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The Best Way to Deal with a Guilty Conscience

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TEXT: Psalm 32

Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

For 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 dried up as by the heat of summer. *Selah*

I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord," and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. *Selah*

Therefore let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found; surely in the rush of great waters, they shall not reach him. You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance. *Selah*

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding, which must be curbed with bit and bridle, or it will not stay near you.

Many are the sorrows of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the Lord. Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!

What do you do with the shortcomings and the wrongdoings in your life? From the beginning of time, human beings have attempted to deal with this question on their own in the most unhealthy ways. They try hiding their wrongdoings like Adam and Eve tried to do with God in the Garden of Eden. Others do their best to rationalize or justify themselves, or others will project the blame somewhere else or on someone else. Then there's the favorite trick of just compare yourself with others who appear to be worse than you. Then you'll feel better. Many choose to rewrite the commandments to fit the world in which we live, or try to make things right with God by being super

good and obedient to make up for all your past sin. But none of that works. Alcoholics Anonymous recognized this. That's why they developed what they call the fifth step. Wrongdoings have to be dealt with. I've been privileged to serve a number of alcoholics who needed to do their fifth step with a pastor, which is about admitting to God, self, and another human being the exact nature of our wrongs. The people I met with would come with a long-written list of things that needed to be confessed. And at the end, I would pronounce an absolution upon them, a word of forgiveness from God. And I've seen firsthand what this step can do for a person.

Martin Luther recognized this as well earlier on. He was well aware of his own sinfulness and he lived with such a tortured soul early on in his life, not knowing what to do. But then he discovered the gospel – the good news of forgiveness through faith in Christ. And he was free. But Luther also knew his ongoing need for confession and God's absolution on a daily basis. In fact, at the end of his small and large catechism, he included a section on the value of confession for all Christians. He recommends it. In his large catechism, he points us to the “Forgive us our sins” petition in the Lord's Prayer, and he says,

For what is our prayer, but a confession that we neither have nor do what we ought, and it's a plea for grace and a happy conscience? This kind of confession should and must take place incessantly as long as we live for this is the essence of a genuinely Christian life to acknowledge that we are sinners and to pray for grace.

Now, where did A.A. and Martin Luther get this idea about confession? Well, it's right out of God's word, scripture. We see a personal testimony to the value of confession in today's Psalm, which is credited to David, Israel's greatest king, who was described as a man after God's own heart. But we also know, from reading his life story in 1 and 2 Samuel, that David was far from being a perfect person in God's sight. He committed great sins along the way, which hurt a lot of people and broke God's heart. One of the most well-known stories about David was his adulterous affair with a woman named Bathsheba, and when she later on told him she was pregnant, he tried to cover it all up and went so far as to even see to the murder of her husband in order to keep him or anyone else from knowing what David had done. But of course, God knew. God knows everything because he's God. He eventually sent his prophet Nathan to David to tell him that he knew all about this, and that he was disgusted that after all he'd done for David, why would he now break God's word? He told him of the consequences to come

because of his sin. Finally, David broke down before Nathan and confessed to sin, and Nathan told him that God had put away his sin and forgiven him.

Psalms 32 is a follow up to this story, because David and his prayer of confession at that time had promised to give public testimony to God's forgiving grace towards him when he prayed,

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew our right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and uphold me with a willing spirit. Then I will teach transgressors your way and sinners will return to you.

And now in Psalm 32, we see David keeping his word. He's teaching God's people about the blessedness and joy a person receives when they confess their sins to God and receive his forgiveness. He begins his teaching in this way. "Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit." That word "blessed" actually means happy. It's about the relief that comes when you know things are now right between you and God. No more need to cover up. God has forgiven you. A sore conscience gets healed.

In this opening, David uses a variety of words which describe how we sin. He first uses the word "transgressions," which means we rebel against God and His commands. Then there is the actual word "sin," which means missing the mark and falling short; a failure to live up to the standard. And then finally, there's that word "iniquity," which means twisted. We're twisted inside. It's our nature. We're naturally self-serving. This is sometimes referred to as original sin, and we all have it. We're all born with it, and it comes out in the most ugly ways.

David also uses various terms to describe the forgiveness of God. To forgive means lifting the burden off and carrying it away. "Covered" means it's taken away and hidden away by God to be forgotten. "Counts no iniquity" – that's a bookkeeping term – in God's record book the debt is canceled out, it's paid. And David testifies happy is the person who turns to God and confesses his or her sins and receives God's forgiveness. Instead of trying to deceive self and others, including God, that things are really okay, pretending that I haven't really done anything wrong or lying to ourselves, that no one is ever going to know about this, David then tells how he had to learn that truth the hard way. He describes his experience of trying to hide his sins and what

happened when he refused to acknowledge them before God. He said, "For 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 dried up as by heat of summer." That sounds pretty miserable, doesn't it? We know that David tried to cover up his adultery and murder for about a year. And now he uses these vivid images to describe this misery he experienced during that year: aching bones, incessant groaning, no strength. David had a tortured soul because God's heavy hand, the hand of conviction was a weight upon him. He'd lost his peace and his joy that he'd known before with God.

It kind of reminds me of a story Christian author and speaker Jill Briscoe once shared. She writes,

I remember talking to a girl two or three years ago who said to me, "Jill, I've lost my joy. I've lost my peace and I want it back."

"Where did you lose it?" I asked.

"That has nothing to do with this," she replied. "Help me to get it back."

"But where did you lose it?"

"I don't want to talk about that."

But eventually the woman did talk about it. She admitted that she lost it when she moved in with her boyfriend. And as a Christian, she knew that was out of bounds and she was filled with guilt and trying to hide it or talk herself out of it. And it was getting her down. But this wasn't working. And like in David's story, it needed to be dealt with in God's way.

We don't know the end of her story, but we do know the end of David's, don't we? David goes on with this testimony. "I acknowledge my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity." I said, "I'll confess my transgressions to the Lord. And I did. And an amazing thing happened. God, you forgave the iniquity of my sin." This is a very happy ending. God's amazing sacrificial forgiveness was freely given to David. And David was filled with joy and happiness and relief. He was now walking, living proof of that opening statement of this psalm. "Blessed [happy] is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered."

And then David spends the rest of this Psalm recommending prayers of confession to everyone who is listening to his story. I'm just going to sum it up in this way. He says, Therefore, let everyone who is godly offer timely prayers of confession to you, Lord, and not put this off for I've learned you're my hiding place, my safe place

to whom I can always run to when I fail and fall in my obedience. Don't be like a stubborn mule, folks, or a horse without understanding. Trust God and a steadfast love for you. Join me in praising God and rejoicing in Him for his forgiveness. That makes us righteous and upright in his sight when we come to him in confession.

It's a great song.

So how about you? How do you deal with your shortcomings and wrongdoings? Are you part of that congregation that David describes that is rejoicing and glad in the Lord, singing along with David? I hope we can all agree, like David, we all sin against God, even those of us who are as children, saved by grace through faith and Christ. That all humans are not basically good and wonderful, but sinful before our Holy God who can't stand sin, and we are in need of his forgiveness. We all fall short of his standards, breaking his commandments, trying to push the envelope on what is right and what is wrong. Selfish and prideful old sinful Adam within still hangs around our necks. We think things, say things, do things that actually scorn God. And now God's Word tells us,

What do you do with these things, these wrongdoings, these sins? Don't try to hide them or deal with them on your own. Instead, humbly confess them to the Lord. And God, in His grace and mercy, will forgive you and wipe the slate clean and put a new song in your mouth. Blessed is the one whose sins are forgiven, whose sin is covered.

Well, that sounds good, but how can we be sure all that's really true? We don't just have to take David's word for it. You see, we're in the season of Lent, moving toward the passion story of Jesus Christ. We have the cross reminding us that God loves us so much that He gave his only son to die on that cross, to pay for our sins and bring us back to himself to make us his own; to make us righteous in his sight. And God raised him up, endorsing that atonement that Jesus made for sin. So, forgiveness is available. A fresh start is available. Restored Righteousness for the sinner is available because of Jesus. And we can trust in that because of the resurrection.

Now, near the end of the Bible, the Apostle John testifies to this divine truth – same truth David learned. He said this. “This I've learned along the way,” he shares with his readers. “If we say we have no sin, the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God was faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

And hallelujah! God does just that. I have been restored myself again and again by His forgiveness in my life as I've turned to him in confession, acknowledging my sins and the Holy Spirit speaks the Gospel into my heart. It's true. It's so true. When I was a pastor, I was asked now and then, "Why do we always have to have that confession in our worship services? Lots of churches don't use it anymore, Pastor." My standard response was "Because your pastor is a sinner and he needs it." And that's true. I'm a sinner saved by grace through faith who continues to sin. And I need to humbly admit out loud my sinfulness before God. And hear the absolution pointing me to that cross and announcing that God forgives me. And I find that when I attend worship services where this is not used, I really miss it because it's fed my soul. It builds me back up to serve him in obedience. I now confess my sins daily during my daily prayers, reminding myself that there's no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, that happy is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

Now, near the end of his article about confession in the large catechism, Martin Luther describes the value of confession with this wonderful image. He said,

If all this [meaning confession and forgiveness] were clearly explained, there would be no need for coercion and force. A man's own conscience would impel him and make him so anxious that he would rejoice and act like a poor, miserable beggar who hears that a rich gift of money or clothes is to be given out at a certain place. He would need no bailiff to drive and beat him there, but he would run there as fast as he could so as not to miss the gift.

So it seems appropriate to end this message today with a prayer of confession. I'm going to say a statement and I invite you to repeat each statement after me. Let's pray. Almighty God, I confess to you that I have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what I've done and what I've left undone. I have not loved you with my whole heart. And I haven't loved my neighbor as myself. For the sake of Jesus, have mercy on me. Forgive me, renew me, and lead me. So that I may delight in your will and walk in your ways to the glory of your holy name. Amen.

Now hear the good news: in the mercy of Almighty God, Jesus Christ was given to die for you and for His sake, God forgives you all your sins. Hallelujah! Amen.