

Broken Commandments and Clean Hearts

Psalms 51:1-12

- 1 Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
- 2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin!
- 3 For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
- 4 Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you may be justified in your words
and blameless in your judgment.
- 5 Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
and in sin did my mother conceive me.
- 6 Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being,
and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.
- 7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
- 8 Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have broken rejoice.
- 9 Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.
- 10 Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.
- 11 Cast me not away from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.
- 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and uphold me with a willing spirit.

How could God judge and reject King Saul so severely, who had seemingly only broken ceremonial laws, and yet in generations come to call King David “a man after God’s own heart”, after he had broken five of the Ten Commandments in the most horrendous manner? It is important to understand the difference in these two men and God’s response to them. It is possible to have “religion” but not have the Gospel of grace by which we are saved and by which we are to be transformed in our daily living. These men illustrate the difference.

Saul and David start off very much alike in their backgrounds and accomplishments:

- By vocation—both tended animals: I Sam. 9:3; 16:11
- By standing—both came from humble backgrounds: I Sam. 9:21; 16:11
- Both called by God, not seeking kingship, and anointed by Samuel: I Sam. 10:1; 16:1,13
- Both effective warriors: I Sam. 14:47-48; I Sam. 18:7
- Both spiritually empowered by God: I Sam. 10:9-11; I Sam. 17:45-49

So what causes God to condemn Saul while praising David? Perhaps we will find a simple answer in their failures.

- Saul broke commands about the ceremonial law two times:

He offered unlawful sacrifice when Samuel didn't show up on time: I Sam. 13:8-14

He kept some animals alive for sacrificing that he was commanded to kill: I Sam. 15:13-21

- David broke five of the Ten Commandments of God's moral law:

He coveted a woman not his wife: II Sam. 11:2

He stole another man's wife: II Sam. 11:4

He committed adultery: II Sam. 11:4

He murdered: II Sam. 11:14-17

He lied about it, tried to cover it up: II Sam. 11:25-27

For Discussion:

- If you were judge and, on the basis of their offenses, were deciding which of these two was most guilty, how and what would you decide?

Based on these behaviors does it seem a mystery that God used David as the paradigm of a godly king for generations to come by calling him, "David, a man after my own heart" ? (see Acts 13:22)

What is the key that unlocks this seemingly unfair treatment between Saul and David? How could a moral lawbreaker of David's magnitude be viewed by God as someone who loved Him with all his heart, while a ceremonial law breaker like Saul was totally rejected as king by God?

There is one more step in the story that holds the key. And it is the key that gives us insight into how we are to understand God, our salvation, and how we are to live our lives. We discover those things when we see how both these men responded when confronted with their sins.

- Saul appealed to his religious behavior: he justified and excused himself by the fact that he was trying to worship God in both instances, but on his terms. His language is "I" did this good thing, and "I" did that good thing. Though having begun by God's grace, he lived as if his efforts were what justified him and pleased God. (I Sam. 13:11-12; 15:15)
- When David was finally confronted by Nathan with his sin the only thing David said was "I have sinned against the Lord" (II Sam. 12:13)

- Later, in Psalm 51, he will elaborate upon the depth of his sin, and describe how it is that only God, in his mercy and grace, could restore him. Psalm 51 is a description of his repentance, confession, description of God's grace, and how it transformed him.

Tim Keller has pointed out, particularly in his exposition of the parable of the Prodigal Son, that instead of just two responses to God (reject God's truth or follow Him) there is a third response, the religious one, that often becomes the default mode for people who say they are Christians. People can embrace irreligion, religion, or something as radical as the Gospel. Religion is to embrace God's way so as to appear to understand the Gospel, but then live as if their Christian life is based on their works and embrace a form of moralism. Their response to sin demonstrates they don't understand the Gospel of God's grace.

As David's language shows, he is aware he has nothing in him to merit God's grace. At the same time he praises a God whose qualities of mercy, love, forgiveness, and restoration are all evidences that he knows what God desires: a broken heart. And he is not mired in shame or self-pity when he declares that God has restored to him the joy of his salvation, evidence that he knows it is God's work and not his.

Application Points:

1. God is holy and desires obedience more than our acts of religious sacrifice, which represent our desire to atone for our own sin.
2. God responds to proper repentance by offering forgiveness and restoration.
3. David's language and pattern of repentance, confession, and praise help us to know if our penitential language reflects that we understand the basis of our relationship with God.
4. I Kings 14:8 describes David this way after he had sinned: "... David, who kept my commandments and followed me with all his heart, doing only that which was right in my eyes". God saw David as righteous in spite of his sin. He sees us that way because He sees us through the sacrifice of His Son on the cross who paid all our debts and gave us His righteousness. The washing and restoration David experiences anticipates the cleansing blood that Jesus, our Passover lamb, shed to make us clean.
5. Along with the joy of our salvation our desire should be like David's who said I desire to "teach transgressors your ways" so "sinners will return to you".
6. We don't have a religion, we have a relationship with a God by grace, who looks, not on our outward appearance but on our hearts and desires, that we would be connected to His heart.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why are our sins against others first and foremost sins against God? (v.4)
2. What are some of the things we are to ask for when we repent? (vv. 1-12)

3. How would you describe “the joy of your salvation”? (v.12)

4. What would you tell others about God’s ways that would be “good news”?