

“HOPE FOR THE HELPLESS”

a sermon preached from the pulpit of the First Presbyterian Church, Kingwood, Texas

by

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Prayer for Illumination: Break through all of our stubbornness and hardness of heart, and speak to us, Lord God, once again your word which brings life, even in this hour. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

Readings: Psalm 51; 1 John 1: 5 - 2: 2

A man walked into a church sanctuary just as the congregation prayed together the words, “We have done those things which we should not have done, and we have not done those things which we should have done, and there is no health in us . . .” The fellow promptly sat down and said: “*At last*, a congregation just like me where I can finally be at home!” That, actually, is not a bad place to hang your hat: with a family of God that knows we are all sinners in need of God’s grace.

We have been examining Psalms of Lament on our way to the Psalms of Ascent. So here is the sermon in a nutshell: There are lots of things in life we can lament, but nothing grieves the heart of God more than our sin.

And here is Psalm 51 in a nutshell: “Lord, I messed up, I’ve made a mess of things—this is my own doing and my own making. Lord, have mercy on me a sinner.”

Now the Hebrew word for mercy is *hesed*. It is the same word as that used for the love of God in the Old Testament. We are desperately in need of God’s *hesed*, of God’s love and mercy, out of which God’s grace flows into our lives.

Grace is undeserved, unwarranted and unmerited. If you take anything away from this sermon, remember: **you cannot earn the gift of God’s grace.**

Many people over the years have said to me, “*I want a heart like David’s; I want to love God like David did.*” That is actually possible, with the help of God. It requires a heart which understands you can not merit or earn the *hesed*, the love and mercy of God.

Since Psalm 51 is about David’s sin of adultery and murder, let’s consider sin for a bit. John Stott notes that the New Testament uses five main words for sin, which together portray its various aspects, both passive and active. The [most common word] “depicts sin as a missing of the target, the failure to attain a goal.” The next word defines sin as ‘unrighteousness’ or ‘iniquity’; a third word as “evil of a vicious or degenerate kind.” Each of these words speak of “an inward corruption or perversion of character.” The more active words for sin define sin as a ‘trespass’ or ‘transgression’, “the stepping over a known boundary,” and the fifth word describes sin as ‘lawlessness’, the “disregard or violation of a known law.” Stott writes that “In each case an objective criterion is implied, either a standard we fail to reach or a line we deliberately cross.”¹

So Stott adds, to understand who I am I must understand

¹ John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, Illinois, InterVarsity Press, 1986), p. 89.

that I am a Jekyll and Hyde, a mixed-up kid, having both dignity, because I was created and have been re-created in the image of God, and depravity because I still have a fallen and rebellious nature. I am both noble and ignoble [to use words of scripture], beautiful and ugly, good and bad, upright and twisted, image and child of God, and yet sometimes yielding [in compliant obeisance] to the devil from whose clutches Christ has rescued me. My true self is what I am by creation, which Christ came to redeem, and by calling. My false self is what I am by the fall, which Christ came to destroy.²

Now the Biblical notion or doctrine of ‘total depravity’ means neither that all humans are equally depraved, nor that nobody is capable of any good, but rather that no part of any human person (mind, emotions, conscience [or will]) has remained untainted by the fall.³ That is why David can rightly proclaim that he was born in guilt and sin.

King David is well aware, also, that life is filled with traps, pitfalls and snares seeking to lead us into sin. Yet David is bold to proclaim and live the truth of Scripture that a humble, broken and contrite heart God will not despise. He knows our human bent is toward pride and willfulness. David knows well that we forever struggle with the notion that grace is unmerited and for the undeserving.

Jesus spoke of our human dilemma this way: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; and even tithe.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even dare to look up to heaven, but beat his breast saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’” And Jesus, the Creator of the universe made this outrageous claim: “I tell you, this man went home justified rather than the other.”⁴

Which is why it doesn’t really matter that we may be experts on other people’s sin; we need to take more seriously our own sin—the sin that grieves the heart of God.

From the beginning of the book of Genesis to the end of Revelation scripture makes clear that the essence of sin is a breach of covenant, and that all of life is upheld by covenant. But sin also means that the soul itself is diseased; and sin spreads like a poison. The Old Testament is chock-full of such examples—right from the very beginning where the first rebellion in the garden took place.

And while the gospel writers do not reference sin very much, they take great pains to display Christ’s work in relation to sin at every opportunity. So John begins his gospel with the baptizer declaring, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”⁵ And Matthew begins his account of the birth of Jesus with an angel declaring to Joseph, “Look! She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”⁶ The Good News of the Gospel begins with the news of Christ coming in to the world to deal with our sin.

² Ibid., p. 285.

³ John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* (Downers Grove, Illinois, InterVarsity Press, 1980), p 79.

⁴ from St. Luke 18: 9 – 14.

⁵ St. John 1: 29.

⁶ St. Matthew 1: 21, 23.

The bottom line is this: ‘If there were any other way than the cross, then the cross was a cruel, vicious and brutal hoax.’ Christianity is a religion which required the very death of God to deal with our sin. As Paul Achtemeier put it: “We know that God loves us not because of the way he feels about us but because of what he did for us— he sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.”⁷

The hymn we just sang was written by Robert Robinson. When Robert was eight his father died and his mother sent him to London to apprentice as a barber. Robinson became a “gang banger” long before the term existed and lived what historians might call charitably “a debauched life.” One night he and fellow gang members went to stir up trouble at a Methodist revival meeting where God got a hold of him and he came to faith in Jesus Christ.

Robinson wrote our hymn when he was 23 years old. Years later he would fall back into sin and began looking again to places other than Jesus for his help and hope. One day later in life, Robinson was riding in a stagecoach where the woman across from him was deeply engrossed in a hymn book. Later in their conversation the lady turned to Robinson and asked him what he thought of the hymn she was humming. Robert Robinson bursting in to tears responded: “Madam, I am the poor unhappy man who wrote that hymn many years ago, and I would give a thousand worlds, if I had them, to enjoy the feelings I had then.”⁸

But forgiveness is not about feelings. It is about action. God’s action and our’s.

1 John 1: 5 - 2: 2 is the Bible’s central passage on confession of specific sins. It is a passage which warns against pretense in our relationship with God.

This is the message we have heard from [Jesus] and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrightousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us

Confession and repentance restores fellowship with God and reintroduces hope into our lives. Anyone who refuses to confess and acknowledge their faults and their sin stifles the cleansing work of God’s Holy Spirit in their life.

And such refusal to confess, and to seek forgiveness has serious ramifications. Psalm 32 says it this way:

When I kept silent,
 my bones wasted away
 through my groaning all day long.
 For day and night
 your hand was heavy upon me;
 my strength was sapped

⁷ Paul J. Achtemeier, *Romans—Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1985).

⁸ Kenneth W. Osbeck, *101 Hymn Stories* (Grand Rapids, Kregel, 1982), p. 52.

as in the heat of summer.
 Then I acknowledged my sin . . .
 and did not cover up my iniquity.
 I said, “I will confess
 my transgressions to the Lord” –
 and you forgave
 the guilt of my sin.⁹

Another piece of good news is that praying is not some sort of spiritual obstacle course, where if we don’t get it right God will have a great excuse for not hearing us.¹⁰ God really wants to help us— God is not sitting around waiting for or hoping we mess up. God is waiting for us to ask for his help. Many prayers for help in the Bible say, “Change my situation so I may praise you.” **Psalm 51 says, “Change me. I am the problem.”**¹¹

“Create in me a clean heart O God.” And God does. “For by grace [your soul has] been saved [and your life redeemed], and this is not of your own doing— it is the very work and gift of God.”¹² Therefore, do not fall back into a spirit of temptation and sin. God will help you. He really will.

Our healing begins in the act of confession, but it takes root from the forgiveness of God which follows. And it grows when the sin life in us is transformed into the spiritual life through sacrifice and obedience.

Heaven really is going to be better than Houston. I know that is hard for some of you to believe. And walking as forgiven followers of Jesus really is better than walking in sin. If we are willing to acknowledge the need for God’s grace and mercy in our lives—that we are in fact helpless without God—there is hope. There is hope always because of the love and mercy and grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Let us pray: Each of us with our heads bowed know our transgressions and that our sin is ever before you, until we confess and repent of our sin, Lord God. We do that now— confessing with sorrow before you any unconfessed, secret sins in our lives: hate, envy, pride, malice, self-loathing, greed, impurity, and all the other sins that separate us from you; indeed we confess our helplessness to do good without you. Remake us, O Lord; cleanse and heal us, we pray. Thank you that you do heal and forgive us. Thank you that we are forgiven now, in this very place and moment. Thank you that the sins which we confess to you have been blotted out, erased, canceled— that indeed, they were canceled at Golgotha. Help us to live as people forgiven, in grace, and to your glory. In Jesus’ name, we pray. **Amen.**

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⁹ Psalm 32: 3 - 5.

¹⁰ Larry Richards, *Every Prayer and Petition in the Bible* (p. 157).

¹¹ James Mays, *Psalms—Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, John Knox Press, 1994), p. 202.

¹² See Ephesians 2, cf. vv. 5, 8.