

**Sermon preached by Reverend Helen Franssell at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne,  
Virginia, on Sunday, June 4, 2017**

**Repentance: Redirection to Righteousness**

**Psalm 51:1-17**

When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.

<sup>1</sup> Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.<sup>2</sup> Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. <sup>3</sup> For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. <sup>4</sup> 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. [a lot of legal terminology here] <sup>5</sup> Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. <sup>6</sup> Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb; you taught me wisdom in that secret place. <sup>7</sup> Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. <sup>8</sup> Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. <sup>9</sup> Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. <sup>10</sup> Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. <sup>11</sup> Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. <sup>12</sup> Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. <sup>13</sup> Then I will teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to you. <sup>14</sup> Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, you who are God my Savior, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness. <sup>15</sup> Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise. <sup>16</sup> You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. <sup>17</sup> My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.

Today is Pentecost Sunday – the day that we recognize and celebrate God’s sending of the Holy Spirit in power to be among His people, and we think of the miracle of all those different languages being spoken by those who had never learned them – all for the purpose of spreading the message of the amazing grace of Christ Jesus, that ALL people would be moved by that same Spirit to repentance and a relationship with God Himself. Acts 2:37 says that the people were “cut”, or “pierced to the heart”; “deeply moved” when Peter spoke, and they said, “what shall we do?” Peter’s answer was: “repent and be baptized”, and 3000 people did just that. Isn’t that just what the Holy Spirit does – cuts into our deepest hearts with the guilt of our sin, and leads us to wholeness.

Now, in our culture today the word “sin” is not used very often; it’s considered to be a very old-fashioned, archaic word, and if it is used, it’s probably in a sarcastic sense. The *concept* of sin is even more unpopular. We hear much more often the terms “mistake” or “bad decision” than “wrong-doing” or “sin”.

Our reading does not ignore that word; it is one of those beautiful (and heart-rending) passages from the book of Psalms that is to lead to repentance, which is the theme of the day. John Calvin, one of the esteemed founders of our Reformed faith, writes that repentance is “the fruit of faith and prayer,” by which all of the Christian life is marked. Repentance is a lifelong process, “not merely the start of the Christian life; it IS the Christian life.” It involves the confession of sin as well as *growth* in holiness. Repentance is the lifelong response of the believer to the Gospel in the inward life, mind, heart, attitude, and will. [Institutes III.3.1-2, 18, 20] It is a redirection to righteousness, and comes from “a pure, earnest fear of God” that is not limited to inward grace; it is also characterized by newness of life.

Some time ago Pastor Neil had the practice of answering the casual “how are you?” with “better than I deserve.” That made me think a bit about grace; so I tested it myself. At work one day one of my coworkers said “Good morning! How are you?” and I answered with “Better than I deserve”. It stopped him in his tracks, and after a moment of shocked silence he said “What do you mean, ‘Better than you deserve???’ Everyone deserves to have a good day!” And I answered with, “I have the love of God in spite of all the wrongs I’ve done and the good I haven’t done that I should have done.” He said “That’s ridiculous; you’re a good person!” I answered, “Well, not

good enough to earn the right to be in the presence of God.” He didn’t know what to make of it; he rolled his eyes and walked away.

So, that begs the question, “What do we do with our sin?” This is a very pertinent question as we come to God’s table today to remember and celebrate our forgiveness in Christ Jesus. We’re going to look at some “sinners” in the Bible – and the Bible is full of them; in fact, I can only think of one Person mentioned in the Bible Who is NOT a sinner – and we’re going to consider 6 of those sinners, their various responses to sin, and OUR prayer of response.

### 1. Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden – Gen. 3:8-10

The man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. <sup>9</sup>But the LORD God called to the man, “Where are you?”<sup>10</sup> He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.”

Adam and Eve lost their – and our - original innocence; they opened their eyes, and became aware of their nakedness, which signified their shame and guilt. Before sin, there was no guilt – not in their relationships with God, and not with each other. With sin came the loss of immediate and easy access to God’s presence. Instead of meeting God in the cool of the day, they hid themselves because of the new awareness of their estrangement from Him. They were no longer comfortable in His holy presence; they were afraid.

It is our tendency to hide from or ignore our sin, isn’t it; to run from it because it feels more comfortable than to face it. We hide it from others and from ourselves; we hide because we think we don’t want to be seen because the shame is too great. And yet, the deeper pain when we sin is the sense of abandonment when we feel we are NOT seen, and we try to hide from God!

Q#1: Is hiding from God repentance? No; first, we *can’t* hide from God. God doesn’t have to look for us; He already knows where we are and what we think we’re hiding – kind of like our cat, Ginger, who snuck into the house and “hid” with his head stuck under the couch, but all of his behind hanging out. As a loving Father, God *wants* to speak to our hearts - to love, forgive, restore. He longs for us to hear and see Him, and unless our sin comes out of hiding it becomes bitterness and shame.

1: Our prayer: Lord, help us to hear You, and to see You.

### 2. The story of Cain and Abel, Gen. 4.

You remember that Cain was so angry that God looked with favor on his brother Abel’s sacrifice and rejected his that he killed him -

<sup>9</sup>Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” “I don’t know,” he replied. “Am I my brother’s keeper?” <sup>10</sup>The LORD said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground.”

Cain was downcast, and became angry enough to remove the focus of his anger by murdering his own brother. He then sought to absolve himself of responsibility for committing this act – “it’s none of my business, and it’s none of your business either, God! I am not responsible!” He seeks to distance himself from his sin, and yet, how can we separate ourselves from ourselves?

Q#2: Is denying sin repentance? It is a sinful attempt at self-deception to claim that we are without sin. God does not leave sin unchallenged, however; He is just and holy. Of course, justice demands punishment, and being

confronted with sin feels like it's even worse than burying it, but God's grace is there. He confronts us with our sin not to punish but to redeem!

#2 Our prayer: Keep after me, Lord; challenge my sin!

### 3. **Let's now zero in on some "sinners" from the narrative of Jesus' crucifixion, beginning with Judas, in Mt. 27:3-5.**

<sup>3</sup> When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. <sup>4</sup> "I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood." "What is that to us?" they replied. "That's your responsibility." <sup>5</sup> So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself.

Judas threw his payment for his sin back at the priests with deep remorse. What is remorse? It is a deep, tortured sense of guilt for one's actions; anguish; self-reproach that can lead to rage and anger, pain and agony, or self-pity. It is the loss of something . . . self-esteem? This was a heart-rending, desperate attempt to find peace, but Judas couldn't find it . . .

Q# 3: Is remorse the same as repentance? Is the restitution that might come from remorse repentance? Did throwing the money back – restitution - undo his actions? No; remorse must be accompanied by resolve to *change*. Judas clearly did not actually repent, or Jesus would not have said "it would be better if he had not been born." (Mt 26:24) The Heidelberg Catechism defines repentance as "running away from sin, and finding wholehearted joy in God through Jesus." Judas' returning the money did not bring wholehearted joy, did it. And what about the chief priests?? They would hear none of it, because their agenda had nothing to do with ministry to a hurting spirit.

#3 Our prayer: Forgive me; I have sinned. Use my sorrow to turn me to You, so that I can pray for You to *change me*.

### 4. **Pilate's defense of his actions, Mt. 27:22-24**

<sup>22</sup> "What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" Pilate asked. They all answered, "Crucify him!" <sup>23</sup> "Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!" <sup>24</sup> When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I am innocent of this man's blood," he said. "It is your responsibility!"

Pilate caved in to the Jews, declaring his innocence. This calls attention to our own refusal to accept responsibility for our actions. There's an arrogance that we think we can claim our own innocence and project OUR guilt, our sin on others – a kind of "he made me do it" attitude. When our oldest, Jonathan, was about 2 years old he and his infant brother, Aaron, who was just 3 or 4 months old, were together at the dining room table, Aaron in his infant seat. I came and noticed crayon scribbles all over the placemat, and I said "What happened here!" or something like that. Our tiny cute Jonathan promptly replied "Aaron did it." Isn't that just the picture of our human nature . . .

Q#4: Is blaming others repentance? No; we cannot transfer OUR guilt; it is a desperate and foolish attempt to expunge, or erase, the truth.

#4 Our prayer: Forgive me; help me to accept responsibility for my sin. Help me to repent and live faithfully.

## 5. The reaction of the chief priests following the news of Christ's resurrection, Mt. 28.

The guards were eyewitnesses to the earthquake, the lightning appearance of the angel with clothes white like snow to the two Marys, his rolling back of the stone, and his telling them of the resurrection of Jesus. The guards reported all that they had seen with their own eyes to the chief priests, who paid them off with the promise of impunity. Committed to the outcome they hoped for – that they had indeed rid themselves of this Jesus - the chief priests ignored the evidence of eyewitnesses, bribing them, hoping everyone would ignore the evidence. They claimed that it never happened, essentially retracting the testimony of the eyewitnesses. Of course, we cannot simply retract what we've said or done, or rewind time to do what we did not, but should have, done; we cannot undo what has been done, no matter what we may do to try to paste good over the bad. Once confronted with truth, that truth is still planted in our minds and hearts, and no bribery can truly remove it.

Q#5 Is retracting our story the same as repentance? No; in fact, truth does not depend on evidence. We know our guilt even if there is no outward sign of it. Without repentance, sin lives on.

#5 Our prayer: Confront me with the facts, that I may get out of my state of denial.

## 6. Last: The priests' and the Sanhedrin's cover-up, Acts 5:27-33

The apostles were brought in and made to appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. <sup>28</sup>“We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,” he said. “Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood.” <sup>29</sup> Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than human beings! <sup>30</sup> The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. <sup>31</sup> God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. <sup>32</sup> We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.” <sup>33</sup> When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death.

The high priest and the Sanhedrin attempted to cover the truth with threats and bribes in order to escape accountability. This was an attempt not only to protect the stability of the society, but to hide their sin. It is much better to allow Jesus to remove sin.

Q#6 Is covering up our sin the same as repentance? No; we cannot remove our sin by any means at all. Only Jesus can remove sin! I John 1:9: “If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” Jesus doesn't call attention to the cover-up to condemn, but to offer salvation and show us His love – John 3:17: “God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.”

#6: Our prayer: forgive me for covering up my sin; help me to hear the Good News and be healed of my sin.

There are plenty of other sinners in the Bible, aren't there – Jonah attempted to run away from his sin rather dramatically; Peter, having denied Christ, went off and wept. But what about us? - Are we hiding from God in fear?

- Are we lying to ourselves, to God, to others?
- Are we stuck in remorse, unable to leave it?
- Are we blaming others rather than taking responsibility for our sin?
- Are we ignoring the truth?
- Are we attempting cover up our brokenness/ugliness?

Let's not stay stuck in these useless responses! And let's not spend this morning contemplating our sin; let's look toward the end point/the goal: a changed heart! We can't just sit and camp in the pain of our remorse and guilt; that would lead to bitterness too great to bear. What should we do with our sin? Give it to Jesus; come to Him – every day, every moment. Instead of regret, remorse, retraction, removal of our sin, instead of attempting to hide, project onto others our sin, let us come to Him in confession and repentance, that He might redeem and restore.

So, what is repentance? How do we come to that place?

Repentance is a process, and that process begins with feelings of regret and remorse, which lead to a changing of the mind, which results in a turning from sin to God – a reorientation of the heart. Yes, justification – being made right – is kind of legal standing, but in the end, it's all about *restoring relationship* – this is where the judicial process leads.

The beginning, those feelings of regret, remorse, and guilt are useful because they can be instructive, but feelings alone do not grant forgiveness and are not repentance. We know that regret is possible *apart* from repentance, so pay attention to your sense of guilt and pursue it, because it is the leading of the Holy Spirit to repentance. Allow yourself to be conscience-stricken about that thing you've done, or that thing that you didn't do that you should have done.

But it doesn't stop there; repentance is more than regret, more than feeling ashamed, more than "I'm sorry", more than being contrite. Judas was contrite – he gave the money back! It is to feel such sorrow for sin as to lead us to the amendment of our ways. True penitence is the resolve to change, and this change is impossible except for the work of the Spirit. It is a turning from sin to God – a *reorientation* that results in true *change*. This change results in the restoration of a *relationship* with God Almighty.

The Westminster Confession says that repentance is not a satisfaction for sin, and does not *cause* forgiveness – forgiveness is an act of God's voluntary grace in Christ, but necessary for all sinners. And the Holy Spirit is that Person Who works this in us. It says: "the Holy Spirit is the only efficient agent in the application of redemption." Thus, the interpersonal relationship between man and God that has been disrupted by a misdeed is re-established. Let us not miss the true focus – the *re-focus* – is on *forgiveness*; on God and His grace. Let us take in the beauty of a *relationship* that was broken and impossible that is now restored.

Prayer: "My sin – O, the bliss of this glorious thought, my sin – not in part but the whole – is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more. Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul! It is well with my soul." [493] Lord, thank you for the pain, the sense of guilt, the remorse, the regret that Your Spirit sends us; cause these to turn our hearts again to You, and again and again and again. Help us not to hide, deny, or blame, but to repent and return into Your arms; for it is there, and only there, that we find peace. We come, O Christ, to You. Amen.