

Forgiven and Guilt Free

Psalm 32 & 51

January 28, 2009

(Sermon notes are a transcript from the sermon with only minor editing, retaining the conversational style.)

Her name was Katherine Ann Powers and a 1960's student who was described as being armed & very dangerous. Katherine had driven the car in the deadly 1970 bank robbery in Boston. One of her accomplices had killed a policeman. A hero cop and a father of nine children.

For twenty-three years, Katherine Powers had hid her past. Changing her name. Changing cities whenever she felt threaten. Deliberately never driving past the speed limit. Losing contact with her parents and six brothers and sisters.

Then at the age of 44, after 23 years of running, she was consumed by guilt and desperately tired. After months of therapy she had come to understand that she had suffered from chronic depression.

She took her first steps towards reconciling her past and her present when she met therapist Linda Carol, in May of 1992. She wept at a class Carol gave at a local hospital.

In private sessions Carol described her symptoms as "*Waves and waves of almost unbearable sadness.*" Each one stronger than the one before.

In a prepared statement she explained, she was ready to face whatever consequences that the legal system would oppose on her.

Carol, who spoke to the newspaper with the permission of Katherine:

When a period of depression struck, Katherine Powers tried to fight back with intense work and exercise and even prayer. But nothing seemed to help. After many sessions Carol said Power realized her emotional difficulties would never end until she came clean and gave herself up as a fugitive.

For twenty-three years she fooled the FBI and every law officer in America. She moved from place to place and never got caught. But she couldn't escape the sense of guilt and shame that filled her own heart. So one day knowing that she'll have to spend time in prison she came forward and said, *I did it. I am the one.*

And now she confesses to the fact she is learning to live with openness and truth and no longer experiencing life through a distorted lense.

She agrees that even prison is better than the internal prison that she has been living in for the past two and half decades.

It took twenty-three years for Katherine Powers to say the three hardest words that any of us say, *I was wrong.*

Sin is the spiritual cancer that we don't like to believe that we have. We are so quick to protect our own innocents. We'll blame the whole world before we blame ourselves.

Ask little Johnny at the age of four who took the cookies from the cookie jar and he'll be quick to blame his sister.

Ask any high school student why they are in trouble, they will be quick to say it's not their fault.

Speak to some prisoner in prison. They tell him that he is there because of his sinful character and he will not listen to you. Tell him instead he is there because of problems of environment and his growing up in a dysfunctional home, he will very cheerfully accept your words.

None of us likes to admit our faults, our inadequacies, and our sins.

Some years ago there was a terrible railroad accident in New York and fifty people were killed. One of those who died was the railroad engineer who was trapped in the cab of his engine. His dying words, the last words that he uttered, as he held out a small yellow slip of paper. His dying words on the paper were, *Take this and it will show that someone gave me the wrong orders.*

That is the cry of everyone of us. In the face of the wrecks and catastrophes, when we are pinned down by our blunders and mistakes, and our unkindnesses, we all want to be able to say, someone else gave us orders.

We will do whatever we can to conceal our sins. We will run. We will hide. We will not be fully honest. Just partial confession just enough to ease our conscience or take the pressure off.

Our minds are quick to develop an easy view of God. We don't like to use words like sin. Or speak of God's wrath. Or God's judgement.

I read a prayer. It's a prayer that perhaps many people will use today in our politically correct society. The prayer goes like this:

Benevolent and easy going Father. We have occasionally made errors in our judgment. We had been badly influence by our heredity and environment. But we have done the best we can under difficult circumstances. We have certainly lived up to the average of decency. We are normal. Deal lightly with our lapses. Be your own sweet self in regard to our imperfections. Be limitlessly tolerant as we expect you to be. Grant us to live harmless lives, full of self- respect. Amen.

We blame others. We fault others for our circumstances. We try to be indifferent to the world or we make a God who is neither holy or just. Endlessly forgiving.

All of this to avoid saying those three most difficult words. *I am wrong.*

Which brings me to Psalm 32 & 51. This is one of the great penitential Psalms of the Scriptures.

You remember the story. Bathsheba was bathing one night on her roof. Whether she does this deliberately to flaunt her beauty before the king or whether she is all together innocent, we do not know. But in any case, his heart goes lustfully after her.

He sends for her. Summons for her. Seduces her. Sleeps with her. She becomes pregnant.

It could not have been her husband. You see her husband, Uriah, was off fighting in a war, where David should have been. David was about to be caught with this situation, unless of course he could correct it.

So he brought Uriah home on special leave. He told Uriah here is a nice bottle of wine. Spend some time with your wife. When the pregnancy became evident it will be believed that it will be the child of Uriah and Bathsheba.

You see, Uriah was a very noble sort. He would not take to himself the pleasures or comforts which his comrades in the arms did not have.

So as much as they could not be with their wives, Uriah slept outside along with the servants at the entrance of the palace.

That took away David's excuse.

David called Uriah the second time. This time he served a lot of wine to Uriah. To loosen him up. To get him in the mood.

But again, Uriah refused to sleep with his wife.

So David writes a note and he was so bold, he gives the note to Uriah to give to Joab, Uriah's commander.

He told Joab to send Uriah to the hottest spot in the battle, the point person.

When the battle begins to get hot, have the other men draw back and leave him there all alone. This time the plan worked. Uriah was killed. David thought he was home free.

That is always what happens with sin. It starts out by a little glance over the balcony one night and then has a way of spreading it's ugly tentacles to other areas.

Unconfessed sin brings a tremendous amount of sin and guilt to a person's soul.

David talks about that in Psalm 32, the sin that he was carrying and the damaging effects that it had on him before he confessed it.

David says in verse 3, *When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of the summer.*

David was saying that his unconfessed sin was taking all the physical and spiritual energy out of his body just like a hot July humid day in Mississippi.

Spurgeon said it well, *Better a world on the shoulder like Atlas, than God's hand on the heart like David.*

David was sick with his own sin, but he couldn't, on his own, bring himself to say those three hardest words.

Perhaps this is a good time for us to be completely honest with ourselves. Perhaps for the first time to be honest in a way we have never been honest before.

We are all intelligent enough to understand ourselves. We know the tragedy of much of our behavior. We know the unseemliness of our thoughts. We know the hardness of our words. We know our reluctance to serve and prefer to have others serve us.

It is important than as we approach this week to admit that we know how to live, but we don't live that way. We must get rid of our great illusions and say with St. Augustine, who at first, was a terrible sinner and later a mighty saint.

Præma intelligentia, uptane nice pap tor. Latin: The beginning of intelligence is to know yourself to be a sinner.

To say those three hard words. *I am wrong.*

You see we cannot be healed of our sins until we admit that we are sick.

There was a man who was a coal miner who lived in the hills of eastern Kentucky. All the family members referred to him as Grampa Joe.

By all accounts he lived hard, worked hard, and drank hard most of his life. When he was sober, he was the loving and beloved patriarch of the clan. He told wonderful stories and the grandkids love to sit on his lap.

But when Grampa Joe was drinking, he would disappear for weeks at a time, choosing whiskey and sex over wife and family.

Later in his life, Grampa Joe contacted liver disease from alcohol and black-lung disease from the coal mines. He was hospitalized, waiting for death to come.

One of his grand-daughters who was 10 years old at the time and a brand new Christian, went to visit her beloved Grampa Joe. She cared about him and wanted him to know that God loved him. She wanted him to have a chance to respond to the forgiveness available in Christ. So she sat by his bed and gently outlined the message of the gospel to Grampa Joe.

After listening politely to her presentation, Grampa Joe looked up and said, *I don't believe I've ever sinned.*

The daughter was shocked, because the whole family knew about his lifestyle. She said, "*But Grampa, we've all done bad things. Can't you think of just one thing you've done that was wrong?*"

He pretended to think for a minute, and then said, *I take it back, I take it back. I have sinned once. I voted Republican one time.*

Pete Rose, baseball's all time hit leader, finally ended a 14 year streak of denying he bet on the game of baseball, admitting he wagered while managing the Cincinnati Reds.

In his book, My Prison Without Bars, Rose says he felt banishment was too severe a sentence. *Right or wrong, the punishment didn't fit the crime - so I denied the crime.*

When Sports Illustrated asked Rose why he wagered, he replied, *I didn't think I'd get caught.*

During one three week period, Rose wrote 11 checks for \$8,000 to a bookie in New York City. But he never felt he had a problem.

I knew that I'd broken the letter of the law. But I didn't think I'd broken the spirit of the law, which was designed to prevent corruption., During the times I gambled as a manager, I never took an unfair advantage. I never bet more or less based on injuries or inside information. I never allowed my wagers to influence my baseball decisions. So in my mind, I wasn't corrupt.

You can't help people who deny the truth about themselves.

Here's a woman who was asked to examine herself, she comes to the conclusion that after examining herself she doesn't do anything that everyone else is doing.; After all her conduct is no different than theirs.

A ministry of self approval is an illegitimate priesthood. Because you see it blurs the line of good and evil, excusing one's conduct by the conduct of others until there are no more lines. Nothing that distinguish

between the two.

So David, for over a year, felt that no one knew of his situation with Bathsheba. He forgot that God knew. No matter how clever you think you are, and you might be so smart that you are the only person in the world that can fool all the people all the time, but God will still know.

Nathan comes on a the scene. Nathan, the prophet of God. He comes into the king's court. One word from David and Nathan could lose his head.

Nathan tells a story. Sir, there is a man who had many many flocks. Near him lived a herdsman, a poor man who had but one lamb that he loved very much.

This man who had so many flocks entertain a guest one night, but instead of killing one from the many flocks that he had, instead of killing one that line the hills that were his, he goes over and takes the one lamb from that poor herdsman. That one lamb that he loved very much. He takes it and kills it and offers it to his guest. What do you think about that sir?

David said, *Bring him to me, he shall surely die.*

David, like us you see, is quick to see sin in the others than he is his own.

Nathan, his eyes alight with the fire from the spirit of God moving in him. Standing tall from the rough courage that comes from living in rough hills. With a voice that rumbled down valleys and made wild beast coward.

Looks at David. He points out that the one with the many flocks is David himself. A whole harem in his palace. He could have picked any woman that suited his pleasure.

Here, Uriah with just one lamb, Bathsheba, that he loved very much.

David takes this one, instead of all those available to him.

You can't catch the drift of it in English. What David heard from the lips of Nathan were these words: *AGTOO HIESH! Thou art the man!*

For the first time, David's heart was cut wide open for him to see the ugliness and the hideousness of his sin.

It's not a pretty sight to see your heart cut open and there lies your sins for all to see. David, with all of his defenses down, finally had to say those three hard words, *I am wrong.*

He is finally completely honest with himself, living in this self-deception for a year.

He says in verse 5, *Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said I will confess my transgressions to the Lord and you forgave the guilt of my sins.*

David had to say he was wrong before he could be healed.

There had to be confession before there could be cleansing.

I want you to notice that David uses three separate words to describe the full dimensions of his evil. Trinity of Evil.

1. *I acknowledge my sin.* The word sin is to indicate that he was missing the mark. Nothing in his life was on target. He was continually going astray.

2. *Did not cover up my iniquity.* Which bears the idea of criminality in that he didn't care at all about God's will.

3. To complete the terrible trinity David says, *I will confess my transgressions.* He uses the word transgressions to indicate that he had been in rebellion against divine authority.

In his great sin with Bathsheba there was:

* A terrific falling short of God's standard.

* A base of criminality.

* Rebellion against God.

That is what it means when we sin.

Realizing the trinity of his evil, David experience the trinity of forgiveness - for each of the three words for his sin is joined by a word which erases it.

Psalm 32

1. *Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven.* His transgression is forgiven that is literally lifted which means picked up and taken away. As far as the east is from the west. Or cast to the bottom of the sea.

2. *Whose sins are covered.* Sin is ugly. He covers it with the blood of his own Son. God has concealed it from his sight.

3. *Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him.*

The Lord does not impute it. To impute is to keep score. What this means is that God keeps no books. Or if there is such a book he tears out the pages from which the mistakes appear and throws them away.

In Computer terms it more than hitting the delete button. It is smashing the hard drive where it is impossible to retrieve the information.

In order to experience complete forgiveness there has to be complete confession.

Today, I see a lot of people practicing what Dietrich Bonhoeffer described as Cheap Grace. This attitude is: *That is what Christ came to do, to die for our sins. So let him do it. I will go to him whenever I need forgiveness.*

That is to close the wound before the poison has been withdrawn. That is to look at something that is utterly solemn, lightly, casually and cheaply.

True confession is to honestly look at your sin. Not to minimize it. But to clearly look at it for what it is and confess it completely.

There was a man who sent a letter to the IRS. It read:

I stole some money from you sometime ago and I can't sleep. So I'm enclosing a check for \$100. PS If I still can't sleep, I'll send the rest of the money that I stole.

That is not the kind of confession that does it. There has to be complete confession before there can be healing and power. When I acknowledge my sin, when I no longer try to cover up my iniquity, When I confess my transgression to the Lord, David says at the end of verse 5, *You then forgave the guilt of my sin.*

One Sunday School teacher asked the class what is repentance? *Repentance is when you are sorry for your sins.*

A little girl raised her hand and what do you think repentance is?

Repentance is when you are sorrowful for your sins to quit.

If we would do this we would be like Augustine that I mentioned. He was a great sinner. He was the one that prayed, *Lord make me a Christian but not yet.* He involved himself in all kinds of sensual sins. A very brilliant scholar. He became the professor of eloquence at the University of Mellon.

Then one day he was sitting the garden. He heard a voice and he said it was like a voice of a little child saying *To La Lake To La Lake. Take up and read. Take up and read.*

And there was a collections of the writings of Paul. He picked them up and began to read and the first words that he read were these. Mind you a riotous and debauching man. The first words he reads are these, *It is not in rioting and drunkenness, it is not in wantonness, make no provision for the flesh to fill the lust thereof.*

And STRUCK by these words, Augustine comes clean before God. He pours it all out and then pours it all out to his mother ,Monica, who had been praying for him for years. He comes clean and God makes him a great saint.

At the end of his life many years later when he was dying in his small room in Africa, he had written upon the walls of his room the words of this 32nd Psalm and some of the other penitential Psalms.

What Augustine is saying to all of us and what David is saying in this Psalm and what the Spirit is saying to us now, we must face our sins. We will either face them here saying, *I am wrong.* And be forgiven.

Or the time will come when the breath of life is gone and our sins will face us before the judgement bar of God. We must face our sins here or there. There is no other way.

Lets pray.

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Resource Material : Bruce Thielemann