

Confession and forgiveness

Readings: Psalm 5:1 – 12, John 1:11 – 18

I have a confession to make. And I don't make it lightly. In fact I think most of my generation needs to repent of this same sin. Most of us don't view it as sin. And perhaps some of it is not our fault. We are victims of our culture. We didn't know any better. However, in the days away at Lake Rotoiti I became convicted of my failure; my sin.

I / We have failed our children – many of whom are adults now. And I / We continue to fail our young people and our children. Not deliberately. We might call this a sin of omission but it seems like sin to me nevertheless. So how have I / we sinned?

How many of our children and young people follow Jesus into adulthood? Not many. I don't have the statistics. I know my statistics – not one of my three children is actively following Jesus. They are good people with great values.

I love them with my whole heart. But I have sinned against them in my ignorance and neglect. I didn't understand what they needed in order to form a life-long relationship with Jesus. I was content when they attended church. I thought that was enough. I didn't share with them enough about my own relationship with Jesus and the challenges and joys found in him.

I feel bad about that. I'm not beating myself up about it. I have asked for my Father's forgiveness, for Jesus' cleansing and the Spirit's enabling to live differently now. And I pray like crazy for them that they will find a renewed relationship with Jesus.

Psalm 51 is David's cry for forgiveness after he has stuffed up. Many Christians find this psalm a bit intense. After all we've been forgiven when we came to know Jesus – right?

The book of Psalms was the early church's song book. They sang the psalms, chanted them, spoke them aloud when they gathered. There is no reason to think they didn't include this one, regardless of whether or not it made them uncomfortable.

So let's give it the attention it deserves. Apparently David wrote it after he raped Bethsheba, had her husband Uriah killed when she got pregnant, lost his baby son and tried to pretend none of that happened.

David's problem was not so much that he sinned; the temple sacrificial system was set up for that. You simply offered a sacrifice at the temple and the Lord would forgive your sin; everyone sinned. David's problem was that his sin was premeditated. Deliberate sin like that fell outside of the usual ritual of sacrifice and forgiveness.

So David did nothing. He put his sin out of his mind until Nathan the prophet confronted him.

Now there was no choice but to deal with it. The Lord loved David too much to leave him living in unconfessed and unforgiven sin. Nathan tricked David into confessing. Perhaps that was a bit devious but I am sure the Lord had tried other methods before this last resort.

When David can't avoid the truth any longer he fesses up. His admission, "I have sinned against the Lord", opens the gates for dialogue and action; for repentance and reconciliation.

Now David comes to God without pretence or cover up. He is honest and remorseful because he now understands his need for forgiveness. So he throws himself on God's mercy.

V 1 O loving and kind God, have mercy.

Have pity upon me and take away the awful stain of my transgressions.

Oh, wash me, cleanse me from this guilt.

Let me be pure again.

For I admit my shameful deed — it haunts me day and night.

David opens up about what he has done and takes full responsibility. He doesn't try to minimise what he has done as we so often do. "It wasn't a big deal. Everyone does it. No-one cares about little stuff like that." We put up walls of self-defence.

David sees that his sin was serious acknowledging that his sin was against the Lord. This doesn't mean that others weren't wounded by his sin – in fact Uriah and David's baby died. What it does mean though is that David understands that his ultimate sin was in rebelling against the Lord and his life-giving commands. All sin ultimately involves shaking our fist in God's face and saying that we know best. We want to be the god of our own lives.

David is desperate for the Lord's cleansing. Verse 7 literally means 'Purge me with hyssop.' Hyssop was used for ritual purification – if someone died in a house, the walls would be sprinkled with hyssop dipped in water. David wants to be really clean again. He needs the Lord to do it; he can't do it himself. He's tried to put it behind him.

Verse 8 – give me back my joy!

Some people say Christians can lose their salvation. I don't believe Scripture teaches that. However we can lose the joy of our salvation. Perhaps your joy needs a top-up? Is that because of unconfessed sin?

David asks the Lord to forget his sin. We know he does that. Acts 13:22 records that David was 'a man after God's own heart'. And the Messiah, Jesus, comes through David's line, through his relationship with Bathsheba in fact. The Lord does forgive and more than that – he brings restoration and joy once more.

The psalm goes on to say that another result of the Lord's forgiveness and restoration will result in David teaching others about the Lord and their reconciliation also. David's brokenness heals others.

When our merciful God does a deep cleansing work in us, others always benefit. We can't keep silent about what he has done. It is so reassuring isn't it, that we don't have to be perfect before the Lord can use us. David was far from perfect and yet God used him mightily.

Let's take a closer look at Jesus himself right now though – the Christ, the Messiah, the One who has been born through David's family line. Not everyone recognised Jesus for who he was. Our reading from John's Gospel begins by pointing out that many did not accept him. They couldn't receive what he brought to them either.

They couldn't trust him and so were not able to be reborn into his Kingdom; his family. Christ, the most complete human being who ever walked this earth showed us the Father's glory. An amazing aspect of the Father's glory is glory is that this great and all powerful God brings us loving forgiveness and truth through Jesus Christ – verse 14.

Verse 16 speaks of blessing upon blessing. Some versions say 'grace upon grace'. There is the sense of piling one blessing upon another – Ephesians 1 puts it like this:

So overflowing is his kindness toward us that he took away all our sins through the blood of his Son, by whom we are saved; and he has showered down upon us the richness of his grace—for how well he understands us and knows what is best for us at all times. Vv7 - 8

It's worth making a brief note about verse 17. While the law seemed merciless at times, the intention was always to bring freedom and grace through the law. Sure the law was tough on sin, but there were ways of forgiveness built into the law. The intention was to set apart the people of

Israel for the Lord to witness to his mercy and grace to the surrounding peoples.

It proved insufficient and so Jesus came – Jesus the embodiment of loving forgiveness. He was the one who told us all about the mercy that indwells the very character of God.

It is through Jesus that we receive forgiveness for our sin; whether it be deliberate like David's or simply ignorant like mine has been. (By the way, we will be considering ways that we can support and encourage our young people much more effectively than I did in the past.)

We need to accept the grace Jesus brings to us. We don't need to wallow in our sin. Confession means we take our eyes off ourselves and look to Jesus – to what he has done and what he is doing.

We can live in freedom, fully loved and accepted in the beloved.

Propped up against the toilet wall somewhere in South Auckland, renewed by the sun, Norm is content.

A smart young lad is approaching. He has the designer casual look of a North Shore boy. Judge not that you not be judged, Norm is reminding himself.

"Excuse me, sir, can I have a word with you?"

"I think I can fit you in before my next appointment, lad. Take a pew."

This teenager's skin is unblemished. He's keen to get on with his spiel, before he loses his nerve.

"My name's Andrew. I'm with a team of people moving through this area to speak to people about the purpose of life."

Norm. "Good to meet you son."

The well-travelled hand held out to the boy causes consternation. This is not in the script. He handles it like a packet of three-day-old fish.

“Norm, I’m wondering if you’ve given much thought to your eternal destiny? Well, it’s funny you should say that – I was just reading something about that when you turned up.”

Andrew is hearing the voice of his instructor. “Whatever happens, don’t let become side tracked.”

“The Bible tells us that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Do you believe that Norm?”

“Romans 3:23 if I’m not mistaken. Do I believe that I’m a sinner? Well, I wake up most mornings surrounded by empty bottles. They’re my witnesses. Every day they line up and say to me, Norm, no matter how much you con yourself or others, you’re an alkie arsehole. But then there’s another voice I hear as well. You know what that says?”

“Could we put that to one side and deal with my question?”

“Listen son. The second part of the verse you started to quote says something like since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they’re put right by his grace as a gift. I wake up and I breathe the air and I see my bottles, and I hear this voice:

Norm, I’ve put you right by my grace as a gift. And then I turn to the bottles and say, Hear that? Now piss off. And they all keep quiet.”

That story is an excerpt from a book by Mike Riddell called *Insatiable Moon*. It was very controversial in Christian circles when it was released.

My point from the story is that Norm, whom many would regard as a hopeless case, understood about God’s forgiveness and grace. He wasn’t cured of his alcoholism. He struggled most days. Yet he understood in the midst of his mess, that the Lord forgave him.

That is a challenging story because many of us would say that we must repent before we are forgiven. And I don't want any of us to think that we can do whatever we want and make no attempt to change because the Lord will forgive us.

But I do want to say that our God is far more forgiving than we give him credit for. He certainly is far more forgiving than we are. And when the Lord forgives he cleans us. None of us is perfect. We all continue to sin. Some of us deliberately. But honest confession opens the door to God's grace, to his forgiveness, mercy and cleansing.

Micah 7:18 - 20

Where is another God like you, who pardons the sins of the survivors among his people? You cannot stay angry with your people, for you love to be merciful. Once again you will have compassion on us. You will tread our sins beneath your feet; you will throw them into the depths of the ocean! You will bless us as you promised Jacob long ago. You will set your love upon us, as you promised our father Abraham!

Let's pray: Dear Heavenly Father, we bow before you and confess that we have too often forgotten that we belong to You. We hide our sin away. Yet your forgiveness is freely available to us through our Lord Jesus Christ. Holy Spirit come and enable us to accept with our Lord offers us, to relish your cleansing and your enabling and to witness to God's goodness always. Amen

Reflection questions

How do you understand God's forgiveness to operate in your life?

How do you understand that same forgiveness to operate in our communal life?

Is confession of sin a regular part of your journey in following Jesus? Why or why not?

How does having a 'clean slate' enable a closer relationship with the Lord and others?