

Praying With The Psalmists: A Study in the Psalms, Psalm 51  
Preached @ Harambee Church by Pastor Michael Gunn on November 30, 2008

*“Religious repentance is self righteous. Repentance can easily become a form of ‘atoning’ for sin. Religious repentance often becomes a form of self-flagellation in which we convince God (and ourselves) that we are so truly miserable and regretful that we deserve to be forgiven. In the gospel however, we know that Jesus suffered and was miserable for our sin. We do not have to make ourselves suffer in order to merit forgiveness. We simply receive the forgiveness earned by Christ (1 John 1:8-9)...In religion our only hope is to live a good enough life for God to bless us. Therefore every instance of sin and repentance is traumatic, unnatural and horribly threatening. Only under great duress does a religious person admit that they have sinned because their only hope is their moral goodness. But in the gospel the knowledge of our acceptance in Christ makes it easier to admit we are flawed (Because we know we won’t be cast off if we confess the true depths of our sinfulness). Our hope is in Christ’s righteousness, not our own, so it is not so traumatic to admit our weaknesses and lapses.”*

Tim Keller

**Intro:**

Our psalm today (**Psalm 51**) demonstrates a heart that is repentant. It has always been seen as David’s words after he was confronted for having sex with another man’s wife (Bathsheba) and conspiring to have that man (Uriah) killed. Many people think that Psalm 38 is also about David, who has concealed his sin and is paying the consequences in his own body. Psalm 51 is a result of David being exposed, and his subsequent sorrowful repentance. We can learn immensely from this Psalm, as I believe repentance is the key to mental health and spiritual growth.

**From the Head...**

Repentance Begins With Acknowledgment of Our Condition

(**Psalm 51:1-6**)

The lack of desire to admit you are wrong is in direct proportion to your pride. It’s hard to be sorry if you don’t feel you are wrong. When we have a weak view of God’s holiness, we have a weak view of our own sin. Because of that, we are not humble enough to repent regularly of our sin before God. That’s why pastor Tim Keller says, *“In religion our only hope is to live a good enough life for God to bless us. Therefore every instance of sin and repentance is traumatic, unnatural and horribly threatening.”* As moralists, we can’t see ourselves as sinful. We sometimes see ourselves as people who sin, but we rarely see ourselves as *“conceived in sin,”* as we see David admit in Psalm 51:5. In the parable of the “Prodigal Sons” (**Luke 15**), we see two prodigals. One displays his self sufficiency through loose living, while the older brother displays his self sufficiency through moral living. What is interesting is that the younger brother, who wasted his life with loose living, was able to come to repentance, whereas the older brother (the Moralist) was unable because of his goodness (see **Luke 15: 28-32**). If my identity is in what people think about me, it is hard to admit that I am flawed.

Repentance Ends With A Restored Heart

(**Psalm 51:7-14**)

Restoration comes as a result of a heart that is free from pride, and that humbly comes before the Lord in repentance. If you don’t believe in the gospel, you will always try to do more in order to get God to forgive you. Or if you have been sinned against, you will demand more of that person before you grant him forgiveness. Both of these sides of the coin only end in hurt, bitterness, guilt and shame. We don’t accept God’s mercy and grace, because we see ourselves or someone else as our functional savior, and we can’t forgive because we don’t see that we are truly forgiven in Christ alone.

It is only God who can create a clean heart in you, not support groups, pastors, counselors, etc. There is nothing wrong with any of these, as long as they lead you to Christ as your only means of healing. We are not called to “penance” but to repentance. And daily repentance is good, as the Holy Spirit brings to light the truth of who we are in the flesh, but made righteous in Christ. In order to live a mentally healthy life, we need to live aware of our sin and of God’s love and forgiveness in Christ. It is only the morally self-righteous that ignore this through denial or false humility. There are many who call themselves sinners until someone confronts them about a specific sin. The falsely humble react in anger, not humility and repentance.

**...to the Heart**

The following is an excerpt from an article by Tim Keller entitled *“All of Life Is Repentance.”* It is taken from 18<sup>th</sup> century pastor/theologian George Whitfield who said, *“God give me a deep humility and a burning love, a well guided zeal and a single eye, and then let men and devils do their worst.”* Only true, regular gospel repentance can free us from our shackles and create in us a “new heart” and loving heart.

**Deep Humility (vs. Pride)**

*“Have I looked down on anyone? Have I been too stung by criticism? Have I felt too snubbed and ignored?”*

- \* **Repent Like this:** Consider the free grace of Jesus until I sense a) a decreasing disdain (since I am a sinner too);
- b) decreasing pain over criticism (since I should not value human approval over God’s love). In light of His grace I

can let go of the need to keep up a good image. It is too great a burden and now unnecessary. Consider free grace until I experience grateful, restful joy.

### **Burning Love (vs. Indifference)**

*“Have I spoken or thought unkindly of anyone? Am I justifying myself by caricaturing (in my mind) someone else? Have I been impatient and irritable? Have I been self-absorbed and indifferent and inattentive to people?”*

\* **Repent like this:** Consider the free grace of Jesus until there is a) no coldness or unkindness (think of the sacrificial love of Christ for you); b) no impatience (think of His patience with you); and c) no indifference. Consider free grace until I show warmth and affection. God was infinitely patient and attentive to me, out of grace.

### **Wise Courage (vs. Anxiety)**

*“Have I avoided people or tasks that I know I should face? Have I been anxious and worried? Have I failed to be circumspect or have I been rash and impulsive?”*

\* **Repent like this:** Consider the free grace of Jesus until there is a) no cowardly avoidance of hard things (since Jesus faced evil for me); b) no anxious or rash behavior (since Jesus' death proves God cares and will watch over me). It takes pride to be anxious; I am not wise enough to know how my life should go. Consider free grace until I experience calm thoughtfulness and strategic boldness.

### **Godly Motivations (a 'Single Eye')**

*“Am I doing what I am doing for God's glory and the good of others or am I being driven by fears, need for approval, love of comfort and ease, need for control, hunger for acclaim and power, or the fear of man? Am I looking at anyone with envy? Am I giving in to any of even the first motions of lust and gluttony? Am I spending my time on urgent things rather than on important things because of these inordinate desires?”*

\* **Repent like this:** How does Jesus provide for me? What I am looking for in these things? Pray: *“Lord Jesus, make me happy enough in you to avoid sin, and wise enough in you to avoid danger, that I may always do what is right in your sight, in your name I pray, Amen.”*

**Books for Further Study:** Baker Commentary on the Old Testament, Wisdom and Psalms, Psalms Vol. 1-2, John Goldingay; Answering God: The Psalms As Tools For Prayer, Eugene Peterson; The Message of the Psalms: A theological Commentary, Walter Brueggemann, Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible, Dietrich Bonhoeffer; Praying the Psalms, Thomas Merton; Bread in the Wilderness, Thomas Merton, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1, Peter C. Craigie, New International Biblical Commentary, Psalms, Craig C. Broyles, The Book of Psalms, Robert Alter, Psalms Volume 1, James Montgomery Boice, A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23, Phillip Keller

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