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Psalm 51:1-4

Confession Series: True Penitence

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When I was a kid, my church used this hymn book. It's called, The Lutheran Hymnal. And some of you grew up with this baby, too. Every single week in our church, the liturgy was either page 5 or page 15. And every week we confessed our sins, either from page 6 or page 16. Those were the only two confessions I ever used, until I went away to college. I knew those two confessions by heart. I could recite them without even thinking about the words.

Page 6: "O most merciful God, who hast given Thine only-begotten Son to die for us, have mercy upon us and for His sake grant us remission of all our sins ..." and so forth.

Page 16: "O almighty God, merciful Father, I, a poor, miserable sinner, confess unto Thee all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended Thee and justly deserved Thy temporal and eternal punishment ..." etc.

As a teenager, I started worrying that God would smite me in church someday, because I knew that my mind occasionally drifted during the confession. I was thinking about the girl sitting over there, or the basketball game I had to play that afternoon, or the waffles I had for breakfast. And I don't blame the pastor for using the same two confessions every week. It was my own fault for failing to focus. But when I became a pastor, I resolved to keep using the classic hymnal confessions once in a while, but also to use a wide variety of confession prayers. And I hope that's helpful to you.

Regardless of what words we employ, making a sincere, heartfelt confession is really important. No, God's not going to smite you if your mind wanders; but he's certainly not

pleased when we just mouth the words, or read from the bulletin without any thought or serious intent. Are you truly penitent when you read the words of confession? Are you deeply sorry for your sins, down in your soul? That's what God wants from us, isn't it? That's what he desires, and that's what we need.

Psalm 51 is an excellent example of someone putting their heart and soul into their confession. Psalm 51 is true penitence. King David wrote this psalm, hundreds of years before Christ died on the cross for his sins. And David had a lot of sins on his conscience.

You may remember the story. David was a good man, a godly king. But then David committed a series of awful sins. He was married, yet he was attracted to another man's wife. He took that woman to be his own, and arranged for her husband, one of his loyal soldiers, to be killed in battle. After several months of flagrant sin and self-delusion, King David was confronted by one of God's prophets, who laid down the law. David finally came to his senses, realized his sins, and threw himself on the mercy of God. From his intense sorrow and shame, David composed his confession, Psalm 51.

In a few minutes we're going to make our confession today. To help us be truly ready, let's see what we can learn from the first several verses of David's penitential psalm.

Read verse 1 with me. "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions." David doesn't appeal for justice, or ask for what's fair. He appeals only to God's mercy and love. He knows he deserves nothing but punishment. And true penitence, for us, begins with the same realization. Our sins deserve punishment. We earn God's righteous wrath. If God gave us what we deserve, as sinners, we'd be hopeless. So we join David in throwing ourselves on God's mercy alone.

Go on to verse 2. “Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!” David recognizes that he can’t fix the mess he’s made. He can’t make himself right with God. Nothing he can do will get rid of those sins. Only God can do it. And only God can cleanse you and me. True penitence recognizes “I can’t; and only God can.”

Read verse 3. “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.” It’s interesting that David uses several Hebrew words for sin in this psalm. One word refers to the specific actions of adultery and murder. Another speaks of sin as a cumulative debt. Other words refer to sin as a deeply ingrained dirt, or as a kind of leprosy. Clearly, David grasps the gravity of what he’s done, and the spiritual peril he’s in. True penitence, in our case, means coming to grips with the deep, pervasive seriousness of our sinful condition.

Let’s read on. Verse 4. “Against you, you only, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.” This is a really important verse. For us to be truly penitent, to be genuinely repentant of our sins, we need to accept that we’re not just sinning against our family, friends, neighbors, and an occasional stranger or two. Every sin is actually a sin against God. He’s the one that really matters. Because, David expresses, God is the one who decides what is evil, and what is not. God alone makes the final call, the final judgment, about what is allowed and what is forbidden. Not the world. Not society. Not you and me.

It’s easy to think sometimes that the Word of God, the Bible, is maybe out of date and irrelevant. But David, in Psalm 51, teaches us the truth. God has the final say. His words are just, and his judgments are blameless. True penitence takes the same approach: yielding to God, accepting that God’s verdicts are correct, and putting them above the world’s and above our own.

David's soulful psalm has much more to teach us about true penitence. I encourage you to read through the remaining verses of Psalm 51 today. Think about David's words, reflect on your own sins, apply these words to your situation, and make this psalm one of your go-to prayers of true penitence.

In the end, true penitence always leads us to Christ, our Savior. David lived before the Lord Jesus was born; but David knew correctly that only God's mercy could save him. And we know that God's mercy came down, in human form, in the person of Jesus Christ. Our Savior never sinned, but in his love for sinners he paid for all our sins by his death on the cross. So with true penitence, with genuine sorrow over our sins, with humble faith in our saving Lord, let us make our confession today, using the words printed on page 5, the same words I used back when I was a kid.

P: Beloved in the Lord! Let us draw near with a true heart and confess our sins unto God our Father, beseeching him in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to grant us forgiveness. Our help is in the name of the Lord,

C: **Who made heaven and earth.**

P: I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord,

C: **And you forgave the iniquity of my sin.**

(Silence for reflection on God's Word and self-examination)

P: Almighty God, our maker and redeemer, we poor sinners confess unto you that we are by nature sinful and unclean and that we have sinned against you by thought, word, and deed. Wherefore we flee for refuge to your infinite mercy, seeking and imploring your grace for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ.

C: **O most merciful God, who has given your only begotten Son to die for us, have mercy upon us and for his sake grant us remission of all our sins; and by your Holy Spirit increase in us true knowledge of you and of your will and true obedience to your Word, to the end that by your grace we may come to everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.**

P: Upon this confession, I, by virtue of my office, as a called and ordained servant of the Word, announce the grace of God unto all of you, and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

C: **Amen.**