

A Man After The Lord's Own Heart

The Bible tells us that David was a man after the Lord's own heart.

While he was still a little boy—the youngest of eight brothers—he was shepherding his father's flock of sheep and he killed a bear and a lion who were attacking his flock.

When he was an adolescent he slew the giant, Goliath, winning a major battle for the Israelites and routing the Philistine army.

Later, as a warrior, he united the twelve tribes of Israel under his leadership and defeated all the enemies of God's people.

The Lord was with David wherever he went because he was a man after the Lord's own heart.

So David showed his gratitude to God for all the blessings He had bestowed upon him by obeying his commands—right?

Wrong!

Even though David had wives and concubines, they weren't enough to satisfy his libido, so he committed adultery with the Bathsheba, the wife of one of his most loyal and valiant soldiers—Uriah the Hittite.

When Bathsheba became pregnant David concocted an elaborate scheme to trick her husband into thinking that he was the father of the child.

When that scheme fell through he had Uriah murdered and then took Bathsheba into his palace as one of his wives.

Coveting, adultery, false witness, murder, theft—David didn't just “bend” the Ten Commandments, he blew half of them away!

Then he tried to put the whole thing out of his mind and get on with the business of being king.

He may have been a man after the Lord's own heart, but he was a moral shipwreck.

But then God did David a huge favor.

He sent Nathan the prophet to remind David of his sin.

Nathan told David that there was a rich man in his kingdom who had a large flock of sheep and who lived next to a poor man who had only one lamb.

The poor man loved his little lamb and doted on it every day.

Then rich man had a visitor one day and instead of slaughtering one of his own sheep to provide dinner for his guest, he stole the poor man's lamb and slaughtered it.

Then Nathan asked David what should be done to that rich man.

David grew angry and said that the rich man should be killed for what he had done.

Then Nathan thundered: "*You are the man! You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own!*"

Stricken by his conscience, David confessed his sin to Nathan and immediately went to the Lord in prayer, searching for what we all desperately need at times like that: forgiveness.

David's prayer is our Psalm for today, the fifty-first Psalm.

I would like to take a close look at it with you because it is a powerful example of the misery brought on by sin, of the cleansing power of repentance, and the restoring power of God's grace.

We'll take it verse by verse.

David begins his prayer by getting right to the point: *Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.*

He throws himself entirely upon God's mercy.

There are no rationalizations, no resentment toward Nathan for calling him to account, no defensiveness or attempts to justify his sins: he simply casts himself utterly on the mercy of the only one who can do something about his guilt and despair: his Father in heaven.

In some of the most moving words in the Bible he confesses not only his sinful behavior, but the sin that lies at the very heart of his nature:

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

There is no equivocation here, no attempt to diminish the severity of his sin, no attempt to justify it.

Just a brutally honest, scathing confrontation of his sin—not as something he did in the past but as a living, breathing, ugly, present reality.

Sinful at conception, sinful at birth, sinful in nature, sinful in thought, word and deed—David confesses that he is a bad tree which produces rotten fruit.

That sin is not only what David does; sin is what David is.

His heart is saturated with guilt and he is seized by the unavoidable conclusion **that he can find no good in himself**: “...my sin is always before me...”

David is laying bare for all the world to see the truth about himself—**that he is not able to serve God by his own will or strength because, down deep, his will and his strength are themselves sinful.**

And what was true of David is true of all of us: down deep we are not willing servants; we are angry rebels.

David realizes this and he confesses it, and it is in his confession that we can begin to see that he is a man after the Lord's own heart.

He is willing to confront the full extent and odiousness of his sin.

Notice in the next verse what David calls this condition of heartfelt despair and self-accusation: he calls it “*wisdom in the inmost place.*”

Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.

We find wisdom and truth when we despair over our sinful nature and realize we are utterly dependent upon God for any good that is going to come out of us.

When he was old, Luther said that when he looked back on his life he realized that it was during the times he had fallen into despair over his own sinfulness that he had been closest to God's grace.

This is the alien work of God, the hammer of his Law, which empties us of confidence in ourselves so that we may be filled with trust in God's grace and mercy and peace.

Having been brought to the edge of the pit of despair, David begins to experience God's grace and mercy and peace which descends upon him like manna from heaven.

Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure

heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me.

Let the bones you have crushed rejoice!

Blot out all my iniquity!

Create in me a clean heart!

Renew a right spirit within me!

Leaving his sin behind, David enters the sphere of God's grace.

There is no more agonizing over what he knows he did—but rejoicing over what he knows that God is about to do.

David transgressed, he sinned, he did evil, he was evil, he is evil.

But God cleanses, washes, forgives, creates, renews and restores!

What a marvelous model this is for our own prayers!

I don't know about you, but I find that when I'm asking someone to forgive me for some sin I committed against them, I have a tendency to add a little explanation about what led me to do it.

"I'm sorry I said that to you BUT I'd had a really bad day,

"I know I shouldn't have done that BUT I just wasn't thinking."

Maybe if they understand the circumstances that led me into my sin they won't hold it against me.

Maybe I can convince them that it wasn't really a sin at all!

In the very act of confessing my sin I attempt to justify it.

There is none of that in David's prayer—only the brutally frank admission that he HAS sinned because he IS sinful—from conception right up to the present moment.

What David understood—and what you and I need to learn if WE want to be people after the Lord's own heart—is that confessions which include excuses are not confessions at all; they are self-justifications and they bind our sins to us rather than get rid of them.

The only confession the Lord wants to hear is the confession of the tax collector:
"Lord be merciful to me, a sinner."

The fifty-first Psalm shows us with crystal clarity what Luther called "the joyous exchange" which God has offered to sinners in the Gospel.

In return for our sins, our guilt, our despair and our misery he gives us his mercy, his forgiveness, his love and his peace.

We offer up polluted hearts and he gives us clean hearts! It's a perfect equation!

You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

How vainly we try to win God over with our sacrifices—our so-called good deeds!

Like thorn bushes, we offer up our thorns to God and hope that He will regard them as fruit.

But God doesn't look at our outward actions, he searches our hearts to see if there is "wisdom in the inmost place" and "truth in the inner parts."

He wants to create people who seek HIS heart rather than their own heart's desires; people who are willing to be emptied of themSELVES so that they can be filled with HIM.

In today's Gospel lesson we heard about a woman who, like David, was a person after the Lord's own heart.

Having sinned much she had been forgiven much, and as a result, she loved much.

What Jesus is telling us is that our ability to forgive and love is a function of how convinced we are that we have **been** loved and forgiven.

And this is good news!

I mean, does anybody here doubt that he or she has much to be forgiven?

Does anybody here doubt that God's forgiveness is theirs—simply for the asking? If you do doubt that, go back and read your Bibles and you won't have to read for very long before you come across God's promise of grace abounding to the worst of sinners.

This simple truth is the heart and soul of the Bible and you will find it on almost every page.

As Luther said, if you cut the Bible at any point it will bleed Christ.

So the next time you go to the Lord in prayer, **beg him** to give you wisdom in the inmost place.

Ask the Holy Spirit to show you your sin and your sinfulness—and he will.

Then ask Him to empty you of your sin and sinfulness and to fill you with God's grace and mercy and peace—and He will.

And as you receive those blessings, you will find that they have a way of overflowing to others.

Like David, you can be a man or a woman after the Lord's own heart.

Amen.