

A Sinner's Prayer

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Readings: 2 Samuel 12:1-15; Psalm 51; Luke 18:9-14 • Text: Psalm 51



Prophet Nathan and David

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In some evangelical circles, particularly in the Holiness Movement churches, a view called “entire sanctification,” also known as “Christian perfectionism” or “Higher Life” is taught. John Wesley, Charles Finney, Francis Asbury, Quakers, Methodists, Pentecostals and Revivalists are some of the most well-known advocates of this view in which a Christian who dedicates himself entirely to God may experience a second blessing or baptism of the Holy Spirit. This second blessing is manifested in extraordinary signs and wonders such as speaking in tongues, healings and prophecies, as well as gradual holiness.

Some people in these churches believe that this gradual holiness can eventually lead to a sinless life, or entire sanctification. In reading, *“Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him... Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God”* (1 John 3:6, 9, KJV), they conclude that it is possible for one who has been regenerated by the Spirit to live a sinless life in this age. But the proper way to read “sinneth not,” “doth not commit sin” and “cannot sin” in the original Greek is “keeps on sinning” or “makes a practice of sinning.” They also ignore John’s warning that *“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.... If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us”* (1 John 1:8, 10, ESV). As well, John exhorts us to heed his words “so you may not sin,” but then assures us that since we cannot avoid sinning, we have Christ as our righteousness, *“But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous”* (1 John 2:1).

Because we do sin until the day we die, David’s penitential prayer in Psalm 51 is a model for us if we are truly repentant of our sin. It is a prayer of a child of God pleading for forgiveness after his sin of adultery and murder. How then did David come to God in repentance? What did he plead God to do for him? What are the benefits and evidences of forgiveness? Psalm 51 teaches us how we are to pray a true **Sinner’s Prayer: (1) Of True Confession; (2) For Complete Cleansing; (3) For Pleasing Communion.**

We know from the story of the prophet Nathan's confrontation with King David that God forgives a broken and contrite heart and cleanses a repentant spirit. John assures us of this same forgiveness granted by God to David when we repent of our sin, *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"* (1 John 1:9).

Of True Confession (Verses 1-6)

A sinner's prayer starts with a true confession – an acknowledgment of God's character, of his sin, and of his helplessness in dealing with sin alone.

God's Mercy and Righteousness

In his prayer for God's forgiveness, David acknowledges his sin and does not make excuses. Knowing his sin and misery and God's grace, steadfast love and mercy, he pleads in verse 1, *"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy"* (verse 1). But David also knows that because God is just, righteous and truthful, his judgment on David – the death of his child with Bathsheba – is justified and blameless (verse 4).

After Israel incurred God's righteous wrath when they worshipped the golden calf at Mount Sinai, Moses pleaded with God not to destroy the people by appealing to God's revealed mercy and justice, *"a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty"* (Exod 34:6, 7). Moses confessed on behalf of the people, and the Lord granted Moses' appeal by sparing the Israelites from certain destruction.

David is well aware of this revelation to Moses of God's character, and so appealed as well to this same revelation. Paul also acknowledges this revelation in the opening words in his epistles, *"Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord."* Notice that God is gracious and merciful towards his sinful people only because of his inexpressible gift of surpassing grace in Christ's work on the cross. All of God's spiritual blessings – election, adoption as children, redemption, forgiveness and heavenly inheritance – are only bestowed *"in Christ"* (Eph 1:3-14).

Like David, do you readily confess your own sin and acknowledge your dependence on God's grace, love and mercy in seeking forgiveness? Or are you hesitant to accept God's chastisement as his righteous and blameless judgment against you when you stray from his commandments? And as people who are in Christ, we have assurance that God is faithful to his promise of forgiveness. As well, he is not only just in his righteous judgment, but also in cleansing us from all our unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

Man's Sin

Most Christians are more familiar with psalms of praise and thanksgiving because through them, we can express our joy as we focus on God and his wondrous and mighty works in creation and redemption. In contrast, because Psalm 51 is a penitential psalm, it focuses on man and his sinfulness and helplessness. David expresses his sorrow as he acknowledges his sin, *"For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me"* (verse 3).

When God revealed himself to Moses as a God of mercy, grace and love, he also proclaimed that he forgives *"iniquity and transgression and sin"* (Exod 34:7). David also uses these three words to describe his rebellion against God in the first two verses of Psalm 51. David uses the word *"iniquity"* in verses 2 and 5, which refers to the *"perversion," "corruption" or "total depravity"* of human nature even from his mother's womb. *"Transgression"* means crossing a forbidden boundary, which best describes his sin of adultery with Bathsheba – violating his marriage covenant vow with his wife to trespass into his neighbor's territory. *"Sin"* means *"missing the mark,"* that is, we all *"fall short of the glory of God"* as his perfect standard (Rom 3:23). This means that even our best efforts to obey God are marred by our selfish motivation, always falling short of God's standard of perfect holiness.



*King David sending Uriah to
frontline*

We continually sin against other people, in word, deed and thought. When we do bad things, we usually do them in secret. We say bad things behind their backs. We cheat them in our business. We lie to protect our reputation. Many married people are secretly unfaithful, because they think no one can see. But ultimately, all sin is a sin against God and his holy nature, and nothing is hidden from his eyes and ears even when we think no one can see.

This is why David acknowledged that his great sin against Bathsheba and her husband is a sin against God. The prophet Nathan made it clear to the king that when he sinned against his neighbors, he had sinned against God: *"Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and have taken his wife to be your wife and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites"* (2 Sam 12:9). David's answer to God's indictment against him was, *"I have sinned against the Lord."* (2 Sam 12:13) and, *"Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight"* (verse 4).

The Ten Commandments instruct us to love God and our neighbor. A violation of one commandment is a violation of the whole Decalogue. Loving God bears the fruits of true worship and thankful obedience to his commandments, which also means loving our brethren. *“And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother”* (1 John 4:21). As David failed in loving Bathsheba and her husband, so we too fail miserably in loving our neighbor when we suppress the rule of God’s law written in our hearts.

Man’s Helplessness

The reason why David recognizes that he had sinned against God is his knowledge of his iniquity, his depraved nature, from birth, *“I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me”* (verse 5). Our sinful nature at birth makes us slaves of sin, so that Paul concludes, *“The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned”* (1 Cor 2:14). An unregenerated sinner is unwilling (“does not accept”) and powerless (“not able”) to understand the things of God concerning his salvation. He is not only unwilling and unable to discern spiritual things; he is stillborn, dead and helpless in sin at birth! (Eph 2:1).

David appeals to God, *“purge me”* and *“wash me”* (verse 7), because he knows his helpless state. Like David, you cannot do anything to make your heart willing and your spirit alive in order to purify and wash yourself of your sin. Only God can cleanse you by the washing of regeneration by giving you a new heart and by making you a new creation. Only God can give you repentance to turn away from sin, and give you faith to live a life of obedience to God. Only by faith in Christ, who shed his blood on the cross, can your sins be forgiven. Only when you acknowledge God’s mercy and holiness, your own depravity and helplessness, and confess your sin are you cleansed of the filth of your rebellion against God.

So David also prays for complete cleansing from sin.

For Complete Cleansing (Verses 7-12)

Our sins make us unclean before God. Before we can stand before God, we need to be cleansed, or God will also be defiled. David uses four verbs in his prayer for complete cleansing: *blot out*, which will completely wipe away transgressions; *wash*, by **trampling underfoot**, kneading or beating, so he will be freed from his sinful nature and be purer than snow; *cleanse* and *purge*, so he will be declared clean as in the Old Testament purification rite. Both water and blood are used in ceremonial washing from sin. Washing is by water;

cleansing and purging are by sprinkling blood through the use of hairy hyssop leaves and branches (Lev 14:1-9).

But Old Testament purification rites did not in themselves cleanse sin, in the same way that our sacraments of water baptism and Holy Communion do not in themselves grant us forgiveness of our sin. But they are outward signs and seals of the inward reality of God's work in cleansing our hearts. This is why David follows his appeal for outward purification with appeals to renew and restore his sinful, downtrodden spirit by God's Holy Spirit (verses 10-12). He knows that when God cleanses his sin, he performs the following: cleanses his heart, renews a right spirit within him, remains in him, restores the joy of his salvation, and gives him a willing and steadfast spirit. In Ezekiel's prophecy of God's new covenant with his people, God proclaims an answer to David's prayer for cleansing:

"I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you" (Ezek 36:25-26a).

David knows that God's grace, mercy and love in cleansing him will result in the blessings for which he is pleading:

First, all his sins and uncleannesses are forgiven and blotted out. This is why he prays, *"blot out all my iniquities"* (verses 1 and 9). God's judgment on his sins resulted in great suffering, as his child with Bathsheba died shortly after birth. But he himself was spared from death and forgiven of his sins because he repented with a broken and contrite heart, *"The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die"* (2 Sam 12:13). He can pray for complete cleansing because God *"has put away [his] sin"* – completely. God's forgiveness is not like our *"forgive, but not forget"* spirit. When God forgives, he will never again hold our sin against us, as if he forgets, *"As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us"* (Psa 103:12). The Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 60 makes this clear: We are righteous before God because he,

without any merit of mine, of mere grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never committed nor had any sins, and had myself accomplished all the obedience which Christ has fulfilled for me.

"As if I had never committed nor had any sins"? Yes, this is possible, only because of Christ's perfect obedience. Do not think that there are *"mortal"* sins that cannot be forgiven, because – in Christ – God forgives all our sins, small and great.

Second, God restores David's joy in God's salvation. David prays that God will let him “hear joy and gladness” and “let the bones that you have broken rejoice.” He prays as well, “Restore to me the joy of your salvation” (v. 12). When he is delivered from the guilt of his murderous sin, “my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness” (v. 14). King David was a picture of this restoration. David fasted and wept and mourned after God pronounced death on his son. But after the child died, his joy was restored. He ended his fast, washed himself, put on new clothes, went to the house of the Lord, and worshiped God. This is why David writes Psalm 51:13-19 in the context of offering true sacrifices of repentance and praise in worship.

Third, not only is David's joy in God's salvation restored, but his communion and fellowship with God is restored as well. When we sin and do not repent, we lose the joy of our salvation and our fellowship with God is broken. We know we are guilty, but after we repent, we know we are forgiven of our sins, and we are to have assurance of that promise.

In our rebellion, God's Spirit and our spirit are at war, so that we suppress the work of the Spirit in our lives. This is what David means when he prays, “Take not your Holy Spirit from me.” When God gives us repentance, he humbles our spirit, so that we acknowledge our total dependence on God's Spirit to cleanse us. Then we repent with humble, broken and contrite hearts, are forgiven of our sin, and are renewed with a right, steadfast spirit within us, a spirit willing to obey his commands.

For Pleasing Communion (Verses 13-19)

Finally, David's prayer shows that true repentance and forgiveness are manifested in the believer's life of thankful worship of God. David now delights in proclaiming God's grace, mercy and righteousness in the assembly of God's people. He vows to God, “My tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness” (v. 13), and “my mouth will declare your praise” (v. 15). David also says that he now delights to “teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you” (v. 13). We too are to delight in proclaiming the gospel to unrepentant sinners in the congregation so they may also be renewed in their hearts, repent and be forgiven of their sins, and worship God truly. This is the reason why we gather every Lord's Day: to sing aloud praises and thanksgiving to God, and to hear his Word proclaimed and explained to us, so we may also declare God's righteousness and praise to others.

As well, David's repentance and forgiveness produce right sacrifices. The visible, outward animal sacrifices in the Old Testament point to the worshipers' invisible, inward heart. David knew that the sacrifices of a rebellious worshiper mean nothing to God, and

therefore, his sacrifices were not acceptable to God as long as he was committing adultery and plotting murder, *“For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.”* As long as he does not have a broken and contrite heart, his worship was not pleasing in God’s sight. In the same way, if you come to the Lord’s Day worship without a repentant heart, your songs and prayers will not be pleasing to God. And this is the reason why we start our worship service with the reading of God’s Law so we may acknowledge our trespasses, and then pray for forgiveness. Only then will God *“delight in right sacrifices,”* and our worship be acceptable and pleasing in his sight.

Conclusion

The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14) is a contrast between a self-righteous, unrepentant Pharisee and a humble, broken sinner, a tax collector. The Pharisee, proud of his own good works and righteousness, does not see his need for repentance and forgiveness, and only sees the sin of others. The tax collector, in contrast, sees his own sinfulness, humbles himself and acknowledges his helplessness in cleansing himself of his sin and of his need for God’s grace and mercy. Like David, he exclaims in repentance, *“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”* Which of these two men went home justified in the sight of God? Not the Pharisee, full of pride and self-righteousness, but the tax collector, helpless, humble, and contrite before God.

As sinners, you have no righteousness before God. Your own good works cannot save you. How can you be justified and forgiven by God? Only when you humble yourself and plead for God's grace and mercy. Only when you put your faith in Christ and his completed work on the cross will your iniquity be blotted out. Only when you repent of your sins with a broken and contrite heart will you be washed clean. Only when you acknowledge your helplessness will you be restored to fellowship with God. Then, and only then, will your worship and sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving be acceptable to God.

To those of you humble yourselves in repentance, you have assurance of complete forgiveness in Christ and restoration to God’s fellowship. And in this, God is pleased and promises earthly and eternal blessings to you, *“God will do good to Zion, God’s people, in his good pleasure.”* As God’s people in the heavenly Mount Zion, you can look forward to spiritual blessings in the heavenly places, not only in this age, but in the age to come.