

## Walking with Jesus: Repentance - Psalm 51 (30<sup>th</sup> Aug 2020)

**PRAY.** Holy Spirit, it is your ministry among us to convict us of sin. I pray you would do that for us this morning, and so lead us to repentance and faith in our Saviour Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

In April, the home secretary Priti Patel was asked about the government's failure to provide enough PPE for NHS workers, and this is how she responded - see if you can spot the problem:

"I'm sorry **if** people feel there have been failings **but** people need to understand we are in an unprecedented situation..."

Just in case you want to give her the benefit of the doubt, which by the way if you're a Christian, you should - maybe she just didn't express herself as she wanted to, the questioner gives her another opportunity:

"just to be clear, you are apologising for the lack of PPE that has resulted in infections and deaths of NHS workers?"

She replies, "I've been very clear in what I've said, and I'm sorry **if** people feel that way..."

Now I'm not trying to get at the home secretary particularly. Sadly, you get the same thing from all politicians whichever party they belong to.

But I'm sure you see the problem with her response?

This is what has become known as the ‘**non-apology apology**’. It *looks* a bit like an apology - it even contains the words “I’m sorry” - but it’s not *actually* an apology.

**First** of all it shifts responsibility and blame on to other people - “I’m sorry *if people feel that way...*” - in other words the problem is not what I’ve done, but your feelings.

And **secondly** it make excuses, “I’m sorry... *but...*”. In other words, this isn’t really my fault, I can’t be held responsible.

Like I say, I’m not getting at the home secretary, she just happened to be the example I chose to use - and there are thousands of them.

And the problem hasn’t been missed by people on social media. Here are a few of my favourite responses:

- y’know if it works for the home secretary it might work with the treasury?

Or this one:

Or this one might be my favourite.

We hear these kinds of non-apology apologies all the time don’t we? And it is especially frustrating from the mouths of politicians! You think to yourself: “I wish they would just own up! Admit their failings. Stop making excuses. Say sorry properly, and start doing something about it.”

But here’s the thing. This non-apology apology doesn’t just affect politicians.

It's a human problem. And my guess is that you do it, too - at least sometimes. I know I do.

When I think back over the past few weeks especially at home with my family, there are times that in my pride, in not wanting to admit I'm at fault, I haven't even managed to muster a non-apology let alone a proper one! And when I have it's looked a lot more like Priti Patel's version than David's.

Maybe it's just me, but my guess is that it's probably true for you too.

We find it hard to repent, don't we? Our pride, our fragile self-righteousness makes it hard for us to humble ourselves, to admit before God and other people we messed up, and say sorry.

And we're not the only ones. Even the great King David in the OT found it hard.

If you're unfamiliar with the background to this Psalm, it's given to us in the superscription there at the top - it's normally in italics and by the way those words are just as much Scripture as the rest of the Psalm - and here it gives us the backstory.

And what we find out is that David has sinned. Badly.

He had taken another man's wife (who's husband was away with the army where David should have been). He got her pregnant. Then he

arranged her husband's death. And for a year acted as though he'd done nothing wrong.

And then Nathan confronted him.

And like the prodigal son, Psalm 51 is David coming back to God in repentance. And he writes down the words of his repentance for our benefit. To give us words, categories that make us attentive to what repentance really looks like in the life of a Christian.

And I hope you know that you do need to Repent (and so do I) - even if you've been a Christian for many years.

In Mark's gospel which you've been looking at as a church, the first word out of Jesus' mouth is "repent" (Mark 1:14).

Repentance and faith in Jesus is the starting point of the Christian life. If you're not a Christian and you're wondering how you get going as a Christian that's how! Turning **from** sin **to** Jesus in repentance and faith.

But it's not merely the start.

When the great Reformer, Martin Luther, nailed his 95 Theses to the door of Wittenburg church to spark the Reformation, his first Thesis, number 1 on the list was this:

"When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent', he willed the *entire life* of believers to be one of repentance."

As I said Repentance is not just turning *away* from sin, but turning *towards* Jesus, and so the whole Christian life is to be marked by repentance because we need to keep doing that!

Repentance is not just a one-time, starting-out experience, but the daily substance of walking with Jesus. Kneeling in repentance is to be our continual posture before God.

In other words, repentance is not just the gateway but the pathway, not just the way in but the way on!

I have met some people, who claimed to be Christians, that seemed to think that Jesus died for them in such a way that they had been propelled beyond repentance so that they didn't need to confess their sins to God or other people anymore.

If that's you, you are not actually trusting Jesus as your Saviour - you're *using* Jesus as an excuse not to face your sin. That is just hypocrisy. And Jesus will not play along with that.

Proud, face-saving people and churches that self-righteously refuse to repent are **repulsive** to God. God's blessing only flows to those who are willing to get on their knees in humble confession of sin.

I love how Ray Ortlund puts it: "the true gospel does not create *superior* people, but people who trust Jesus enough to face themselves - honestly - and own up."

So if you want to be a useful, growing Christian; if we want to be a useful, growing church - first we need to be repentant people; a repentant church.

So how does Psalm 51 lead us towards that? 3 things:

## **1. Repent! - Rest on God's Character (v1-2)**

One of the reasons I suspect we live in a society where the non-apology apology is a regular reality is because we also live in a culture, and social media is a big part of this, that is high on moral outrage but low on forgiveness.

If a government official were to stand up and own up, rather than do what they normally do and shift the blame and avoid taking responsibility, I suspect the reaction might actually end up being worse. There's only one headline worse than "politician dodges responsibility again" and that's "politician admits they are responsible!"

We live in a culture that loves to trawl back through people's facebook and find something stupid they said in 2005, cancel people at the click of a mouse and hang them out to dry - where there is not even the possibility of forgiveness.

In that kind of culture you will rarely find genuine repentance. It's far too dangerous.

The two almost always dwell together - a culture of repentance flourishes only where a culture of forgiveness is manifestly present.

But often we take what is true of our society and apply it to Jesus. We think to ourselves - if he finds out what I've done now... If he finds out I've done it *again*... surely this is the end of the road... no more second chances.

But do you notice, that's not what David does.

Now don't forget what he's done. He has blown it. Big time.

And sometimes people are tempted to compare themselves with David and think "well I'm not *that* bad" - and so see themselves as somehow *above* repentance because they've never committed adultery with a married woman, got her pregnant and arranged the death of her husband.

But the point of understanding just how much David has blown it, is not to put ourselves above repentance.

No, the point is that if David can come to God like *this* when he's done *that* - you can come to God, in the same way, whatever it is you've done, however big or small you've blown it this week.

You see the gospel does not *remove* the need for repentance; it provides for it.

And so David comes to God and he admits 3 things - (1) his transgressions, (2) his iniquity and (3) his sin - each describes a different

dimension of sin - law-breaking, waywardness from God, missing the mark.

And he appeals to God for 3 things - (1) to show him mercy, not to deal with him as he deserves. (2) To blot out his transgressions, like editing out a scene from a film. (3) To wash away all his iniquity, to hose down the filth, to cleanse him.

When you stop and think about it, that's an outrageous request isn't it? Where does David find the audacity to ask for that given what he's done?!

His confidence is in the character of God.

“have mercy on me, O God, **according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion** blot out my transgressions...” (v1)

Repentance rests on God's character - it rests, it depends on his unfailing love, his great compassion, his abundant mercy. That is his character, proven to us in the person of Jesus.

And Because God is *that kind* of God you can repent - you can rest, safely, in his compassionate embrace to sinners, and admit your sin.

Again, the gospel does not *remove* the need for repentance; it provides for it.

But we go one step further than David - we don't just rest on God's mercy and compassion, but also on his *justice*.

The apostle John puts it this way,

“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is **faithful** and **just** and **will** forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:8-9).

Isn't that a remarkable statement?

He **will** forgive. It would be **unjust** of God to ever deny you forgiveness if you come to him, because Jesus has paid for all your sin on the cross!

And God is not unjust. No one has ever come to God, confessing their sins in humility, and been refused. And no one ever will.

You see, again, the gospel does not *remove* the need for repentance; it provides for it.

You CAN confess your sins because JESUS DIED FOR THOSE SINS!

And so whoever you are, whatever guilt you've lugged around from this past week, you can come to Jesus. Not for **comeuppance** - (Jesus has taken the punishment you deserve by dying on the cross in your place!) - but for **forgiveness**.

Repent! Rest on the Character of God.

And secondly,

## **2. Repent! - Render no Excuses (v3-9)**

In these verses David describes his sin like a looming, accusing spectre - always in his rear view mirror, never giving him a moment's peace. And I guess we all know something what that's like - being haunted by the guilt of our selfish choices or foolish decisions.

And we try to run away (but how can you run from yourself?), we try to hide from God, we try to distract ourselves. We let time pass to dull the ache, thinking God might forget if we just don't bring it up.

And the truth is it sort of half works doesn't it? We do forget - some things at least.

It's like we stuff our guilt in a rucksack and we just get used to carrying it. It's not that it goes away, we just get used to the weight - and we get so used to it we barely notice it anymore except for the odd occasions where it rears its ugly head again.

David knows what it's like to do that.

And he's here to tell us that freedom from that, release, peace - only comes through repentance.

Do you see what David says in v7-8? The crushed and groaning bones are filled with joy and gladness. That's what repentance opens the door to.

But it must be real repentance. Not the non-apology version. The real thing. And genuine repentance renders no excuses.

Do you see the language David uses in v4?

He says “against you, you only, have I sinned, and done what is EVIL in your sight.” (v4)

David here isn't denying his sin against Bathsheba, Uriah or anyone else, but acknowledging that sin is fundamentally, and ultimately, against God.

And what he did was *evil* in God's sight.

Have you ever used those words with God when you confess your sins?

Of course we would rather say “I just slipped up”, “I just had a bad day”, “I was just stressed”, “it was out of character”, “we're all human aren't we?”, “but you must understand it was an unprecedented situation.”

They are all just other versions of the non-apology.

I want to suggest that genuine repentance is when we stop sugar-coating our sins, and we start using words like 'evil', facing up to what it really is, owning what we've done.

That's what's going on in v5, he's not blaming his mum for his sin, he is acknowledging that this is actually in keeping with the whole pattern of

his life. From birth he has had this sinful nature that has plagued his entire existence.

If you want to know freedom from the guilt of your sin - repent, and stop making excuses. There's no need - you can trust God's character, he will excuse you, you do not have to do it yourself.

The extent to which you're able to do this is actually a good litmus test of what you're actually trusting in.

Whatever you say you're trusting in, if your actual hope is to live a good enough life for God to bless you, one of the symptoms of that is that every instance of sin and repentance is traumatic, unnatural, and actually threatening. Only under great duress does a self-righteous person admit they have sinned - because their hope is their moral goodness.

But in the gospel the knowledge of our acceptance in Christ makes it easier to admit we are deeply flawed people. Why? Because we know we won't be cast off if we confess the true depths of our sinfulness.

Our hope is in Christ's righteousness, not our own - so if we are trusting in Jesus it is not nearly as traumatic to admit our failings without excuse. And actually if you are truly trusting Jesus repentance will become more and more natural to you.

If you're growing as a Christian you will repent *more*, not less. Without excuse.

Repent - rest on God's character, and render no excuses. And thirdly and finally,

### **3. Repent! - it Results in Restoration (v7-19)**

I recently came across this Japanese art form called *Kintsugi*. Basically you find a beautiful bowl or plate, and you break it.

But then the artist carefully puts it back together again using a gold ceramic paint,

and the end result is a beautifully restored bowl - even more beautiful than it was to start with.

And Repentance is a bit like that.

You see, according to v17, Repentance will always involve brokenness.

David says, "You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise." (v16-17)

When David says that, he isn't rejecting the sacrificial system, but showing us that even the best gifts are offensive to God if he does not first have your broken heart.

What God wants from you, first and foremost, is not your sacrifices, not your offerings of money or whatever, not even your service - but your broken heart.

Do you get that?

You can't make up for a lack of brokenness in your heart and repentance in your life by working really hard to serve Jesus! He wants your heart not your performance. Only once he has your broken heart will he accept your service.

And it's not that we bring our brokenness in exchange for forgiveness, as if we're trying to *earn* our forgiveness through feeling sorry, making ourselves so miserable and regretful that we *deserve* to be forgiven. That's not it.

Rather, the broken and contrite heart laments sin's offensiveness, not just the consequences of sin but the act itself, and acknowledges that we have *nothing* to offer God except our sin.

If you come to God like that, in brokenness and contrition, in humility and lowliness, he will not despise you.

It is painful, humiliating even - to experience that breaking of our hearts because of sin, to come before God and others and confess our sins *without excuse*. It can be sore spending time down on our knees.

But just like *kintsugi*, it results in restoration, in fact something even more beautiful than how it began.

Now I should add that restoration doesn't always mean everything will go back to how it was. Repentance doesn't mean there won't be consequences - there were for David.

And especially if you have sinned in a serious way that involved an abuse of power or position, restoration doesn't mean being put back in that same position again. In fact to repent properly is to accept the consequences of our actions without appeal.

But there is the restoration of ourselves, our humanity, our assurance of Christ's love for us.

That's what's going on in in v10 when David prays for more than just cleansing, but for a new heart, a renewed, restored spirit, a spirit of joyful, willing obedience.

And in Christ that is yours! In Christ, by the Spirit, you have been given a pure heart. The joyful, willing, Holy Spirit of Jesus lives in you! And you are assured that you will never be cast off.

And only now are we ready to be useful in the Lord's hands, v13. "**Then** I will teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to you."

You see, only repentant people can be used by God.

If you want to be useful in the Lord's service, if you want to be a church used by God to turn sinners back to him, we must embrace repentance as a way of life. There is no other way.

But God promises that in this way, he will build his church.

And even with David, though his sin causes a great deal of collateral damage, God is gracious in bringing restoration. Solomon, who is David's second son by Bathsheba, becomes King, and in his lifetime he builds a wall around Jerusalem (Ps 51:18; 2 Kings 3:1).

Because God brings beauty out of brokenness, restoration out of repentance.

So let's embrace repentance as a way of life - and let's make sure we do it properly. Rest on the character of God. Render no excuses.

Because for all our sin, which is many, his grace abounds even more. And Repentance results in Restoration.

## **PRAY.**

"Lord God,  
we have sinned against you;  
we have done evil in your sight.

We are sorry and repent.

Have mercy on us according to your unfailing love and compassion.

Wash away our wrongdoing and cleanse us from our sin.

Renew a right spirit within us

and restore us to the joy of your salvation,

through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen."