

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

9244 Five Forks Road

Waynesboro, PA 17268-9612

Tel: (717) 762-2991

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SERMON: "Overcoming Guilt"

(Acknowledgment to Tim Keller for his insight into Psalm 51)

Psalm 51:1-6.10-12.15 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Surely you desire truth in the inner parts ; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.

This morning we wrap up our sermon series called **Ancient Words, Ever True**. For the month of July we've been looking at these ancient stumbling blocks, and the one we'll be looking at this morning is **a guilty conscience**.

Something we all have first hand experience with. And if we don't get out from under it, it can have a devastating effect on our relationship with Jesus.

This morning's message is titled **Overcoming Guilt** and we're going to be looking at what I think is one of the greatest passages in the Bible when it comes to dealing with a guilty conscience.

It's **Psalm 51**, and if you happen to have your Bible open to this passage, you may see a little heading before verse 1 that says this: ***A Psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.***

The first thing we need to do is understand the background - the context – and so we'll want to start by looking at **Nathan's Confrontation With David**. It was this confrontation that prompted David to write this prayer, this plea for God to forgive him for the terrible things he had done.

As we look closely at this prayer, we will see **two very important distinctions that David makes**...two things that David has learned that will help him get out from under the weight of a guilty conscience.

First, David learned **The Difference Between Remorse and Repentance**. And David also learned **The Difference Between A Reprieve and Regeneration**...which is big word that means being given a new heart...a new nature.

So let's start by looking at...

1. NATHAN'S CONFRONTATION WITH DAVID

When David was a young man, he was very popular...so popular that **Saul – the king of Israel - became extremely jealous of David**. So jealous that he set out to kill David, forcing David to flee out into the wilderness...a remote place where he could avoid being captured and killed by Saul.

When David fled to the wilderness, he took with him 37 men who the Bible refers to as **"David's Mighty Men."** They were mighty warriors and very loyal to David. Eventually Saul died, and David came out of the wilderness and became the king of Israel.

Some time passed, and then came the time when some enemies of Israel attacked and invaded the land, forcing David to flee out into the wilderness yet again.

And once again, his mighty men went with him. And I can't stress enough how loyal they were to David. Some of you are familiar with that time while out in the wilderness, David sighed and wished out loud for a drink of water from a well near the city gates of Bethlehem.

Three of these mighty men heard David's lament, and they take off, fighting through enemy lines just to get David that water that he longed for. And they succeeded, bringing the water back and presenting it to David. Tremendous love and loyalty towards David. Never mind that David took the water and poured it on the ground...that's another sermon.

The point is, these 37 mighty men were extremely loyal and would do anything for David, including risking their own lives. **One of them was a man by the name of Uriah - the Hittite.**

Once again time passes and eventually David is able to return and assume the throne back in Jerusalem. There was this occasion when David sent his army - which would have included those mighty men - off to battle. He remained behind.

One night while walking on the rooftop of the palace, he spots a beautiful woman in a nearby courtyard bathing, and he decides that he must have her. And so he sends for her, but when she is brought to him, somebody spoke and said...

II Samuel 11:3b "Isn't this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite?"

She was the wife of one of David's 37 exceedingly loyal mighty men.

You would have thought that this would have stopped David in his tracks, but it didn't. He slept with her and she became pregnant. Now David has a problem, because barring tragedy, Uriah is eventually coming back home.

He looks to overcome this problem by calling for Uriah to come home from the battlefield in order to sleep with his wife. Uriah will think that the baby is his...problem solved.

If you know the story, you know it didn't go according to plan. David was very manipulative, trying over the course of two nights to get Uriah to go be with his wife. But when Uriah refused to do so – out of loyalty to his fellow warriors out on the battlefield – David took extreme measures.

He sent Uriah back to the battle with a note to the commander of the army and said, *“I want this man dead. Put him on the front line where the fighting is fierce, and when the time is right, withdraw from him so that he is killed.”*

A couple of days later a messenger came back from the fighting and brought David a message saying, “Such and such has happened, and such and such has happened...and **Uriah the Hittite is dead.**”

And now David is in the clear, and he takes Bathsheba to be his wife. And nine months pass.

Now, it's really fascinating how these things go. It's fascinating how we view our sin so differently depending on whether or not it's been exposed or not.

First comes what I will call **The Season of the Cover Up**. Yes, there is usually **some degree of guilt**. David knew and we know when we have done or are doing something wrong. Our conscience *may* bother us, but **we do a pretty good job of suppressing it** during this cover-up period. We find reasons to excuse what we've done rationalize what we're doing...because when you get right down to it, we have this incredible capacity of being able to deceive ourselves.

And so while some guilt may be present, **we're more focused on making sure things don't get discovered**. Making sure we've covered our tracks when it comes where we've been, what we've been doing and who we've been with. Clearing the computer history. Hiding the fact that we are spending money we shouldn't be spending. Abusing our spouse, or our children, or both. Making sure there are reasonable explanations for the marks and bruises.

The Season of Cover-Up.

And then comes **The Day It All Falls Apart**. Like it did for David the day that Nathan stopped by. At first, David didn't suspect a thing.

Nathan tells David that he has a sad incident to report...*"There are two men in a town here in your kingdom, and one of them is quite wealthy, with much in the way of livestock. The other man is very poor, so poor that all he has in one little lamb.*

Well, a traveler came through that town and encountered the wealthy man, but the man, instead of taking a lamb from his own huge flock, went and took the one lamb belonging to the poor man, killed it, and served it to the traveler. What do you think?"

Well David became furious when he heard this....he looked at Nathan and said,

II Samuel 12:5b "As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this deserves to die!"

And Nathan said to David, "**You are the man.**"

David had many wives. Uriah had but one.

And then for David came that moment that I believe all of us have experienced. And it's a terrible moment. It's the moment that we are found out. The moment our sin is exposed and brought to light.

And what is fascinating is this...in that moment, everything changes. Including the way we see our sin.

Before we deceived ourselves and found ways to rationalize what we were doing. But once it's brought out into the open, for the first time, we see it for what it is. It's **the horror of self-discovery...** *"How could I do this? How could I be capable of this? How could I not see that this was wrong?"*

And the guilt which we were able to suppress during the cover up...now can crush us. This is what nearly happened to David. Nathan held up a mirror and David saw himself and for the first time became aware of the magnitude of the evil he had done. And where it took him was a place far worse than when he was on the run out in the wilderness.

If you have ever experienced what David experienced, you know that it is one of the most painful, embarrassing, shameful experiences of your life.

But here's the thing...David was able to get out from under it. Before he is done here, he will be saying...

Psalm 51:15 O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.

And that request was granted. David did get out from under it. He did have many opportunities to praise the Lord. And so if you find yourself in a similar place...either trying to suppress the guilt because of something you're doing, or trying not to be crushed by the guilt of something you've done...let's look at these two distinctions that David made, because it changed his life, and it can change yours as well.

First, David came to understand...

2. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN REMORSE AND REPENTANCE

Let's start with **remorse**, a word that we're all familiar with. Is remorse a good thing or a bad thing...what do you think? Truth is, it can be either one...good or bad.

If my remorse is centered around the fact that I got caught...*"Boy, this is really going to embarrass me"* or *"What will people think about me?"* ...well, then it's still all about *"Me"*. This is what the apostle Paul referred to as worldly sorrow.

In II Corinthians 7, Paul says...

II Corinthians 7:10 Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret; but worldly sorrow brings death.

Remorse that revolves around the fact that we got caught is worldly sorrow and is of no value.

But remorse is not always a bad thing, because sometimes we're able to see beyond ourselves...we feel remorse of the pain we've brought upon others...we may even feel remorse knowing that we've sinned against God.

And this kind of remorse – godly sorrow – can lead to the necessary step of repentance.

Now when I say the word **“Repentance”**, how does that make you feel? I'm wondering if some of you might be saying, *“Oh, great, I got out of bed for this. Thanks Bill...this is the very reason I stopped going to church. All they do is try to make you feel guilty.”*

I get that...I know that this word has been used in an unhelpful manner. And so I want you to know it's not my intention to pile on the guilt, but point you to the One who can take it off.

You see, the Bible makes clear that there is something we all must do if we want to follow Jesus, and that is repent.

When **John the Baptist** was preparing the way for Jesus, he had but **one message for the people: Repent!**

When the crowd said to **Peter** on the day of Pentecost, **“What must we do to be saved?”**
The first word out of Peter's mouth was **Repent!**

Now **the problem is this: The thing that most people think of as repentance is really remorse.**

But David says something here that would indicate that he has discovered the difference between the two, and I would think you would be asking...**How do I know if the sorrow that I have over my sin is repentance or remorse?**

David gives us the answer in verse 4 when he says to God...

Psalm 51:4 Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.

Wait...what? What about Uriah, that loyal warrior lying dead on the battlefield because of David's treachery?

Surely David knows that he has sinned against Uriah and Bathsheba and others, but in this verse we see that **David has learned something profound about sin.** David has learned that **sin is not primarily the breaking of a law** – adultery...murder for instance. It's bad, but that's not the worst. And you say, "What could be worse than that?" Here's what: **Sin is primarily a rejection of the Lawgiver.**

Let's go back for just a second to the Garden...back to Eden. Here we have Adam and Eve living in this paradise and they've been told "*Just don't eat from that tree.*"

And then along comes the serpent and the serpent said to Eve... "*God is trying to hold you back. Let me tell you, if you eat from that tree, it will be wonderful.*"

Do you see the serpent's strategy? To get them to break the law – "Don't eat from that tree" – he must get them to decide what they believed about the Lawgiver. **Was He above them, or were they above Him?**

Before breaking the law, they first had to reject the Lawgiver.

For you and I to break any law...to lie, commit adultery, covet, steal, you name it...first we must decide what we believe about the Lawgiver. What do you – what do I – really believe about God?

You name any sin...lying, adultery, coveting, envy...the committing of any of those sins all come in second. First comes the rejection of God...a rejection of the love He insists He has for you. A rejection of His plan and purpose for your life.

And it would appear that David has grasped that his primary sin is the adultery or the murder, it was his rejection of God, and it's why he says...

Psalm 51:4 Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.

Can you feel David's pain? The pain of self-discovery? The weight of the guilt?

But you know what? It is in this place of pain that **we also find our hope.**

Because if He is above us, which He is...If He is the Lawgiver...which He is...if those things are true, then so is the fact that **He is** merciful, loves you with an unfailing love, and has great compassion for you.

*Psalm 51:1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.*

This means that right here, right now, without a moment's delay, you can put your sin and your guilt behind you by repenting of what you have done and are doing.

Yes, you have sinned against a Holy and Righteous God who cannot and will not overlook your sin. But you are also dealing with a merciful God who loves you so much, He came to us and He took the punishment that should be ours.

And so this is one critical distinction that David was able to make...the difference between remorse and repentance. But there is one more very important distinction that David learned, and that is...

3. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A REPRIEVE AND REGENERATION

Have you ever - after you messed up - asked somebody for another chance? “Please, just one more chance...I’ll never do it again.” Have you ever asked *God* for another chance? “Lord, get me out of this one please, and I’ll never do it again.”

David doesn’t do that. He knows it won’t do him any good. David has bigger concerns. He needs more than a reprieve, because something has gone very, very wrong here.

You see, **David isn’t just shocked about the fact that he did this**...the adultery...the murder. **He’s shocked about the fact that he is even capable of doing this.**

“How could I ever do such a thing? I took another man’s wife! And then I took his life! How am I capable of something like this?”

And he answers his own question in verse 5...

Psalm 51:5 Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

You see, David understands that he had this nature...this sinful nature from the time he was born. It was in his blood.

And so he realizes that it won’t do him any good to ask for a reprieve, for a second chance...because he’ll just do it again.

And so he goes right to God and says...

Psalm 51:10 Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

He’s asking for God to create within him a new heart...a clean heart...a pure heart.

AND...once David receives *that*...he asks for God to “renew a steadfast spirit within me.” Because David wants to keep God in His rightful place when temptation comes his way.

What he is asking for is pretty incredible...a new heart, a new nature. And yes, it is incredible, but not impossible. The fact is, it's absolutely necessary. It's what Jesus calls being "born again."

One night Jesus was meeting with a religious leader named Nicodemus, and Jesus said to him...

John 3:3b "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

This is **Regeneration**. Big word.

And I guess the best way I can put it is this: Something changes. You don't get any younger or stronger or smarter. But something changes. For some it's dramatic. For others, it's less so, but when you cross paths with this person a few years later, the change that has taken place over time is every bit as dramatic.

And so it's at this point of regeneration that we begin to see God differently. We now begin to see ourselves differently. We begin to see sin differently. It will still look appealing at times. But we begin to understand it, and how it works. We are no longer so easily deceived. We no longer so easily deceive ourselves.

And so what all of us need is not a reprieve, we all know what it is to be in that cycle of sin, remorse and confession, sin, remorse and confession, sin, remorse and confession. We need regeneration...we need a new nature.

So...let's close this message and this series by talking about the steps we can take if a guilty conscience is impacting our walk with Jesus.

First step... look at verse 6, which says...

Psalm 51:6 Surely you desire truth in the inner parts...

The first thing God wants you to do is come clean. With yourself and with Jesus.

When there is truth in your inner parts, there is no suppressing, rationalizing or excusing sin. You've got to stop any self-deception and see you sin for what it is. If you've been covering it up, **repent of it** right now, recognizing that – more than the sin – you have been rejecting God and placing yourself above Him.

Then there's this: If you've never done so, ask for God to **create in you a new heart**, a new nature.

(Psalm 51:10 Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.)

I don't know whether the change in your life will be dramatic or less so...I just know that change will begin.

And once you have done that or if you have already done that, every day, and I mean every day throughout the day you are asking God to just **renew a steadfast spirit within you.**

I have a new nature, I am sure. I'm not who I once was.

But temptation is coming after me every day throughout the day, and I need God to just work with me and continually renew that spirit of steadfastness within me.

Write those words – **renew a steadfast spirit within me** - somewhere where you will see them often this coming week. Burn that prayer into the front of your mind and keep asking God for it.

Now...how can you be sure that God will respond? After all that you've done...after all the sin...all the cover up...all the excuses. You don't have a leg to stand on, do you? No, you don't. Neither do I. But I'm still standing, and you can be standing too, free from a guilty conscience.

Look again at the very first words of David's heartfelt prayer, his heartfelt plea...

Psalm 51:1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion, blot out my transgressions.

Here's what you can count on...God has a love for you that never fails, no matter what you've done or how often you have done it. God has great compassion for you...He knows the guilt that you have carried and are carrying, and wants to take that incredible weight, the tremendous burden off of your back.

And so because of His love, because of His compassion, Jesus came and died the death that should be ours due to our rejection of God. And because of what Jesus endured, what Jesus did on the Cross.. our transgressions – our sin – is blotted out. Gone. Visible no more.

And if your sin is no longer visible to God, then how about if you do the same and leave it behind you...and from here on out just follow Jesus, saying, as David did...

Psalm 51:15 O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.