

## **More (but not less) Than Sorry**

*(The following message is the second in our series titled *The Journey to the Cross: Four Practices to Prepare Us for Easter.*)*

### **Psalm 51**

I read this week that there's a new self-help line in France. It's called 'The Line of the Lord,' and it's designed to give people a chance to confess their sins over the phone. The service, which costs 50p per minute, tells callers: 'For advice on confessing, press #1. To confess, press #2. To listen to some confessions, press #3.

I wonder which number gets pressed the most?

Seriously.

Still, the French Confession line points us to a truth we don't like to talk about too much: Everyone needs to confess sometimes.

It's not just phone-in services—and it's not just the French. I looked on the internet for English-speaking confession sites last week, and stopped counting after 50 separate sites designed to give people a chance to confess something—to come clean about something they've done.

Everyone needs to confess sometimes.

Our text this morning is one of the great prayers of confession in the Scriptures. Listen as David confesses his sins to God.

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+51&version=NIVUK>

Lent is a time of reflection and preparation for our remembrance and celebration of Christ's love for us as we find it in the Easter miracle. Over these four Sundays we're exploring some practices that will prepare our hearts and minds for Holy Week and Easter. The habits and practices we'll look at are prayer, confession, forgiveness and hospitality. Each one of these serves to help us understand and experience what Christ has offered to us—each one of these gets us out of our regular routines and practices and makes Lent and Easter more meaningful.

As a part of that I offered a challenge last week to pray the Lord's Prayer five times each day between now and Easter. If you weren't here last week, feel free to start today. Even though the prayer is only 30 seconds long or so, it's harder that it looks to do it five times every day. I managed it just once last week, but some of you have emailed me with questions or things you're learning by praying the prayer. Keep those notes coming—you guys are teaching me a lot with your comments.

So about our text: It was one of the biggest political scandals in the history of the nation. King David had an affair with the wife of one of his military officers, and has the man killed to cover it up. Then he married the woman, and thought he could live happily ever after. The details of the story are in 2 Samuel.

The airing of this scandal in public was as dramatic as any in the history of the world. I'm just old enough to remember watching the Watergate hearings, and after that there were Cabinet and Supreme Court nomination battles in the States. Here we've seen recently the Chicot Inquiry on the war in Iraq, but there is a long string of public hearings on accidents and political corruption dating back to 1847—the first public inquiry in the sense that we know it was a study of the educational system in Wales. Isn't that interesting?

The airing of the scandal surrounding King David threatened to throw his nation into complete chaos. Here's how it happened.

Nathan the prophet—God's mouthpiece in David's administration—came to him with a story about two men, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a large herd of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had just one sheep, that he had raised from birth and was a part of his family.

When a guest came to visit the rich man, as Nathan told the story, it was the custom for him to prepare a feast for him. But the rich guy didn't want to use one of his own herd, so he took the poor man's one sheep and killed it and served it to his guest.

When David heard the story he was furious—the Scriptures tell us that he 'burned with anger against the man,' and so he said to Nathan: 'As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this deserves to die. He has to pay the man back four times over, because he did this thing and had no pity.'

I can just see David feeling pretty good about himself at that point. He was the King, he had all the power, and he knew that God loved him. I can see him sitting back on his throne, smiling and feeling proud, ready to look around to his advisors and ask 'what's next?'

It's right at that point that Nathan points his finger at David and says:

'You are that man! This is what the Lord, the God of Israel says: I anointed you king over Israel—I gave your master's house to you—I gave you the house of Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little for you I would have given you more. Why did you despise the word of the Lord by doing what is evil in his eyes?'

Can you imagine?

Can you get a feeling for what it would have been like, there in the courts of power, with the king making plans and decisions about all kinds of things. The whole cast of characters in the court were there—advisors, visitors, servants—and all of them heard the king accused of the worst kind of sin. That's how this scandal was made public. And it's in David's exposure as a philandering, murdering scoundrel, that he sits down and writes the psalm of confession we read today.

It's worth looking at a few things about this psalm.

First, notice how completely David takes responsibility for his sin. 'I have done evil in your sight—my sin is always before me.' That probably wasn't his first reaction, but by the time he sits down to share his experience in this psalm, he understands that only by coming clean completely can he be forgiven and restored.

Second, listen to what David asks for. 'Create in me a clean heart, O God...Restore to me the joy of what it means to be your child.' David wants to be made new again—to have a chance to start over.

Finally, notice that David promises to share what God has done for him with others who are burdened by their sin or brokenness. 'Then I will teach others your ways, and sinners will turn to you for forgiveness.' There's a clear link here between David's prayer and the covenant relationship God invites us to live in. We're talking about this in our Bible studies on Sunday. God promised Abram that he would bless him, so that he would turn around and be a blessing to the rest of the world. God blesses David, and David turns around to share that blessing with those

around him.

God blesses us, even when that blessing is being forgiven for our sins. God blesses us, but it's with the understanding that we'll share that blessing with others.

There's a great practical example of this in an old West Wing episode. Josh is struggling with something and Leo offers to help him. Leo tells a story about a guy in a hole who's asking for help. A friend hears him and jumps into the hole. The first guy says 'great, now we're both stuck in here.' The second answers by saying, 'yep, but I was in here before and I know the way out.'

We learn in confession that God loves us and has blessed us, and the natural response is to share that good news—to find someone else in a hole and show them the way out.

The church staff is reading a book together. It's in the reading list in your bulletin—it's called '*God Hides in Plain Sight*.' The book is a meditation on seeing God in the everyday—about experiencing the sacraments—all seven of the Roman Catholic sacraments—in the events and practices and cultural things that we see around us.

The author talks about confession as a way to order our inner lives—to take the rooms or spaces in our hearts and minds that might be cluttered by sin and brokenness—to take those rooms and tidy them up in confession.

"Confession, penance, forgiveness and reconciliation are part of the heartbeat—part of the order in our disorder—of what it means to be a whole human being. At various levels in our lives there is conflict, some of which will never be completely resolved. But at those deep relational, spiritual, or even institutional levels, we make the climb out of the river difficult when we keep retrieving our past and carrying it with us. Usually we need someone's help in letting go of it..."

'Usually we need someone's help in letting go of it...' Confession calls on us to be in relationship, with God and with each other. We can confess to God directly, of course, but more often than not that confession isn't complete until we share it with someone in our lives. Until we ask for someone's help in understanding what we've done, and how God will forgive us and restore us.

Confession that goes beyond just saying that I messed up—confession that is a

means of sharing our messy lives with someone else—that kind of confession is an important part of being Christian disciples together.

If we think about confession that way, then it becomes a lot more than just saying sorry. It's a part of being in Christian community—part of what it means to be a church.

Everyone needs to confess sometimes, and during this season of Lent it's a healthy thing to be reminded of—to practice—to let it help us reflect and prepare for remembering Christ's sacrifice for us.

Everyone needs to confess sometimes.

When I went to my 10-year high school reunion in 1991, we had to list what we were doing in a little book that everyone got when they came to the party. I had just graduated from seminary the year before and was working as a college and youth minister near my hometown. I have to say that I learned as much that night about what people need from their minister as I did in any seminary class I took.

Over the course of the evening people came to my table and made their confessions. People I knew, people I'd lost touch with, and even people who never said a word to me during high school—they dropped by the table to say hello, and ended up telling me some of their darkest secrets—they were looking for a way to get out from under their deepest sins.

Everyone needs to confess sometimes.

Jesus knew that when he taught his disciples to pray. If you've been saying the Lord's Prayer this past week you know that right there in the middle of the prayer there's a confession line: 'Forgive us our sins.' You can't get away from it. 'Forgive us our sins.' It's a part of any basic prayer—it's a part of how we begin to align our hearts and minds with the heart and mind of God himself.

Everyone needs to confess sometimes. But how does that help us move through the season of Lent? How does that help us prepare for Easter?

If we think of confession as a way of sharing our lives honestly with each other, it prepares us for Holy Week and Easter by reminding us of why Christ served and died for us in the first place. One of the reasons Lent is more somber than the rest

of the church year is because we're asked to reflect on why we need a sacrificial savior at all—why Christ's sacrifice was necessary.

It's in confession that we get the answer to that question. God sees who we are and what we are, and his response is to love us sacrificially—to act decisively to bring us back to him.

God sees who we are and what we are, and in the practice of confession, so do we.

Remembering what Christ has done through the events of Holy Week and Easter—and why he did those things—being people who remember is a part of the life of faith.

Confession isn't there just to get us to focus on ourselves. Confession, in the end, gets us to focus on God. It reminds us of who God is and what he's done and what he promises to us.

Confession prepares us to experience God in a new way—to experience his love in the places we need it most.

I invite you, as we move through the season of Lent—of preparing our hearts for the miracle of Easter—I invite you to make confession a part of your life. The Lord's Prayer is a place to start, as we ask God to 'forgive us our sins.'

Reaching out to someone else to share your life is the next step. Building connections like that, in relationships that are built on trust and faith, strengthens our community and makes us more into the church that God calls us to be.

However it works for you, I invite you to make confession a part of your preparation for Holy Week and Easter.

We'll do our part right now, as we say the Lord's Prayer before coming to the Table together. Hear especially that crucial sentence of confession, and make it yours.

Let's stand and prepare our hearts for Communion by saying the Lord's Prayer.