

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
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A Broken Offering

Psalm 51

We preachers don't usually like to give away the whole point of the sermon right up front. Instead, we would rather have you, the listeners, join us as we enter into the Scripture text with curiosity and patiently explore its space and movement. That way we can all experience a sense of discovery as the meaning of the text gradually unfolds during the course of the message. So I normally don't begin my sermons with a statement like, "Today's Scripture passage is about _____, and this is the point I want to make."

But the very way today's text, Psalm 51, is laid out, undercuts any preacher's attempt to withhold the fundamental subject from the hearers. How? By including a heading. I know this is true of the NIV, which many of you are using, and I'm guessing it's probably the case with other translations as well. This psalm has a superscription which reads, "For the director of music. A psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba." So there you go. There's no need for me to try to be cute with the topic of this text. A later editor has already stuck a neon sign above the doorway of this psalm, announcing that the verses you're about to enter are mainly about sin and forgiveness.

And not just any old run-of-the mill sin. No, this is about big time transgression. Sleeping with Uriah's wife, and then killing him. That's the background of this psalm. It sounds like a biblical storyline lifted straight from an episode of Dateline. Something so heinous, and yet so intriguing, that it seems worthy of an investigative report and an audience of viewers.

But the audience members for this morning's Scripture passage aren't folks sitting on the sofa with remote controls in hand. The audience members are us, sitting in our pews with Bibles in hand. And when we open those Bibles to a text like this, set against a background of political corruption and unbridled lust, it's tempting for us to distance ourselves from behavior like David's. Wow, we think, that's really wicked stuff, the kind of stuff that happens mostly behind palace walls and in the lives of people whose evil deeds end up on national television. You see how we start to feel better about ourselves when we focus on the unholy mess that others have made of their lives, and the lives of people around them.

But this psalm doesn't allow us to divide humanity into the good and the bad, or even the somewhat bad and the really bad. The honesty about sin that we hear in this psalm is more than just one individual's reflection on their offenses against God and their desperate need for his mercy. It's also an expression of how all of us are fundamentally broken and disobedient to God's will. It's a sobering call to remember our own spiritual condition and the kinds of things that we're capable of.

Several years ago, Kay Warren, wife of Pastor Rick Warren, wrote an article acknowledging her fear of monsters, and warning about the internal monsters that come forth in our own evil behavior. She reflects on a trip to Rwanda this way:

The first time I visited Rwanda, I went looking for monsters, albeit a different category of monster—the kind that isn't relegated to B movies. I had heard about the 1994 genocide that had left one million people dead—tortured, raped, viciously murdered—and somehow I thought it would be easy to spot the perpetrators. I naively assumed I would be able to look men and women in the eyes and tell if they had been involved. I was full of self-righteous judgment.

What I found left me puzzled, confused, and ultimately frightened. Instead of finding leering, menacing creatures, I met men and women who looked and behaved a lot like me. They took care of their families, went to work, chatted with their neighbors, laughed, cried, prayed, and worshiped. Where were the monsters? Where were the evildoers capable of heinous acts? Slowly, with a deepening sense of dread, I understood the truth: There were no monsters in Rwanda, just people like you and me. The question I was forced to ask myself was, "Could I have done what they did?"

Warren answers this way:

You might as well face the shameful truth: You and I, put in the right situation, will do absolutely anything. Given the right circumstances, I am capable of any sin. I've grown more afraid of the monster lurking in the dark corners of my soul than of any monster lurking in the dark corners of my house.¹

There's no use trying to self-righteously distance ourselves from the darkness, depravity, and desperation voiced in Psalm 51. Rather, each of us needs to take up its words as our own words: "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me" (vv. 3-5).

Notice how much deeper these words go than the mild expressions of contrition that we often hear in contemporary conversation. Consider these examples: "Yes, I acknowledge that I had a lapse in judgment." "Okay, I admit that I've had my youthful indiscretions." "Hey, I never claimed to be perfect. I'm just a human being, like everybody else." These articulations of regret don't even come close to the open-eyed, heavy-hearted, burdened-soul language that pours forth in today's text.

The psalmist doesn't settle for a brief glimpse in the spiritual mirror and a quick, apologetic Tweet to God. No, what we overhear in this psalm is a brokenhearted plea that takes the full measure of sin's impact. The sense of guilt and filthiness runs deep. And that's because the problem runs deep. The problem isn't just specific sins. The problem is sinfulness. The problem is the pervasiveness of sin, its enslaving and corrupting power, in each human being, and in humanity as a whole. So just touching up a few imperfections, and smoothing off a few rough edges, won't do. What's needed isn't a slight attitude adjustment here or a little behavioral modification there. What's needed isn't renewed determination or a sincere desire to do better next time. No, what's needed is absolute washing, cleansing, healing, and restoration. What's needed is an act of God, a forgiving God who alone has the power to give life in the midst of death.

No wonder the psalmist pleads, "Create in me a pure heart, O God and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me" (vv. 10-11). If God, the source and sustainer of life, were to do that, it would mean death, death for you and death for me. So our only hope, hope for you and hope for me, is that God is a God of reconciliation and restoration.

That's why this psalm begins with God's character and behavior, not our own. As we've seen, our character and behavior will enter the discussion soon enough. But before there's talk of our misdeeds, there's talk of God's mercy, God's unfailing love, God's great compassion. As the verse on our church sign currently announces to all passers by, "He does not treat us as our sins deserve. . ." (Ps. 103:10).

Clearly there is bad news about human nature. But even more clearly there is good news about God's nature. The good news is that God is willing to forgive and able to re-create. He did it continually in the life of his people Israel. He did it in the life of David. He can do it in your life and in my life, as individuals. He can do it in our life together as a church. Never lose sight of the fact that God is in the business of rectifying things that have gone horribly wrong. Healing what's broken is God's specialty.

For a violinist, one of the greatest experiences in life would be to play a Stradivarius. British violinist Peter Cropper got that opportunity in 1981 when the London Royal Academy of Music honored him by loaning him a priceless 258-year-old Stradivarius for a series of concerts. But then a terrible thing happened while Cropper was performing in Finland. He tripped and fell on top of the violin and broke it. What had been the dream of a lifetime had now turned into a terrible nightmare. Understandably, Cropper was inconsolable.

Then a London violin dealer told Cropper about a master craftsman who could repair the Stradivarius. When the craftsman was done, the repairs were so perfect that they couldn't even be seen, and the notes coming from the instrument were more beautiful than they had ever been before. And all this because the broken parts were placed in the hands of a master craftsman who applied those skilled hands to the work of healing.

As a church, we're a community of the broken. We deal in our own brokenness, and engage the world's brokenness, day in and day out. Broken lives. Broken relationships. Broken hearts. Broken families. Broken bodies. Broken institutions. Broken buildings. Broken ministries. And only in the light of God's amazing grace do we realize just how deeply broken we are, and how desperately we need healing. As pastor and author Timothy Keller captures it, "The gospel says that you are more sinful and flawed than you ever dared believe, but more accepted and loved than you ever dared hope."

So what are we to do in response to a God whose mercy generates that kind of hope for healing? We're to bring our broken selves into God's presence, offering praise and seeking wholeness. In other words, our primary offering is ourselves. As Paul puts his appeal in Romans, "Therefore I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship" (12:1). Or as the psalmist says, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (v. 17).

Of all the things we bring into God's presence in order to declare his praise, nothing pleases him more than a humble, contrite heart. A heart desperate for healing. A heart that throws itself on divine mercy. A heart that knows God's unfailing love is the only hope. A heart that believes the reality of God's grace is greater than the reality of sin. And so, in view of God's grace, we come and present ourselves as a broken offering, longing for reconciliation and restoration.

¹ Kay Warren, "The Only Hope for Monsters." Christianity Today website. October 15, 2008. Accessed March 19, 2015 <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/october/24.98.html?start=1>>.