

The Good Fit of Ill-Fitting Prayers

Purpose

To see why prayers of confession are important to a life of faith

Focal Passage

Psalm 51:1-5, 9-12, 17

Background Text: Psalm 51:1-17

Key Verse

“Create a clean heart for me, God; put a new, faithful spirit deep inside me!” (Psalm 51:10)

Connect

A few years ago, while hospitalized, I received one of those hospital gowns that have the opening straight up the back. Almost all of us have had to wear one of those unflattering garments at one time or another. They are often described as “one size fits all” coverings, but the nurse who handed me this one called it a “one size fits nobody” cloak. And both descriptors are essentially true. Not one of us would want to wear one in a fashion show. They just aren’t the “us” we’d like to project.

Yet, in the context of what they were designed for, they are a close-enough fit, and they do what they were intended to do. They permit the doctor to get at the parts of us that aren’t working right and apply the needed remedy. They permit nurses to check our dressings, administer shots, and so on, all without fully exposing us. Hospital gowns allow all those helpful things to take place and still cover us sufficiently so that our nakedness is not out there for all to see.

It occurs to me that hospital gowns function somewhat as do the prayers of confession we use in church. They are “one size fits nobody” in that no corporate prayer can address the specifics of each individual’s transgressions, but they are also “one size fits all” in that all of us fall short of living a holy life. Thus, most prayers of confession fit well enough. They aren’t there to enable us to walk down the fashion runway; they are there to enable God to get at the parts of us that aren’t working right and apply the remedy—gracious forgiveness.

This lesson invites us to consider the good fit of even ill-fitting prayers of confession and how important they are in a life of faith.

Inspect

Psalm 51 is a prayer of deep repentance for serious sin. The text itself identifies neither the sin nor the sinner, but the superscription at the top of this psalm, which was added by some

early editor of the passage, says it was written by David about his sins in the Bathsheba episode. That event is recorded in 2 Samuel 11–12, the account where David had sex with Bathsheba and arranged to have her husband Uriah killed. Second Samuel 12:13 records David’s acknowledgement of his guilt against the Lord; but it’s not clear whether he spoke it to the Lord or to Nathan, the prophet who confronted him about the evil he had done.

After Nathan told David that the child Bathsheba had conceived would die, David pleaded with the Lord for the child’s survival, and he did that to the full measure, including fasting and prostrating himself on the ground all night. Presumably during those hours, David confessed his sin to God, perhaps in vocabulary similar to that contained in Psalm 51, but the biblical account only tells us that David implored the Lord on the child’s behalf.

For these and other reasons, some biblical commentators have questioned whether David is, in fact, the author of this psalm. But in terms of how we read the psalm, it doesn’t matter. Whoever wrote it was obviously under profound conviction of sin regarding something he or she had done and as a result felt separated from God. (For ease of reading, I will use male pronouns to reference the psalmist going forward, but the words of the psalm could just as well have been composed by a woman.) The psalm writer was so out of fellowship with God that he could hardly think of anything but his sin and said so plainly: “My sin is always right in front of me” (Psalm 51:3).

Because the psalm speaks about the nature of sin without getting into the specifics of the

psalmist’s wrongdoing, it serves as a model for a prayer of repentance, whether all of its words exactly apply to our situation or not. It acknowledges that all sin, including that against our neighbor, is ultimately against God. It recognizes that God desires us to be truthful with ourselves. It also plainly asks God for spiritual cleansing and renewal; and as such, it stands as a clear example of how we might pray when we have done wrong.

Psalm 51:1. Without a formal salutation, the prayer begins with an appeal to God’s mercy, faithful love, and compassion. Those three terms, used in the Common English Bible, translate three Hebrew words: *hanan*, *hesed*, and *rahamîm*. The three words together provide a good description of God’s character.

Hanan (“mercy”) depicts a heartfelt response by someone who has something to give to one who has a need. It is sometimes also translated as “graciousness.”

Hesed (“faithful love”) includes three basic qualities that interact with one another: “strength,” “steadfastness,” and “love.” Thus, *hesed* is a rich word that is weakened when rendered simply as “strength,” “steadfastness,” or “love.” “Love” by itself easily becomes sentimentalized; “strength” or “steadfastness” alone suggests the fulfillment of a legal or other obligation.

English translations generally convey the sense of *hesed* by combining two words: “faithful love,” “lovingkindness,” “steadfast love,” “constant love,” “generous love,” or something similar. *Hesed* implies personal involvement and commitment in a relationship beyond the rule of law, so “devotion” is perhaps the best single English translation capable of capturing the nuance of *hesed*.

Rahamîm (“compassion”) is related to the Hebrew word for “womb” and is perhaps best translated as “motherly compassion.” In Isaiah 49:15, the prophet used this term to compare God’s regard for Israel to that of a mother for her nursing baby. Mercy, faithful love, and compassion are the characteristics of the God toward whom the psalmist directed his confession.

Verses 2-4. The psalmist then turned to his sinfulness, using three specialized Hebrew words: *'awan*, *hatta't*, and *pesha'*.

'Awan, rendered as “guilt” (verses 2, 5) in the CEB and “iniquity” or “wickedness” in other versions, refers to the personal culpability of the sinner. In the verb form, the word means “to bend, twist, distort,” which is something we do when we intentionally veer from God’s laws.

Hatta't is the general Hebrew word for “sin” (verses 2-4), and its basic meaning is “to miss the mark.”

Pesha', translated as “wrongdoings” (verses 1, 3) in the CEB and as “transgressions” in several other versions, suggests willful rebellion or revolt.

Together, these three words convey the pervasiveness and harmfulness of sinful behavior.

In verse 4, the psalmist asserts that his sin is against God and God alone. This is not to say that it had no injurious consequences for others, but that all sin is ultimately against God, who defines it to begin with.

As a contrast to how seriously Psalm 51 takes sin and the confession of it, consider the prayer below, which was written tongue-in-cheek to make a point about the seriousness of confession. The author altered the words of a traditional prayer of confession from *The Book of Common Prayer* as follows:

“Benevolent and easygoing Father: We have occasionally been guilty of errors of judgment. We have lived under the deprivations of heredity and the disadvantages of environment. We have sometimes failed to act in accordance with common sense. We have done the best we could in the circumstances; And have been careful not to ignore the common standards of decency; And we are glad to think that we are fairly normal. Do thou, O Lord, deal lightly with our infrequent lapses. Be thy own sweet Self with those who admit they are not perfect; According to the unlimited tolerance which we have a right to expect from thee. And grant as an indulgent Parent that we may hereafter continue to live a harmless and happy life and keep our self-respect.”¹

Verse 5. This verse is sometimes quoted during discussions of original sin, and it is a good starting point when talking about the human condition. It is not saying that sin is transmitted biologically or that sexuality is itself sinful. Rather, it is stating the inevitability of human failure.

Verses 9-12. These verses, along with verses 7-8 that precede them, are the psalmist’s plea for God to cleanse his sins. That’s an acknowledgement that the problem is not with God or with any external circumstances, but with himself. As biblical commentator James Luther Mays observes, “Many. . . prayers for help say, ‘Change my situation so I may praise you.’ But [Psalm 51] says, ‘Change me; I’m the problem.’”²

The psalmist assumes that God is able to “wipe away all [his] guilty deeds” (verse 9) and recreate his heart and spirit.

The word “spirit” appears three times: faithful spirit (verse 10), holy spirit (verse 11), willing spirit (verse 12). The first and third uses refer

to the inner attitude that the psalmist is asking God to put within him. The “holy spirit”—one of only two uses of this term in the Old Testament (the other is Isaiah 63:10-11), is not likely intended as a formulation for the third person in the Trinity but rather as a reference to the characteristic of God the psalmist seeks as his abiding companion.

In verse 10, the psalmist asks God to “create a clean heart for me, God.” In biblical vocabulary, the heart is the part of one’s being through which one’s spiritual condition and direction is expressed. The psalmist is not saying he never had a clean heart but that it is now ruined and dirty beyond repair. The only hope going forward is for God to create for him a new one.

The Hebrew word underlying “create” is *bârâ*, referring to God’s creation of the world. Throughout the Old Testament, *bârâ* is used exclusively for the activity of God. The word appears often in the opening chapters of Genesis, but it also occurs in Deuteronomy 4:32; Psalm 89:47; Isaiah 40:26; Jeremiah 31:22; Ezekiel 21:30; Amos 4:13; Malachi 2:10, and other verses, always alluding to the fundamental newness and uniqueness of what only God brings into being. Here we find it in Psalm 51, in a prayer of confession and plea for spiritual newness.

Verse 12’s “Return the joy of your salvation to me” indicates that this psalm is not the prayer of someone who is making a first approach to God but rather someone who has already known the goodness of being in sync with God. Sin has spoiled that, and thus the confession contained in this psalm is to seek that joy’s return.

Verses 16-17. Although only verse 17 is included in the focal passage for this lesson,

that verse flows from verse 16 where the psalmist acknowledges that a formal sacrifice—a burnt offering—will not suffice to atone for his wrongdoing. Instead, his “broken spirit” and “[broken] heart” are the sacrifice. Those inner changes will certainly result in outer changes that reflect the clean heart God has created in him.

Reflect

Preparation

Beforehand, arrange for class members to be able to read a prayer from *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (476). You can make paper copies for everyone, project the prayer on a screen, or write it out on a large sheet of paper and post it in your classroom.

Provide enough Bibles of the same version so that every class member can have one to use.

The Bad Fit of Prayers of Confession

When class members have gathered, begin by saying something like this:

- “Over the centuries, one of the means the church has presented to us for fixing our relationship with God when it has been broken by our wrongdoing is the prayer of confession. In some churches, the entire congregation prays a prayer of confession aloud as a regular part of the Sunday worship service. Many Communion rituals also include prayers of confession. Some people object to such general prayers, however, because many of them seem not to be a good fit for each person present. Consider, for example, this one taken from our own denominational prayer book.”

Then hand out or project the prayer in the form you’ve prepared it.

Ask: *What do you see in this prayer that you feel is not a good fit for you?*

Discuss whatever members offer. Ask: *Do you ever have any similar reactions to prayers offered in worship?*

After members have given their answers, offer this regarding my thoughts about this prayer of confession:

- The writer of the teacher book explains: “Admittedly, some of my thoughts about this prayer may actually be attempts to excuse myself (which is one reason why I need to pray prayers of confession), but other of my objections may have some validity. Take, for example, my objection to the line ‘We have not loved you with all our heart and mind and soul and strength.’ My problem with it is that it is so absolute in its wording; it refuses to recognize that I am trying to love God with all my heart and mind and soul and strength.”

Ask: *If these prayers are imperfect fits, what is the value of praying them?* (Answers might include that they provide models for prayers that can be tailored to our specific sins and that they acknowledge the gap between where we are and who God calls us to be.)

Then tell the hospital-gown story from “Connect” and ask for reactions to it.

Exploring Psalm 51

Explain that Psalm 51 is traditionally considered to be David’s prayer of confession after his sin against Bathsheba and Uriah. Ask a volunteer to read aloud the first few paragraphs of “King David’s Confession” in the student book.

After you’ve reviewed that story, ask the volunteer to read aloud the last few paragraphs, beginning from, “After Nathan told David . . .”

Discuss the questions at the end of that section: *Has God ever opened your eyes to your sin by speaking through another person? If so, how did you respond?*

Distribute Bibles, and ask everyone to turn to Psalm 51. Read verse 1. Then, using the material from “Psalm 51:1” in this book, note the three Hebrew words the psalmist used about God’s character: *hanan*, *hesed*, and *rahamîm*. Explain what they say about the nature of God.

Now read aloud verses 2-4. Then, using the material from the corresponding subsection, note the three Hebrew words the psalmist used about his sin: *'awon*, *hatta't*, and *pesha'*. Explain the differences in each term.

Ask everyone to turn to “I Know My Wrongdoings” in the student book and read silently the last few paragraphs, beginning, “It takes courage to confess . . .”

Ask everyone to respond silently to the two questions at the end of that section: *What wrongdoings do you need to confess before God? How have you experienced forgiveness and freedom from the burden of sin?* Invite anyone who wishes to share their answers to do so, but don’t pressure anyone.

Using the information from “Verses 9-12” and “Verses 16-17” in this book, explain that a prayer of confession for sin not only states the sinfulness, but asks God for forgiveness and acknowledges an intention to do differently henceforth.

Tell class members that prayers of confession make two things clear to us:

- First, God cuts through our excuses. Many of our objections to prayers of confession are rationalizations to let ourselves off the hook, like the person who doesn't want to admit to the doctor what symptoms he or she is having. But the examination the hospital-gown prayer allows enables us see where God's remedial work is needed. Such prayers don't expose our moral nakedness to others, but they do help us be aware of it.
- Second, prayers of confession make clear that Christianity is not primarily about our sins but about God's grace. That's why, in the traditional design of worship services, prayers of confession do not stand alone, but are followed by words of assurance or by a declaration of pardon. The statements convey that God's intention is that we turn in our hospital gowns and be clothed instead in the finely-tailored garments of righteousness.

Praying Psalm 51

Ask class members to look at Psalm 51. While each person follows the reading in his or her own copy, ask a volunteer to read aloud verses 1-5, 9-12, 17.

Now ask class members to point out phrases from those verses that may not be a good fit for everyone. When they have finished, ask them to point out phrases that apply to all. (*Its petitions to make the penitent desire truth inside, to be washed morally clean again, to have a right spirit installed within, and so on, do fit us in the ways that matter.*)

Remind members that confession is the spiritual practice we are focusing on in this series of lessons and that while not all confession is about sin, much of it is.

Now read to the class the first few paragraphs from "Holy Time" in the student book. Then ask everyone to read Psalm 51:1-17 aloud together in an attitude of prayer.

¹From *He Sent Leanness*, by David Head (Macmillan, 1959, third printing, 1965); page 19.

²From *Psalms*, by James Luther Mays, in the Interpretation commentary series (John Knox Press, 1994); page 202.

Declarations of Pardon

In the traditional design of worship services, prayers of confession do not stand alone but are followed by words of assurance or by a declaration of pardon. Some are directly from Scripture. Others are in pronouncements from the worship leader, and some combine both. Here are some samples:

May almighty God, who caused light to shine out of darkness, shine in our hearts cleansing us from all our sins and restoring us to the light of the knowledge of God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Leader to people: Hear the good news: Christ died for us while we were yet sinners; that proves God's love toward us. In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!

People to leader: In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!

Leader and people: Glory to God. Amen.

This is the message that we have heard from him and announce to you: "God is light and there is no darkness in him at all." . . . But if we live in the light in the same way as he is in the light, we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from every sin. (1 John 1:5, 7)

The LORD is merciful and compassionate, very patient, and full of faithful love. (Psalm 145:8)

May the almighty and merciful Lord grant us remission of all our sins, true repentance, amendment of life, and the grace and consolation of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Leader: God turns us around, opens our eyes, renews our faith, forgives our sins. We are truly blessed.

People: Thanks be to God!

Leader: The transforming love and power of God seen in the unexpected surprises of Christmas and Easter are available to us today. In the name of Jesus Christ, our sins are forgiven.

People: Thanks be to God!

Leader: Jesus gave the most extravagant gift of all—the offering of himself for us. Through this selfless gift, we are set free, and our sins are forgiven.

People: Thanks be to God!

Reprinted from *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, page 476; "A Service for Word and Table I" in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, page 8; *Book of Worship*, 475; *The Sourcebook of Worship Resources*, Volume 3 (Communication Resources, 2001); page 102, #79 and #80.

Wesleyan Core Term:

Conviction of Sin

Wesley was convinced that living truthfully is a mark of God's grace in our lives. God is actively at work, moving in and through the messiness of things, illuminating our lives, and prompting our desire to see what is really going on. Because we are created in God's image and our destiny is to be restored to the fullness of that image, we need to discern our responsibility in refusing and failing to live according to God's good purposes. We need to acknowledge that we are incapable of resolving things according

to our own wisdom and power. According to Wesley, God's prevenient (preventing) grace assists us to be honest with God, ourselves, and others. This requires humility, and a desire to change our minds and the direction of our lives and characters. Wesley believed that the Holy Spirit empowers this turning in a manner that fully respects and enables the workings of our human capacities.

Reprinted from *The Wesley Study Bible*, NRSV (Abingdon Press, 2009); page 690.

Practicing Lectio Divina: Psalm 51

Reflective reading of the Bible to lead us into prayer has been a practice in the church from the earliest centuries. It can take many forms, from singing the Psalms as a community, to reciting the Lord's Prayer, to a systematic reading of each section of a book with pauses for reflection and prayer. This last method is often called *lectio divina*, from the Latin for "divine reading." Spiritual writers describe it in a variety of ways, but all agree that it has a definite pattern to it. That pattern is described here briefly as four steps:

1. a slow and thoughtful reading of a passage from the Bible
2. a time of reflection and thinking about the meaning of that text to me as a reader

3. a period of prayer to God to bring its message or wisdom to fruit in myself
4. a decision on what I should do in my own life as a result—that is, an action plan or decision to change or improve

Reprinted from "How To Practice Lectio Divina," by Lawrence Boadt, CSP, in *The CEB Lectio Divina Prayer Bible* (Common English Bible, 2018).

Consider not only practicing *lectio divina* personally but also guiding class members in this experience, using the suggestions below.

Read Psalm 51

In this most beloved of the "Penitential Psalms," the psalmist captures all of the dimensions of the sinner's true repentance: a thorough

acknowledgment of one's guilt, the reasonableness of the punishment deserved, but at the same time a heartfelt hope in the mercy of God, a concrete vision of a new life of grace in communion with others, and the firm desire to embrace that life as an undeserved but welcome gift.

Reflect

It is better to be a saved sinner than an insecure defender of my own righteousness.

Pray

Lord, with a clear vision of my broken self, I rely on your mercy and accept the gift of the new life that you offer me.

Act

I will acknowledge the ways in which I am still struggling with God.

From *The CEB Lectio Divina Prayer Bible*, pages 695-696.