

Two Sermons on Psalm 51 (Sermon One)

Kenneth Korby

Psalm 51:1–12

The Text: Psalm 51:1–4

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The text for the sermon this night is from Psalm 51. It's the first three verses.

Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Thy lovingkindness; according unto the multitude of Thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgression, and my sin is ever before me. Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned and done this evil in Thy sight, that Thou mightest be justified when Thou speakest and be clear when Thou judgest.

Truth in the Inward Being

That is the text, my dearly beloved brothers and sisters of our Lord Jesus Christ. In these times of worship during the academy this year, I shall, if God is merciful to you and me, preach to you on Psalm 51. The hub of the themes for all of the homilies is going to be that God desires truth in the inward being. He not only desires it; He delights in it, and in the hidden parts of our being, he shall make us to know wisdom. My desire for myself and for you is precisely that: that we shall know that wisdom which begins with the fear of God, the wisdom which begins with proving us in the inward being.

How do you make a liar true? How can a liar speak the truth? How can one who is born a liar live the truth? And how can you ever trust what comes out of the mouth of a liar to be the truth?

And yet, the whole work of God is to make truth in the inward being.

Each day in our devotion, we shall take a piece of this song and constantly engage ourselves in that theme. "You delight in truth in the inward being, and in the hidden part You shall make me to know wisdom."

Called to Be a Confessor

We shall be speaking of a number of different kinds of confessions. Therefore, I shall try to illustrate what happens when a person is called to be a confessor.

For to be a confessor is not merely being schooled in how to spread rumors about God—a kind of indecent loquacity that you always have something to say about God. If somebody talks about a geranium, you soon have them somewhere else.

But what happens when God calls a person to a stand, to a witness stand, and now God becomes the questioner? Then God's questions we shall look at in these times together.

David and Nathan: “You Are the Man”

But tonight I want to follow the lead of the psalm itself, and to talk about another episode, another kind of confessor, the man who, according to the little heading in the psalm, wrote the psalm, and we will go with that heading, David, a psalm he wrote after Nathan, his pastor, had come to him.

You remember the story, do you not? I take it that you love David. He was a lusty, an [unclear] man, a fierce and an intelligent man, a man who taught his people to worship God. One day he saw a pretty woman, and he not only did what most men do—craved her—but he gave way to his craze, because I take it David was not of that level of most of us who thought that because he had an itch, a little scratch might do. He took her, and when it was known that she was with child, his adultery led him to deceit, and his deceit led him to murder, to murder good and noble people, and his murder led him to abuse his office as king of Israel.

And finally, do you recall the episode? He finally had that she and the child come to the palace. What a story for the newspaper! “A war hero's widow is taken to the White House. Never again shall you worry about medicine or money for education. Our king knows how to treat war widows.”

He used charity and generosity to cover over the sin. With his good show of charity, he was going to smear the eyes of God and of himself and of his people, and make the sin leave.

And then I pray to God, you are a pastor like this, and that you have a pastor like this, for I wonder who your Nathan is. Nathan came to this intelligent poet and told him a little story, and David knew how to respond to a good story. He wasn't a psychotic who couldn't keep his

mouth shut about his evil. He was a king who said, “The man who did that shall die.” And Nathan said, “You are the man.”

And then David now is called to be a confessor. Now the issue is what truth will be put into David, and you know David’s confession: “I have sinned.”

This deceiver, murderer, adulterer, and corrupter of his office now speaks the truth. “I have sinned,” and out of the mouth of another man comes the very word of the living God: “The Lord has put away your sin.”

Confessors Are Called to a Stand

It is out of that that I want to speak tonight about how to confess sin in the presence of the mercy of God, as part of becoming true in the inward being. Confessors are called to a stand. David may have had many questions about God, about religion, about good Hebrew poetry, about liturgical rubrics. We do not know how many questions he had, but a man of such spirit and such intelligence probably had many of them. But that’s beside the point now. Now he is on the point, on the hook, and God is at the other end of that point: “You are the one who has sinned.”

Confessors are called; they are called into a posture. They are not autogenetic, making themselves, as if they could say, “Let’s all be witnesses now.” People who go around making themselves witnesses end up being perjurers. But what is heard in the ear, “You are the man,” that is what [unclear] in the heart, and that’s what bubbles out of the mouth.

Witnesses are made by the word of God and by the Spirit of God. Confessors are not autogenetic, and the confession of sin is the confession that David made in the face of the mercy of God.

He who will not have God for his just judge cannot have God for his merciful Father. For the confession of David in this poem that he wrote is a confession that is grounded on the merciful one who deals with him. He cannot have God if he will not have this judge. But having this judge, this judge, he has the God to whom he says, “Have mercy on me, O God.”

Confession Justifies God

I call to your attention now the first point. This confession of sin is the step of justification. It is the justification of God. It is saying with our mouth, when God judges us and slays us, it is

saying, “Your words are right. Your words are true.” God is justified when He speaks this way.

The Septuagint translates this word “victorious.” “Victorious is Your judgment,” and as I meditated on that, both for my sake and for your sake, it occurred to me that one of the elements in that victory is the way God rules in the church through His pastor, through His Word, the Word of truth that is addressed to sinners, that is heard by them, and that issues from their mouth—that is the way God rules over your sin. He kills it. He destroys it. He wipes it out.

Your words are right, but they are also clear. We do not live so much in the time when there is clarity about sin. We live in the time of the fog and the numbness and the dullness, the kind of dank growth in the soul. And so, to pray, “Have mercy on me, O God,” for the forgiveness of sins in the face of the mercy of God is to have God clear when He judges. You are clear. The fog is blown away. There is the clarity of that victorious conquest. You may be wrong, but you are not in doubt.

So the rule of God among the church is by this word that is victorious over sin. It will catch you and me in our twists and our evasion, our deceit, and especially our religious, charitable cover-ups to try to hide from the truth, but God loves truth in the inward being.

Knowing Your Sin: Arthur Miller’s After the Fall

And my dear brothers and sisters of the Lord Jesus, the great advantage that you have being Christian and being sinners is the advantage of blessedness in the kingdom because you know your sin. I commend to you the reading of *After the Fall* by Arthur Miller.

Maybe you remember the story, some of you. Quentin is a magnificent attorney who has defended the indefensible and who has rescued those who were inexorably entangled in wrong, but he doesn’t know how to love. Maggie is a slut who is driven by nightmares. Quentin says Maggie must know something about love; she does it so much. And Maggie says Quentin must know something about rescuing people; he rescues so many, and they get married.

Do you remember the line that has become so famous when their marriage collapses? Quentin finally says, “Maggie, we never loved each other; we just used each other.”

Well, the play opens with the soliloquy of Quentin talking about his life disintegrating, and he says, “I guess it was that all my life I had been accustomed to preparing a case.” I would get my

data, I would make my argument, I'd go before the bench and I'd lay it out, and I got a verdict. It was guilty or innocent, but I had a verdict. My life began to disintegrate when one day I looked up and there was nobody sitting on the bench," and then he uses the phrase "and that life of boredom and weariness, the endless litigation with myself, never, never having a clear judgment one way or the other."

That's the truth in the inward being that you have: God judges your lawlessness, and it is before your eyes that He reveals it. He does not let you get away from it or with it.

Mercy, the Ground of Our Praying

But the second point is that God loves truth in the inward being because He has mercy, and that is the ground for your praying. The ground for your praying is that you do not—not that you feel so badly. Most of us never feel that badly about our sins. The ground for your praying is not that you believe so rightly, because most of us don't know how to believe that rightly, anyway. The ground for your praying is not that you wallow so or that you are so meek.

The ground for your praying, if you are going to learn from the Spirit speaking in David, is "according to Your mercy, Your tender mercy." The securitas that grows, the arrogance that inflates itself, the presumption that thinks it has rights to God: "Maybe because it's been so bad, I have been so wicked. Therefore, God—" Rather, this psalm plays wipeout.

For mercy will strip you naked, but it will not leave you naked. Mercy will allow nothing but mercy, but if mercy is everything, absolution therefore is not an excuse for your sin or mine. Is not a way that you can escape the judgment and the death. Absolution is not excuse. It is deliverance from death by grace through death.

"Wash me." Don't just dabble a little bit behind my ears and sprinkle a little bit on my forehead. Scrub me down from my transgression. Scrub out the lawlessness—not merely the deeds of words, or the deeds of mind, or the deeds of—but the lawlessness within. "And cleanse me from my sin."

Truth Begun in Baptism

The truth began with you in the inward being when our dear God, through the hand of a pastor or a nurse or perhaps your own parents, baptized you into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The Judge, speaking clearly with great mercy, executed us with

Him, nailing us to the cross with our dear Lord and burying us there. But the wonder and the mystery of this death is that it is resurrection from the dead. This is the mercy from which we pray.

A Closing Question: Praying for Mercy

I close with a question then, and it will be the beginning of our homily tomorrow night—but tomorrow morning, when I shall speak directly on verses five and six about truth in the inward being—but my question is: When we pray as we do in the liturgy, “Lord, have mercy on us,” are we praying as if God were a reluctant giver, coy, stubborn, far away, high-minded, and we must wallow and grovel and butter Him up? Are we praying for mercy because mercy is absent? It lies down at the end of the prayer, at the end of the road, and maybe we’ll get mercy when we get there.

I think that that is deceit in the inward being to pray this way. What do you think? Is not praying for mercy—“Have mercy upon me, O God”—praying from what is already given? The mercy that we live on by faith is the mercy that is the ground of our boldness to be confessors.

To confess is to use mercy. Mercy is what we live on.

If you don’t believe me, I invite you to listen to the Kyrie in Bach’s Mass in B Minor. He is praying for mercy, like David, like a Christian, like a confessor, because he trusts the mercy to be the ground of his prayer. The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus for life everlasting.

SOURCE

Kenneth F. Korby · Evening homily, Psalm 51:1–4 (“Have mercy upon me, O God”) · date not given

Transcribed from an audio recording of a sermon by Kenneth F. Korby (CTSFWMedia). [unclear] marks words that could not be made out.