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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

**“HAVE MERCY”**

**Psalm 51; Second Samuel 11-12**

{Lk 18:11, para.} A man prays: **“God, I thank you that I am not like other people – abortionists, gang-bangers, sexual deviants – or even like those socialists in D.C. who are running our country into the ground.”**

{Lk 18:11, para.} Or maybe he says: **“God, I thank you that I am not like other people – one-percenters, nationalists, racists – or even like those right-wing extremists who are taking over our country.”**

{Lk 18:13-14} Meanwhile a radical LGBTQ activist or a militant militia group leader prays: **“O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.”** **“I tell you, *this* sinner,”** the one who seeks mercy, is **“justified before God.”** Yet the one who is certain of his own decency is not **“justified.”**

‡ Each of us is one of the characters in this parable. Are we **“confident of [our] own righteousness”** or do we feel the gravity of our sin?

‡ Sometimes I have been the Pharisee, and at other times the Tax Collector. What about you?

□ Please turn with me to Psalm 52.

■ In verses 1-2, King David writes:

<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.**

His very first words are **“Have mercy.”** Be *gracious*. Show *leniency*. Act with *forbearance*.

📖 In this context, mercy is kindness or forgiveness extended to an offender or enemy.

People who argue about whether so-and-so deserves mercy are missing the point. Mercy is, by definition, *unearned*. It depends on the goodness of the giver, not the recipient.

{Ps 103:10} **“Have mercy,”** David pleads. **“[Do] not treat [me] as [I] deserve or repay [me] according to”** my wickedness. Go easy on me. Do not give me what I have got coming.

**“Have mercy on me.”** David’s first words reveal that he is not hoping for a positive response on the grounds of correct religious ritual, right words, virtuous deeds, or anything else he has to offer. He is relying solely on the goodness of the Living God.

David is in desperate need of mercy. As we shall see, his transgressions are terrible.

Yet he has good reason to hope. YHWH is extravagantly, tenaciously, incalculably good to us, for which we should give thanks.

{Ro 2:4} Without the Lord’s goodness we would not even dare try to repent. So the apostle Paul warns, **“do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?”**

■ God’s kindness accomplishes its purpose in verses 3-4:

<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.**

📖 Psalm 51 has a superscription, an introduction written above the first verse.

■ What does it say? **“For the director of music. A psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.”**

This ugly episode is recorded in Second Samuel, chapters 11 and 12. It is evening, but King David cannot sleep. He “[gets] **up from his bed**” and takes a stroll on the roof of the palace.

He sees Bathsheba, lusts after her, and has her brought to him. He has several wives and Bathsheba is married to Uriah the Hittite, but he takes her anyway.

Is the encounter fully consensual? Is it a charming seduction? An intimidating demand? An out-and-out assault? We are not told.

We do know that David is a mighty king. Bathsheba, on the other hand, is a woman, the wife of a Gentile who serves in David’s army. The power differential between the two is considerable.

Bathsheba gets pregnant. In a devious effort to conceal his sin, David orders Uriah home from the front and urges him to sleep with his wife.

Surely, Uriah *desires* her. Still, he refuses: ‘My Lord, your army is **“staying in tents.”** The men I serve

with **“are camped in the open country. How could I go to my house to eat and drink and make love to my wife?”** He bunks at the palace with the servants.

So David invites Uriah to a banquet and gets him drunk. But instead of going home to Bathsheba, Uriah crashes on a mat in the palace.

Bathsheba’s pregnancy will soon begin to show. If Uriah denies paternity, all the evidence and every honest witness will corroborate his testimony. The king will be known as an adulterer.

When Uriah returns to the front, David has him deliver a sealed letter to his general, Joab: **“Put Uriah out in front where the fighting is fiercest. Then withdraw from him so he will be struck down and die.”**

Joab follows orders, and Uriah is killed. In the process some other Israelite soldiers are also struck down.

David assumes he has escaped justice. He has not.

Nathan maneuvers him into condemning a ruthless criminal, then announces, **“You are [that] man!”** He tells David that he has **“shown utter contempt for the LORD,”** and David is powerfully convicted.

■ This is reflected in the words of Psalm 51:4:

**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.**

“**Against you, you *only***” only *sounds* ridiculous. It is fundamentally true.

➔ First, though sin is always social, the language of sin has meaning only in reference to the Father, Son, and Holy Sin.

God’s being is holy. God’s actions and relationships are righteous. It is who God is, what God does, and what God teaches that reveals covetousness, adultery, deception, and murder as sin.

➔ {Ge 1:27} Second, God has “**created human beings in his own image.**” This phrase applies not only to Adam and Eve but to our entire species. We are all, without exception, icons of the Living God.

Each and every human individual is a bearer of the divine image. It follows that whenever we sin against a person, we sin against God.

○ David pays a high price for it: his infant son soon dies; henceforth, his dynasty will be wracked by betrayal and palace intrigue; and Israel will be troubled by foreign enemies for as long as his descendants reign.

{Ro 6:23} As grim as all this is, God is amazingly merciful, “**For the wages of sin is death.**” If ever anyone has earned a horrible demise, David is it.

★ Nevertheless, “**the LORD [erases his] sin.** [He does not] **die**” as a result of his offenses.

Why? When Nathan confronts David he is horrified by his own actions. He is cut to the heart.

■ Verses 5-6:

<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.**

★ David is not making a statement about biological transmission of sin from parent to child. He is admitting that these deeds are an outward fruit of his inward nature.

These sins are for him uncharacteristically brazen; yet in their substance they are consistent with who he is. He is a sinner, and he always has been.

David’s parents are not to blame for this. Bathsheba is not to blame. Uriah is not to blame.

Much less is Holy God to blame! Even while David was in the womb, the Creator “**taught [him] wisdom**” (that is, moral and ethical wisdom). From his conception the LORD enlightened and equipped him for goodness.

★ Hence, when David cries out for mercy, he is not begging merely to be absolved of these specific offenses. He is pleading to be changed from the inside out.

■ Verses 7 and 10:

<sup>7</sup> **Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be  
clean;  
wash me, and I will be whiter than  
snow.**

<sup>10</sup> **Create in me a pure heart, O God,  
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.**

📖 This is repentance in a nutshell: grief and revulsion, not for being caught and punished, but for our sin itself. Grief and revulsion profound enough to inspire confession and a significant and constructive change in our conduct.

■ The goal in repentance is to receive forgiveness, to be transformed, and above all to be reconciled to God whose mercy we seek. Verse 11:

**Do not cast me away from your presence  
or take your Holy Spirit from me.**

Of all that David could lose – his throne, his family, his life – fellowship with YHWH would be the worst injury.

★ The most catastrophic after-effect of sin is separation from God's good presence. Likewise, the most potent deterrent against sinning is to press deeply into God's good presence.

■ This is to our benefit, God's glory, and our neighbors' good. As we read in verses 13-15:

<sup>13</sup> **Then I will teach transgressors your ways,  
and sinners will turn back to you.**

<sup>14</sup> **Deliver me from bloodguilt ... my Savior,  
and my tongue will sing of your  
righteousness.**

<sup>15</sup> **Open my lips, Lord,  
and my mouth will declare your praise.**

O Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, you are good. **“Be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.”** In your kindness justify me, for your Name's sake.

Psalm 51 is the word of the Lord.