

THE PATH OF FORGIVENESS
Confession and Forgiveness

Psalm 51:1-12

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In preparing this important sermon series, I've made some discoveries regarding the science of forgiveness. A University of Notre Dame researcher discovered that people who believe that a loving God forgives them are more likely to forgive others. Plus, those people were more likely to forgive themselves. More surprising, forgiveness was linked with better mental and physical health, including lower blood pressure [*Christian Century*, May 1, 2015, p. 15].

To understand forgiveness, we must understand sin. Psalm 51 deals with it so honestly. Three Hebrew words are used for sin (vv. 1-2), translated transgression, iniquity and sin. Transgression: crossing a line, out of bounds, rebellion, excess, revolt. Iniquity: twisting that which was intended for good, perverting, distorting. Sin: missing the mark. Imagine archery competition, shooting an arrow and missing the target. We have to see how sin destroys us, others, and our relationships with God, others and self. It destroys the environment and social structures. In fact, if we are ever going to forgive others, we must learn that we are all sinners, a mixture, capable of great good and great harm. Desmond Tutu reminds us we've all been hurt, but we've all done our share of hurting others! [*The Book of Forgiving*, p. 5]. Remember the Lord's Prayer? Forgive us our trespasses as....what?

Only when we realize sin's gravity can we really confess (the words means "to say the same thing"). Note the brutal honesty of the psalm (vv. 3-4). The "I" is emphatic, meaning, "I and no one else..." Here's a simple exercise: learn to say three simple words. I AM SORRY. Practice at home. Practice with others, and it will easier to do with God. Practice with God and it will easier with others!

When we finally confess to God, some rich, rich forgiveness comes our way. Last month, I was sitting at home, watching the Chiefs put it on the Houston Texans in a playoff game. And I'll admit it in front of everyone (it's Lent, and confession is good, right?)--I was eating a hotdog! With ketchup, mustard and relish! And I got so excited, I spilled some of that on one of my favorite sweaters. Now, I wanted to make sure that I used the right "stuff" on it for laundering. So I asked Janet, "Is this the Oxi-Clean gel stick I should use to dab on there? I don't want to make it worse!" You know, some views of God, guilt, sin and forgiveness actually make it worse! I used the stick and it came out as good as new, as if the spill had never happened! Isn't that the goal of forgiveness? Read v. 2 again with me. "Wash me thoroughly...cleanse me."

You see, there are at least three movements to forgiveness (God's of us and ours of others and self). 1) Removal of debt (you no longer "owe" the other person or God). 2) Removal of stain (conscience is clear...this is where Hebrews 10:11-22 comes in; through Christ's death on the

Cross, we have not just a covering of sin, but a removal). 3) Re-establishing the relationship. Read vv. 8, 10-12. Sin does something to joy and assurance, so that relationship needs refreshing.

Let me warn you. Culture is really big into self-forgiveness. But that only after a higher court rules on it. You need Someone beyond yourself to pronounce you cleansed. Trust me on this. I am a certified sinner, with lifetime membership. I've tried this pronouncing self cleansed and it doesn't work! So here's something beautiful to think about. The word "create" in v. 10 is the Hebrew *bara*. God is always the subject; it is always done freely; and it always brings about something that never before existed. Only God can do the forgiving. Mark this down. You can't forgive others until you forgive yourself. And you can't forgive yourself until you experience God's forgiveness.

One man described his struggle with sin and guilt in this way. He said it was liked being locked in a dungeon, but discovering that the key was there in the cell with him all the time [Tutu, p. 80]. Yes, sin, shame and guilt are real. But the key is near us. What God has done for us in Christ. The stain of sin is deep; God's forgiveness is deeper! The voices of sin and shame are loud. But God's grace is louder!