

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,  
by Pastor David Fischler, on Sunday, March 23, 2014**

## **RESTORING OUR JOY**

### **Psalm 51:1-19**

In case it's not already obvious, I want to start by saying that today I'm going to be talking about sin and in case there is any doubt whatsoever, let me make it perfectly clear: I'm against it!

When I see the North Korean government starving its people so that their military might have all the toys that they want...

When I see the government of Bashar Assad using chemical weapons on his own citizens and those who fight against him, beheading Christians who won't convert to Islam...

When I see the Russian government jail and kill journalists for telling the truth...

When I see Christians persecuted in Pakistan and in Sudan and Egypt and elsewhere...

When I see these kinds of things I want to call to the Almighty and ask for His retribution.

When I see Mexican drug cartels gunning down people in the streets of Monterey and Tijuana and Los Angeles...

When I see the Crypts and the Bloods kill innocent bystanders on the streets of Chicago because they happened to wander into the wrong turf...

When I see drug companies falsify data in order to get pharmaceuticals approved by the government...

When I see corporations mistreat their employees...

When I see politicians lie and scheme for the sake of their own power...

When I see husbands beat their wives...

When I see uncles molest children...

When I see teachers mistreating their charges...

When I see families break apart, I want to call out to the Lord, "Give us justice. Deal with the sin of the world."

When I see all of this going on I think to myself what a sin-sick world we live in and then I stop and I realize that every single one of the examples I just gave you have something in common. Do you know what it is? None of them pertain to me. That's not to say they're not evil. It's not to say that they don't deserve denunciation in the strongest terms. It doesn't mean that God shouldn't judge. But it is to say that it is easy to live in the world that we live in and find something to be continually outraged about regarding the way that governments and corporations and militias and families and unions and teachers and lawyers and everyone we can name treat one another and treat others. There's plenty to be outraged about, and rightly so.

But today I'd like for us to lay all of that aside and take a different focus. As we come to Psalm 51 we come crying as David did. Crying not for the sin of the world, as awful as

that is, but crying for our own sin. Crying for the ways in which we fall short of the glory of God.

This Psalm contains three cries. The first is in verses 1-6 and it's a cry for mercy. David asks God to forgive him and to cleanse him. "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love." He asks for God to forgive him for his sin and the heading on the Psalm is quite specific as to what the sin is that he's referring to – his adultery with Bathsheba. He knows it. He knows what he's done. He's been confronted by Nathan. Even if he wanted to ignore it he can't. So he cries out to God for forgiveness. Then he asks for cleansing. "According to Your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Purge my heart, O God, of the stain that sin leaves." Because he knows that this is not simply a matter of having a dalliance with another woman. In fact, the consequences of that action spread out to affect everything in his life. And he bases his plea on God's love, not on His justice. "Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your unfailing love." And there's a reason why he does that. He knows he has no claim on either God's forgiveness or His cleansing. He's done nothing to deserve either one. What he's done deserves nothing but God's condemnation and God's rejection.

So he asks that God give him not what he deserves but what he desperately needs, and needs if he is to continue to be a child of God – that forgiveness and that cleansing. So he asks God for forgiveness and for cleansing and in verses 3-6 he acknowledges his sin. "For I know my transgressions and my sin is always before me." He doesn't make any attempt to shift blame or to avoid responsibility. He doesn't point to all of the people around him and say, "You caused me to do this and you forced me to do that and I don't know about you over there in the white shirt, but I know you're somehow responsible for this." He didn't do that. He knows his sin and it is an ever-present reality in his heart and mind, according to verse 3. He recognizes that as bad as his conduct has been toward others – you'll remember he didn't just commit adultery with Bathsheba, he arranged to have her husband killed so that he could have her for his own. He didn't just, however, offend against other human beings. Ultimately it is God against Whom he offends. He says, "Against You, You only have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are proved right when You speak and justified when You judge." David says, "I did it. I did it. I can't run, I can't hide. There is nothing I can do but acknowledge what I have done and seek Your mercy for it." It is always before him. And in acknowledging this, he goes even a step farther and he doesn't try to say, "Well, you know, I messed up once. I made a mistake. I hope you'll forgive me for this and let it go. Nobody's perfect. You've got to cut me some slack here. I'm only human." No, instead he goes on in verse 5 and makes quite clear that the sin that he specifically confesses with regard to Bathsheba is very much a part of who he is. "Surely," he says, "I was sinful at birth. Sinful from the time my mother conceived me." He didn't become a sinful human being when he looked upon Bathsheba with desire. No, he was a sinful human being from the beginning. One of the questions that was asked of the Prices this morning was whether they acknowledged and would enable Caleb to acknowledge when he's old enough to understand that he, too, is in need of the saving blood of Christ. Well, I mean he's just a little kid. Admittedly, he's a well-dressed little kid. He wears a hat better than most people. I don't mind telling you, he's as cute as he can be, and yet even he, every bit as

much as his parents, every bit as much as his aunt and uncle, every bit as much as his grandparents, every bit as much as every person in this room. We're all in the same boat he's in. People sinful from the moment we came into existence, in need of forgiveness, in need of cleansing, in need of restoration and reconciliation with God from the very moment we came into the world.

This is the truth and David says in verse 6, "Surely do you desire truth in the inner parts. You teach me wisdom in the inmost places." In other words, don't try to explain it away. Don't try to act as though you're somehow above it all. You're not. And that is a call that goes out to every single one of us and it doesn't matter what's going on in North Korea or in the Sudan or in the streets of Chicago or in the oval office. None of that is as important at this moment as this: We all stand in the same place that David did.

Now I don't know what your particular sins are. There is a specificity to this. There is no mistake that this Psalm begins with that inscription regarding the adultery with Bathsheba. There is something very specific that provokes this. In each of our lives there is something specific and it's going to differ from person to person. Only you can say what it is. One of the things that the season of Lent is about, in fact every single day is about, but Lent reminds us particularly of this, is that this is a time for wisdom in the inmost parts. This is a time for truthfulness with regard to who we are and the ways that we have all fallen short of the glory of God. I leave you to do that yourself.

I'd like to mention at least three ways – and I'm sure there are a lot more – but at least three ways in which I see myself in David's position. I do this not to flagellate myself in front of the congregation, but rather to give you an example of the kind of self-examination that all of us need to engage in. One problem, one sin that I claim as my own without any pride whatsoever, is self-righteousness. I'm a wonderful person. My wife tells me that on a regular basis. Well, no, she doesn't, actually, but she implies it and I take it a step further. The fact is that I don't go around bragging about how good I am, like the Pharisees in Jesus' story in Luke 18. You remember, the Pharisees went to the Temple and they stood before God and they bragged about their righteousness and all the wonderful things that they did, unlike this poor soul, this tax-collector, scum of the earth. I don't do that, because that would be bad. Pounding my chest and talking about how righteous I am would be bad. Instead, I tell people how bad I am, because that's good. Okay. Instead, what I do is keep my opinion of my own worthiness to myself. I tell myself in my inmost parts what a good person I am.

The second thing I have to confess to is intellectual pride. It's easy to have intellectual pride when you're always right. When someone is wrong, let's say on the Internet, I correct them. That's the joke in our house. Maryanne sees me typing at the computer and if it's not a regular work hour she says, "Somebody's wrong on the Internet again, aren't they?" Yep.

The third thing is a sense of entitlement, and you can kind of understand how this grows up. If you're really good and you're always right, then don't you deserve the best that God has to give you? I do. And I ask Him for it on a regular basis. And you know what

He tells me? This is how you know God is from New Jersey. You know what He tells me? “THPPFFT!” It’s an occupational hazard. Being a pastor means that you’re a professional holy man, which means you have to be good. And it means you’re at the very least an amateur if not a professional theologian, which means you always have to be right. And before long, you begin to believe your own press clippings. If you would like further confession from me, I’ll see you in my confessional booth in my office after the worship service.

Each of us needs to go through that process of self-examination. As I was preparing this sermon this week I was thinking what should I mention as my sin. There’s that. There’s this, this, this, I probably shouldn’t mention that, but there’s this and that. Before long we’re sounding like Martin Luther who would go to confession for seven or eight hours a day. Finally his spiritual director Johann Staupitz said, “Martin, you’re just not that bad. What you’re describing is Satan, not yourself.” But Luther, even though he went way over board, was onto something which is he recognized that David’s confession was his confession. Sin was his and it had to be confessed.

The second part of this Psalm is a cry for restoration and renewal. It’s not enough – David knew that, we all know that – it is not enough to confess sin. The next step is to ask that something be done about it. In verses 7-9 he says, “Cleanse me with hyssop and I will be clean. Wash me and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness. Let the bones You have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sin and blot out all my iniquities.” And that is the gospel. That God does do that. That God hears that prayer and does what David asks Him to do. God sees that sin and He turns from it and in the process, blots it out as if it had never been. And in the process there is joy and gladness, the crushed spirit recognizes how far he is from God, rejoices because he knows that that’s not the way it has to be, that in fact God in His mercy can deal with that sin and blot it out and make all things new.

But even deeper than cleansing, in verses 10 and 12, is recreation. “Create in me a pure heart, O God.” I can’t do it myself. All the confession in the world will not change this. All the New Year’s resolutions and good intentions will not deal with this problem. What’s needed is a new heart. “Create in me a pure heart, O God. Renew a steadfast spirit within me.” David desires to be a new man. What he’s asking for in verse 10 is the functional equivalent of what Jesus called being born again. Paul uses this language in 2 Corinthians 5:17 when he says, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation. The old has passed away. Behold, the new has come.” And that is something that only God can do, which is why David prays, “Create in me a pure heart, O God. I’m at Your mercy.”

He asks then in verse 11 that the Holy Spirit not be taken from him, despite his sin. “Do not cast me from Your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.” Even though he is a sinner and even though he confesses this fact without hesitation, he recognizes that his plea for renewal is utterly dependent on the work of the Spirit of God in his heart. And in verse 12 he says what the effect of that renewal will be. It’s the restoration of the joy of his salvation, which is not just the reality of it, but the experience of it. “Restore to me

the joy of Your salvation and grant me a willing heart to sustain me.” Even as a Christian, it is possible to be so sunk in sin that one no longer rejoices that one is saved, but rather one sees nothing but darkness and despair. It is possible to live that way and what David does is to tell us that we do not have to. We can’t change it. God must change it. “Restore to me the joy of Your salvation.”

One last element here in Psalm 51 is a cry of commitment. On top of the cry for mercy and the cry for restoration and renewal, there is David’s cry of commitment. Because what has happened in the course of this Psalm is that we have seen the gospel illustrated. Sin is recognized. Forgiveness is asked and received. And the result is transformation. “Then I will teach transgressors Your ways and sinners will turn back to You. [I’ll take this good news and bring it to others.] Save me from blood guilt, from the guilt of Uriah the Hittite. Save me from blood guilt, O God, the God Who saves me, and my tongue will sing of Your righteousness. [Show me Your mercy. Show me Your love, and it will be on my lips with all whom I meet.] O Lord, open my lips and my mouth will declare Your praise.”

In my Sunday School class this morning we were talking about the letter to the Laodicean church in the Book of Revelation, a church that was neither hot nor cold but which, in any event, seemed not to care much, self-satisfied and pretty secure where they were. And we see the very opposite of that here. We see a man who recognizes that when God does for him what he can’t do for himself, when God deals with his sin, when God brings them back into a loving relationship, it is all he can do to not burst into praise and to thank God, not just in the privacy of his room, but in front of all the people of Israel. And he does that because God doesn’t delight in sacrifice. If it was sacrifice that was required here, he’d do that. He doesn’t take pleasure in burnt offerings. Once again, that’s not what God is looking for. Instead, he says in verse 17, “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” “Come to Him,” David is saying, “just as I had to.” Come to Him with a spirit that recognizes how far you fall short. A spirit that recognizes what the sin is that is preventing you from relating to Him as a loving Father. Come with that spirit and God will receive it every time. Do that, be renewed, be restored, be cleansed, and then go out into the world, to the Russians and the Syrians, the politicians and the gangs and proclaim to them, “Your sin is judged. Now turn and be transformed.”