

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,
by Dr. David Fischler, on Sunday, June 19, 2016**

BLESSED IS THE ONE

Psalm 32:1-11

I doubt very much that it is news to anyone for me to say that for the most part politicians are not leaders, they are followers. They may want to be leaders but in fact most of them simply don't have what it takes to be a true leader. A true leader is one who points in a direction and calls to those who follow behind, "This way! This way is the way we should go." Politicians, at least those in recent years, are much more about turning to their followers and saying, "What do you all think? This way? This way? This way? What am I supposed to do when a third of you want to go each way?" And they're up a creek.

You may have noticed in recent decades politicians have become almost incapable of saying, "I'm sorry." About anything. Getting a politician, whether a president, a member of the House or Senate, a governor, a member of a state legislature, even a member of a town council, getting any politician to say, "I'm sorry," is akin to the difficulty of putting a man on Jupiter. It simply isn't going to happen. Instead you get what we all have heard characterized as "the Washington apology." You know how the Washington apology goes? Regardless of the offense, no matter how grave, no matter how many people it affected, no matter how serious the misdoing, the Washington apology says, "I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings." No, actually, I take that back. The Washington apology is even better than that. The Washington apology isn't, "I'm sorry that *I* hurt your feeling." The Washington apology is, "I'm sorry if your feelings are hurt." That's like the cat turning to me and saying, "I'm sorry that you're such a klutz that you fell on your ankle. What a terrible thing!" The Washington apology doesn't actually apologize for anything. Instead it expresses sorrow that *you* have reacted in a particular way that has nothing to do with me or my actions.

The reason this is significant is because politicians follow the culture. And the culture that we live in now is one that finds it very, very difficult to apologize, to acknowledge wrong doing, to place the blame where it belongs. We have seen that this week as our media have rushed to place the blame on last Sunday's events in Orlando absolutely anywhere but on the person who carried out the massacre. Of course, he's not around to acknowledge his wrong doing. So in his stead we will apologize, or at least point the finger at people who weren't there and had nothing to do with it. We do that at least in part because if we insist that other people take the blame for their own actions, if they admit that they have done wrong, then that means that we have to as well. And that's something that increasingly Americans are unwilling and perhaps even psychologically unable to do. But we are sorry that your feelings are hurt.

When facing God, as opposed to facing your spouse or your children or the media, it is necessary to acknowledge our wrong doing. The truth of the matter is there's no point in not doing so. He knows far better than we do the sum and substance of all our errors, all

our mistakes, all our misdeeds, all our sins. And so the psalmist, David, a man who knew sin from the inside out, wrote Psalm 32 at least in part to acknowledge the necessity to admit his sin but also to celebrate the God who not only convicts of sin but forgives it.

David begins, in verses 1-7, by talking about the blessing that forgiveness consists of. In verses 1 and 2 he makes very clear that despite my use of poor analogous words this is in fact not about error or misjudgment. This is not about mistakes honestly made. This is not about addition or subtraction mistakes. This is about sin. “Blessed is he whose transgressions [that means sin] are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him and in whose spirit there is no deceit.” That means sin. Transgressions, deceit, sin, they all refer to the same thing here. And what they refer to, of course, is offenses. They refer, in fact, to a multitude of things. Offenses against God or against people. They refer to offenses big or small. It refers to offenses conscious or accidental. And refers to offenses of omission as well as commission. He does not say, “Blessed is he whose murder is forgiven,” but that’s covered. He doesn’t say, “Blessed is he whose lies are forgiven,” but that’s covered. He doesn’t say, “Blessed is he who is forgiven when he fails to help another in need,” but that’s included. All of our offenses against God and against people, regardless of how large or small they are, the reaction is the same. In each instance the reality is the same. Someone has been offended, rules have been broken, people have been hurt, God’s righteousness has been repudiated or trampled upon. But in every instance as well we are blessed (another way of saying we are favored) by God when our sin is dealt with.

Now *forgiven*, as in “Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven,” means for our sin to be taken away, to be treated as though it was not. *Covered*. Whose sins are covered. *Covering* refers to atonement, to Christ standing in the way and masking our sin so that when God sees us He sees Christ rather than us. We are all blessed when God looks at us and instead of seeing us in the filthy rags of our own unrighteousness, He sees us clothed in the sinlessness of Jesus. *Counts*. Whose sin the Lord does not count against him. *Counts* expresses God’s attitude toward those whom He has forgiven. He remembers our sin no more. You’ve all heard, I’m sure, the expression, “Forgiven but not forgotten.” Which is our way of saying yes we will forgive you but we’re not going to forget that you’ve done whatever it is that you’ve done and we’re going to be ready for the next time that you do it so that we can pounce on you and say, “You did it again!” That requires a double apology.

God doesn’t treat our sin that way. Once your sin is dealt with it is as if it had never been. Of course in one sense that is contrary to God’s nature. God, in fact, knows all things and is incapable of not knowing. He doesn’t literally forget in the way that, for instance, I forgot that when you put your foot down it’s better to land on the bottom of it rather than the top of it. Forgetting is not exactly what God does. That’s an anthropomorphism. But He does treat it as though it had never been. He counts it not against us.

Now the interesting thing is that after noting the blessedness of forgiveness, the wonderful joy of forgiveness, David then goes on to take account of something that all

too often we don't. In verses 3-4 he makes very clear that failure to receive forgiveness for sin hurts us. Look at what he says, "When I kept silent my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer." When I kept silent. When I acted as though everything was fine. Now we can do that with people. I have no doubt that everyone here, including me, has offenses in his or her past that you will recall, that you could recall and for whatever reason you never asked to be forgiven. Maybe it's that the other person didn't notice. It is possible to do something that harms someone else even though they don't even realize it. Maybe it's because you didn't think it was a big deal. You thought you told a little white lie and misled your spouse but she never knew the difference. Yes, I lied to her and that in itself is a break – not a fatal one of course – in the marriage covenant. But she didn't notice so I don't need to say anything about it. For whatever reason, we don't ask for forgiveness even when we know that we should. And if we have any conscience at all, which of course all Christians do, conscience formed by Christ, the result is eventually that's going to catch up with us. It is true, because of the way we are constituted, it's more likely that it's going to catch up with us if it's a big thing. But even the little things, they accumulate and they place a burden on us, and eventually, like David, we find ourselves physically, as well as mentally and emotionally drained by that. Because the truth is that carrying around the knowledge that we have hurt others or that we have sinned against God, who of course knows it instantly, in fact knew about it before the beginning of the world, doing that means that eventually we're going to break down and realize that we simply can't handle it any longer.

If you've ever read Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* you know how this works. You may remember the story of the young student Raskolnikov who had a Napoleon complex that was an idea that was only just beginning in the 19th century. The idea that the *great man* is beyond good and evil. The *great man* is beyond rules, that they don't apply to the person who rises above them. So he came to believe that he was one of these great men. He had no reason to believe that, but he wanted to be one. So he decided that the rules didn't apply to him. In order to test this theory, he kills an old woman and he does so without apparent remorse. He's not caught. There are no witnesses. He's gotten away with it. And he thinks, "Well, that was neat. I can kill. I can violate the most significant taboo of society. Kill an innocent person with no consequences whatsoever."

He does that within the first 50 pages of the book and, of course, this being a Russian novel it's 3,000 pages long, or something like that. And for the rest of the novel we see him slowly, by inches, and then by feet, and then by yards, slowly and then more quickly and more rapidly go insane. He starts to have doubts at first because he's questioned by a policeman who is not 100% convinced that he had nothing to do with this, but he doesn't have any evidence, so he can't do anything about. And yet the thought that he might get caught eats at him. And the more the thought that he might get caught eats at him, the more the realization that in fact he is subject to society's rules, grows within him. And by the end of the novel he has gone insane, insane from guilt. Insane from the knowledge that he has in fact done one of the worst things that a human being can do and despite the fact that no evidence is ever found to link him to the crime he goes to the police and confesses because confession is the only way that he can even begin to retrieve his sanity.

David dealt with that. We in smaller ways deal with that as well. And the result, then, is to push us toward confession. And David acknowledges in verse 5, “I acknowledged my sin to you and I did not cover up my iniquity. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord’ – and You forgave the guilt of my sin.” He acknowledged his sin, he confessed his sin, and the result was that he was forgiven of his sin. That’s not to say that in every instance when David sinned there were no consequences. We all know that there were. For instance, most notably from his adultery with Bathsheba and his arranged murder of her husband Uriah, you’ll remember that the result was that the first child that he would have had with Bathsheba died. That was a consequence. But, though there were still consequences, nevertheless David rejoiced. He rejoiced that he had been forgiven. Because the truth is that when we have sinned, when we have offended against God or another person we can deal with the consequences better than we can deal with the lack of forgiveness.

David then goes on in verse 6 to universalize his experience, and rightly so. He says, “Therefore let everyone who is godly pray to you while you may be found; surely when the mighty waters rise they will not reach him.” Let everyone confess their sin. Let everyone acknowledge the ways that they fall short of the glory of God and they will be blessed. Not because they have committed sin, but because they have gone to their Father in heaven, who like any good parent hears his child say, “Father I have sinned against you and I am profoundly sorry for that.” And no good father, having heard that will turn from his son or daughter but will instead wrap his arms around his son or daughter and say, “It’s all right. I forgive you. We can move on now.”

Well after universalizing his own experience he makes clear then in verse 7 that those who do what he has done will receive forgiveness as well. We need have no doubts that that’s the case. “You are my hiding place,” he says to God. “You will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance.” Songs of deliverance from the sin that I have committed. Songs of deliverance from those who would harm me as a result of that or anything else. Most importantly, perhaps, he doesn’t use the term, “You will deliver me from the tempter.” And of course we all know how true this is because we have prayed as we did this morning under Neil’s leadership, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, and lead us not into temptation.” We might have prayed Psalm 32 just as well as the Lord’s Prayer. We’d have been saying essentially the same thing.

So we go to the Lord confessing our sin and we receive the blessing of forgiveness. So what happens next? David then in verses 8-11 gives us the way forward. He makes clear that forgiveness will be followed by instruction in holiness. Having been forgiven David indicates that we are expected to learn from our experience and choose to walk according to God’s counsel. He says in verse 8, “I will instruct.” And this, by the way, even though it is not in quotations in the NIV, this I think is God speaking. If it’s not God speaking, it’s David saying, “I’ve been where you are and so I’m going to let you know what to do about it.” “I will instruct you and teach you in the way that you should go. I will counsel you and watch over you.” “I’m experienced in the ways of sin,” if this is in fact David, and we’ll treat it that way since there aren’t quotes in the NIV, which would

indicate that God is speaking. Let's say this is David. What he's saying is, "I'm experienced in the way of sin. I've done whatever you've done. I've lied. I've stolen. I've committed adultery. I've committed murder. How many more of the Ten Commandments do you want me to admit I've broken? I can probably go through them and find something that's broken all ten of them." And the truth is that whether it's in actual physical deed or in the heart, all of us have done so as well. In case you're telling yourself, "Well, I've never killed anyone," we all know what Jesus said about that. If you've harbored anger unrighteously in your heart against your brother you might just as well have broken the 6th commandment. If you've lusted after a man or a woman to whom you're not married, you might just as well have broken the 7th commandment.

So the chances are that all of us, in one way or another, have broken all ten of the commandments and lots of other laws. There are 613 of them. Not as many as the Federal Government has, but the chances are still pretty good on any given day you've run afoul of at least one or more. So that's what David is saying. "I can walk in your shoes. I've been where you are. I know what you're going through. So let me tell you what needs to happen." And then he does that in verse 9. He says, "Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you." Think about this. If you have an animal, let's say a dog, since cats don't obey.

I hope you won't mind. I want to interrupt myself for a moment. Maryanne went next door to our neighbors' to tell them what had happened because they had seen the ambulance. Their son is seven years old and just a card. She said to them that the cat got under my feet and I tripped and dislocated my ankle. And their son said, "Yeah, I know. Our cat tries to kill us every day." I would have liked to have been there to ask him for some more details.

So let's use a dog. We all know they're trainable. But when you bring a puppy home, the puppy doesn't automatically know what to do, right? A puppy is not going to, at the first instance of an impulse, automatically go to the door, turn and look at you and say, "I want to go outside. I have some business to do." No. You bring a puppy home and the chances are pretty good that unless somebody had gotten to him or her first, they're going to decide that your living room floor is as good a place as any to do their business. I don't know about you, but one time we had a dog and that's exactly what she did when she first got home. We had to train her that when she needed to do that she needed to let us know and we would take her outside where it would be perfectly okay. It wouldn't cause a mess and it wouldn't smell up the house or create extra work. It was fine. That's all it takes, is some training. Puppies, like babies, don't come preprogrammed.

And the truth of the matter is, we don't either. Except for the extent that we are preprogrammed to sin. We all come into the world with a sinful nature, a nature that says it wants to go its own way, do its own thing, make its own decisions, decide on its purpose in life and go through life essentially like a bull in a china shop, running over anybody who gets in our way. That's the way we come into life. And even when we first become Christians that impulse is really strong and at times overpowering. And so

David is saying, don't be like the dumb animal who never gets trained. Don't be like the horse who you put a bit and bridle on once and you can use that to make it do what you want but then never put it on again and think it will obey next time. No, next time it probably won't. Because there is a process involved in breaking a horse and getting a horse to obey. Just like with children and just like with us. And so he says, take the bit. Take the bridle. Be instructed and be led so that the sin that you have so recently committed and received the blessing of forgiveness for is less likely committed again in the future.

And if that's the case, we can rejoice. He says in verse 10, "Many are the woes of the wicked, but the Lord's unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in Him." The one who places himself in God's hands and says to Him, "You are my loving Father, I know. You are a parent who cares about the path that I walk in life, who cares about right and wrong, who cares about whether I harm other people. And I admit I'm a dumb animal. I don't know what to do. Show me. And give me your Holy Spirit to overcome the impulse to go back to old ways that I might overcome them." And if we do so, no, *when* we do so the result in verse 11 is that we will "Rejoice in the Lord and be glad, you righteous." Not righteous because of your sin. Not even righteous because God has forgiven you. But righteous because God has given you a righteousness that is not yours. Rejoice in Him, you who have been made righteous.

"Sing, all you who are upright in heart!" All you who wear the bit and bridle, all you who heed the instructions of the Lord. And when on those occasions when inevitably you toss the bit and the bridle aside and you seek again to find your own way, at that point, turn the page back and go back to verse 1 and see it start again and once again be blessed by His forgiveness.