

Living Word Small Group Study Guide

May 24-30, 2020

Sermon Series: Momma Said

Week One: "Say 'I'm Sorry'"

Study groups can choose to use the daily Scripture readings and associated questions from either the current or previous week's Daily Study Guide, or to focus on the Scripture reading from Sunday's sermon. This study guide delves more deeply into the Scripture from the Sunday sermon.

Suggested Opening Prayer:

Both the opening and closing prayer are offered as suggestions. Feel free to offer spontaneous prayer instead.

Almighty God, You have called the church into being and have gathered us into one family. By the power of Your Holy Spirit, help us to live in unity and peace with all Your children. May our actions this day be fruit of our faith in Your Kingdom. In the name of Christ, Amen.

Sermon Series Theme:

A Simple Guide to prayer. What are those simple phrases your mother always told you to say to others? Say "I'm sorry." Say "Please." Say "Thank you." These phrases are basic components of our prayer life.

This Week's Sermon Theme:

We are meant to ask for forgiveness for all our sins - big and small, and daily. Not that our soul is imperiled by every transgression, but that a life of saying "I'm sorry" is a life that is focused upon redeeming the areas that prevent us from having the mind of Christ and acting in Christlike ways. Some expressions might say that these are the unsundered parts of ourselves. Confession keeps those transgressions in front of us and challenges us to continually seek to allow the Spirit to take them away.

Sunday Scripture Reading: Psalm 51:1-13 (A group member should read the passage aloud).

For Group Discussion:

What does the text actually SAY?

The goal of this discussion is to make sure group members understand the actual content of the passage.

What four ways does the psalmist describe what he wants God to do for his sin? (51:1-2)

What two ways does the psalmist describe the weight of his sin upon him? (51:3)

Who does the psalmist feel he has sinned against? (51:4)

How does the psalmist describe the depth of his own sinful nature? (51:5)

What two things does the psalmist think God wants of him? (51:6)

What two new metaphors does the psalmist use in verse 7 to describe what he is looking to have done for him? (51:7)

What does the psalmist hope will happen to him when he gains a sense of forgiveness? (51:8)

Eight more metaphors for God's actions are given in verses 9 to 12 – list all eight of them. (51:9-12)

What two things does the psalmist say will happen as a result of God's actions? (51:13)

What questions does the text raise for us?

The goal of this discussion is to allow group members to respond to their own emotions and reactions related to the passage. Questions are suggestions, but open discussion is encouraged. These are "I wonder" questions that the group might want to pursue together.

If we look at the heading of this psalm, we might ask at first, "what's the story with David, Nathan, and Bathsheba?"

We might wonder if "have mercy on me," "wipe away my wrongdoings," "wash me clean of guilt," and "purify me from my sin" are all just different ways of saying the same thing.

If the psalm is in response to something David did to Bathsheba or her husband, we might wonder why David says he has sinned against God, and God ONLY.

We probably wonder why David has a sense of guilt from the day he was born – are newborn babies, even unborn babies, really guilty of sin?

We might wonder about the ancient symbolism of purification "with hyssop," or why a metaphor of being washed "whiter than snow" are used. Could that language be perceived as racist today?

We might wonder if the psalmist feels that somehow God is responsible for how he feels when he says, "let the bones you crushed rejoice once more."

We can almost certainly ask, what exactly is David asking for, and how will he know when he has received it?

Do we honestly believe that if we "teach wrongdoers your ways" that "sinners will come back to you"? How much impact can we really have?

Commentary on the text:

The goal of this section is to provide further background that provides context for the content of the passage.

See also: Psalms 6, 32, 38, 102, 130, and 143; 2 Samuel 11-12; Leviticus 14:49-52; Numbers 19:18

Psalm 51 is called a "penitential psalm" – a psalm that expresses a strong desire to repent and to seek forgiveness from God. From ancient times, the church recognized seven psalms as particularly suitable

for use to express our universal need to confess our sins, and to seek forgiveness. The other “penitential psalms” are Psalms 6, 32, 38, 102, 130, and 143. You might want to take some time in your group to look at several others of these psalms to get a sense of how they are similar and how they differ in their expression of this universal need.

Psalm 51, like many other psalms, contains a superscription – words that come before the text of the psalm that often contain instructions for musical accompaniment, notes of authorship, or other interesting information. The superscription here is rather long – and says that David composed the psalm “when the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.” If you look at the superscriptions for Psalms 51 through 63, you will see that many of them provide historical context for the composition of the psalm. Although the superscription provides the gist of why David felt such a pressing need to confess his sin, the full story of King David’s adultery with Bathsheba can be found in 2 Samuel chapters eleven and twelve. Not only was Bathsheba a married woman, but when he received word that she was pregnant, David went to great lengths to cover up his adultery by bringing her husband Uriah home from battle in the hope that he would sleep with Bathsheba, explaining the pregnancy. When Uriah refused, from a sense of honor, David arranged to put Uriah on the front lines, where he died in battle. David then made Bathsheba his wife. The prophet Nathan then came to David to hold him accountable for his sins.

The story provides important context, then, for the depth of guilt and shame Psalm 51 presumes on the part of the psalmist. From ancient times, Jews and Christians alike have seen in the story of David and his psalm of confession and repentance a reminder that even the most revered of human beings fall into sin and must confess that sin before God. King David was respected as the picture of a Godly king – and yet even King David sinned in a most profound manner. His psalm, then, demonstrates for us that if even David felt the need to fall to his knees to confess his sin before the all-knowing God, none of us can simply presume God’s forgiveness, either.

Turning to the psalm itself, the first thing to notice is that in the first two verses, David expresses a desire for God’s forgiveness. This is the motivating factor behind David’s prayer. Forgiveness is expressed in three unique metaphors – blotting out of transgressions, washing away of iniquity, and cleansing from sin. Each of these metaphors clearly demonstrates that there is a further, underlying metaphor being assumed here – and that is the belief that sin is a “stain” that must be removed. “Blotting out,” “washing away,” and “cleansing” are all words having to do with purifying something that has been stained or defiled in some way, to restore it to a state of cleanliness. Sin, then, makes us less than we are supposed to be – until it has been dealt with, we are “stained.”

But notice also that David’s request for forgiveness is not based in his own worthiness, but entirely in God’s nature! David appeals to God because God is a God of “unfailing love” and “great compassion,” a God who David anticipates will “extend mercy.” The awareness of David’s sinfulness in the face of God’s merciful nature provides the transition into David’s statements of confession in verses three through six. David describes the seemingly permanent consequences of his sin – “my sin is always before me.” The guilt weighs heavily upon him. David recognizes that ultimately, it is God who he has sinned against. This should not be taken to imply that David does not acknowledge that he has sinned against Bathsheba herself, or Uriah her husband... but that even were he to acknowledge his sin before them, the only way to have the stain of his guilt removed is through an appeal to God, the ultimate Judge of human

behavior. David is not looking only for forgiveness from those he has harmed – he is looking to be restored to a state of cleanliness, acknowledging that human nature itself is sinful.

After returning to metaphors of cleansing (“cleanse me with hyssop,” “wash me whiter than snow,” “blot out my iniquity” – see Leviticus 14:49, 14:52, and Numbers 19:18 to see how hyssop was used in cleansing rituals), verses ten through twelve shift the tone to a desire to then be empowered to actually respond to God’s mercy. David now asks God for “a pure heart,” “a steadfast spirit,” and “a willing spirit.” The prayer moves beyond a seeking of forgiveness to a desire to be formed into someone who can live in a new way. This new life is imagined as the reality of an awareness of God’s presence, being filled with God’s Holy Spirit. To live in such a renewed state would bring the kind of joy and gladness that issues forth with rejoicing.

In verse 13, David responds to the promise of God’s forgiveness in the only way he can – by promising God that he will work to convince other sinners to confess their sin and give praise to God. When we are truly able to receive God’s forgiveness, we are transformed into people who want others to experience the release, the lifting of the burden of shame, that only confession of sin to God can bring! And that is why confession of sin is such a central part of prayer. God wants us to live free of that burden, God wants to cleanse us and restore us to a state of purity, God wants to empower us to live the kinds of lives that free us from having to feel that way again! It all begins with confession.

Final Thoughts for Discussion:

The goal of this section is to get people thinking and talking about how the passage should affect their behavior after they leave the group.

Is personal confession of sin a regular part of your prayer life?

Do you confess sin in specific detail, or in general terms, like “forgive me for my sins”? What value do you think you would see in getting specific?

How do you relate to the idea of forgiveness as removing a stain? Are there other metaphors you prefer? How do you experience forgiveness?

How are prayers of confession and prayers seeking renewal or empowerment for life connected in your own prayer life? Why do you think David connects the two?

How does the context of David’s adultery with Bathsheba impact your own willingness to confess sin to God? Are there sins you would rather not talk about, even with God?

In what ways do you respond to the awareness of God’s forgiveness?

Suggested Closing Prayer:

Holy God, we too are stained. We too come to You seeking forgiveness, not because of our own worthiness, but because You are merciful and compassionate. Cleanse us of our sin, forgive our transgressions, and help us to grow in newness of life. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, who makes all these things possible. Amen.