

TEACH US TO PRAY

Week Five | November 12, 2017 | How To Pray When We've Messed Up

PREPARATION

MONDAY THROUGH WEDNESDAY

Spend some time alone in God's Word reading through Psalm 51:1–17. Pray that God, through His Spirit, would bring to life the truths of this text and allow you to teach it well to those in your care.

THURSDAY THROUGH SATURDAY

Read through the questions included in the guide this week. Many questions have been included in this lesson for discussion. Determine which questions will work well to encourage, push, and grow your group in the best way.

DAILY

As you prepare, pray for the preaching of God's Word this coming week at the corporate church gathering. Pray also for your time together as a group, that the Spirit would make effective your teaching and bring gospel clarity, gospel change, and a heart for gospel mission to those who are present.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL REALITY

When we mess up in life and sin against the Lord, we must **own up** to it through confession, ask God to **change up** our hearts through transformation, and **speak up** about His mercy and glory so others may return to Him as well.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

According to David's example, when we pray in repentance, we avoid remaining defensive about our sin and consequently are freed to be transformed into those who love God and bring others to know Him.

MEDITATE

"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me" (Psalm 51:10).

GETTING STARTED

+ Use this section to prepare your heart and mind for the truths of this week. This section will help to introduce the focus of this week's lesson.

- Q: *Why do you think we neglect cleaning certain parts of our home, car, or yard?*
- Q: *What kind of defenses do you make in order to keep your sin?*
- Q: *When you've messed up, how do you usually approach God? Do you avoid Him? Or do you list off the right things you've done in the past, hoping they will balance out any recent blunders? Or do you sit in despair, assuming you can never change?*

A man named Bill had lived in his house for about ten years. He had taken care of the flower beds in his backyard rather decently, but his fence had grown grimy and disgusting, covered in mold and mildew, causing a stench. He had simply turned a blind eye to that part of his yard, growing complacent. One day, a man named Ed moved into the house next door. Ed was revolted by the fence. He could smell it a mile away! Ed used a pressure washer to clean his side of the fence, and his side looked brand new. Seeing the disparity between the sides of the fence made Bill realize just how gross the fence had become and what a bad steward he had been of the yard God had given him. Bill headed next door and asked if Ed would let him borrow the pressure washer. After a couple of days of pressure washing and finding he enjoyed the activity, not only did Bill's fence look brand new, but his patio and the siding on his house were squeaky clean too. Once his attention was drawn to the grime he was neglecting, he couldn't help but want a total overhaul for his home.

This story serves as a parable for us. Getting the neglected grime off our lives is messy work, and most of the time we don't really try to change until someone else draws our attention to it. However, with the right tools, God can "power wash" our hearts and make us new. Psalm 51 offers us a few tools for getting the grime of neglected sin out of our lives. Through a famous prayer of David's, originally prompted by someone who pointed out the disgusting grime in his life, we will see what being made clean can truly look like through the power-washing tools of confession and repentance.

- Q: *What grimy areas of your life do you turn a blind eye to?*

Q: *Has God ever used someone else to point out sin in your life? How has this impacted you for the better?*

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

So far in this series, we've studied how to pray in good times, how to pray in bad times, how Jesus prayed for us, and how to pray for other believers. Now we will explore how to pray when we've messed up. In one of the most famous chapters in all the Bible, King David prays a prayer of confession and repentance after committing the horrific sins of adultery and murder. David messed up in the most extreme of ways, and his prayer teaches us three ways to approach God when we feel we have done the same:

- 1. LEAN INTO GOD'S MERCY AND CHARACTER**
- 2. CONFESS YOUR SIN TO THE LORD**
- 3. ASK GOD FOR TRANSFORMATION**

GOING DEEPER

+ *This next section will help show what God's Word says about this week's particular focus. Read through the Scripture passages and connect the text to this week's biblical truth.*

LEAN INTO GOD'S MERCY AND CHARACTER

■ PSALM 51: 1, 6, 16-17

Q: *What is David's first request of God in this psalm? Why do you think he starts here?*

Q: *When you have messed up, do you begin your prayers with trusting in God's abundant mercy? Why or why not?*

Though Psalm 51 comes from the life of King David, it is famously known as the Bible's quintessential example of repentant prayer. Second Samuel 11–12 tells us about the darkest season of his life. Instead of going off to war to fight for his land alongside his soldiers, King David decided to stay in his luxurious home and remain comfortable. In his purposeless and idle time there, he saw a neighboring woman named Bathsheba bathing on her rooftop—a moment that initiated a sequence of events that spiraled out of control and caused incredible pain in his life. After watching her bathe, David beckoned Bathsheba to his bedroom, resulting in an unplanned pregnancy. Though sleeping with her should have been enough to send David running to God in repentance, he continued following the path of his sin.

Desperate to cover his tracks, David came up with a plan to pass off Bathsheba's growing child as her husband Uriah's. David called Uriah, a soldier, off the battle field and gave him time to come home and be with his wife, hoping that he and Bathsheba would enjoy intimate time together. In David's mind, Uriah would go back to war after his night with his wife and come back to a baby he assumed was his and no one would be the wiser. But his plan didn't work. In honor of the other soldiers still on the battle field, Uriah decided to sleep on David's doorstep, away from his wife. He didn't even go home! He didn't consider it right to enjoy the intimacies of home while his fellow warriors risked their lives. Yet again, we might expect David to finally repent of his sins, but he goes even further. Since Uriah won't comply with David's plan, the king must find another way to keep the truth from getting out. To make sure Uriah never knows about the baby, David sends him to the front lines of battle where he knows Uriah will likely die. That way, Bathsheba will be widowed and free to marry David. Instead of being an obvious product of adultery, their child will look legitimate.

Though David thought he got away with adultery and murder, God obviously knew about all his sin, and sent the prophet Nathan to confront him. After being confronted directly through Nathan, David finally repents of his wicked wrongdoings. The great king has seriously messed up, and it's time to come clean before the Lord in prayer.

Q: *Why is it difficult to believe God will be merciful to us when we have sinned?*

Q: *According to verse 6 and 16-17, what does God delight in? What does He not delight in? How do you think we can cultivate what God delights in?*

Amazingly, the Bible not only tells us the story of what David did, it also gives us his actual prayer of repentance

after he was rebuked by Nathan. As David pulls away to pray to the Lord for the first time about the adultery and murder, we get to listen in on what the king says to God. How do we get to do this? Because the king chose to write it all down in Psalm 51!

What is most striking about this Psalm is where David chooses to begin, with the great mercy and character of God. While he could have approached the Lord a million different ways, King David first roots his prayer in *who God* is as opposed to what David has done. He begs for mercy, not because he deserves it, but because he knows that God is compassionate. In addition to beginning this way, the psalm shows us that David weaves God's character through the middle and end of the Psalm as well. This shows us that, from start to finish, David bases all his hope on God, not on how great or eloquent his prayer is.

In addition to leaning into God's mercy, David leans into the things that God delights in—honesty, purity, and humility within a person's inner self, not empty, ritualistic sacrifices. Instead of trying to appease God or pay Him off with religious deeds or meaningless ceremonies, the king simply offers God his shattered heart. David is sure that God would never reject a truly repentant heart, broken by its own sin, and he stands on this truth as his anchor to see him through to other side of this painful, self-inflicted ordeal.

Imagine the confidence and faith it took to lean into God's compassion after not just committing adultery and murder, but lying about it all and avoiding the consequences until he got caught! Surely if David banked on God's mercy in this way, even in the face of such wickedness, we can also lean into the Lord's tender character when we come to Him in repentance. We, too, can be anchored in the fact that God will never reject us when we are truly broken over our sin, no matter how badly we've messed up.

In fact, on this side of the New Testament, we see God's compassionate character even more clearly than David did. Because Christ already paid for our sin, God has only mercy waiting for us when we come to Him with a broken heart in our prayers. God would have been fully justified in refusing David's request for mercy, dispensing judgment instead. However, when we pray for mercy in our sin we can bank on the fact that God has already dispensed judgment on the head of Christ in our place. While David hopes and prays for God's mercy in this situation, we are guaranteed it!

Q: *How do you sometimes try to offer God "sacrifices" in place of a broken and repentant heart? What does Psalm 51 teach you about this way of approaching God when you've messed up?*

Q: Summarize the things David trusts about God's character, even when he has severely sinned. How often do you lean into these things when you approach God about current sin in your life?

CONFESS YOUR SIN TO THE LORD

PSALM 51:3-5

Q: Who does David say he has sinned against ultimately? Why is this unexpected? What does this statement teach you about our sins against others?

Q: How often do you ask God to keep your sin "ever before you?" Why is it good to have your sin always on your radar?

Though David deeply depends on God's character, verses 3–5 show us that he knows he has a part to play in repentance, namely calling out his sin for what it is. In other words, while we can tell God he is merciful all day, we do not get to enjoy that mercy without actually confessing our sin to Him. When we **mess up**, we have to **own up**. David knows this, and he clearly addresses his failure before God. First, David says he is acutely aware of his transgressions, and that his sin is "ever before" him. The ways he has messed up are all over his radar, and he owns up to this dreadful truth instead of trying to defend himself.

Next, David confesses he has sinned against God only in all these horrible actions he has taken with Bathsheba and Uriah. This approach seems most unexpected, given that he clearly has sinned against others during his dark season of rebellion against the Law of God. He had gotten someone pregnant and ended another person's life! Obviously, his sin had effects on others, so why would he say he had only sinned against God? In this part of his prayer, David is not saying that his sin did not reach other parties involved. Instead, he's simply recognizing that God is the ultimate judge for all sins. In harming other humans made in God's image, David sees that he's really offending God.

This is a valuable truth we all must incorporate in our prayers of repentance. When we address our sin before the Lord in prayer, especially when it involves sinful actions we've taken against others, we must confess that above messing up our life or our relationship with others, we've ultimately messed up with *God*.

Q: *David agrees with God about what? Explain how this is the opposite of defensiveness.*

Q: *According to verse 5, does David consider his recent sins a one-time, accidental thing? How does he view his sin in general?*

Next, David shows us another important principle in his prayer of repentance, namely, that confession is simply *agreeing with God about our sin*. In verse 4, David confesses that God is justified, or proven right, in His judgments against his sin. God is right about the dark place David finds himself, He was right to send Nathan, and He would be right to judge the king harshly should He decide to. David teaches us what the opposite of defensiveness is. Like David, instead of trying to prove that we are correct in our sin, we must agree with God that we have messed up and declare that God's viewpoint is the correct one.

The final principle we learn about confessing sin in these verses is that humans are *sinful by nature*. David declares that he was sinful even in his mother's womb! David has a very deep and comprehensive view of sin. Instead of seeing sins as individual accidents or mistakes, He assumes his very *nature* is the truly "messed up" part of his human existence. Yes, he committed adultery and murder, and those individual actions are sinful; but a deeper problem lies within him. He doesn't simply sin sometimes, he has a sin *nature* that *desires* to mess up. In other words, it isn't just his actions that are off. His heart is off, and it's been that way since before he was born. David shows us here that humanity itself is corrupted internally. People don't simply make random mistakes by accident, they mess up because they *want to*. The king is not just confessing his individual sins, but owning up to the reality that sin has polluted him on the level of his desires.

In our own prayers of repentance, like David, we must also acknowledge that we messed up due to a sinful, compromised heart. Confession should always include the what of the individual acts of wrongdoing, as well as the *why* behind them—a polluted nature that desires to sin in the first place.

Q: *When you mess up, do you solely confess the individual wrongdoing you've committed, or do you confess also that your heart is compromised?*

Q: *If a non-believing friend asked you what "agreeing with God about your sin" means, what would you say?*

ASK GOD FOR TRANSFORMATION

PSALM 51: 2, 7-17

Q: *What is David's ultimate plea in these verses? What does he want God to do in him?*

Q: *How has God washed us whiter than snow, on this side of the cross?*

David didn't just agree with God about his sin, acknowledging the corrupt nature of his heart, and leave in despair, assuming there was no way to change. The next part of his prayer is a natural follow-up to this problem. While he does ask to be cleansed from the particular guilt of his sinful actions (v.2 and 7), David goes deeper, requesting that God give him *total heart transformation* (v. 10 and 12). He doesn't want to merely avoid moments of sin or just be cleansed from individual sins. He wants a new, clean heart that doesn't *desire* to sin. He understands that if his heart is changed, he will avoid individual sins by default. And he believes God can create a clean and loyal heart within him, even when he has lived in such darkness.

Here we learn that the big goal of repentance is not to sit in despair, wallowing in our wrongdoing forever. Instead, God wants us to confess when we've messed up and repent with a broken heart so that we can be *changed*. Once we have confessed our sin to God and owned up to the ways we've messed up, God wants us to move forward, trusting He can change us.

Q: *When you mess up, do you simply confess your wrongdoing and then end your prayer? What does this say about your view of repentance and, ultimately, of God?*

Q: *What barriers keep you from begging God to transform you on the heart level?*

Lastly, we see that David prays for two types of transformation, internal and external. Internally, he prays for a clean heart and a renewed spirit that loves God and wants to keep His Word. He asks for God to restore his relationship with the Lord and the joy he once had in his salvation, and begs God not to take His Holy Spirit away. In short, David **messed up, owned up**, and now he asks God to **change up** his mind and heart.

When praying in repentance, we too must ask God to restore the great joy we should be experiencing in our salvation through Christ, and ask Him to give us a clean heart with proper desires. On top of this, though we cannot lose the Holy Spirit who dwells in New Testament believers, we must ask for God to strengthen us to a place where we do not quench His work in our hearts. When we pray these things, we are praying for true heart transformation as David did.

Next David prays for external transformation in the lives of people around him. The king knows that, just as his sin has severely affected others, a transformed heart can also affect others in great ways as well! In verses 13–15, David notes that once his heart is restored, he will be able to teach God’s ways to other transgressors. If God can forgive him of such wicked sin, and even transform him internally, his story will impact others who are wandering from God. If the Lord can forgive David, He can forgive anyone. Just as the king has returned to the Lord through this prayer, he wants others to return also. David wants God to use this time of confession and restoration to draw others into the great mercy and forgiveness the Lord offers sinners.

David does not just want his changed heart to be hidden away; he wants it to overflow into his speech, speaking praise and worship of God in front of others. Even in his sorrowful prayer of repentance, David has God’s glory on his mind. When praying for transformation, we too should also focus on God’s glory being seen in His restorative work, even amidst our worst sins. Like David, when we **mess up, own up**, and ask God to **change up** our minds and hearts, we can finally **speak up** about His glorious grace and forgiveness to others around us, drawing them in to know this merciful God who saves and restores wandering souls.

🗣️: *Who in your life could be externally blessed by your seasons of repentance? Who needs you to “speak up” about your journey with God through a sinful season, as a means to draw them into a relationship with the God who restores sinful people?*

NEXT STEPS

+ *Connect the truths from God’s Word to your daily life. Process how what you’ve learned this week will impact the way you live beyond today and into the future.*

🗣️: *What parts of God’s character give you great encouragement when you have*

messed up? How can you interweave the truth of God's character throughout your prayers of repentance from now on?

- Q:** *How can you move from merely asking God for forgiveness for individual acts of sin to asking Him for total heart transformation? How will your prayers look different in the future, given your view of your deep sin nature?*
- Q:** *How can you fight the inclination to defend your sinful actions? What would "agreeing with God about your sin" look like in your prayers of repentance from now on?*
- Q:** *Summarize David's model of messing up, owning up, changing up, and speaking up. How can you incorporate all of these elements into your prayers of repentance in the future?*

PRAY

+ Use these prayer points to connect your time in prayer to this week's focus.

- God, thank you for inspiring David to write down this prayer of repentance so that I can learn from it.
- God, convict me when I sin and give me the strength not to defend myself, but simply "own up" to my wrongdoing, trusting in your mercy to help me.
- God, "change up" my heart and mind. Renew a right spirit in me and give me a clean heart, one that's loyal to you. Change any part of me that desires sin and make me new.
- God, reveal to me a person who needs me to "speak up" about a season of sin that you have restored me out of. Help my story of confession and repentance influence others to do the same and bring you glory.

PSALM 51 While this prayer is very personal for David, it's more than just a private experience. Over time, it became an instructional hymn by which God's people confessed their own sins. As with Psalm 25 and 32, it enables its singers to appeal to God's own gracious character as the grounds for their cry for forgiveness, echoing Ex. 34:6–7. The Psalm also reinforces the view, found in the Levitical system, that the sacrifices bestow their benefits only on those who use them in humble and penitent faith. Here we see just how much impact a truly repentant prayer can have on an entire people.

PSALM 51:1–2 David's choice of terms shows how familiar he is with God's covenant and system of paying for sins. The terms "mercy" "steadfast love," as well as "transgressions," "iniquity," and "sin," all evoke God's proclamation of His own name (Ex. 34:6–7), with its focus on His grace and kindness. The terms "wash" (Ex. 19:10) and "cleanse" (Num. 19:19) come from the ceremonial system, referring to rituals that allow a person to come safely into God's presence. Here, David is asking God to do these things not to his body, but to his soul (which is what the ceremonies point to), showing how well he understands the reality of sin.

PSALM 51:5 By saying he was sinful even in his mother's womb, David is not communicating that the act of conception was itself sinful, but that each person can trace his sinful tendencies to the very beginning of his existence, not only from birth, but even from before that, to conception. This verse is also used to affirm personhood from conception, not from birth. If the Bible affirms that the sinful nature cast upon an unborn child at the point of conception, and only humans have original sin (as opposed to animals), then the child growing in the womb is surely a person.

**All exegetical content and commentary resourcing for this lesson was provided by the ESV Study Bible Commentary Notes.*