

The Sinner's Prayer

Psalm 51

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Ames, Iowa

September 20, 2026

When we began the Psalms series, Psalm 51 was on my radar screen. It actually is a Psalm that intimidates me because of the story behind it and the message that flows from it. It is also very familiar to so many people, which can make it challenging to preach. Psalm 51 is like the letter of Romans in the Psalms. In fact, the Apostle Paul draws heavily on Psalm 51 in Romans 3.

To understand Psalm 51, we need to begin by reading the superscription at the beginning of the Psalm, which says:

*TO THE CHOIRMASTER. A PSALM OF DAVID, WHEN NATHAN THE PROPHET
WENT TO HIM, AFTER HE HAD GONE IN TO BATHSHEBA.*

The events behind Psalm 51 are found in 2 Samuel 11:1-12:23. I don't have time to read all of it, so I'll summarize the events that lead to the writing of Psalm 51.

King David committed adultery with Bathsheba, and after he found out she was pregnant with his child, he arranged the death of her husband, Uriah. Approximately nine months later, the prophet Nathan confronted him with his sin. David recognized the seriousness of his sin and confessed his guilt to God. These are the events that led David to write Psalm 51.

The main point of Psalm 51 is: *The God who exposes our sin also cleanses it, renews our relationship with Him, and gives us a new heart through Jesus' redeeming grace.*

I want to work through Psalm 51 as a model prayer for asking God for forgiveness and renewal. Psalm 51 is the original sinner's prayer. Jesus used it as a model for asking for forgiveness in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:21) and the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:13).

I'm going to keep this outline very simple and practical. I want the outline to teach you how to pray a sinner's prayer. If you're not a Christian and you want to be, this teaches you how to pray and ask God for forgiveness and salvation. If you're a Christian, this prayer should be a staple prayer for you as you and I continually go to Jesus for forgiveness, repentance, and renewal.

Let me say one other thing before we get into Psalm 51. When you hear Psalm 51, you may be thinking of someone who needs to hear this message. You'll be tempted to listen and think, "*Man, they really need to hear this sermon and its message.*" Don't let this be your mindset as you listen to this sermon. If you're able to glean something that helps your personal ministry with people, that's great. But here's the deal: You need to listen to this sermon as if you're listening to what God has to say to you about asking for forgiveness, striving to repent, and seeking restoration.

Now let's get to work on Psalm 51. Remember, we are looking at it as a model prayer for confessing sin, seeking forgiveness, repenting, and seeking restoration.

I. First, base your prayer on God's character and covenant (v. 1)

Look in v. 1:

*Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy*

Notice how David begins his prayer. He grounds it in God's character rather than his own worthiness. He does not say, "*Have mercy on me because I have served You faithfully,*" or "*Because I am Your anointed king.*" He prays to God on the basis of God's lovingkindness and tender mercies.

I've covered this in previous sermons, but let's do a little review. The Hebrew word "*hesed*" is translated as "*steadfast love*." It is the word for God's covenant love and faithfulness. David's hope is grounded in God's mercy and faithfulness to His promises or covenant.

But here's what we need to understand as we base our prayer on God's character and covenant faithfulness. We're not Jewish. We don't base our prayers on the Old Covenant. The *hesed*, or *steadfast love*, we base our prayer on is in Christ. We look to the New Covenant in Jesus. We've got to go to the cross and resurrection.

In the New Covenant, God came in Christ to reconcile His people to Himself. He did this by coming in Jesus and living a perfect, sinless life, earning all the righteousness we need, and then dying on the cross to make full payment for our sins. On the cross, our sins were transferred to Jesus, and Jesus' righteousness and sinless life are transferred to us through our faith in Him and repentance of our sin.

So, when we base our prayer on God's character and the New Covenant, we come to God in Jesus' name, thanking Him for sending Jesus to pay for our sins and earn the righteousness we need to stand before Him and have our prayers heard and answered. So, base your prayer on Jesus and pray in His name.

II. Second, ask God to forgive and cleanse you of your sin (vv. 1b-2)

Don't miss this, or you will misunderstand forgiveness and repentance. First, forgiveness and repentance are two sides of the same coin. They go together like wings on an airplane. The plane won't fly with just one wing. So, forgiveness and repentance go together.

Second, remember that *forgiveness and repentance* begin with God's gracious character. We just talked about that, but here's what I mean. If we think we are worthy of forgiveness and that we can repent in our own strength, then that is not forgiveness and repentance. That is self-righteousness and self-reliance, and together, they are a deadly combination. So, we must ask for forgiveness and seek to repent of our sins.

Next, what do I mean by "*seeking forgiveness of*" and "*repenting of*" sin? In other words, what is sin?

I want you to look at the three words David uses to describe his sin. At the end of v. 1 and in v. 2, he uses three words: *Transgressions*, *iniquity*, and *sin*. *Transgressions* are deliberate rebellion and violation of God's authority in your life. *Iniquity* means guilt and moral crookedness. Basically, it means we are guilty of breaking God's laws. Finally, *sin* means missing the mark of God's righteous standard and His character. In other words, we don't reflect the glory of God in our lives. David says he is guilty of all three of these sins. News flash – so are we.

So, David asks God to cleanse him of his *transgressions*, *iniquities*, and *sins*. But here's what you need to understand. Even in David's confession of his sin, he appeals to God on the basis of God's nature, character, and covenant faithfulness.

Verses 1-2 are about God and proclaim God's graciousness. Even David's understanding of sin is grounded in God's covenant with him. Listen to Exodus 34:6-7, where Yahweh passed before Moses and declared who He is:

The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷ keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.

David appeals to the mercy and forgiveness of Yahweh based on Yahweh's covenant with Israel. He drew on what he knew about God from Moses' encounter with Yahweh. King David knew the Scriptures very well.

Then notice what he says. He asks God to "*blot out*" his transgressions. The imagery is that of removing a written record of debt or erasing an indictment. It is a judicial term. He longs to be justified - just as if he never

sinned. Then he asks to be *washed and cleansed*. *Sin is both guilt that requires forgiveness and defilement that requires purification.*

How did David receive the fullness of this forgiveness and practice repentance? How do we? Here it is: The gospel announces the fulfillment of David's hope. The Apostle Paul tells us in Romans 3 that before Jesus came, God put the sins of His people in forbearance. Then, when Jesus came and bore the sins and guilt of his people on the cross, He paid for their sin.

What this means is that Jesus is the One who paid for David's sin. David received the cleansing he longed for, but it wasn't fulfilled until Jesus paid for his sin on the cross. Like King David, believers receive forgiveness and a cleansed conscience through Christ's once-for-all sacrifice on the cross.

Let me give you a warning when it comes to confession of sin and repentance of sin. Beware of practicing "*bait and switch*" when we pray to confess our sin. Do you know what I mean when I say "*bait and switch*?" It's when we ask God to forgive our sin and seek to practice repentance, but what we are really trying to do is repair our reputation. Don't let that be your motivation for seeking forgiveness.

When we seek forgiveness and repentance, we are appealing to God's mercy based on the New Covenant we have with Him through Jesus life, death, and resurrection from the dead. When we have sinned, God invites us to come honestly before him, confessing our guilt and trusting in the person and work of Christ on our behalf.

III. Ask God to make the gravity of your sin real to you (vv. 3-9)

Let's dig even deeper into what it means to understand the depth of our sin when we ask for forgiveness. Verses 3-9 are a deeper unpacking of vv. 1-2. King David digs deeper into his heart to make a thorough confession of sin. He needed to go deeper so he wouldn't offer a shallow confession. You know what? A 2-ounce confession means nothing when it is a 10,000-pound sin.

In v. 3, David says, "*For I know my transgressions.*" The Hebrew word "*know*" doesn't simply mean "*to be aware of*" or "*to acknowledge*." It means to be "*deeply aware*" of the sin that has offended God. David grasps the gravity of his sin, and it is so grievous and painful that it dominates his mind. It runs on repeat in his brain, and he hates it.

Then in v. 4, he says:

*Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight.*

David is not saying he didn't believe he sinned against Bathsheba and Uriah. He's not saying he didn't sin against his family, his kingdom, and the people of Israel. So what does he mean when he says, "*Against you, you only, have I sinned*"?

King David recognizes that sin fundamentally is an offense against God. Every violation of another person is also a violation of the Creator's law and authority.

The Prophet Nathan's makes this clear in 2 Samuel 12:9, when he said to David:

Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight?

David despised the Lord's commandment and did evil in God's sight. David's sin was not merely a failure of personal integrity; it was rebellion against the covenant God. Here's the bottom line: *We've all done that, and true repentance does not merely say, "I regret the consequences." It says, "I have sinned against a holy, perfect, loving God."*

Let's go deeper, because now he gets to the bottom. In v. 5, he says he was conceived in sin. He doesn't mean his mother and father were having some kind of illicit relationship and he was the result. He means he was born a sinner.

David takes us all the way back to Genesis and the original sin of Adam and Eve that he inherited. David understands that he didn't sin and then become a sinner. He knows that he sinned because his heart is corrupted by original sin.

Then, in v. 6, he turns his argument around and looks at the other side of the issue of the heart. Look at what he said:

*Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being,
and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.*

The word "Behold" tells us he's building on his previous argument. He's telling us that people are deeply sinful and therefore God must work deep in the human heart. When we take the words "inward being" and "secret heart," we are getting to the depth of our personhood. We are getting to the core of who we are. The heart is where desires, emotions, and affections live. The desires of the heart drive the decisions we make.

Bottom line: The heart of the issue is the issue of the heart. God doesn't desire outward religious performance. He wants the heart to be transformed. The person and work of Christ do not merely provide forgiveness for sins. It does, but it addresses the deeper problem of the sinful heart. Christ not only pays the penalty of our sin on the cross, but through the Holy Spirit, He begins the work of inward transformation. This means true forgiveness and genuine repentance are not mere external behaviors, but evidence of a transformed heart filled with truth and wisdom of God. It is evidence of being born again.

Finally, vv. 7-9 are restating vv. 1-2 with vivid imagery. Verse 7 is the cleansing that David desires. He wants his heart to be whiter than snow.

The only way for our hearts to be cleansed of sin and made whiter than snow is through the cross of Christ. The gospel fulfills the hope of v. 7 because it is the blood of Christ that washes our sins away and makes us white as snow. Then in v. 8 he says:

*Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have broken rejoice.*

David holds two key truths together. First, he describes the weight of divine conviction of sin. It feels like his bones have been crushed. This is poetic language for the profound anguish of a conscience under the awareness of God's judgment.

Secondly, he knows the deep conviction he feels doesn't mean he is ultimately destroyed. He understands that God wounds us in order to heal us. He brings sinners to the point where they stop trusting themselves and cry out for mercy so that they are eventually filled with joy and gladness. This is the conviction that God works in our lives to bring us to repentance.

Finally, in v. 9 he returns to the fact that his sin is so grievous that God should not look upon him, but he asks God to blot out all his iniquities. The implication is that if God will blot them out, then God will turn His face back upon David.

Here's how we apply this. When we pray to God, ask for forgiveness, and seek to repent, we need to have a clear understanding of the grievousness of our sin against God. Now, I don't mean we wallow in our guilt and sin, but that we have a thorough understanding that we sinned against God and need His mercy and New Covenant love that is found in Jesus.

Think about it this way: In his work on Psalm 51, the early Church Father, Saint Augustine, helps us learn how to pray the sinner's prayer:

Listen to [David] crying out, and cry with him; listen to him groaning, and groan too; listen to him weeping, and add your tear to his; listen to him corrected, and share his joy . . . The prophet Nathan was sent to that man; and notice how

humble the king was. He did not brush his mentor's words aside . . . he listened to the prophet; now let Christ's lowly people listen to Christ.¹

IV. Ask God to Renew Your Heart (v. 10)

Look at v. 10. Verse 10 is the theological heart of Psalm 51.

*Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.*

For us to have clean hearts is a work of God alone. The Hebrew word for “create” is “*bara*.” It is the word used in Genesis to describe when God created the universe out of nothing. “*Bara*” means to bring into existence what didn’t exist before. It is a miracle of God that produces a “*clean heart*,” or what we might call “*a new heart*.”

In his commentary on Psalm 51, Christopher Ash writes:

Here is a word that [means it] borrows nothing from the creature, for it must be a new and sovereign work of God, creating a clean heart not by a measure of assistance in cleaning up an indifferent heart (which just needs a little bit of divine help for its self-improvement) but by a work of sovereign grace ex nihilo [out of nothing].²

The Bible teaches that the heart is the center of the person—the seat of thoughts, desires, and affections. David is asking for a sovereign transformation that reaches the deepest level of his being.

So, after we pray a prayer of forgiveness and repentance, we come to God and ask Him to do in us what we can’t – *create in us a clean heart*.

Listen to me: The way this prayer is answered is in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus lived a life we should have lived, and died the death we should have died, and rose from the dead on the third day to purchase grace to create new hearts for His people.

Here’s how this works: For the unbeliever seeking God, the Holy Spirit gives spiritual life to those who were dead in sin because people are saved by grace alone. For the believer, it is still much the same. The heart is continually transformed by the Spirit and grace of God. Just like we are saved by grace, we are also sanctified by grace.

So, when you pray the sinner’s prayer, ask God to create in you a new heart and fill you with His Holy Spirit that creates desires and affections that long to love God from the heart.

V. Ask God to Restore Your Relationship with Him (vv. 11-12)

Everything we have been looking at has worked toward restoring our relationship with God. Listen to vv. 11-12 and hear David’s words as he prays for restoration:

*Cast me not away from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.
¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and uphold me with a willing spirit.*

We can understand David’s concern when we read the phrase “*cast me not away*.” He remembers what happened to King Saul when he disregarded God’s commandment. God removed him from being king and took His Holy Spirit from Saul. More than anything, David feared losing God’s presence in his life through the Holy Spirit.

Just to be clear, v. 11 is not about losing your salvation. It is a prayer that desires a broken relationship to be restored. Verse 12 bears out that hope. He asks for the joy of God’s salvation.

¹ Saint Augustine quoted in Christopher Ash, *The Psalms: A Christ-Centered Commentary: Vol. 3, Psalms 51-100*, 4.

² Ibid, 15.

Then the phrase “*uphold me with a willing*” points to God’s gracious sustaining power. David needs more than a momentary emotional bump; he needs God to keep him faithful. The evidence of a restored relationship with God is when we long for the presence of God in our lives and do not want to do anything to break fellowship with Him.

VI. Ask God to Renew Your Heart of Worship (vv. 13-17)

Verses 13-17 are where Jesus takes the misery of our sin and turns it into ministry. God, in His time, can take the misery of the sin you and I have committed and turn it into ministry to those living in darkness and help Christians who need wisdom and encouragement.

Verses 13-15 focus on evangelism, worship, and proclaiming the gospel. David wants to worship God and lead others back to God. This overflows from a transformed heart, and it is beautiful.

But here’s the deal: This doesn’t mean God wants a lot of religious activity in your life. While ministry is important, David helps us keep the main thing the main thing, and vv. 16-17 drive this point home.

In these verses, David says God doesn’t desire a lot of religious activity. It’s not the formalism that Pastor Dean talked about last Sunday. Look at what the main thing is. Look at v. 17:

*The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

David gets back to the heart of the issue, and it is the issue of the heart. Listen, God wants us to be broken over our sin. But here’s the deal: Brokenness does not earn our forgiveness.

There’s only one sacrifice that earned forgiveness, and that is Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross. On the cross, His spirit was broken, and His heart was broken, His body was broken, so that when we are confronted with our sin, we can be broken over our sin and still live. Jesus’ brokenness over our sin purchased our ability to be broken over sin and yet renew our crushed hearts.

So, here’s the bottom line when it comes to asking God to renew your heart of worship. Ask God to make the pain of your sin a platform for ministry. Ask Him to take the misery of your sin and use it for ministry. But remember what God ultimately wants your heart. He wants you to have a broken and contrite heart over your sin. If ministry flows out of that, then praise God, but that is not the main thing.

VII. Ask God to Renew His People (vv. 18-19)

Verses 18-19 conclude the sinner’s prayer. Now, David has come full circle:

*Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;
build up the walls of Jerusalem;
¹⁹ then will you delight in right sacrifices,
in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.*

King David’s personal repentance led to a renewed commitment to God’s people. Here’s the application for us: We should seek not merely private spiritual relief but the strengthening of the church, the restoration of relationships, and the honor of God’s name in the community.

So, the sinner’s prayer concludes by asking God to do good to His local church and the church at large. David turns us toward doing life with the people of God. We need the community of faith to live out our Christian lives. We need to do more than just show up to a church worship service. We need to be involved in the life of the local church. So, if you’re not a member of a local church, find a local church and covenant to do life in that church.

Let me close with a story to put the sinner’s prayer into perspective. My son-in-law, Elliot, went to seminary at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kentucky. He took a class called Pastoral Ministry with a professor named Dr. Hershel York. He said he was an awesome professor. He looked like Colonel Sanders.

He said Dr. York told a story in class one day that he will never forget. He said that once, at his church, a husband and wife joined their church. The husband used to be a youth pastor at a different church, but he stepped down because his wife had an affair with a female intern.

So one day, this couple came to Dr. York for counseling to work through everything they had been through. In their first session, the wife asked him, "*Dr. York, what do I need to do to get past this?*" That was her question. "*What do I need to do to get past this?*"

And here's what he said. He said, "*You will never get past this. Someday, years from now, some other kid in the church will tell your kid, 'Guess what I heard about your mom?' Years from now, people will see you and whisper about what you've done. You can't change that. The only thing you can change is what people will say after that.*" She replied that she never would have thought this in a million years. And then he quoted something to her from the British preacher John Angel James. He said, "*Let your repentance be more notorious than your sin.*" Let me say it again so it sinks in, because we all need to learn this lesson: "*Let your repentance be more notorious than your sin.*"³

I don't know what you're thinking of when you think about Psalm 51. You might be pondering a grievous sin you committed like King David, or you might be thinking that you have not done anything that bad. Perhaps you haven't done anything like adultery, but you know what? Adultery is not listed in Psalm 51. Murder is not listed in Psalm 51. Do you know what is listed in Psalm 51? Transgressions, iniquities, sins, and our need for God's mercy. Here's what I do know. Everyone in this room has committed transgressions, iniquities, and sins and needs the mercy of God in Christ.

Friends, we have a great Savior in Jesus Christ who loves repentant sinners. And if you will let Him, He will work in your life so powerfully that your repentance will be more notorious than your sin. May this sinner's prayer lead you to live a life where your repentance is more notorious than your sin.

³ Elliot Goldinger, Sermon: *Godly vs. Worldly Grief*, 2 Corinthians 7:2-16, West Hills Church, Morgan Hill, CA, 05/03/26 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vae8yAvKQsQ&list=PL-0j_uHmYqoEd5pZcaySn7hjKZ1YaKTf-&index=13.)