

February 18, 2015

Ash Wednesday

"The Sinner's Prayer"

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What a strange custom, these ashes! But what a fitting way to express sorrow for our sins. Putting ashes on your head is an ancient custom to express grief or mourning. Tonight, as we wear that mournful mark on our heads, we're saying to God, "My sin grieves me, Lord. I know I am a sinner, and I am genuinely sorry for my sins."

A prayer much like that was in the heart of King David, back in the Bible days, when he wrote the words of Psalm 51. This aching, regretful psalm is commonly known as "The Sinner's Prayer." David wrote these words after a horrible episode in his life.

Many of you remember the story, from your Sunday School days. King David is powerfully attracted by a woman named Bathsheba, who's not his wife. He knows she's married to someone else, but the king also knows her husband is off fighting in the army. So David sends messengers to her, and invites her to the palace. He sleeps with her, and Bathsheba returns home. Sometime later, a chilling message comes to the king from Bathsheba: "I'm pregnant."

So what does David do? First, he tries to be sneaky and manipulative; but, eventually, the king panics and has Bathsheba's husband killed. He then marries Bathsheba; but he's living with a guilty conscience. The Lord sends his prophet, a man named Nathan, to confront David. Nathan shows the king what he has done wrong, and he pronounces God's punishment for David's sin.

David recognizes his sin right away, and he confesses it. He is a sinner, and Psalm 51 is a sinner's prayer. Let's read verses 1-4 together again, from p. 2 in your bulletin. (*read*)

Now, let's give David credit here. At least he's honest about his sin. He doesn't cover it up, or make light of it. He confesses his sin, and acknowledges his responsibility. David, the sinner, prays to God, "*Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight...*"

Ash Wednesday, friends, is a good time for us to be honest, too. This night is a perfect time to take stock of our lives, to confess our sins, to acknowledge our responsibility, and to be honest with God about who we are, about how we've acted. Have we done or said things we regret? Have we neglected people whom we love? Have you failed to honor God in your life, failed to honor your marriage vows, failed to honor your parents or your bosses, failed to help your kids come to know and honor God as they should?

Ash Wednesday, and this whole season of Lent, is a time for all of us to be honest about our sins and to be sorry for our sins. Each of us needs to make this first part of "The Sinner's Prayer" our own prayer. "*For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.*"

Notice, though, what David does next. We go on to verse 10, where David does something that is powerful and profound, something that is vital for us to do, too. He asks God to change his heart. Read verses 10-12 with me again, from page 2. (*read*)

It's one thing to confess your sin. It's another thing entirely to ask God to so thoroughly change you that you never sin again. Are you ready to do that? Confess your sin, and then pray for God to actually change your heart? David was. In Lent, we confess our sins and bring them to the cross of

Christ. But we also need to see clearly our need to change, our need to grow stronger, our need to resist temptation and to become the kind of people God wants us to be. That's the second part of "The Sinner's Prayer."

There's an old *Peanuts* comic strip, where Lucy and Charlie Brown are playing football. Like so many times before, Lucy holds the ball so Charlie Brown can kick it. She always picks up the ball at the last second so Charlie Brown falls flat on his back.

This time, though, Charlie Brown refuses to fall for it again. He declines to kick it. Finally, Lucy breaks down and confesses. "I've been terrible to you," she says, "But I've seen the error of my ways. I've been wrong, so wrong. Won't you give a poor penitent girl another chance?"

Charlie Brown is moved, and he gives her another chance. And, once again, at the very last second, she pulls the ball away, and down he goes. Lucy says smugly, "Recognizing your faults and actually changing your ways are two different things, Charlie Brown."

Indeed they are. King David knew it was true. So in Psalm 51, he prayed not only for God to forgive his sins, but that God would also give him a new heart so he wouldn't sin again.

Friends, that's the second part of "The Sinner's Prayer." And we need to pray both parts of that prayer from our heart tonight. Be honest about your sins, and take responsibility for them; but, just like David, we all need to pray for God to change our hearts, too. Recognizing our faults and actually changing our ways are two different things. We need God's help, to make real changes. *"Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me."*

During Lent we rejoice that God sent his Son to die on the cross for our sins. But Christ didn't sacrifice himself so that we would just keep on sinning the same old sins, and falling prey to the same old temptations. He wants us to change; and only Jesus has the power to change the heart of a sinner like David, a sinner like me, a sinner like you.

So pray "The Sinner's Prayer," Psalm 51. Study "The Sinner's Prayer." I challenge you to read all of "The Sinner's Prayer" in your Bible tonight, and every day of this Lent season. Make "The Sinner's Prayer" your own prayer -- both parts. Be honest with God about your own sins, and ask him to help you change.

And may the power of God's awesome love in Jesus Christ make "The Sinner's Prayer" come true for you. Amen.