

CALL and RESPONSE

Psalm 51

Layne Lebo

January 24, 2021

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love.

Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.

Cleanse me and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.

My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.

May those words from Psalm 51 be our posture and our prayer this morning. AMEN!

I've titled this sermon series, "Call and Response," because the Psalms powerfully portray the call of the human heart to God and God's response to us in our need, but the phrase "Call and Response" doesn't adequately communicate the reality that God is always the initiator. It's only his grace and mercy that allows us to call out to Him, and so while it would be clunky, a more accurate title for our sermon series would be: "God Initiates, We Call Out to Him, He Responds and the Cycle Continues." In Psalm 51, the psalm we're focused on today, we see David calling out to God from the depth of his soul, but as we'll see, David calls out in response to God's pursuit of him. As I read this psalm in preparation for preaching early last week, I wrote the words: honesty, transparency and vulnerability, humility and self-awareness, because those words capture the heart of King David as expressed in this psalm.

One of my first thoughts—and I'm quite sure I'm not alone in thinking this—was, "How refreshing to see honesty, transparency and vulnerability, humility and self-awareness from a political leader." Whether you blame it on our political system, our leaders, or the times in which we live, we can't help but be surprised when we see traits like these in our political leaders. I don't say that as an indictment of Joe Biden, Donald Trump, Nancy Pelosi, Mitch McConnell or any other leader. Finding fault with our political leaders, in the current climate is like picking low hanging fruit. Whichever way we turn, political leaders are easy targets for our

criticisms. And while Psalm 51 was written by a king caught in deep political intrigue, I challenge us to move beyond correlations with current political leaders and allow the Holy Spirit to shine his spotlight on our hearts. A good starting point for us is to admit that honesty, transparency and vulnerability, humility and self-awareness are rarities in the human experience, not just in political leaders. And closer to home, these traits are rare in the Church and they don't come naturally to you or for me.

As I read Psalm 51 early this week, my mind was drawn to James chapter 4.

But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble." Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts; you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up. James 4:6-10

"God opposes the proud, but He gives grace to the humble. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up." Those are amazing promises...and yet, our pride, our quickness to turn from God when we sin and our propensity to lift ourselves up, create distance between us and our Heavenly Father. I'll come back to us, but for now, let's turn our focus back to King David.

The heading for Psalm 51 reads, *"A psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba."* The sordid details of David's sin are found in 2 Samuel chapter 11, but here's a quick summary...

While Israel's army went off to war, King David stayed behind at his palace. And one evening as he walked on the roof of his palace, he noticed a beautiful woman bathing. After a servant identified her as Bathsheba—the wife of one of David's inner circle of warriors—he told his messengers to get her and bring her to him. David had sex with Bathsheba, and she became pregnant. When David learned of Bathsheba's pregnancy, he quickly moved into cover-up mode. He called Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, home from the battle under the pretense of finding out how the fighting was going. David's plan was to have Uriah sleep with his wife, so it would naturally be assumed he was the father, but there was a glitch in David's plan. Uriah's sense of duty wouldn't allow him to sleep in his own bed, in the comfort of his home with his wife while his fellow soldiers were enduring the deprivations of war. After the king talked with him and sent him home, Uriah slept on the doorstep of the palace. David was resourceful and

not one to give up easily. He invited Uriah to stay another night and this time he got him drunk. Surely, David thought, in his compromised state Uriah would forget about honor and he'd sleep with Bathsheba. But when morning came, Uriah was found once again sleeping on a mat with the king's servants. So, the king launched phase 2 of his cover up. He wrote a note to Uriah's commanding officer, Joab—which he sealed and gave to Uriah to carry to his commander. The note simply said, *“Put Uriah out in front where the fighting is fiercest. Then withdraw from him so he will be stuck down and die.”* Joab followed his king's orders and Uriah was killed in battle and Joab sent a messenger back to David with word that his instructions had been fulfilled—Uriah was dead. Bathsheba mourned her husband for the appropriate length of time and then the grieving widow was brought into King David's house. She became his wife and in due time she gave birth to a son.

The political maneuvering to cover up wrongdoing demonstrated by any of our modern presidents has nothing on King David. While leaders tend to think they can hide wrongdoing, the people closest to them often know what's really happening or at least have suspicions. I can't help but think David's sins of adultery and murder were widely suspected around the palace—General Joab knew about the murder and could put 2 + 2 together and officials and servants around the palace could count well enough to know the timing of Bathsheba's pregnancy didn't reconcile with how long the king and Bathsheba had been married. And yet David tried to go on with life as normal. 2 Samuel chapter 11 concludes with the words, *“But the thing David had done displeased the Lord.”*

God was displeased, but He was intent on providing King David with a chance to confess his sin and repent. As I read 2 Samuel chapter 12, think about the grace God extended to David in revealing his sin to him and take note of David's response...

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. The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, 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.

“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.”

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

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. I gave your master's house to you, and your master's wives into your arms. I gave you all Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more. 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. 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.'

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

Then David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." 2 Samuel 12:1-13

With a word or a simple signal King David could have had the prophet Nathan permanently silenced and then could have gone on with life as usual, just as he'd been doing, but instead he admitted his sin to the prophet and confessed to God. And at some point he penned the words to Psalm 51. Follow along as I read these words again...

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 you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge.

⁵ Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

⁶ Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb; you taught me wisdom in that secret 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, so that sinners will turn back to you.
- ¹⁴ Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, you who are God my Savior, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.
- ¹⁵ Open my lips, Lord, 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 My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.
- ¹⁸ May it please you to prosper Zion, to build up the walls of Jerusalem.
- ¹⁹ Then you will delight in the sacrifices of the righteous, in burnt offerings offered whole; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

I won't walk through those statements line by line, but the words I shared earlier sum up this psalm well:

- **Honesty**—after all of his previous maneuvering to try and cover up his sin of lust and adultery and abuse of power and eventually murder, David is now honest before God.
- **Transparency and vulnerability**—David is no longer trying to hide or dismiss or obfuscate. 14x he mentions his wrong-doing, using the words *sin*, *transgression*, *iniquity*, *evil* and *guilt*.
- **Self-awareness**—reading this psalm we see a man who understands himself. *“I was sinful at birth”*—David shows his awareness that his sin is deep-rooted. *“Grant me a willing spirit to sustain me”*—he needs God's strength to do right. *“You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God will not despise”*—David understands that God desires right actions and right thoughts, not religious rituals.
- **Humility**—Throughout the Psalm David places himself under God. *“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion, blot out my transgressions.”* *“Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.”* *“My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit”*—David's language and tone is one of surrender to God, placing himself under God's authority.

Our culture gives lip service to the values of honesty, transparency and vulnerability,

self-awareness and humility, but there is often little evidence that they're truly valued. We're encouraged to appear to embrace those traits, all the while understanding that those values often need to be sacrificed if we're going to get ahead in the world. I emphasize again that it's critical for each of us to allow the Holy Spirit to shine his spotlight on our hearts, rather than thinking about how this applies to our leaders or others who could benefit from this sermon.

One of the things that has greatly troubled me over the past year as differences of opinion across our nation and in the Church about the Coronavirus, racial injustice and the election have surfaced, is how followers of Jesus have responded. Honesty, transparency and vulnerability, self-awareness and humility haven't been widely on display. That's true for the Church (Big C), that's true for followers of Jesus in general and that's been true for you and for me. It's difficult to choose honesty, transparency and vulnerability, self-awareness and humility when we're fighting for our rights; defending ourselves from the accusations or what we feel are unfair criticisms of others; convinced we have the truth and others are misguided and wrong; convinced our leaders aren't leading the way we think they should; or, when our followers aren't following the way we think they should.

I've written and spoken often about my desire for unity and I've been critical of people stirring up division, but I'm also beginning to understand the ways in which I contribute to division and disunity by dismissing criticism from people I don't feel are supportive of me and what our church is trying to do, and by harboring anger and isolating myself from people with whom I'm frustrated. It's easier to be honest, transparent and vulnerable, self-aware and humble when things are going well and I feel like I'm in control, but it's when times are tough that we have the opportunity to learn the most and to grow by engaging with people in healthy ways, rather than withdrawing into our safe circle of people who agree with us and think like we do. This past year has been challenging for every pastor I know, myself included. The issues we've faced—COVID, racial unrest and the presidential election—are polarizing topics that make it easy for us to gravitate toward the extremes, rather than engaging in healthy give and take with those who think differently than we do. God's been gracious to me during this season, calling me to spend time with Him focusing on not allowing bitterness and anger to fester in my heart, surrounding me with people who have loved and encouraged and supported

me and putting me in relationships with people who have helped broaden my perspective and have challenged me to push forward rather than remaining comfortable. But I find it a daily challenge to embrace honesty, transparency and vulnerability, self-awareness and humility.

The amazing and wonderful thing about David's response to Nathan is that he was able to repent so quickly. When Nathan came to him, David was neck deep in his denial and cover up. He had compartmentalized his sins and seemed to be functioning like nothing bad had happened and everything was right in his world. And yet, when God confronted him with his sin, he quickly turned in repentance. God is gracious and merciful and He continues pursuing us. David's humble response amidst being consumed with hiding his sin, and God's unrelenting mercy give me hope that repentance is always available for me, for you, for our church, for the Church and across our nation.

I'm committed to seeking to embrace honesty, transparency and vulnerability, self-awareness and humility, and I challenge each of us to pursue the same, so the light of Jesus can clearly shine through us to a watching world. As the Apostle Paul writes in Philippians chapter 2: *"Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation. Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life."* Philippians 2:14-16 I encourage each of us to view the next few moments as a time of Spirit-led self-reflection and confession before God. The healing and unity God desires for our nation, for the Church, for our local community and for McBIC begins with individuals embracing honesty, transparency and vulnerability, self-awareness and humility.

As we head into our time of singing and reflection, I invite us to say The Lord's Prayer aloud together.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. AMEN.