

“Coming Clean”

Psalms 32, 51

Some time ago a loved one stole something from me—something that was very personal, something that he knew was important to me—and he stole it knowing full well that I would eventually find out about it and that he would have to face the music.

I was very close to this person. We had what I thought was a very open, transparent relationship and we spent a lot of time together, including time praying and studying the Bible.

When I discovered the theft it hurt so badly I literally felt sick to my stomach. I felt betrayed and defrauded. But I did not immediately confront this person; I intentionally waited to see if and when he would initiate a conversation about his transgression and try to make things right. Days went by, and then weeks, and even though I saw him frequently, even though there were plenty of occasions when we were alone and he *could* have talked to me about it, he didn't. He pretended that nothing had happened and nothing was wrong; he went about his business as though everything was fine between us.

You know something? That pretense—that deception hurt *far* more than the offense itself. The theft was a selfish act of greed or desperation and I just happened to be the victim. But choosing to live a lie, choosing to let our relationship suffer because he was unwilling to resolve it was an indication, or so it seemed, that this loved one didn't value our friendship and our fellowship the same way that I did. And with each passing day my grief intensified because the wall between us got bigger and we grew further and further apart.

After several weeks I finally decided to tell him what I knew because I could no longer stand to watch our relationship, which was so precious to me, continue to disintegrate right before my eyes.

As I was going through that painful ordeal I was conscious that our Lord experiences this very thing all the time with many of his loved ones. Often one of his children will sin against him and then do nothing about it, knowing full well that *he* knows about it; knowing full well that one day he is going to have to face the music. He lives his life and goes about his business as though nothing has happened, as though everything is just fine, as though time will erase the guilt or heal the wound or repair the rift. And our Lord waits...and He waits...and with each passing day the wall between Him and His loved one gets bigger, and the separation gets wider.

How do you think Jesus feels when that happens? Do you think that He is so accustomed to this kind of treatment by now that it no longer bothers Him? Do you think that He just blows it off, and chooses to give His attention, instead, to His more responsive followers?

I want to suggest to you that the intense sorrow I felt when *my* friend ignored the offense and I felt like our relationship was deteriorating is only a fraction of the sorrow our Lord feels. You know why? Because His love is far deeper than my love. He loves perfectly. And the relationships He has with *all* of His children are so precious to Him that when *one* of them is unresponsive or hard-hearted it breaks His heart.

Not long ago I did a series of messages on the life of David that I called, “*Having God's Heart.*” Mostly we looked at David's positive qualities—his *courageous* heart, *loving* heart, *gracious* heart, *submissive* heart, and *worshipful* heart. But in that series we saw just how *vulnerable* his heart was. One day, while King David was walking on the roof of his palace,

he looked over the wall and saw a woman bathing, lusted after her, and then abused his power as the king by sending messengers to go get her so he could have sex with her. He did so knowing full well she was married, and that her husband was on the battlefield fighting for Israel.

This tragic circumstance reveals that even though David was a man after God's own heart, he was not immune to being overpowered by temptation. Even though David was normally influenced by the Holy Spirit, even though he had a close friendship with the Lord and loved him dearly, even though he was used by the Lord in extraordinary ways, he was vulnerable, he was susceptible, and he fell hard, just like a man without those spiritual advantages.

One of the lessons in this story is that everyone is capable of succumbing to temptation, no matter what their spiritual pedigree or level of spiritual maturity. Please don't ever forget that. All of us possess the remnants of our sinful nature, even though we have been born again and are being sanctified. All of us have propensities that make us vulnerable to certain sins. And while most of us might be able to resist temptation on most days, given the right conditions, the right stimuli, and the right trap, we can *all* fall.

What is more, if we *do* fall, we are all in danger of becoming hardened by sin's deceitfulness. That simply means that sin can thoroughly distort our judgment and our sensibilities so that we can think, say, decide, and do things we wouldn't dream of thinking, saying, deciding or doing otherwise.

Bathsheba became pregnant after David committed adultery with her. And because David didn't want anybody to find out about his sin he used deceptive means to manipulate the circumstances to make it seem like it was her husband who impregnated her. And when that didn't work he resorted to more devious means until, before long, he committed murder in order to cover up his sin.

Unconfessed sin is like untreated cancer. In the attempt to cover it up or make it go away, it leads to more and more sin, more and more hurt, and more and more destruction. And because of sin's deceitfulness, the one who is involved in the sin doesn't always see how dangerous it is, how destructive it is, how consequential it is, or how trapped he or she is by it. Sometimes, in fact, sin has so distorted their perceptions that they are convinced the sin they're involved in is not that big of a deal, or that they can actually get away with it, or that no one will get hurt.

But sin is *always* a big deal, no one ever gets away with it, and people always get hurt. And the longer sin remains unconfessed the more ugly and messy things get, because sin is never benign. It grows and spreads and metastasizes to everything in its path.

So here's the question: When someone has sinned, is there hope? If so, what is that hope?

Ah, yes! There *is* hope. But our hope is in one thing and one thing only. It is the mercy of God. It's not by the sinner mustering up his spiritual strength and pulling himself up by his spiritual bootstraps. It's not by the sinner doing serious penance for a specified period of time. It's not even by the sinner coming clean and promising to never sin again.

It's by throwing himself, completely and totally, on the mercy of God.

Most of you know the story with David. For a long time—at least a year—he lived in denial. He tried to go on with his life, business as usual, pretending that he had *not* sinned, pretending, in fact, that he was a benefactor to this poor widow by taking her in after the

tragic death of her husband, marrying her, and raising her unborn child as his own. Until finally, God sent one of his prophets, Nathan, to confront him. And he did so by concocting a story. **2 Sam. 12:1-14.**

The LORD sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, “There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. ² The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, ³ but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.

⁴ “Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him.”

⁵ David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, “As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this deserves to die! ⁶ He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity.”

⁷ Then Nathan said to David, “You are the man! This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. ⁸ I gave your master’s house to you, and your master’s wives into your arms. I gave you the house of Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more. ⁹ Why did you despise the word of the LORD by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. ¹⁰ Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own.’

¹¹ “This is what the LORD says: ‘Out of your own household I am going to bring calamity upon you. Before your very eyes I will take your wives and give them to one who is close to you, and he will lie with your wives in broad daylight. ¹² You did it in secret, but I will do this thing in broad daylight before all Israel.’ ”

¹³ Then David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the LORD.”

Nathan replied, “The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die. ¹⁴ But because by doing this you have made the enemies of the LORD show utter contempt, the son born to you will die.”

This passage is an historical narrative. It tells us the facts of the story but it doesn't tell us much about what was going on inside the minds and hearts of the characters in the story. For example, you could read 2 Samuel 11-12 and conclude that until Nathan the prophet confronted him, David had hardly given his sin a second thought. However, that wasn't true. He wrote a psalm, in which he said that while he was living with this unconfessed sin, the guilt and shame weighed so heavily upon him that it made his life unbearable. He said in Psalm 32, *When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer (32:3-4).*

But as is often the case, instead of acknowledging that guilt and shame in the Lord's presence, instead of letting Him shine His light on it, which, of course, initially accentuates those feelings of guilt and shame, David chose to live in the shadows. He tried to escape the guilt and shame by occupying himself with other things besides God. Anything *but* God. Until God couldn't take it anymore. Since David wouldn't initiate, God *had* to initiate.

It's not the *ideal* way for there to be restoration with God. It's not the *best* way. It would have been better for David to respond to his miserable guilt and shame by confessing his sin to God on his own initiative, without having to be confronted about it, and the sooner the better.

Nevertheless, God's initiative to restore David by sending his prophet Nathan to confront him was, in itself, an act of God's mercy. He loved David. David was his dear friend. And David had gotten to a place in his life where he was so stuck in his sinful, selfish behavior, that God knew the only way for him to get unstuck was for God Himself to throw him a rope. And Nathan was that rope.

God, in His mercy, sent Nathan the prophet to confront David about his sin, and to do it using a simple story that he knew would arouse David's emotions so David could see the magnitude of his sin. And even though through Nathan God revealed His immense displeasure over David's sin and informed him that there would be dire consequences, David knew that ultimately God had pursued him because He loved him.

How do I know? Because David wrote another psalm after Nathan had confronted him in which he gives us an intimate account of his personal dealings with God. It is Psalm 51, and it begins like this:

¹ Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. ² Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. ³ For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. ⁴ 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. ⁵ Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. ⁶ Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place. ⁷ Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. ⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. ⁹ Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. ¹⁰ Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. ¹¹ Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. ¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

¹³ Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you. ¹⁴ Save me from bloodguilt, O God, the God who saves me, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness. ¹⁵ O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. ¹⁶ You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. ¹⁷ The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

This psalm pretty much speaks for itself, but I do want to underscore a couple of things. First, when we sin our only hope is to thrust ourselves on God's mercy. The way we do that is by confessing our sin to God and asking Him to forgive us. And when we do, He will. We are told in 1 John that "*If we confess our sins he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness*" (1:9). I'll explain why He does that in just a few moments.

Second, there is a condition for obtaining God's mercy and forgiveness that I believe is both implicit and explicit in Psalm 51. It's not just saying the words, "Lord, I've sinned, have mercy on me and forgive me." It's not saying those words fervently or repeatedly or respectfully. The words themselves are not so much what God is looking for as the attitude

of the heart. David said in verse 16, *“You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.”*

What is interesting is that at the time David wrote this there was a whole system of sacrifices for sin, burnt offerings, that God Himself had instituted that were intended to satisfy His justice and appease His wrath. But David, rightly, says, “I know that’s not what *really* pleases you. The kind of sacrifice you really want, **verse 17**, *“is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”*

Do you know what a broken and contrite heart is? It is a heart that has been truly humbled, a heart is genuinely remorseful. It’s describing someone who has come to grips with his or her sin, sees it for what it really is in all its ugliness and hurtfulness and destructiveness, and takes full responsibility for it.

And that attitude always gets God’s attention. In fact, God said through the prophet Isaiah, *“This is the one I esteem: He who is humble and contrite in spirit, and who trembles at my word” (66:2).*

Not long ago I finished reading Kings and Chronicles in my daily devotions, and I was struck by God’s response to the very *worst* king in the history of Israel and Judah. His name was Manasseh. He was an idolater and he set up idols and altars throughout the land. He defied the Lord and his commandments, practiced sorcery and witchcraft, shed innocent blood, and actually sacrificed some of his own sons to pagan gods. He was a horrible man and he did horrible things.

But when God brought him to a place where he finally realized what he had done and how he had defied and displeased the Lord, we are told in Chronicles that *“when he was in distress, he entreated the favor of the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. ¹³ He prayed to him, and **God was moved by his entreaty** and heard his plea and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord was God” (2 Chron. 33:12-13).*

“God was moved by his entreaty.” He was moved by his contrition. Amazing! And He was also moved by the contrition of Ahab, the most vile, wicked king of the northern kingdom of Israel. What’s more, He was moved by the contrition of Nebuchadnezzar, the pagan king of Babylon, when he humbled himself before the Lord (Dan. 4:28-37), and He was moved by the contrition of the pagan king of Nineveh (Jonah 3).

We read about these wicked men and all the sin they committed and the blood they shed and some of us think, “Why wouldn’t God just rid the world of them? Why wouldn’t He just pluck them out of their circumstances and drop them straight into the pit of hell where they belong?”

It’s hard for us to understand the wideness of God’s mercy. But it’s because of that wideness in His mercy that He is so responsive to a contrite heart. A contrite heart is irresistible to Him! He responds *every* time He sees it!

And, of course, God knows a contrite heart when He sees one. There are a lot of people who pretend to be contrite, or who know how to act or come across as contrite, and they have fooled a lot of people. But God is never fooled.

But it raises a question. How do we know if someone has a genuinely contrite heart? Even though only God knows for sure, I do think there are some things that indicate genuine contrition.

First, we can be pretty sure that someone is genuinely contrite when he accepts full responsibility for his sin. He doesn't minimize it, he doesn't make excuses for it, and he doesn't blame others for his involvement in it. She sees the magnitude of it—sees it for what it is in all its offensiveness, all its ugliness, all its destructiveness, and owns it.

Second, we can be pretty sure that someone is genuinely contrite if he repents of his sin. That means she renounces it, cuts all ties with it, and refuses to have anything more to do with it. He doesn't leave a back door open for it to reappear later on. He's done with it, once and for all.

If you are presently living with unconfessed sin in your life and the guilt and the shame is eating you up inside, or if you are presently stuck in a pattern of sin and you don't know how to get unstuck, I want to encourage you: Fling yourself on the mercy of God. Come to Him with a broken and contrite heart, come into the light, confess your sin to Him, repent of it, and let Him heal you and restore you and reconcile you to Himself.

He has made provision for you to be fully, freely, finally, and forever forgiven through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. He bore our sins in His body when He died on the cross and experienced the punishment that we deserved, thereby satisfying God's justice, and making it possible for us to be forgiven, acquitted of the guilt of our sin, made righteous, and reconciled to God through faith.

That's why when John said that *"if we confess our sins he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9)*. Since Jesus is the once-for-all atoning sacrifice for our sins, God has guaranteed the forgiveness of sins to all who put their faith in Him and trust Him. So when we sin, and we confess our sin, He most certainly will forgive us because Jesus' blood covered that sin.

I want to encourage you not to delay or procrastinate confessing your sin to God and being restored to fellowship with Him. He already knows about it. The initial discomfort and shame you will feel when you come clean in His presence is worth the joy of restoration in your relationship, which is so precious to Him, and which is the very reason Jesus died for us—to make that kind of relationship possible.

“Coming Clean”

Psalm 51, 32

Main Idea: Because God is gracious and merciful, He fully forgives those who confess their sins with a contrite heart.

David’s plunge into sins (2 Samuel 11)

David’s merciful restoration (2 Samuel 12)

God’s initiative and pursuit

God’s motive

Activating God’s mercy (Psalm 51)

Acknowledging it is one’s only hope

Accompanied with genuine contrition

What is contrition?

How do you know when one is genuinely contrite?

Takes full responsibility

Doesn’t minimize or blame others

Understands that it is primarily a sin against God

God’s merciful provision in Christ

The completeness of forgiveness

The assurance when we confess (1 John 1:9)

The Savior is waiting (Revelation 3:20)

Family Life Groups

“Coming Clean”

Psalm 32, 51

Main Idea: Because God is gracious and merciful, He fully forgives those who confess their sins with a contrite heart.

When we sin, why do we have a tendency to wait for a while (sometimes for a long time) before we confess our sin to God and are restored to fellowship with him, even though we are miserable during that period of time?

What are some ways the Lord has gotten your attention when you have sinned against him (or someone else)?

How can you keep your heart sensitive to the guilt and danger of sin so that your heart does not become hardened by sin’s deceitfulness?