



“CAST AWAY”
QUESTIONS FOR GOD PREACHING SERIES
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
SCRIPTURE: PSALM 51: 1-12; JOHN 6: 24-35

August 5, 2018

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Psalm 51:1-12

51:1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

51:2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

51:3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

51:4 Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.

51:5 Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.

51:6 You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.

51:7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

51:8 Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

51:9 Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

51:10 Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

51:11 Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.

51:12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

John 6:24-35

6:24 So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

6:25 When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?"

6:26 Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.

6:27 Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal."

6:28 Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?"

6:29 Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent."

6:30 So they said to him, "What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?"

6:31 Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'"

6:32 Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven.

6:33 For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

6:34 They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always."

6:35 Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

Questions for God:

1. How does God get you to believe that you can be forgiven for something that you don't think deserves to be forgiven?
 2. What is really more important? Loving or not sinning?
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You all have been asking your pastors a lot of questions. It's my turn to ask you one: What is your definition of sin?

Don't think too hard about it. What do you really believe sin is? Not what you're supposed to believe, but what you really believe.

(listen for some answers/input)

Sin is perhaps the most misused and abused concept in the Christian tradition. It has been darn near impossible for human beings to resist using this concept to divide and to shame and to distort who God is.

Instead of owning sin as something that speaks to a common condition we all share as human beings, something that helps cultivate compassion and mutual understanding, Christians often fall prey to using sin as a way to cast people out, to create insiders and outsiders, to concentrate power in the institutional church, and even to justify violence in God's name.

Sin is a state of being—a way of being in the world that is estranged from God. Sin is living in a distorted relationship with our created nature, with the image of God that we carry.

Sin as a state of being estranged from God, or having a distorted relationship with God can manifest in all sorts of ways—in thoughts, words, actions, and feelings. But we misunderstand sin if we make it just about thoughts, words, actions, and feelings.

Psalms 51 is one of seven psalms of penitence in the Psalms—it is the only one of these Psalms of penitence in which the psalmist's lament to God is about the psalmist's own sin. The psalmist isn't asking why God has forsaken him or receded from his life, but he is confessing his deep need for God to be God.

Scholars conjecture that a later editor may have come in and put in the language attributing this Psalm to David—portraying David as contrite about taking another man's wife in Bathsheba and then having her husband killed.

But, David's selfishness, arrogance, pridefulness, and violence are not the main topic of this hymn. They are employed to amplify the power of God's love to heal us from our most debilitating and destructive wounds.

The truth of David's sin shows us the truth of God's power.

If David had come making excuses and minimizing and blaming others for what he did, God's promise and power would be trivialized. It would have been a psalm about David's insecurity instead of a psalm about God's power. If David had decided his sin was unforgiveable, then this would be a psalm about a man's despair instead of a psalm about God's power.

(go to font) So every Sunday when we gather together to worship God, we tell the truth about ourselves and our need for God.

At the font we remember God's promise that the truth will set us free.

At the root of our Confession is trust—trusting a promise that our most difficult, painful, embarrassing, paralyzing, frustrating, unattractive, destructive, annoying, harmful, diminishing, demeaning truth is something Jesus already knows and understands—something He will not shy away from being fully present to—something he yearns to set us free from—the worst things about us are not too much for God, they are exactly what God needs us to lay down, to lay bare.

The image shows two systems of musical notation for the hymn "Je - sus knows the in - most heart: noth - ing can be hid - den." Each system consists of a vocal line (treble clef) and a bass line (bass clef). The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 6/8. The first system is a simple harmonic setting. The second system includes guitar chords written above the vocal line: Bm, Em, D, G, Am7, Bm7, Em, and Fine. The lyrics are written below the vocal line in both systems.

Here's another question for you. How do you define grace? Don't think too much. What do you really believe grace is, not what you think you are supposed to believe.

(Listen for some input/ideas)

Grace is only grace when it is born of freedom—we don't control it. Not only is it not our job to decide who deserves God's grace or what deserves God's grace, such fencing around God's capacity to meet us where we are is the very antithesis of grace.

God's grace is not waiting for you to tell it that it's safe to come in—God's grace is sufficient for whatever it is you are hiding.

When we question God's grace—there is something else going on—because the nature of God's grace does not depend on us—we do not define it, we do not constrain it, we do not get to say when it is in effect and when it is not.

When we question God's grace, we are avoiding another question that only we can answer—what is it that is keeping us from forgiving ourselves? Holding on to one's sin as a reason for feeling outside God's grace is not God's doing—it is our doing—an ironic twist of human pride—when our efforts to be humble and sorry for what we've done are actually rooted in self-loathing, pride, or mistaking our own stuckness for God's judgment.

I grieve the distance humans put between God and us just when we need God the most—it is so unnecessary, it has such diminishing returns. The life of faith can become another place of bondage when we make it about us and not about God.

God's grace, God's love is an ocean—you can't control it, you can't hold it back, you can't empty it or match it in power or purpose or strength. God's invitation is for you to give yourself to it, to trust it, to immerse yourself in it, to feel yourself embraced, enveloped, accepted, loved.

God is here when you are truly ready to be free.

The image shows a musical score for a hymn. It consists of two systems of music. Each system has a vocal line (treble clef) and a piano accompaniment line (bass clef). The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 6/8. The lyrics are: "Je - sus knows the in - most heart: noth - ing can be hid - den." The first system ends with a double bar line. The second system includes chord markings above the vocal line: Bm, Em, D, G, Am7, Bm7, Em, and Fine. The piano accompaniment in the second system includes a final chord marked with a double bar line.

(Go to Communion Table)

One more question. What is one thing you are hungry for when you come to this Table? (get some input)

The crowds went looking for Jesus when he and disciples weren't where they thought he would be. When they find him they said they wanted more of him—but Jesus said you came looking for me because you liked the feeling of having a full belly you got when I fed the multitudes. But you really are not seeing me.

The crowd in John's Gospel keeps pushing for more: signs, instructions, and assurances. They show their ignorance over and over again about who it is they are encountering when they encounter Jesus.

Jesus keeps telling them that your work is believing, not striving, not grasping, not earning, not controlling or creating, but believing. But the crowd has a contingency: give us a sign and we'll believe. They want a sign after he fed the multitudes with five loaves and two fish. They want a sign after he walked on water. The Gospel writer makes it pretty obvious. The problem isn't with Jesus' lack of signage, it with the crowd's lack of vision, with their stubborn clinging to their own learned helplessness.

How can we cast away the things that are blinding us, binding us, holding us in places of self-destruction or anger or fear or blame? Our unwillingness to believe in the depth and breadth of God's grace, our denial of the power of forgiveness, feeds the estrangement that defines sin in the first place.

Forgiveness is not about perfection or being able to repair all the harm we've done or the suffering we have created. Forgiveness is about trusting God's grace to do far more than we can do for ourselves. Forgiveness is freedom.

And while Jesus's gift of this Communion Table has been another place seized by oppressive systems and human pride, used to exclude and to shame and to demean—we come again today, on Christ's invitation, to taste and see God's goodness, God's justice, God's mercy, God's love. The try again to trust a promise so beautiful that it is hard for us to really see it sometimes.

You might come looking for signs, looking for different bread, looking for a cup you don't have to share, hedging your bets, concealing your brokenness, telling God you couldn't possibly be included in those welcomed here.

Today cast away those delusions, those distorted ways of seeing. Today take a chance on believing God would never cast you away—you, God's beloved and cherished child. God is eager for you to come closer and to believe. Today come humble, come hungry, come honest—and let God embrace all of who you are.

6:35 Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

Thanks be to God.