

Sermon for February 22, 2015 – Lent 1

Psalm 6 (NIV84)

Theme: When overwhelmed with guilt. . .

- 1) Cry out to the LORD for mercy
- 2) Trust in His forgiveness

For the director of music. With stringed instruments. According to sheminith. A psalm of David. O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath. ² Be merciful to me, LORD, for I am faint; O LORD, heal me, for my bones are in agony. ³ My soul is in anguish. How long, O LORD, how long? ⁴ Turn, O LORD, and deliver me; save me because of your unfailing love. ⁵ No one remembers you when he is dead. Who praises you from the grave? ⁶ I am worn out from groaning; all night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears. ⁷ My eyes grow weak with sorrow; they fail because of all my foes. ⁸ Away from me, all you who do evil, for the LORD has heard my weeping. ⁹ The LORD has heard my cry for mercy; the LORD accepts my prayer. ¹⁰ All my enemies will be ashamed and dismayed; they will turn back in sudden disgrace.

Guilt is a very powerful emotion. Many people use it to manipulate others into doing things they didn't necessarily want to do: like giving money for a cause or volunteering for an undesirable job. How can this emotion move people to do things they don't want to do? It's because no one likes the feeling of guilt.

The true horror of guilt, however, is not realized through such manipulations; it is experienced when people come face to face with the devastating consequences their actions have caused. Consider the man who got drunk and killed a boy while driving home. Consider the woman who, in a moment of weakness, cheated on her faithful husband. Consider the parent who, in a moment of rage, severely injures his/her infant child . . .

These examples share a few things in common: all the people in them sinned. Their sins are all shameful. Their sins had a horrible effect. But imagine the people who committed these sins were Christians. Imagine for a moment that it was you who committed any one of those sins. I know, some of you might think, "I would never do something like that," but we must all admit that we have been tempted. Many of us have driven when we probably shouldn't have. Many of us have felt the attraction of another man or woman and wondered: "what if?" Many of us have felt an out-of-control rage. It is by God's grace that we were spared from acting on our passion; but imagine the worst-case scenario happened in our momentary weakness. What would the effects be like?

First of all, our consciences would be ripped apart, realizing that we have sinned. Then there would be the shame of it all, people reminding us of how stupid we were to sin in the first place. Then there is the effect of the sin, which might have hurt somebody else. How we wish we could go back in time and erase that sin . . . but we can't.

This is when the flood of overwhelming guilt hits. We get sick to our stomachs, our eyes start flooding with tears and we shake with a feeling of utter helplessness. "Dear God, what have I done! I'm a Christian and should know better. I don't think I can ever forgive myself. How can God ever forgive me?"

What should we do **when the darkness of guilt overwhelms us**, especially when we know that our guilt is for something that is totally our fault? Do as David did in our sermon text: 1) *Cry out to the LORD for mercy and*, 2) *trust in His forgiveness*.

Part One: Cry out to the LORD for mercy.

Our sermon text begins: *O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath*. What particular sin is David confessing in this Psalm? Could it be his adultery with Bathsheba and contract murder of Uriah? Could it be his sinful pride that led him to order a census, which had devastating consequences for Israel? Maybe it's a combination of all sorts of sins as he looks back on his life? The truth is we don't know, and I am happy we don't. Psalm 6 allows each one of us to confess our own sin – be it idolatry, hatred, gossiping, stealing, faithlessness, an adulterous heart, or all sins in general. No matter how “minor” or horrible our sins are, the LORD wants us to confess them to him.

Notice that David is throwing himself on God's mercy. He is saying, “LORD, Be my loving Father. Discipline me in love and not in wrath. According to your great mercy, do not send me to hell.” Discipline for our sins in this life may seem unpleasant, shameful and hard, but we must remember that discipline from the LORD in this life is not the same as punishment. When the LORD disciplines us in life, he is correcting our thoughts and behavior – teaching us self-control. The LORD disciplines us so that we might avoid his wrath, which is hell. What is experienced in hell is no longer discipline, but punishment. What is experienced there does not come from the concerned and loving heart of a Father, but is from an angry and vengeful Judge. This is what David wants to avoid.

² *Be merciful to me, LORD, for I am faint; O LORD, heal me, for my bones are in agony.* ³ *My soul is in anguish. How long, O LORD, how long?*

David cries out from the depths of his guilt - so anxious with sorrow that He feels drained of all energy. When he thinks about what he did, his bones ache, his stomach churns and muscles tighten. This is why he urgently pursues God's mercy, saying:

⁴ *Turn, O LORD, and deliver me; save me because of your unfailing love.* David flees to the LORD for mercy because He remembers how the LORD described himself to Moses: *"The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, ⁷ maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished."* (Exodus 34:6b-7a, NIV84)

David's situation, therefore, is not hopeless. God forgives sins. Why? Is it because God knows that, deep down, we are all good people? Is it because we, at least, try hard? No. The Bible says: *There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.¹² All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.*" (Rom 3:10-12, NIV84). If this is true, what reason, then, did David have to trust that God would actually forgive his sin? Verse 4 tells us that it was God's *unfailing love*."

The Bible says: *God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* (Rom 5:8 NIV84). Yes, for even the most horrible sins that we can't seem to forgive ourselves Christ died. This is why we don't have to be afraid to confess our sins to him and ask for His forgiveness. God's Word promises that ⁹ *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness* (1 John 1:9, NIV84). To this hope David clung, even though his heart was overwhelmed with guilt. And to this hope we can also cling.

David continues: ⁵ *No one remembers you when he is dead. Who praises you from the grave?* David is not denying life after death. Rather, he is simply saying: “Now is my time of grace. If I let my sorrow and guilt drive me to the grave, how can I recall your love and faithfulness to my children? How can I praise your wonderful, forgiving name on this earth?” David asks for forgiveness so that he can rejoice in God’s love by proclaiming it to others.

⁶ *I am worn out from groaning; all night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears.* David’s sorrow and guilt made him cry himself to sleep. His pillow and bed were drenched with sweat and tears. But regardless of how sorry he felt, it still could not change what he did. His weeping and terror of conscience could never atone for his sin.

Sometimes we think that our deep sorrow can earn God’s mercy. How often has the thought popped into your mind: “I just sinned. How can I ask for forgiveness now? I need to force myself to feel genuinely sorry first.” But our sorrow does not atone for sin. Our feelings of guilt can’t change anything. Only God’s love and mercy can.

David continues: ⁷ *My eyes grow weak with sorrow; they fail because of all my foes.* The foes David mentions are probably not his earthly enemies, but his spiritual ones – as the Apostle Paul once wrote: “*Our struggle is not against flesh and blood*” (Ephesians 6:12, NIV84). The devil, the world and his own sinful nature are the enemies with whom David contended, who were trying to rob David of all comfort he had as being God’s child. They were the ones driving David to despair of all forgiveness and hope. By God’s grace David realized this, and this is why he cried out to the LORD – trusting that God would forgive him for His mercy’s sake.

Part Two: Trust in His forgiveness.

This led him to cry out: ⁸ *Away from me, all you who do evil, for the LORD has heard my weeping.* ⁹ *The LORD has heard my cry for mercy; the LORD accepts my prayer.* What made David so confident that the LORD heard his prayer and forgave his guilt? Was it feelings of peace that came over him? Was it because some angel told him? No. David knew that the LORD heard his prayer because the Bible records God’s promise to hear our prayers and forgive all who turn to him in repentance and faith. Even though the anguish of guilt continued to torment him, David trusted God’s Word. This is why he reassures himself three times that the LORD has heard his prayer.

David continues: ¹⁰ *All my enemies will be ashamed and dismayed; they will turn back in sudden disgrace.* Satan was trying to get David to feel that his guilt was too great and his shame too horrible to be forgiven. This was not true. No, the devil will be ashamed and dismayed. He will turn back in sudden disgrace. David’s sins were paid for. The LORD forgave him, and if the LORD forgave him, there is no one who could rightly condemn him. The devil would try, but even He could no longer do it. David trusted in what St. Paul would later write: ³³ *Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies.* ³⁴ *Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died-- more than that, who was raised to life-- is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us* (Romans 8:33-34, NIV84).

The devil also tries to make us feel condemned because of our sins, but since Jesus paid the price necessary to forgive us and is even interceding before God on our behalf, the devil’s charges and condemnations amount to nothing.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, when waves of guilt come upon you because of your sins and you find yourself being dragged under by the slipstream of sorrow and despair, cry out to the LORD for mercy.

Confess your sins to him, and remember His love. There is not a sin for which Jesus did not die. And, as you throw yourself on the mercy of God, know this: no matter how guilty you feel, if you turn to Christ in repentance, the LORD has heard your cries and seen your tears: you are forgiven! Repeat to yourself: "My heavenly Father has heard my prayer. As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed my sins from me. I stand forgiven for Christ's sake; God's Word promises it and I believe it. Even though I might have to face severe earthly consequences for my sin, I can rest assured that these consequence are not punishment, but stem from God's fatherly discipline, which He will use to His glory and my good. I am forgiven in Christ. Lord, help me live in the peace of this forgiveness." Amen.