

Ancient prayers for modern times: Confession

Message for Sunday, November 2, 2014
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Psalm 51, 32; 1 John 1:8-9

Children's Message: Luke 18:9-14 (Pharisee and tax collector praying)

Have you ever made breakfast for your parents, to give them a treat? How did it go?

Here's a story of someone else who did it...

Six-year old Brandon decided one Saturday morning to make pancakes for breakfast for his parents. He found a big bowl and spoon, pulled a chair to the counter, opened the cupboard and pulled out the heavy bag of flour, spilling it on himself and on the floor. He scooped some of the flour into the bowl with his hands. He went over to the fridge and got the jug of milk, and poured out a cup of milk, which he poured into the bowl. You could see where he had gone to the fridge by the trail of flour his feet were leaving on the floor. The flour trail then went over to another cupboard, where he got the sugar bowl. He wasn't sure how much to put in, so he scooped out a handful and put it in the bowl. The family kitten was now leaving its own tracks around the kitchen.

Brandon was covered with flour and getting frustrated. He wanted this to be a good surprise for Mom and Dad, but it was becoming a bad surprise. He didn't know what to do next, whether to put it all into the oven or on the stove, (and he didn't know how the stove worked!).

Suddenly he saw his kitten up on the table, licking from the bowl of mix. He reached over and pushed her away, but when the kitten jumped down, she knocked the egg carton to the floor. Brandon was almost ready to quit, but he knew he must clean up the mess. As he walked to the sink to get a cloth, he slipped on the eggs and fell right in the mess of flour and eggs on the floor. The sticky goo was on his hands and pyjamas. It was then he saw Dad standing at the door.

Big tears came dripping out of Brandon's eyes. All he'd wanted was to do something good, but instead he had made a terrible mess. He was sure a scolding was coming, maybe even a spanking. But his father just watched him. Then, walking through the mess, Dad picked up his crying son and hugged him, getting the sticky goo on his pyjamas, too.

That's how God deals with us. We do something wrong – the Bible calls that sin. We try to fix it, to hide it, but

things just get worse. The only answer is to ask God for forgiveness.

Jesus told the story about the tax collector who prayed simply, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." You know what makes God really happy? It's when you and I don't try to make excuses when we've done something wrong. It's much better if we just say, "God, what I did was wrong. I'm sorry. Please forgive me. Help me now to apologize to the other person. Thank-you, in Jesus' name. Amen."

Do you think you can do that?

And we can apply the same idea to when we do bad things with other people, not just with God.

I remember hearing about a school principal one time who made a major mistake and everybody in the school knew about it. He thought, "I'm not going to apologize to everybody. I'd be embarrassed and go down in the kids' eyes." Then he changed his mind. So he spoke over the intercom to the entire school and said, "I made a mistake and I apologize. I want to ask this whole school to forgive me for this decision."

He became the most honored principal of that school, simply because the teachers and the kids were so unused to having someone admit it when they were wrong. The kids went up to him saying, "I just wish I had a father like you. I wish I had a dad who could admit it when he was wrong."

Do you think you can do that, too?

Introduction to reading Psalm 51

Aside from Jesus, the greatest hero in the Bible is David, who was king of Israel during its golden era. He reigned for forty years, and brought the nation from a rag-tag band of feuding tribes to a period of peace and prosperity. Even more important, he loved God with all his heart, and restored the worship of God to the centre of the nation. A thousand years later, when the people of Israel were longing for the Messiah to come and free them from the oppression of Rome, the other title by which they called the Messiah was the "Son of David."

But David – yes, David the wonder king, who loved God with all his heart – David had a secret. You can read it in the Bible, in 2 Samuel 11 & 12. As with many sins that people get themselves into, it started innocently enough. One day he happened to get a look at a beautiful woman, Bathsheba, while she was bathing. Instead of putting the image out of his mind, he fantasized about her. Then he went further. He invited her over to the palace – and when the king invites you, you don't turn him down. He had sex with her, and she went home. That might have

been the end of it – although I doubt it; once the door of adultery is opened, it tends to become a hallway. A month or two went by, and she found she was pregnant, and told David. David brought her husband Uriah home from the battlefield, and told him to go home and sleep with his wife. He figured that would make it look like the husband was the father. But Uriah was a loyal soldier, and wouldn't dream of sleeping on his soft bed while his comrades are catching naps where they can during battle; Uriah slept on a mat with the palace servants. So finally David sent him back to the battlefield, but with secret orders for the commander: put Uriah in the front lines, then retreat and leave him there by himself, so he will be killed. That's exactly what happened. Shortly after that, David took Bathsheba as his legal wife – again hoping that would cover up any questions about her pregnancy.

It looked like he was going to get away with it. But then God sent the prophet Nathan to confront David about his sin. It takes a pretty courageous person to stand up to the king, but that's exactly what Nathan did. David's response was an honest confession: "I have sinned against the Lord" [2 Samuel 12:13].

Sometime later – perhaps immediately after Nathan left, or maybe in the evening when he was alone, we don't know exactly when – David prayed. We know this because he actually wrote down the prayer, and it's in the Psalms. It's Psalm 51.

I don't know if any of you have ever murdered someone. But I do know this: all of us – every last one of us, including myself – have sinned. That is, we knew what was the right thing to do, and we didn't do it. You know it, I know it and God knows it. This Psalm is a prayer for all of us here. If you've been hiding your sin, this prayer is your opportunity to come clean.

Message: "Ancient prayers for modern times: Confession"

1) Guilt is good

Psalm 51:1-3, New Living Translation:

Have mercy on me, O God,
because of your unfailing love.
Because of your great compassion, blot out the stain
of my sins.
Wash me clean from my guilt.
Purify me from my sin.
For I recognize my shameful deeds—
they haunt me day and night.

"Have mercy on me, O God." That is all we can do. We cannot work to make up for our sin. We cannot put an extra big cheque in the offering to take care of it. We cannot make a deal with God: "If you'll forgive my sin, I'll quit my job, give away everything I have, and move to Haiti to work with the poor and needy." The only thing we can do is ask God for mercy. William Temple said, "The only thing of my very own which I contribute to redemption is the sin from which I need to be redeemed."

Throughout this Psalm, there is no pointing fingers, blaming others, making excuses. It's very simple: I have sinned. I am guilty. I need you, God, to help me. Wash me, purify me, make me clean once again.

Most people know when they've done something wrong. We have a conscience, and it makes us squirm. Some people try to escape from their conscience. They try to drown it with booze, but that just makes it worse. They try to occupy their minds with other things, but nothing helps. This is good. All of us, at some point in life, have to come to grips with the fact that we have sinned. Only then can we take the next step, and ask forgiveness.

I want to be clear about one thing: I'm talking here about true guilt. False guilt occurs when you punish yourself for not measuring up to somebody else's standards: your parent's, the church's, or society's. True guilt occurs when you do not measure up to God's standards. Feeling guilty, feeling shame is healthy. It is God's way to help us see our need to change.

One time there was a old sailor dying in a Navy hospital. A Catholic priest was sent to do the last rites over him. The priest said to the old man rather traditionally, "My son, are you sorry for all your sins?"

He was astonished to hear the old sailor say, "To be honest with you, Padre, I'm not. I rather enjoyed all of that whiskey I drunk. I rather liked all those Jezebels in all the ports of the world. I know it's probably not what you're supposed to say, but if I'm going to be honest, Padre, I have to tell you that I'm not sorry."

Well, many priests would probably have become angry and said, "Well, you old reprobate, if that's the way you feel, then go to the hell!" But this priest knew about the marvel of God's grace. He said, "Well, let me ask you another question. Are you sorry that you're not sorry?"

There was a long pause, and tears began streaming down the face of the old sailor. Finally he said with great conviction, "You know, Padre, I can say that. I am sorry

that I'm not sorry." With that, the priest assured him of God's love and mercy, even for sinners.

Guilt is the first step towards healing. Guilt is good.

2) We need to repent – to turn around

These verses are the climax of David's prayer. He has confessed. Now he asks God for inner healing, for restoring their relationship, and he desires to turn his life in a new direction.

Psalm 51:10-12, New Living Translation:

Create in me a clean heart, O God.

Renew a right spirit within me.

**Do not banish me from your presence,
and don't take your Holy Spirit from me.**

**Restore to me again the joy of your salvation,
and make me willing to obey you.**

Confession is more than just saying, "I'm sorry I sinned." Confession is complete only with repentance, "and I aim to never do it again."

Back when Billy Graham was just starting out, a mobster named Mickey Cohen attended a meeting where Billy was speaking. Mickey was attracted by what he heard, but did not surrender his life to Jesus that night.

A while later a Christian friend was talking with Mickey again about being a Christian, and this time Mickey said he wanted to do that. Mickey had a notorious reputation as a gangster, and when the newspapers got hold of the story of him becoming a Christian, it helped make Billy Graham famous.

There was only one problem – Mickey Cohen never repented. He changed nothing in his life. He had heard that so-and-so was a Christian athlete, and so-and-so was a Christian actress, so he thought he would be a Christian gangster.

Confession must always include repentance: I turn away from the sin in my life, and I follow Jesus instead.

3) The sheer joy being forgiven

Psalm 32 is another of David's prayers. The introduction to this one doesn't say when it was written, but it would be quite appropriate as a followup to Psalm 51, his prayer of confession. This prayer is about the joy of forgiveness.

Psalm 32:1-2, New Living Translation:

**Oh, what joy for those whose rebellion is forgiven,
whose sin is put out of sight!**

**Yes, what joy for those whose record the Lord has
cleared of sin,
whose lives are lived in complete honesty!**

My friends, there is nothing in this world to compare with the pure joy of knowing God's love and forgiveness. This past week, a group of men were jumping up and down with joy, hugging each other, patting each other's bums – apparently it's OK for men to do that when you've just won the World Series. They were on top of the world. But that kind of thrill doesn't last. Knowing God's love is better than anything else.

Marghanita Laski was a well-known novelist and secular humanist. She was being interviewed on television in 1988, shortly before she died as it turned out, and she spoke with transparent honesty about her beliefs. She said, "What I envy most about you Christians is your forgiveness; I have nobody to forgive me."

Here is a Scripture verse to remember and cherish.

1 John 1:8-9, Today's English Version:

**If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves,
and there is no truth in us. But if we confess our sins
to God, he will keep his promise and do what is right:
he will forgive us our sins and purify us from all our
wrongdoing.**

Next Steps:

- Think of your own prayer of confession. Then pray it: quietly, just you and God.
- Next turn to someone near you and read to that person this promise of forgiveness from 1 John 1:8-9. Let that person read it to you.