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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“HAVE MERCY”

Psalm 51; II Samuel 11-12

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

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

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

‣ Who are we in this parable? Are we **“confident of [our] own righteousness”** or do we feel the gravity of our sin?

‣ Sometimes I am the Pharisee, and at other times I am the Tax Collector. What about you?

- Please turn to Psalm 51:1-2. King David writes:

¹ **Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.**

² **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*.

📖 Mercy is kindness or forgiveness extended to an offender or enemy who does not deserve it.

When we debate whether so-and-so merits mercy, we are missing the point. Mercy is, by definition, *unearned*. It depends on the goodness of the giver, not the worthiness of the recipient.

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

David is not hoping for approval on the grounds of correct ritual, the right words, or virtuous deeds. He is relying solely on the goodness of the Living God.

David is desperate. His transgressions are truly horrific. Yet he has good reason to hope. YHWH is extravagantly, tenaciously, incalculably gracious.

{Ro 2:4} Without the Lord’s goodness we would not even be able to repent. So, the apostle Paul cautions: **“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?”**

- His kindness accomplishes its purpose in vv. 3-4:

³ **For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.**

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.**

📖 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 {p 318}. 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 a charming seduction? An intimidating demand? A brazen assault? We are not told.

What we do know is that David is a mighty monarch; In contrast, Bathsheba is a lowly woman, the wife of a foreigner serving under David’s command. Bathsheba really is not in a position to refuse him.

She 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.

{11:11} His subject refuses: ‘My Lord, your army is **“staying in tents.”** The men in my unit **“are camped in the open country. How could I go to my house to eat and drink and make love to my life?”** He bunks at the palace with the servants.

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

(It is possible that he is suspicious, and means to hold his sovereign’s feet to the fire. If so, he is fatally underestimating David’s capacity for ruthlessness.)

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.

{11:14-15} 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 his orders.

Uriah is killed. In the melee, other loyal soldiers of Israel are also slaughtered alongside him.

{12:7, 10} David assumes he has gotten away with it, but he is mistaken. The prophet Nathan maneuvers the king into condemning a heartless sinner, then announces: **“You are [that] man!”** Nathan accuses him of **“[showing] utter contempt for the LORD.”**

■ He is cut to the quick. In Ps 51:4 he cries out:
**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 only” is hyperbolic. Hasn’t he also sinned against Bathsheba, Uriah, the other

soldiers, and their families? Of course, he has! David is exaggerating to make the point that though he has sinned against many people, his worst offenses are against YHWH.

For one thing, God sets the standard for holiness. He is holy in his being. His actions and relationships are perfectly righteous. It is who God is, what God does, and what God teaches that expose lust, covetousness, adultery, lies, and murder as evil.

{Ge 1:27} Not only so, God has made us “**in his own image.**” Each human being is, without exception, an icon of the Creator. It follows that every time we sin against any person we also sin against the One whose likeness they bear.

David’s immorality and injustice against Bathsheba, Uriah, the other soldiers, and their families are despicable. His sins against God are worse.

The king’s injustice and immorality carry a high price for everyone: Uriah and several others lose their lives, Bathsheba is widowed, David’s character is significantly eroded, and his infant son dies soon after birth. Henceforth, the Davidic dynasty will be wracked by betrayal and palace intrigue, and Israel will be perpetually troubled by external enemies.

{Ro 6:23} As grim as these consequences are, God is amazingly merciful, “**For the wages of sin is death.**” David has earned damnation!

★ Nevertheless, the LORD erases his guilt. He does not die as a result of his offenses.

Why? When Nathan confronts David, he is sickened by his own actions. He honestly repents.

■ Psalm 51:5:

**Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother
conceived me.**

David is not making an academic statement about the genetic transmission of sin. He is admitting that his deeds are the outward fruit of his inward nature.

These sins are, for him, uncharacteristically audacious; 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 his depravity. Bathsheba is not to blame. Uriah is not to blame.

★ 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:

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

**¹⁰ 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. Grieve and revulsion profound enough to inspire confession and real, constructive change in our conduct.

■ The goal of repentance is forgiveness, transformation, and above all reconciliation to God. Verse 11:

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

★ The most catastrophic result of sin is alienation from the Triune God. Likewise, the best deterrent against sin is to draw near to him in prayer, worship, Scripture, fellowship, and acts of obedient love.

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

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

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

¹⁵ **Open my lips, Lord,
and my mouth with 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.