiveness.** We open ourselves to your purifying and cleansing love, O Lord, and we accept

⁸ The four steps here were inspired by this document from St. Aidans Anglican Church in Winnipeg, MB: http://www.staidanswinnipeg.ca/uploads/2/0/4/9/20495756/gsl_ser_mt_series_10.3.19_week_one__1_.pdf

your forgiveness as a way to make right what is wrong and to walk in new ways of life (Ps. 51: 10-12).

- Having received forgiveness, I now invite us to commit to 4. **Obedience on the path of New Life God has shown us** (Ps. 51: 17), knowing that this can be done through the power of the Holy Spirit and the love, support, and grace of the body of Christ. We commit to a life of acceptable sacrifice.

I invite you again to take a deep breath in and out, and once more say the words: **I am held by a God of love and mercy.**

AMEN