The Path of True Repentance

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Preacher: David Court

[0:00] I'm going to read for us scripture now. We're going to read from the book of Psalms, Psalm 51. I'm going to read the passage and then David's going to come up. He's going to preach to us from this passage. This is Psalm 51.

To the choir master, a psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him after he'd gone into Bathsheba. Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love.
According to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me.
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. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me.
Behold, you delight in truth and the inward being and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.
Purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean. Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.
[1:00] Let me hear joy and gladness. Let the bones that you have broken rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

Cast me not away from your presence and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore me to the joy of your salvation and uphold me with a willing spirit. Then I will teach transgressors your ways and sinners will return to you.
Deliver me from blood guiltiness, O God. O God, my salvation and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips and my mouth will declare your praise.
For you will not delight in sacrifice or I would give it. You will not be pleased with a burnt offering.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart, O God.
You will not despise. Do good to Zion in your good pleasure. Build up the walls of Jerusalem. Then will I delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings.
[2:03] Then bulls will be offered on your altar. Amen. This is God's holy word. I've decided not to make the long climb to the pulpit this morning.

It's good to be with you. My name is David Court. I'm the associate minister here. We're going through in the mornings a series in the Psalms.
And we turn this morning to Psalm 51. Let me take you back in time to the summer of 1974.
It was my first boys' brigade camp. And if you don't know what the boys' brigade are, then you can speak to me at the end.
It was my first extended period away from home and family. And the campsite that we were located on was situated on a farm near Kirkcaldy in Fife.
[3:04] I was joined at the camp by a number of my school friends. Among them was John. His father owned the local chip shop in the village.

But unfortunately for John, the camp was not a great experience. One afternoon, he found himself escorted back to camp by two police officers.
He'd been caught shoplifting in Kirkcaldy. Now, it transpired that there was a single in the charts by the perils. It reached, I think, number 10 in the charts in June of that year.
And it had just a one-word title. And that title was this, Guilty. And that song, with its chorus, reverberated all around the campsite.
It played on the radio. It even had a record player. It was listened to there. Its chorus was sung repeatedly all across the campsite. The words of the song simply could not be avoided.
[4:09] You have been found and convicted of a serious crime because you're guilty, guilty, guilty.
And just as all those years ago, my friend John could find no hiding place from those accusing

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words, guilty.

So, that was surely true of the author of Psalm 51. That man, of course, was David, King David. And even though no one had been singing those words to him, he had heard them nonetheless. Because you're guilty, guilty, guilty. It wasn't that David had been caught shoplifting in Woolworths. No, his theft had been on a far grander scale.
Indeed, for a long time, his crime or crimes had gone unnoticed. He had appeared to have… He'd got off scot-free.
So, what brought him to this point, to this famous prayer petition, Psalm 51? Well, we can read the story more fully for yourself.
[5:19] 2 Samuel chapters 11 and 12. We didn't have time to do that this morning. It began with a careless and lustful glance at a beautiful woman. Bathsheba was her name.

And unfortunately for David, she was already married to one of his own army officers, Uriah the Hittite. And perhaps David only meant it to be a brief fling, a one-night stand.
But Bathsheba fell pregnant by him. And that's when things really started to get complicated. Uriah was away from home. He was serving in the armed forces.
A scandal was sure to break. And so, David sought to cover things up. He had Uriah sent back home to his wife. But Uriah wouldn't play ball.
And because his fellow soldiers were still on the front line and fighting, he did not go to his wife. And so then David conspired to have Uriah killed in battle.
[6:16] And David's operation cover-up went really smoothly, without hitch. And it wasn't long before Uriah was just another casualty of war.

With the husband out of the way, David was free to marry the grieving widow, adopt her unborn son as a royal prince, and they could all live happily ever after. I have little doubt that David hoped that his catalog of sin, adultery, deceit, lies, murder, would all end there.
He may have broken at least four of the Ten Commandments, but at least he hadn't broken the eleventh. Thou shalt not get found out. He'd covered his tracks well.
The few that were in the know could be relied upon to keep their mouths shut. It had been an unfortunate episode, but it was now over and done with.
It was in the past. It could be forgotten. Life goes on. And so David, as it were, shut the cupboard door, turned the key, walked away, hoping to leave this festering skeleton of sin out of sight and out of mind.
[7:26] But in doing that, David made a great mistake. Because in reality, sin cannot be dealt with in such an easy and painless fashion.

It cannot really be locked away in the cupboard and forgotten. Even if it's not penalized by the law, even if it's not exposed by the press, even if it's buried and hidden away from prying eyes, even if we continue as if nothing had happened, as I suspect David himself did, the skeleton still remains, rotting away in the cupboard.
And sooner or later, the stench seeps out under the door, through the cracks, and begins to suffocate us. It's impossible to cover up the skeleton of your sin and guilt.
No matter how hard you try, it cannot be done. The smell lingers, and before long, the odor permeates every room in the house.
There's only one thing to do with that skeleton. You need to get someone in to clean out the cupboard. And there's only one person who has the power to do that.
[8:54] There's only one person who can clean out the skeleton of our sin, erase the stench of our guilt, and disinfect our hearts. And that was the lesson that David had to learn.

He learned it through the ministry of the prophet Nathan. One day, Nathan confronted David with what was lurking behind the cupboard door.
And Psalm 51 is the song he wrote in the wake of that door being flung open for all to see in his guilt being unmasked and uncovered.
It's an intensely personal composition. Unlike some of the Psalms, it's not as carefully crafted and structured. It's raw. It's emotional.
In the light of his sin being exposed, a torrent of different feelings cascade to the surface. Here is David facing up to what he has done, to the kind of person he really is.
[9:58] And it turns out to be an excruciating discovery. Here is David casting himself, throwing himself on the mercy of God.

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Thomas Chalmers, one of the founding fathers of the free church, observed, this is the most deeply affecting of all the Psalms. And I am sure the one most applicable to me.
Psalm 51 is perhaps the most famous of the seven, they're known as the seven penitential Psalms. It was written because David wanted others to learn from his experience.
Look at verse 13. Then I will teach transgressors your ways and sinners will return to you. Here is what we need to do with our own festering skeletons of sin and guilt that we're often tempted to bury and forget.
Here is David teaching us the path of true repentance. And I want to summarize, really, the message of the Psalm under three headings, three things from the Psalm that David wants us to learn.
[11:14] And the first is this. There's something that we need to acknowledge. Something we need to acknowledge. What is that? It is our own sin and guilt before God.

I know my transgressions, verse three, my sin is ever before me. Before, David had covered it up. He'd concealed it. He'd buried it.
But now it has been exposed. His sin is before him. He cannot avoid it. The cupboard door has been flung open. And he's been forced to acknowledge what lies within.
And in the opening verses of the Psalm, you'll notice David uses a whole variety of different words to describe the truth about himself. He talks, verses one and three, about his transgressions.
It's a word that conveys the idea of rebellion. He speaks of iniquity in verse two and five. That word suggests something of being twisted out of shape or made crooked. He mentions sin in verse two and four.
[12:17] That word means to miss the mark, to fall short. And then again in verse four, he uses the word evil. He openly and publicly acknowledges the uncomfortable truth that he had discovered about himself.

And what was that? It was this. It was he was a sinner. I came across this quote from the late Professor MacLeod. He says, evangelicalism is not first and foremost about belief in an inerrant Bible.
Rather, it begins with a certain kind of self-understanding. The knowledge of our own guilt, our own depravity, our own alienation from God.
Before David's guilt could be dealt with, he had to acknowledge, admit what he had done. He had to look into his own heart.
He had to face the awful reality of what he found there. Now, that's not an easy thing for us to do because it calls for brutal honesty. It can be an uncomfortable, a profoundly unsettling experience.
[13:27] It can be a shock to ourselves to see ourselves naked in our sin, to see ourselves warts and all, to see who and what we really are. I've discovered over the years that people will go, frequently go to enormous lengths to avoid acknowledging the truth about themselves.

Why? Because it's a painful thing to do. We much prefer to make our excuses, to rationalize our behavior, anything to avoid facing personal responsibility.
Did David do this? Well, I suspect he probably did. It's what we all do. I mean, how could Bathsheba have been so careless as to get pregnant? How could Uriah have been so honorable?
If only they had done things differently, it would all be okay. It's really their fault, not mine. How readily and easily we spray our excuses to cover up our sin.
And of course, today we live in a culture where people are increasingly encouraged to move responsibility away from themselves. Huge attitude shift in the past couple of generations.
[14:48] We are now a society of victims. It's always someone else's fault. Now, I'm not saying there are not victims, and I'm not saying that on occasion it is someone else's fault, but it's always someone else's fault.

And that's a very dangerous way of thinking. Why is that? It's because without an acknowledgement of personal responsibility, there can be no repentance.
There can be no change. You can't repent of that which you don't feel responsible for. And if people continually believe themselves to be innocent victims rather than guilty sinners, then their repentance is impossible.
But then, of course, perhaps there are others of us here who are more inclined to take the moral high ground, to bolster our sense of self by telling ourselves how much better we are than others.

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We run down others. We assassinate their characters, all to enhance our own feelings of moral superiority. It makes us feel a little cleaner. And who of us here has not done that?
[16:03] Indeed, David himself exhibited this very characteristic. On that occasion, when the prophet Nathan told him the story, the famous story of the poor man who had his ewe lamb taken from him by his rich neighbor, we're told there in 2 Samuel 12, 5, David's anger was greatly kindled against the man.

He said to Nathan, as the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die. Friends, how often we do the same. Our anger is greatly kindled against this and that and the other.
And yet much of it is a smokescreen to deflect from our own sin and guilt. It was Robert Burns who famously said, Oh, what some power the gift of Gias to see ourselves as others see us.
But what about the power to see ourselves as God sees us? This is what happens to David. He comes to see his sin as God sees it.
He comes to acknowledge it for the awful thing that it really is. Verse 4, Now that may at first glance appear a very strange thing for David to say.
[17:28] I mean, what about Bathsheba? What about Uriah? Hadn't he sinned against them in a most despicable manner? Well, yes, of course he had. But what David came to realize and acknowledge was that ultimately his sin was against God himself.

That's a really important thing to understand. Sin is not primarily a sociological or psychological category. It is theological.
It is to do with our relationship with God. Our guilt before God is something real and objective. It is something that stands between us and God.
When we sin, we are doing more than just flouting a social convention. We are offending the living God who made us. We are expressing a rejection of the one who created us and the one to whom, in the final analysis, we are ultimately accountable to.
Sometimes you hear people saying, you know, I've let myself down. Or, you know, I'm angry with myself. I should have done better. It's never enough just to be angry with ourselves.
[18:43] We have to realize that God Himself is angry. Our sin has injured Him, provoked Him, placed us under His just judgment and condemnation.

And so we need to take sin seriously. We need to understand it as an offense against a holy and righteous God. And unless we're prepared to do that, we can never be free from it.
Because the God of the Bible desires truth in the inner parts. Verse 6, Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being.
You teach me wisdom in the secret heart. Here is where we need to be made clean. Here is where we need to be renewed. And for that to happen, the truth must be acknowledged.
What lies within must be exposed and opened up so that God Himself might deal with us. There's something we need to acknowledge.
[19:51] I wonder this morning if you acknowledged that you're a sinner. And secondly, I think we have here something we need to ask for.

What is it that David asks for in this psalm? Look at verse 1. And 2, Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love, according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions, Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, cleanse me from my sin.
A little later on, verse 7 and following, Purge me with hyssop, I shall be clean. Wash me, I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness. Let the bones that you have broken rejoice.
Hide your face from my sins, blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a right spirit within me. There's something to ask for.
Most of us, by nature, don't like asking for things. It's often a kind of last resort. We sense that in some way, asking can be viewed as an admission of weakness.
[20:59] In asking for help, we're tacitly admitting that we don't have the resources to cope with or manage on our own. Asking, therefore, can often be a sign that we've come to an end of ourselves and an end of our resources.

And here in Psalm 51, David asks, what does he ask for? Well, having acknowledged the reality of his sin and guilt before God, he asks God to clean him up.
He doesn't ask God to make him feel better about himself. He asks God to deal with the heart of the problem. Clean out the cupboard of my sin.

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Remove that rotting, festering skeleton of guilt. And what David had come to realize, of course, was that his sin went far beyond the particular circumstances of his affair with Bathsheba, his conspiracy against Uriah.
Look at verse 5. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. As you see, sin is no minor flaw in his character.
[22:15] It's something deeply embedded in his heart and mind. And friends, that's true for all of us. Sin is the moral defect that we're all born with, a corruption of our nature, the very heart and core of our human personalities are twisted and misshapen by sin.

There is no part of us that remains unaffected. It is an all-pervasive influence in our lives. This is what the Bible, this is what theologians talk when they talk about human depravity.
It's not that we're all as bad as we could be. It's rather that sin has tainted and touched every aspect of us. And this idea, again, a common one today, that all human beings are intrinsically good, is one that is fundamentally flawed.
I think it was the American preacher, Dale Ralph Davis, who commented that he was always glad when he had, it was in American context, when he had members of the highway patrol or local police in his congregations.
Why? Well, he said, because you don't need to convince them of the depravity of human nature. You see, if we don't understand this, we're going to be destined to experience disappointment and disillusionment.
[23:42] Sin is the great problem we have as human beings. The evil habits we cannot break, the selfish desires we must gratify, the weight of guilt we cannot escape.

By nature, we stand in opposition to the purposes of God. We're in rebellion against His authority as our Creator. We're in defiance of His will.
We're in disobedience to His law. And before a holy God, we all stand stained, dirty, and unclean. That is the extent of our human plight.
And so, it's not a minor repair job that's required. It's a complete overhaul. We need renewal, total renewal, and regeneration.
David asks in verse 10, create in me a clean heart, O God, renew a right spirit within me. He's asking for heart transplant surgery.
[24:39] He's asking the Lord to give him a renewed heart, a clean heart, a pure heart. He's asking God to wash away the dirt and change him from within.

I wonder, have you ever asked for that? Have you really, ever really asked God to change your heart? Truth is that many people don't want to take those words on their lips.
Why? Because they're radical. They're scary words. I mean, we don't mind God sticking a little bit of spiritual elastoplast on our lives.
We don't mind Him patching us up a bit or giving us a religious tonic to pep us up. But a new heart? That's way too radical.
Why, that might mean everything would have to change. Who knows where all of that might lead? That's scary. We much prefer our cover-ups.
[25:46] We like things the way they are. We like to be in control. We don't really want to change. And if truth be told, we don't really want to be clean.

We're often much happier wallowing in our own filth. for even the smell from the cupboard isn't that bad when you get used to it.
I remember visiting in a flat in WrestleRig many years ago. And this guy's flat was in a horrific state. It was the smell, the stench that made me wretch. The smell was unbearable. He, however, was utterly oblivious.
He'd become accustomed to it. For him, it was absolutely normal. friends, the desire to be clean is something that God alone can give us.
[26:52] Only when His Holy Spirit is active in our lives can we ever come to the place of asking for a cleansed and renewed heart.

Will you dare to ask God for a new heart this morning? Will you dare to ask Him to cleanse you and wash you and forgive you and change you?
Something to acknowledge. Something to ask for. And then thirdly here, something to accept. Something we need to accept.

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What is that? Well, we need to accept the promises that God has made to us on the basis of His own character.
We have to take God at His word. We have to believe what He tells us about Himself. We have to trust Him and throw ourselves upon His mercy.
[27:57] Look at what David says. The sacrifices of God, verse 17, are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

How could David be so sure? How did he know that God wouldn't just kind of slam the door in his face and tell him to take a hike?
How did he know that God would hear and answer his prayer? After all, God would have been quite justified in telling him to get lost. So, maybe there's a clue in the words of verses 11 and 12.
Cast me not away from Your presence and take not Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and uphold me with a willing spirit.
God was no stranger to David. In the past, he had enjoyed a deep, a real, a vital relationship with Him. And deep down, David knew that God's character was one of steadfast love and abundant mercy.
[29:09] And it's only on that basis that he is able to speak to God. Yes, David knew full well that God in His righteousness and justice could have banished him forever, cast him into hell.

But he also knew that a broken and contrite heart he would not despise. And so, in faith, he casts himself on the mercy of God and turns towards God in repentance and faith.
Friends, that's what we need to do as well. If our sin and guilt are to be cleansed and forgiven, if we're to be made new and stand in a right relationship with God, there is no other way.
Repentance, you see, occurs not only when we see the horror of our own sin, but also when, if I can quote the words of the Shorter Catechism, we have an apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ.
Turning from sin and towards God involves us seeing that with Him there is forgiveness. How can we be sure that if we come to Him in repentance that He will welcome us, receive us, forgive us?
[30:34] How can we be sure He will accept us? Notice how in the opening verse David speaks of God's steadfast love and abundant mercy. That's the very basis and foundation of His request for cleansing, for forgiveness, for renewal.

Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your steadfast love, according to Your abundant mercy. Blot out my transgressions. It's not, have mercy on me because I'm important, I'm very religious, because of my social standing, because of all, look at all the good things I've done.
It's, have mercy on me according to Your steadfast love. And friends, in this regard, we have far more to go on than did David because we have nothing less than the cross of Jesus Christ because it's at the cross we see most clearly a God of steadfast love and abundant mercy.
One of his books may have told this story before, I can't remember, can never remember where I've told him stories, these stories, but anyway. In one of his books, David, a man called David Redding, he relates a story told to him by a prison warden and it involved a friend of his, a fellow warden traveling by train in the United States and he's, the person next to him is in a pretty poor condition, very shabby, very woebegone and as he got into conversation with this young man, the young man confessed that he just, he just got out of prison.
And he, his whole life had cast a shadow over his family, his criminal record had brought them shame and his grace in the community. And over the years, he'd almost lost complete contact with them.
[32:24] And he'd hoped that the silence of the years meant that they were just too poor, maybe too illiterate to write. So before his sentence was up, he hatched a plan to find out how they really felt about him.

And he wrote a letter explaining, home explaining that he would be on a train past their little farm on the outskirts of town. And in the letter he said, if they were able to forgive him, they were to hang a white ribbon on an old apple tree near the tracks.
If it was not hanging there when his train went by, he wouldn't bother them. He'd never see them again. And so as the train approached the familiar haunts of his childhood, the suspense, the anxiety, was more than he was able to bear.
And so he exchanged seats with his companion and asked him to watch and to report what he saw. Within a few minutes, the tree came into view and his companion's eyes filled with tears.

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He placed his hand on the young man's shoulder. In a hoarse whisper, he said, it's all right. The whole tree is white with ribbons.
[33:46] And friends, isn't that what the cross of Jesus Christ tells us? Isn't that the message that this table this morning proclaims to us? The cross is the tree, white with the ribbons of God's grace and forgiveness.

A tree that shouts to us to come home. A tree of steadfast love and abundant mercy. A tree that tells us of God's welcome for prodigal sons and daughters.
Because here is the God, you see, who blots out our transgressions, who hides his face from our sins, who washes us and cleanses us, who restores us, who doesn't cast us away, but welcomes us and embraces us.
We see this God and his love for sinners in the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ. What can wash away my sin?
Nothing. Nothing but the blood of Jesus. Here is a cleansing deeper than that of any ritual or ceremony.
[34:57] Because on the cross, Jesus was pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. There the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Can you believe and accept that this morning? That the God of the Bible delights to welcome sinners? That he is a God rich in mercy, abundant in grace?
Do you really believe that God is like this? Well, here's the test. If you do, you won't run away from him.
Instead, you will run towards him. And in Jesus Christ, you will come to discover for yourself the God who is running towards you.
Augustine says of this psalm, listen to David crying out and cry with him. Listen to him groaning and groan too.
[35:59] Listen to him weeping and add your tears to his. Listen to him corrected and share his joy. What is that joy? It's the cleansing joy of divine forgiveness and salvation.

What are you doing with your sin? what are you doing with your guilt? Are you one of those who's just content to bury it, cover it up, hide it away, pretend it never happened, point the finger at other people?
Or are you going to learn from David? Will you acknowledge that you're in the wrong, that before God you're a sinner? Will you ask God to forgive you, cleanse you, change you?
Can you accept that he really is a God of steadfast love and abundant mercy? Have you come to understand that while your sins are many, his mercy is so much more?
Will you take and travel the path that David outlines here, the path of true repentance?
[37:16] Let's pray together. Lord, our prayer is simply this. Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love, according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions, wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.

And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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