

1 | Mercy Me: Psalm 51 and Everyday Life

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

PSALM 51:1

It was one of those moments you want to take back. It was one of those times when you go where your desires and emotions are leading you. It was one of those situations when you know you should stop or walk away but feel you can't. And it was one of those moments when afterward you are confronted with the sin that still lives inside of you. Yes, it was one of those moments.

It wasn't a big deal in one way. Just a small conversation that had turned a bit ugly. It wasn't a dramatic life-altering moment. It was in the privacy of my home with one of my family members. But maybe that's the point. Perhaps it's very important because that's where I live every day. You see, you and I don't live in a series of big, dramatic moments. We don't careen from big decision to big decision. We all live in an endless series of little moments. The character of a life isn't set in ten big moments. The character of a life is set in ten thousand little moments of everyday life. It's the themes of struggles that emerge from those little moments that reveal what's really going on in our hearts.

So, I knew I couldn't back away from this little moment. I knew I had to own my sin. The minute I thought this, an inner struggle began. "I wasn't the only one at fault. If he hadn't said what he said, I wouldn't have become angry. I was actually pretty patient for much of the conversation." These were some of the arguments I was giving myself.

Isn't this interesting. Rather than appealing to the mercy of the Lord in the face of my sin, what I actually do instead is function as

my own defense lawyer and present a list of arguments for my own righteousness. The theology behind the defense is that my greatest problem is outside of me, not inside of me. In so arguing, I'm telling myself that I don't really need to be rescued by the Lord's mercy. No, I'm telling myself that what I need to be rescued from is that sinner in the room who caused me to respond as I did.

Here's the point. Before you can ever make a clean and un-amended confession of your sin, you have to first begin by confessing your righteousness. It's not just your sin that separates you from God; your righteousness does as well. Because, when you are convinced you are righteous, you don't seek the forgiving, rescuing, and restoring mercy that can be found only in Jesus Christ.

What's actually true is that when I come to the Lord after I've blown it, I've only one argument to make. It's not the argument of the difficulty of the environment that I am in. It's not the argument of the difficult people that I'm near. It's not the argument of good intentions that were thwarted in some way. No, I have only one argument. It's right there in the first verse of Psalm 51, as David confesses his sin with Bathsheba. I come to the Lord with only one appeal, his mercy. I've no other defense. I've no other standing. I've no other hope. I can't escape the reality of my biggest problem—me! So I appeal to the one thing in my life that's sure and will never fail. I appeal to the one thing that guaranteed not only my acceptance with God, but the hope of new beginnings and fresh starts. I appeal on the basis of the greatest gift I ever have or ever will be given. I leave the courtroom of my own defense, I come out of hiding, and I admit who I am. But I'm not afraid, because I've been personally and eternally blessed. Because of what Jesus did, God looks on me with mercy. It's my only appeal; it's the source of my hope; it's my life. Mercy, mercy me!

Take a Moment

1. When you go to God in prayer, do you go as your own defense lawyer or as the guilty party (see Luke 18:9–14)? Do you tend to stack up arguments for your acceptability before God?
2. If you more quickly rested in God's mercy and, because of this, more readily admitted your sin, what practical changes in your life would result?

whiter than snow

No, that requirement has been satisfied
By the blood of the Lamb.
Yet God asks of you a sacrifice
It is the offering of words,
Words of humility,
Words of honesty,
Words of moral courage,
Words of moral candor,
Words that could only be spoken,
By one who rests in grace.
Words of confession are what you must bring.
Place words,
Free of negotiation or excuse,
On His altar of grace,
And receive forgiveness and cleansing.
Uncover your heart,
Exposed by words, and say:
“We will never again say, ‘Our gods’
To what our own hands have made,
For in You the fatherless find compassion.”
What David willingly did He requires of you,
Come with words,
It is the way of grace,
It is the way of freedom,
It is the way to God.

Take a Moment

1. What “word” sacrifice is God calling you to bring to him? Where do you need to seek the grace of forgiveness?
2. Is there a place where you are saying “our gods” to what your hands have made? What thing(s) in the creation tend to compete in your heart with the place that the Creator alone should occupy (a possession, position, person, circumstance, relationship, personal dream)?

4 | Big Grace

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,^a and in sin did my mother conceive me.

PSALM 51:5

What a devastating and hard-to-swallow description! Maybe you had it happen to you? A friend tells you he wants to talk to you, and when you get together, you realize that what he really wanted to do was confront you. You’re not really excited about being told bad things about yourself, but this is your friend, so you’re willing to listen. As he begins to lay out his concerns, you begin to feel pain inside. You can’t believe what you’re being told about yourself. Silently and inwardly you begin to rise to your own defense. You marshal arguments that you’re a better person than the one being described. You want to believe that what you’re hearing is a distortion, lacking in accuracy and love, but you know you can’t. You’re devastated because deep down you know it’s true. Deep down you know that God has brought this person your way. Deep down you know what you’re being required to consider is an accurate description of yourself.

Such a description is found in Genesis 6:5, “The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” What a devastating description! It’s hard to swallow, isn’t it? You want to think that this biblical description is of the people who are more sinful sinners than you and I are. But this verse is not describing a super-sinner class. No, it’s a mirror into which every human being is meant to look and see himself. It is capturing in a few powerful words what theologians call “total depravity.” Now, total depravity doesn’t mean that as sinners we are as bad as we could possibly be. No, what it actually means is that sin reaches to every aspect of our

personhood. Its damage of us is total. Physically, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually, motivationally, socially, we have been damaged by sin. Its ravages are inescapable and comprehensive. No one has dodged its scourge, and no one has been partially affected. We are all sinners. It reaches to every aspect of what makes us *us*. Sadly, when each of us looks into the mirror of Genesis 6:5, we see an accurate description of ourselves.

Now, you have to ask yourself: Why is Genesis 6:5 so hard to accept? Why do we spontaneously rise to our own defense? Why are you and I devastated when our weakness, sin, and failure are pointed out? Why do we find confrontation and rebuke painful even when they are done in love? Why do we want to believe that we are in the good class of sinners? Why do we want to believe that we are deprived, but not depraved? Or that we are depraved, but not totally? Why do we find comfort in pointing to people who appear to be worse sinners than we are? Why do we make up self-atoning revisions of our own history? Why do we erect self-justifying arguments for what we have said or done? Why do we turn the tables when someone points out a wrong, making sure that they know that we know that we're not the only sinner in the room? Why do we line up all the good things we've done as a counter-balance for the wrong that is being highlighted? Why is this all so hard to accept?

There's only one answer to all of these questions. There's only one conclusion that fits. We find this all so hard to accept because we studiously hold onto the possibility that we're more righteous than the Bible describes us to be. When we look into the mirror of self-appraisal, the person we tend to see is a person who is more righteous than any of us actually is!

We were at the end of a wonderful service at Tenth Presbyterian Church that had been punctuated by a powerful sermon from the Ten Commandments. I immediately turned to my wife at the end of the service and said, "I am so glad our children were here to hear that sermon!" She didn't even have to say anything to me. She simply gave me that look. You know, the one that says, "I can't believe you are actually saying what you are saying." Immediately I felt embarrassed and grieved. It had happened to me so subtly and quickly. I had placed myself outside of the circle of the sermon's diagnosis. I had accepted

the fact that whatever Exodus and Phil Ryken were describing did not include me. And I was glad that the people in my family who really needed the diagnosis had been in attendance.

"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God" (Romans 5:1-2). If the Bible's description is accurate, then God's grace is our only hope. Thank God that he has given us big grace! Each one of us needs grace that's not only big enough to forgive our sin, but also powerful enough to free us from the self-atoning prison of our own righteousness. We're not only held captive by our sin, but also by the delusion of our righteousness. Resting in God's grace isn't just about confessing your sin; it's about forsaking your righteousness as well. So we all need the big grace that's found only in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We must all, with humility, say to the God of big grace, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. . . . Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!" (Psalm 51:5, 2). And then rest in his righteousness alone.

Take a Moment

1. Is there a possibility that you are not resting in the righteousness you have been given in Christ because you are seeing yourself as more righteous than you actually are? Where in your life do you tend to take too much pride in your wisdom, maturity, and performance rather than resting in the big grace you have found in Jesus?
2. How do you typically respond when personal sin, weakness, failure, foolishness, or immaturity is pointed out to you? Where do you tend to erect self-justifying arguments for your words or behavior?

7 | Violent Grace

Let the bones that you have broken rejoice.

PSALM 51:8

Our relationship with the Lord is never anything other than a relationship of grace. It is grace that brought us into his family. It is grace that keeps us in it, and it is grace that will continue us in it forever. But the grace that we have been given is not always comfortable grace. Here is why.

As sinners we all become way too comfortable with our sin. The thought that once bothered becomes an action that no longer plagues our conscience. The word that troubled us the first time it was uttered now is accompanied by others that are worse. The marriage that was once a picture of biblical love has now become a relationship of cold-war detente. Commitment to work degenerates into doing as little as we can for as much pay as we can negotiate. A commitment to a devotional life becomes perfunctory and empty duty, more like getting our ticket punched for heaven than enjoying communion with our Lord. Minor, unexpressed irritation, which once troubled our hearts, is now fully expressed anger that is easily rationalized away. Sin is like the unnoticed drips of water that silently destroy the foundation of a house.

You see, we all have a perverse capacity to be comfortable with what God says is wrong. So God blesses us with violent, uncomfortable grace. Yes, he really does love us enough to crush us, so that we would feel the pain of our sin and run to him for forgiveness and deliverance. David says, "Let the bones that you have broken rejoice" (v. 8). It is a curious phrase. Crushed bones and rejoicing don't seem to go together. You wouldn't say, "Hooray, I have a broken bone!" But that is very close to what David is saying. He is using the searing pain of broken bones as a metaphor of the pain of heart that you

feel when you really see your sin for what it is. That pain is a good thing.

Think about it: the physical pain of an actual broken bone is worth being thankful for because it's a warning sign something is wrong in that arm or leg. In the same way, God's loving hammer of conviction is meant to break your heart, and the pain of heart you feel is meant to alert you to the fact that something is spiritually wrong inside of you. Like the warning signal of physical pain, the rescuing and restoring pain of convicting grace is a thing worth celebrating.

So God's grace isn't always comfortable because he isn't primarily working on our comfort; he's working on our character. With violent grace he will crush us because he loves us and is committed to our restoration, deliverance, and refinement. And that is something worth celebrating.

Take a Moment

1. Have you allowed yourself to become comfortable with something that God does not want to have bring you comfort?
2. Is there a place in your life where you have been tempted to doubt God's love because you are experiencing the pain of his rescuing and restoring grace? Stop and thank him for violent grace that rescues you from yourself.