

Sunday October 13, 2019  
Lesson 7: One Size Fits All  
Scripture: Psalm 51: 1-5, 9-12, 17

**Context:**

The next focus on God moves to the book of Psalms. The psalms give us a glimpse into the poetry of the ancient world. We also receive a clear picture of the diversity of experiences humanity has with God.

Psalm fifty-one is perhaps one of the most well-known psalms and has been included in more worship services than any other psalms. It has been used especially on Ash Wednesday as a penitential prayer as the proper psalm to help lead in the season of Lent and is used as a regular prayer of confession.<sup>1</sup> The prayer makes very clear that the person is in trouble and that they need God's deliverance.

The authorship of the psalm also plays a role in why it is used and the weight that it carries as a confessional prayer. The superscription of the psalm identifies it as a prayer made by David after the prophet Nathan confronts him about his sin in the affair with Bathsheba and the subsequent order to kill Bathsheba's husband Uriah by placing him at the forefront of a battle.<sup>2</sup> The psalm is a prayer of confession and a plea for God's forgiveness for the atrocities that have occurred at the hands of one person's choices. Yet as it is read, one can imagine all the other sins that individuals have committed and the feelings that arise when we know we have done something that hurts God and others.

The psalm has been used for years in both the Jewish and Christian traditions. Many of the features in the psalm suggest it was composed during or after the exile as words taken from the time of David and then used in Israel as a general penitential prayer.<sup>3</sup> When reading the prayer individually or corporately in worship, one comes to understand that confession of sin is based on the grace of God. Confession of sin is a step on the way to justification because it is a response to grace and humanity acknowledges that we are sinners and that God is gracious.<sup>4</sup> This psalm reveals that God is merciful and just and that humans are recipients of that grace and compassion even though we do not deserve it.

It is in the psalm that the author names their sin, asks for forgiveness, and then seeks absolution and for God to create a clean heart for the individual. They offer their spirit as something pleasing to God and ask God to heal them. God is named as forgiving and one who does not despise someone for this posture, but instead accepts the person and their contrite heart. God will take the psalmist, mend their soul, and help them grow and become a more mature disciple of the Lord.

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<sup>1</sup> James L. Mays, "Psalms," *Psalms: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY, 1994), 198.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 198. See 2 Samuel 11-12 for details of the entire story.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 199.

## **Application**

I have often heard this psalm used in sermons and in prayers offered on Ash Wednesday and then hear it again throughout the season of Lent. It is a beautiful psalm that evokes the deep need for humans to confess and get something off their chest. We can acknowledge our human frailty and the fact that we are in need of healing and restoration. We acknowledge that we are not God.

Confession is a spiritual discipline that all Christians should be able to do both individually and corporately. On an individual level, we know that we mess up. We covet the car that our neighbor drives. The green-eyed monster begins to rise up in us when we see a colleague receive a raise or a promotion. We lust after money, other people, and power. No one is immune to sinning in this life. Temptation is always there beckoning to us to come forward and nourish the desires of our heart and body.

On the corporate level, we participate in sins that entire societies and even nations commit, simply shrugging our shoulders and claiming that we are victims too. We allow institutions to do our sinning for us from neglecting the poor to protecting narcissists to ignoring the plights of minorities. Sometimes our behavior is with force, but more often than not, it is in silence that we commit these sins.

I think it is important for us to name both these individual sins and these corporate sins to God. We need to confess that we have coveted and that we have lusted with our eyes and heart in our personal prayer time and maybe even with a trusted comrade who will help us move forward. We need to confess as a people before God of where we have messed up, naming that as a people of God we have failed, expressing that in small groups and corporate worship. Confession helps us clear the air and finally acknowledge the truths that are in our heart.

What happens when we are able to name our struggles and our issues is that we are first able to confess that we do not have it together and we need help. We need a Savior to protect us from ourselves, to cleanse our hearts, and restore our souls. We desire to be fully known, loved, and forgiven even though we have messed up.

This psalm reminds us that fortunately for us, God does love us and wants to be in relationship with us. God hears our confession and gives us that forgiveness even though we don't deserve it. God sees our bleeding heart and patches up the wounds that may have caused damage to ourselves and to others. God creates order out of chaos, and beauty out of ugliness. God mends the spirits of the broken and helps them to overcome the error of their ways. There is not a promise that it will be easy, or that it will not take time. But there is the promise that God will be there with us in the process.

Whenever I preside over the table at Holy Communion, I usually have a period of silent prayer before we say the prayer of confession together. I think it is important in that moment for us to name before God where we struggle: maybe with a sin, a person, or a situation. When we move into the prayer of confession together we are reminded that we are not alone and that others around us have sinned as well. Finally, we are reminded that even though we are sinners, Jesus Christ has forgiven us and will help us in the days to come. It is good for everyone to both confess and then be reminded that Jesus Christ has come to love us in our sinful state. A repentant heart leads to a new day.

Do you confess your sins to God when you pray? Who do you turn to when you

need to confess something or hold you accountable? What are the individual sins you see people commit in day to day to life? What are the corporate sins you see society as whole commit? Which set of sins do you think are easier to confess and name? What does it mean to have a “repentant heart?” How will you think of confession when it comes to receiving means of grace such as Holy Communion?

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