

WHAT DOES GOD REQUIRE?

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Psalm 51:1-3, 5-17
2 Corinthians 7:8-11

Psalm 51 is the most powerful and heartfelt prayer of confession in the Bible. It's the best known of the seven penitential psalms that the early Christians used in worship to inspire repentance. In it David expresses his remorse for committing adultery and murder. He acknowledges his unworthiness, but seeks God's forgiveness.

David's crimes are heinous. They're so despicable that ordinary people sometimes have trouble relating to David. The story that unfolds in 2 Samuel, chapter 11, is as juicy as anything you might pick up from TMZ or the Church Mouse.

Bathsheba, is minding her own business, enjoying her bath in the privacy of her roof or back yard. David sees her as he's walking around on the high roof of the palace in the cool of the evening and he immediately wants her. His palace spies inform him that she's married to one of his soldiers, a man named Uriah. David welcomes the news because his army happens to be occupied. While the king is at home enjoying himself, they're out laying siege to Rabbah, the chief city of the Ammonites.

David sends the palace guard after Bathsheba and takes her into his bed. Soon afterwards, she sends David the news from her home that she's pregnant. Oops – but not to worry – David's a smart guy and he holds all the cards. David arranges for Uriah to come home for a bit of R and R. David assumes, quite reasonably, that Uriah will sleep with his gorgeous wife, and everyone would assume that he, Uriah, is the father of the new baby.

But of course the plan backfires. Uriah plays the part of an ultra-loyal soldier and refuses to sleep at home. "How can I go home and enjoy myself," he says, "when my brothers are engaged in battle? How can I eat, drink and sleep with my wife when the Ark of the Covenant and my commanding officer are sleeping in tents?"

The contrast with the conniving, adulterous king couldn't be greater.

David decides to take a more drastic step to solve his problem. He instructs his field general, Joab, to send Uriah to the front, where the fighting is hot, and then withdraw his men so he'll be killed. Joab obeys, but the operation doesn't go entirely according to plan, as things seldom do in the heat of battle. Several other men are killed along with Uriah so David is now guilty of multiple murders. Yet with Uriah out of the way, David now has a free hand. He brings Bathsheba to the palace and marries her, and she gives birth to a son.

History is filled with examples of tyrants who believed their power and greatness placed them above the law, and who would stop at nothing to satisfy their personal appetites. The dictator Raphael Trujillo ruled the Dominican Republic with an iron fist for more than thirty years. He regularly directed his goons to kidnap teenage girls that caught his eye on the streets and bring them to his bed. Though he was guilty of thousands of atrocities, Trujillo was best remembered and most despised for his crimes against virgin girls and their families.

The Bible tells us that David is a man after God's own heart, yet there are times when his crimes are on a par with those of Trujillo, or any number of other homicidal despots. And that suggests something alarming about *us* as well. It suggests that we're all corruptible. Under similar circumstances, we'd all do

as David did – or worse. Because wherever power and privilege are given free reign, sin multiplies and spreads its deadly poison.

God is angry with David. If ever there was a king who deserved to lose his throne and his head, it's David. But God has chosen David, and he still loves him. He still wants him to rule. He sees his heart and knows there's goodness in him. So God gives David a chance to come clean. He uses a prophet, Nathan, to confront him with his sin and bring him to his knees.

Nathan tells David a story about a rich man who shamefully abuses a poor man. The rich man is obliged to entertain a traveler, but instead of killing one of his own sheep to make a feast, the man takes from the poor man the one and only sheep he owns.

David explodes with rage when he hears the story. He demands that the rich man pay for the poor man's lamb with his own life. Nathan's fearless response is worthy of Shakespeare. "You are the man!" he cries. He then spells out all the sordid crimes associated with Bathsheba-gate.

The scene concludes with a pronouncement of God's judgment. Nathan accurately prophesies that someone close to David will steal David's wives and sleep with them in broad daylight. The fulfillment of the prophecy comes much later when David's beloved son, Absalom, drives David from Jerusalem and attempts to steal the throne.

A lesser man would have disposed of Nathan. But David responds by falling to his knees and confessing his guilt. Nathan assures David that God has forgiven him. "You're not going to die," Nathan tells him, "but you *are* going to pay dearly for your crimes. God is going to take the child that you've had with Bathsheba." David fasts and prays for seven days in an effort to change God's mind, but without success. His beloved son dies. And sometime later – we don't know when – David writes Psalm 51.

When it comes to repentance, the best teachers are often the worst offenders. That's definitely true of David. All along the road that he travels as he returns to God's heart, we see the signs of true repentance. There are four that should guide us when we disobey God and are in need of his grace.

David first appeals to God's mercy. That's the first sign. David knows he has disappointed God. But he also knows that God has been patient in the past with those who have failed him. He brought the Hebrew people out of Egypt and through the wilderness even though they whined and complained nearly every step of the way. He fought for the people and gave them the land of their enemies even though they doubted him. He preserved Israel despite the fact that their first king, Saul, repeatedly disobeyed him. So as an act of faith, David asks God to show him mercy.

Many people avoid God and try not to think about him. Having spent their whole life basically living according to their own rules, they assume that God is angry with them, and disappointed with them. When they think of God at all, they picture him as a great, scowling grandfather who has disowned them.

David reminds us that there's always hope for the sinner. Our Father stands waiting for us, with his arms open wide, on the road that leads back home. As long as we're still breathing, we can always pray with David:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion, blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.

- Psalm 51:1-2

If you're a disciple of Jesus, you probably know people that need to hear that good news – people who are living in rebellion and are pretty sure that God has rejected them. They need to know that God doesn't hold grudges. They need to hear from someone who knows God that he won't despise anyone who seeks his grace. And you're probably the right person to tell them.

David, secondly, is completely honest about his sin. He knows that nothing is hidden from the one who created him. "I know my transgressions," he says, "and my sin is always before me.... Surely I was sinful at birth" (51:3, 5).

This is the place where many of us stumble on the road to repentance. We judge ourselves according to worldly standards and not according to heavenly ones. We compare ourselves with other people – usually acquaintances who have obvious, glaring flaws – and not with the one man, Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. And we've become so good at making excuses for our defiance of God that we can't see straight.

Think about the language we use to talk about our sin. When we do something we know is wrong, we talk about messing up, making a mistake, or blowing it. Or we talk about giving into our weakness or making poor choices. We seldom talk about our worldly nature that loves what is bad, and deliberately rejects what is good.

All of those phrases help us to feel better about ourselves, at least for a while. They help us to shift blame away from ourselves, and that often helps us to get ahead, at least in worldly terms. But God wants to be completely honest with him and with ourselves. In his kingdom, nothing will do except the cold, hard truth. If we want to be reconciled to God, we have to own our actions. We have to acknowledge the many ways that we have rejected his will and done what seems good in our own eyes.

David displays for us a third sign of true repentance. He's ashamed. He clearly understands the seriousness of his sin. He never suggests that his royal status somehow exempts him from God's law. Knowing full well that he has offended God's majesty and honor, David asks God to hide his face from his sins and blot them out from his memory.

People often go through the motions of confessing to God and asking for his forgiveness without really thinking about how they've offended him. They regret their poor decisions, but they aren't ashamed of themselves. They aren't worried about the possibility that, as a result of their sin, they might be cut off from the Lord forever. Instead, they're thinking only about the things they've suffered because of their poor choices.

- The adulterer is thinking about the many ways his spouse has disappointed him.
- The drunk is thinking about the loss of her family, her reputation and her health.
- The angry person is thinking about all the ways he's been used and abused.
- The prideful person is thinking about her need to be vindicated.

None of them understand that they're in full rebellion against God, and that they've chosen a life that can only end in death.

The seventeenth century British preacher, William Secker, describes the double-mindedness that makes true repentance impossible. Secker writes:

Some have tears enough for their outward losses, but none for their inward lusts; they can mourn for the evil that sin brings, but not for the sin which brings the evil. Pharaoh more lamented the hard strokes which were upon him, than the hard heart that was within him. Esau mourned not

because he sold the birth-right, which was his sin, but because he lost the blessing, which was his punishment. This is like weeping with an onion. The eye sheds tears because it smarts.

True repentance begins in sorrow and wretchedness. The sacrifice that God wants from us, as we learn from David, is a broken spirit. It doesn't matter how awful our sins have been. When we go to God in humility, and with remorse, he welcomes us home.

The fourth sign of true repentance is a sincere desire to be changed. David wants to be separated from his sin in every way possible. He's not holding onto it and with secret affection. He genuinely longs for God's Spirit to invade his heart and set him right. He prays:

Deliver me from bloodguilt, O God, you who are God, my Savior, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.

- Psalm 51:14

Why do we choose darkness and death when God freely offers us light and life? C. S. Lewis explores that question in his fantasy, *The Great Divorce*. He imagines a conversation between a great saint and one who is struggling to give his life to God. They're talking about lust, and our tendency to prefer the lesser delights of earth to the greater delights of heaven:

The sensualist... begins by pursuing a real pleasure, though a small one. His sin is the less. But the time comes when, though the pleasure becomes less and less and the craving fiercer and fiercer, and though he knows the joy can never come that way, yet he prefers to joy and mere fondling of unappeasable lust and would not have it taken from him.

Later, the saint explains why people end up in hell even though God's burning desire is that they would join him in heaven.

There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says in the end, 'Thy will be done.' All that are in hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. To those who knock it is opened.

- C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, pages 72 and 75

The awful truth is that, from the day we're born, we're slaves to our lesser nature. Sin rules our flesh, and our flesh always chooses the lesser good that the world offers over the greater good that God offers. In other words, the more we need God, the less likely we are to seek him. How then can *anyone* be saved?

God's solution to our dilemma was to send his only Son, Jesus, to choose the good that we reject, and to blaze the trail that we could never follow. By his strength, and with his life inside us, we can choose what is best – we can throw ourselves on God's mercy and genuinely want what he wants.

Some of you probably remember the sex scandal of the late 80s involving presidential hopeful, Gary Hart, and a young woman named Donna Rice. Rice accompanied Hart, who was a married man, on a pleasure cruise to the Bahamas on a yacht called *Monkey Business*.

At the time, Donna Rice was what the Baptists would call a backslidden Christian. As a freshman in high school, Rice had received Christ at a Cliff Barrows crusade. Throughout high school her life revolved around choir, youth group, and missions trips.

When she went away to college, though, she gradually compromised to the point where she was far from God's heart. Then, the Gary Hart scandal put her and her picture on the front pages of newspapers and magazines across the country.

Her life fell apart. She resigned her job, and the press hounded her. She was offered millions to tell her story. As she wrestled with what to do, her mother and grandmother said something to Rice that seemed obvious: "Before you make any decisions, get your life straight with God."

But it wasn't obvious to Rice. She said, "I was stunned because I hadn't yet realized I could put the entire mess in his hands."

Then Rice's mother gave her a cassette tape from a former youth-group friend. "Donna, I imagine you're in a lot of pain right now," the friend said. "I just want you to know that God loves you, and I love you."

Rice recalls, "When she began to share songs we used to sing together, I collapsed on the floor of my apartment and sobbed. I knew I – and no one else – was responsible for my choices. I cried out, 'God, it took falling on my rear in front of the whole world to get my attention. Help me to live my life your way!' God answered my plea by flooding me with his presence and forgiveness and by surrounding me with Christian fellowship."

There's no going to God without repentance. There can be no second chances for us until we're convicted of our need for grace. The sacrifice God desires is a broken spirit. That's what we learn from David. That was the message Jesus preached, and gave his disciples to preach. He said, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; *repent* and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15).

Some of you have grown accustomed to living in sin. You've chosen death, and you're just trying to make the most of the short time you have on earth. What God requires of you today isn't perfection, but remorse.

Some of you feel far away from God. You feel abandoned, but in reality, you're the one who moved – you're the one who drifted away. What God requires of you is honesty. He wants you to recognize that your loyalties are divided. He wants you to make a way for Christ so he can fill you again with his life and grace.

God has brought to the table today the body and blood of his one and only Son - Jesus Christ, who was broken for us. What will you bring to the table as you meet with him?

What hidden sin, what deep regret will you bring to him?

Holy God, we know that forgiveness and new life can come only as we move towards you in repentance. So we ask you today to humble us, and to show us where we need to be broken.

Each of us is struggling with some sin we have not named. Lord, help us right now to name that sin, and give it to you.

Redeeming Lord, we thank you for your grace – grace that covers our sin, and restores our souls. We thank you for your Holy Spirit that even now is restoring our hearts and minds. Help us to live as people who have been set free from sin and death, so that others might know you and love you.

Amen.