

June 15, 2025

“A Newly Created Heart”

Psalm 51:1-19

Intro:

What is confession?

During the month of June, we are looking at what are traditionally known as the penitential Psalms. These are psalms that were sung or recited as part of liturgy of Ash Wednesday. They are psalms that guide the worshippers in acknowledgement of sin, and confession of sin in preparation for Lent, Good Friday, and ultimately Easter.

Part of understanding these Psalms, and Psalm 51, which is our psalm for this morning in particular, is coming to an understanding of just what confession is. Perhaps you have formulated an answer to the question of what confession is. Perhaps you are still working on that.

When thinking about confession, memories of your childhood might come to mind. One, or all of those times when you did something that was wrong and your parents made you “say you are sorry” to the offended party. This is certainly a form of confession, but if we take a moment to be honest with ourselves, how often did we really mean it, versus how often did we just say it to get our parents off our backs? Sometimes, we might have said we were sorry, only to receive a response that the person (usually our parents) didn’t want to hear us say we are sorry, but rather they wanted us to show we were sorry by changing our actions. This is getting closer to the confession we find in Psalm 51.

Maybe your mind went to the classic image of a confessional booth, especially as is usually portrayed on TV or in the movies. A person enters into the booth and sets the scene with the words “Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been ‘x’ number of days/weeks/months/years since my last confession.” The rest of the back and forth involves the priest listening to a person confess a sin that is often

habitual, and watching the scene, one gets the distinct impression that the person has no intention of changing his ways. Confession, in this instance, is more like going through the motions as a bit of extra insurance in case God really is paying attention.

Spoiler... He is.

What we find in Psalm 51 is something deeper than all of that. Here, the psalmist understands that when confession is truly offered and forgiveness truly sought, something deep and profound happens.

Unpacking the Psalm:

Psalm 51 is credited to David in the aftermath of his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah to cover it up.

And just in case you might get the wrong impression, nowhere in all of this confession and message do we find a statement that says what David did was right. Confession, and forgiveness, does not make wrong things right, and David still had to deal with the consequences of his actions.

The (not so) secret tryst with Bathsheba has occurred, pregnancy is discovered, and after efforts to try and set things up so that Uriah would legitimately believe the child is his have failed, Uriah is sent to be killed in the front lines of battle. It wasn't neat but David might have thought that he had gotten away with something, and had for all intents and purposes put the whole thing out of his mind.

This is when Nathan walks in. Nathan has a privileged position. He is the prophet of the Lord, which gives him some clout, and his reputation is such that he can expect to have an audience with the King whenever he wants. He also has the unenviable task of being the one to tell the King he is in big trouble. We know the narrative and can picture the scene. Nathan goes to David and tells him a story about two guys living in the same town. One is wealthy and has lots of animals

and resources at his disposal. The other is poor and has just one precious lamb to his name. We know it is precious because Nathan goes to great effort to paint a picture of this little lamb getting to eat and sleep with the family as though it was a family member itself. One day the rich man has some guests over and puts on a feast for them, but instead of butchering an animal from his own flock, he goes and takes that one lamb from the poor guy.

It is a story that pulls at the heart strings. The listener sides with the poor man, to sympathize with his sorrow and lack of power in the situation. The listener wants to go out and defend the poor man and get revenge on his behalf. Justice of some sort is called for. As David listens to the story, he gets madder and madder. He wants to seek out justice for this man. He wants the rich guy to pay a hefty price and penalty for his selfish and unjust actions. For all David knows, Nathan is telling him a real account, and it is within the power of the king to do something about it. David pronounces judgement and looks around for the military personnel who will carry that judgement out. But before he can issue the summons, Nathan throws in the twist. This is a real story, but it is not about two guys and a lamb. It is about a king – David – who had everything and yet took the one wife, and then the life, of Uriah.

David hears the accusation, acknowledges his guilt, and the result of that is Psalm 51.

Sometimes we have trouble with this psalm, especially verse 4 where David says, “Against you, and you alone, have I sinned;” No, we are pretty sure it was against Uriah and Bathsheba that David sinned. They were the victims of his abuse of power. But this is not the psalm that we have. We have a psalm that acknowledges that yes, there is usually a human to human factor in our sinful actions, but it is ultimately the relationship between us and God that is damaged by our sin and so we need to confess first and foremost to God. And it is God who is only and truly able to do anything about that sin.

Psalms 51 leans into that dynamic – first the acknowledgement of sin, and then the hope for forgiveness. This is a hope that is based on the knowledge of who God is and His character. It is a hope that can be relied upon.

But David is not content to just say “I’m Sorry” and let God reply with “That’s OK”, and thus leave room for it to happen all over again.

Confession, here, is something deeper. Confession is a search for God to bring a miracle into our lives. Confession is saying to God, “this person who does the thing I am confessing needs a complete make-over”. We need to know that we are forgiven, yes, but we also need to have our standing with God made new again.

The parable of the prodigal son, as we read a bit of earlier, tells this story. We pick it up after the son has wished his Dad was dead, gone off and spent all his inheritance, and found himself in the lowest place he could end up. He understands his sin, and against whom that sin was committed. He decides to go back, confess his wrong-doing and express his remorse, hoping for a small sliver of mercy and to be allowed to return home as one of household labourers. But that is not how the story ends. In a completely unexpected twist, the father embraces his errant son and treats him like family royalty. The son is not just forgiven, he is fully restored.

In Psalm 51, David is asking for even more than that from God. He is asking to be completely rebuilt from the inside out. He is appealing to the creative wonder and nature of God to create in him a new heart that not only confesses his sin, but would not be tempted to go down that road ever again. This is the “Create in me a new heart” of the Psalm.

Conclusion:

This is what confession needs to be for each of us. Not just saying we are sorry, but seeking God to take out our old heart – our old being – that was susceptible to sin and replace it with a heart that is fixed only on Jesus. We can want to

change. We can say we will change. We can try our best to change. But it is only the creative power of God that can bring about that change in our lives. David knows this and that is what he asks God for. And he is confident that God will do it.

When we confess, it is not just to say sorry. It is to seek God to remake us and restore us to obedience to Him. It is to open ourselves to God removing sin from our lives and replacing it with love, grace, and mercy – both experienced by us and extended from us to others.

This is the last part of confession. That when we have understood and experienced forgiveness from confession, we will then make it our business to tell others about such forgiveness. The restored and renewed person will want to “teach (God’s) ways to rebels” and “joyfully sing of (God’s) forgiveness” as the psalmist puts it.

This is confession. And it is what God wants to see from our heart more than any other form of coerced “sorry”, or going through the motions of worship and trying to “look the part” and deal with our sin on our own.

May we all find confidence in the hope and trust of God creating a new heart within us.

Let’s Pray.