

## The Gospel According to David: How to Actually Change

Psalm 51:1-12

March 12, 2023

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I'm an oldest sibling. And there are perks that come with being the oldest. Simply by age I was the biggest and smartest kid in my family and I used this to my advantage.

In fact, one of my favorite pastimes was obliterating my little sister. Laura is three years younger than me, and I was a bad brother to her. When I was bored, nothing would bring me greater joy than to find a way to destroy her.

And, being bigger and stronger and having a slightly more developed frontal lobe meant I could do this with calculated efficiency. My favorite move was to find something small which would be unpunishable if detected by my parents. I'd just make an offhand comment or something. It could mean nothing, except that it would hurt her. But if she complained I could deny everything and she would look like she was overreacting. Of course if mom and dad weren't around then I could escalate this until she would snap and strike out in rage. She would attempt to punch and scratch and bite because there was nothing else she could do.

And being bigger and stronger and smarter I could easily deflect this, but wickedly I could ensure this would all happen when mom or dad was just around the corner. And Laura would be caught and punished. And while that was happening I would be gloating smugly outside her bedroom door.

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Good morning. Welcome to Fort George. Believe it or not I'm one of the pastors here, and we're glad you are joining us in person or online.

If you've been with us over the last several months, you know that we have been looking at the Gospel According to David. David is the predominant mini Christ figure in the Old Testament. And this is why Jesus isn't called the Son of Abraham or the Son of Moses, instead He's called the Son of David. David's story constantly points us to Jesus' good news. And today's text is no exception.

We are in Psalm 51 today, which is the prayer David wrote after being confronted by his Nathan – we did this last week. David had murdered a friend to steal his wife and was lying to himself that it was fine until Nathan presented him with a grand theft lambo story. There was a rich man who took the pet lamb of a poor man and fed it to a guest.

And Nathan asked, what should be done to such a man. And David, the shepherd, was indignant. He should be put to death! But that's not justice. That's the overreaction of a guilty conscience. And into that reaction David's Nathan speaks: "You are the man!"

And David was caught. He was found out. But then David reacts in a way that is not normal. He doesn't get defensive. He doesn't put up walls.

Instead, David humbles himself to hear the words of his friend and repents. And we get that prayer of repentance today. And this prayer offers us the path to redemption that works no matter how far you've fallen. So please stand with me as we come to Psalm 51. Hear now the word of the Lord.

[Read Psalm 51:1-12]

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

Have you ever been frustrated with yourself when you've tried to change and failed? Maybe it's a habit that you know isn't bringing you life, or an addiction, or some selfishness in the way you relate to the people you love. And you've looked at this and said to yourself, I'm going to change. And then you didn't.

Well, here's the beauty of this text. There's actually hope and power in David's prayer that can enable us to leave sin behind and grow in Christlikeness for our joy and God's glory. And these things go together.

You see, sin always promises to make us happy – that's why we do it – but it delivers less in the end. Every sin does this – it promises joy but takes life. And so the path to our real happiness and God's glory requires that we kill the sin that's killing us. But how? That's the question this Psalm answers. And it gives us one thing to stop, two things to start, and the power to do it.<sup>1</sup> That's our outline.

Here we go. The one thing to stop. Look at verse 5. David says:

For I was born a sinner—

yes, from the moment my mother conceived me. (Psalm 51:5)

Now some other translations say "In sin my mother conceived me" but that makes it sound like David is saying "My mom was up to no good, and that's why I did this." He's not saying that. David's point is that his sinful nature is his fundamental nature. He has been full of sin from conception.

So you've probably heard people talk about the 'innocence of youth.' And whatever people mean by this I assure you it can be cured by becoming a parent. But it's more complicated than that. So it's true that before a certain age children don't understand the sinfulness of their actions. But this doesn't mean young children aren't sinful. So none of my two-year-olds ever said "Wow, I'm full of manipulative tendencies and selfishness" But guess what, they all were. Now if you don't have kids you're saying "Wow, Pastor Dan is a terrible dad. My kids will never be like that." Just wait.

But this is what David is saying: while he had never murdered or committed adultery before, these big sins were really just the flowers on a bush that had been growing in this direction forever.

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<sup>1</sup> Outline adapted from Tim Keller <https://gospelinlife.com/downloads/reality-forgive-us-our-debts-8663/>  
(Accessed March 11, 2023)

Another way to say this is, every sin we commit is in character for us – there is no such thing as an out of character sin. Every sin we commit simply grows out of a more juvenal version of the same thing.

But it's actually worse than that. In fact every sin anyone has ever committed is consistent with the character of every person in this room. We are all capable of committing every sin that has ever been committed.

What! Give me a break. I'm not perfect; I might have teased my sister and reveled in her mental destruction at the hands of my parents, but I didn't murder her. I was just being a kid.

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Now, it's true I've never actually killed anyone or raped anyone or trafficked any children – and chances are neither have you. But David says "look, the terrible things I ended up doing grew out of something that was in me from the beginning.

So if you grab a pinecone and plant it in a field, and it gets water and sun, chances are it will grow to be 100 feet tall or more. But if you take that pinecone and plant it in the gravel beside the highway it will fair differently. Why? Because the soil and salt and ditch cleaning crews will change the outcome of the seed.

Similarly, the sins we commit are different – teasing isn't murder – but the difference isn't because some of us are better than others, the difference between the sins we commit is circumstantial. The same seed is just growing up in different soil.

So David's not saying "oh the murder I committed wasn't that bad", what he's saying is "I've always been this bad, even before I committed murder."

And here's where we come to the one thing we must stop doing if we are going to kill the sin that's killing us for our good and God's glory. And that is we must stop denying our sinfulness. You simply will never meet Jesus as long as you don't see yourself as a sinner in need of a Saviour. And that's because Jesus only saves sinners. If you aren't a sinner Jesus has no time for you. So embrace your sinfulness as a core element of your identity. We are all born sinners.

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Now by embracing your sinfulness I don't mean just say "oh well, I'm a sinner that's who I am. There's no point in trying to change." No. We have to kill the sin that is killing us. But how? The first thing we have to do is get out of denial. Stop denying what you are capable of. But that's not the end, that's the beginning.

Next, David gives us two things we have to start doing. And they are both equally essential if we are going to kill the sin that is killing us and actually grow in Christlikeness. And together these two things are the joy of repentance.

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Now wait a minute, how can you possibly use the word joy and repentance in the same sentence. Repenting is about as joyful as stubbing your toe and that's if the sin is small. But listen to where David's Psalm ends. After working through his repentance, he says:

Restore to me the joy of Your salvation,  
and make me willing to obey You....  
Forgive me for shedding blood, O God who saves;  
then I will joyfully sing of Your forgiveness. (Psalm 51:12-14)

For David, repentance and joy go together and that's because repentance restores what we were created for in the beginning. So what David is saying is "I remember how I used to be happy in You. You saved me when I was in the wilderness running from Saul. And I had joy in You. But I lost that joy because I embraced sin. And it hasn't worked out the way I thought. Sin promised excitement and fulfillment but it's stolen the joy I was created for; it's killing me. And I want my joy back so I'm repenting.

And in verse 4 he gives us two things to start doing in order to repent for real. Here they are: We need to make a clean confession of our sin, and we need to embrace a real hatred of our sin.

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So what do I mean by a clean confession. I mean David doesn't do the classic human trick of half repentance. Look at verse 4. David says:

I have done what is evil in Your sight.  
You will be proved right in what You say,  
and Your judgment against me is just. (Psalm 51:4b)

And then he stops. What David doesn't add is a reason why he sinned – an excuse. "If Bathsheba wasn't on the roof, I wouldn't be here today. I shouldn't have done it, but really, I couldn't help myself." David doesn't say that.

And if we want the joy that real repentance can bring we need to start accepting responsibility for our actions. We need a clean confession of our sin.

So put your big boy pants on or your big girl pants on and admit it. I sinned. And there's not an excuse that explains why. The reason I sinned is that my heart has been desperately sinful from the moment of my conception. I was sinning wickedly as a child, and guess what, I just got better at it. Make a clean confession.

But a clean confession isn't enough by itself, you need the other side of the coin. And that is you need a real hatred of your sin.

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Oh great, that's impossible. I mean the reason I sin is because it brings me joy. There is nothing more fun than listening to my sister desperately argue for her innocence while her story just sounds false. And then she gets it while I snicker outside.

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And the reason I get angry is that I love how powerful it makes me feel. And the reason I lust is because I love feeling like somebody wants me. And the reason I medicate with substance or media is because it masks the loneliness I feel. I sin because I love it.

Now sure, I hate getting caught. And I hate the guilt I feel when I sin. And so I do my best to avoid that, but I love the sin. Is there anyone here today who loves sin?

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The only way to hate something we love is to love something else more. You will not kill the sin that is killing you without loving something else more than you love the sin. Now look at how David gets here he says:

Against You, and You alone, have I sinned; (Psalm 51:4a)

Now wait a minute David. You only sinned against God? What about Bathsheba? She had no opportunity to resist your advance – you sinned against her. And what about Uriah? He's dead because you chucked him under the bus – you sinned against him.

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Actually David's not denying that he sinned and hurt other people, rather he is emphasizing that ultimately he has hurt God – he's emphasizing the foundation of his sin.

So when David says "Against You, You only have I sinned" he's realizing that his sin has actually broken the relationship between him and God. Of course he sinned against Bathsheba. Of course he sinned against Uriah. But the reason he sinned against them was because he had already sinned against God. And he's disgusted by this sin.

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Now does that sound like a copout? Like David is weaseling out of responsibility? He's not. In his commentary on the 10 Commandments, Martin Luther notes that the first commandment is "You shall have no other gods before Me." And then later you get the other stuff – don't lie, don't kill, don't commit adultery, don't covet. And Luther says all the other commandments actually stem from the first one such that you can only break them when you have already broken the first one – you have made something else god in your life.<sup>2</sup>

So you lie because you've made something else God in your life. Your reputation is your god so you lie to maintain it. Or money is your god so you lie to get more of it. And in David's case he's saying, "Before I committed physical adultery, I committed spiritual adultery. Why did I need her love if I could have Your love God? Why did I need her affirmation if I could have Your affirmation God. Why is there is vacuum in my heart that I feel the need to fill? It's because I've lost You.

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<sup>2</sup> Luther, Martin. "On the First Commandment—Exodus 20:3." Blue Letter Bible. 4 Oct 2017. Web. 11 Mar, 2023.

And so when David says “Against You, You only have I sinned” what he is acknowledging is the root sin underneath all his sin. And we all have the same seed. Every sin we commit has fundamentally been done because we have trampled God’s heart and rejected His rule as God in our lives.

Now here’s the power: Only when we realize that our sin is primarily keeping us from the joy and meaning God wants for us can we actually hate our sin. Without this all we hate is getting caught. All we hate is the bad stuff sin results in: broken relationship, guilt, loss. And if we could do the sin and not get caught we would do it because we love the sin.

But when you see, like David, that actually sin has deceived you and is the very thing that is keeping you from the joy and meaning you’re seeking, then you can actually hate it. You can only hate sin when you see that it’s killing you.

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But how do we get there? How do we get the power to make a clean confession acknowledging our sin, and how do we get the clarity to see that sin is actually killing us so we can hate it? David gives us the answer in verse 1. He says:

Have mercy on me, O God,  
because of Your unfailing love.  
Because of Your great compassion,  
blot out the stain of my sins. (Psalm 51:1)

The power to kill the sin that is killing you comes from encountering the unfailing love and compassion of God. It’s when Jesus captivates us with His unfailing love that we can change. And the word “unfailing love” here is the word *Hesed* that we looked at two weeks ago – it’s who God is – He is Loving Kindness. And it’s what He does – He lavishes His undeserved kindness and generosity on His people. And it’s when we see His love, and see it again, that we are empowered to change.

You see love is the ultimate motivator. You won’t change because you hate getting caught. You will just get sneakier. And you won’t change because you hate feeling guilty – you will just find ways to medicate your guilt. The only way you can change and actually kill the sin that’s killing you is when the love for your sin is overshadowed by your love for God. And the only way to love God is by seeing how much He loves you.

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Now it’s awesome that David saw this and changed, but the amazing thing is we’ve got so much more to go on here than He did. You see there’s a confusing line in Psalm 51. Near the end David prays:

Do not cast me from Your presence  
or take Your Holy Spirit from me. (Psalm 51:11)

And in this moment David’s wavering and wondering whether he’s gone too far. But it’s only because he doesn’t understand God’s *Hesed* like we do. We’ve got Jesus! So the reason David doesn’t have to worry about being cast out of God’s presence is that Jesus was cast from God’s presence on his behalf and ours.

And this is the extreme power of Heseed that David only had a hint of but that we can see in full. You really are a sinner but Jesus got what you deserve, and He was happy to take it.

Hebrews says it was for the joy set before Him, of restoring you to the relationship with Himself that He created you for in the beginning, that Jesus endured the cross. He saw what you really are – more clearly than you see yourself – and yet He loved you and died so you could live with Him now and for eternity.

And when you see this Jesus, and are won by His love, then all of a sudden change is possible. Real change is possible when you are won by love. Real change can happen when your love of Jesus is bigger than your love of sin. Friends, you don't need to try harder to stop sinning, you need more Jesus. Because when you love Jesus, you actually want to do things that bring Him joy.

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I met Nikki at 18 and we hit it off. But I remember very early in my attraction to her I walked into our church after the service had begun and I saw Nikki sitting in her pet. And there was a guy beside her. And his arm was around her.

And this was exceptionally concerning for me. But I was trying to play it cool, so I went up to one of Nikki's friends, and I just asked nonchalantly "Hey, who's that guy beside Nikki? I've never met him before. Just interested."

And she said, "Oh, that's Mike. He's her big brother."

And two thoughts flooded immediately through my mind. Relief – this girl wasn't taken. And conviction. I was not any kind of brother to my sister like Mike was to his. It was a mind job. And if I wanted this girl to like me, I had better fix this.

And so the next day, when I was driving Laura home from school, I did something I had never even wanted to do before. I repented to her and told her that I would never treat her like I had again. And I changed. I had encountered a love greater than I loved my sin, and it empowered me to change.

And the greatest love – greater than all our sin – is the love of Jesus. And His love, if you see it, can empower you to repent and change. So feast your soul on Jesus.