

A CHANGE OF HEART
Psalm 51:1-12
(The Three C Outline from
Randall O'Brien's book, *Set Free by Forgiveness*)

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Even a junk yard looks pristine after the freshly fallen snow. Everything is covered in a blanket of white. Where there was a pile of old tires, there is a beautiful white hill. Where there was a front yard barren of grass, there is a beautiful covering, a white blanket. And after the snow, your yard looks just as good as your neighbor's yard, despite the fact he has a lawn in the spring that looks like a putting green. Doesn't matter after the snow. Everybody is even. Everybody is equal. It all looks the same.

It seems to me that after a snow – and I mean a really good snow – it seems as if God, in His own way, has painted the world pristine white.

I like to listen to the snow, too. Hearing silence as it covers the ground, as if to say, “All is covered.”

I like to look at the snow-covered ground before anyone walks in it – not a footstep, not a dog's paw, not even a bird's tracks. Perfect, even, and smooth.

When it snows, the world of dark, dingy, and dirty sinfulness is covered with the grace of God. Snow. An image of God's grace.

David wanted a snow storm. David wanted that silent white – that snow white – that only God's grace can bring in his life after sin. Perhaps it was his sin with Bathsheba. I don't know. No scholar can be sure. But whatever it was (and it doesn't even matter that we know – God knew and David knew), David was ready to be rid of it. He was ready for the white of the freshly fallen snow.

Look at verse 7.

Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

People who wear sunglasses in the summer get them out again when it snows. Snow is a bright white, beyond compare.

David is calling out, “Lord, come into my stained life and wash me and make me clean. Make me like the white of snow.”

Karin Albert says all of us have things in our hearts that can leave us convinced that we are somehow unforgivable, unqualified, cut off from the full measure of inheritance that God has for us. Maybe something happened in our life a long time ago, like an abortion that few people know about. Or maybe it's a long-term struggle with a secret sin. Or maybe, she writes, it's just a case of feeling terminally unique, that subtle feeling that somehow we're the only creature in God's whole creation who cannot be fully forgiven.

The problem is that refusing to receive God's snowstorm of grace leaves us with hearts of stone. As long as we leave ourselves under a load of shame and condemnation, our ability to work for the kingdom of God is cut short. As long as we accept the lie of Satan that somehow God's grace won't heal this one, that the death of Jesus can't remedy that one, then we are hamstrung in our work for God's kingdom.

The theological truth of the matter is that once we confess our sins before God, it's not our place to decide whether or what or how much God forgives us. That's God's choice. And He has already given us His decision in His word. (adapted from "You can't abort God's forgiveness," Karin Albert's web page, 1/22/00, employees.org/~karin/cant-abort-gods-forgiveness.html)

As we look at the psalm, I want us to look at the process of receiving forgiveness.

Randall O'Brien has said, "If God were not willing to forgive sin, heaven would be empty." (O'Brien, *Set Free By Forgiveness*, p. 107)

I know, I know it's true – God doesn't owe us one thing. Not a dime's worth of forgiveness, not a nickel's worth of grace. We've been given a copy of the rule book. We know the commandments. But we have chosen to eat of the tree of death, rather than God's good tree of life.

God owes us nothing. Yet God is willing to give so much.

I want us to look at the three C's of sin.

I. Consciousness of Sin

It's that moment when we stop denying and openly admit our wrongdoing.

I John 1:8-9 says, "If we say we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

When we pretend we're not sinners, then we are liars. It is only when we confess that He can forgive.

The first C is consciousness of sin.

When I share the gospel with children in my office – one of the delights of my job – we talk about the subject of sin. I’m here to tell you that we’re raising a generation of children who really do not have a concept of sin. They have exchanged the word sin for the word mistake.

“Who has sinned?” I ask the child.

“Well, everybody has made a mistake.”

There is a difference between a mistake and a sin. Sin can be, and often is, willful disobedience against God. One child said – probably the best definition of sin I’ve ever heard – “It’s when we do things our way instead of God’s way.” That’s it, isn’t it. God said, “Don’t eat of that tree,” but we do it our way. God says be patient, work hard, you can have it. We want immediate gratification, and we become a thief. We want an easy way out, and we become a liar.

We really don’t want to admit our sin. Our criminals are sick. Our politicians don’t sin, but have indiscretions. There is an avalanche of euphemisms under which we bury the word sin.

Newsweek printed an article entitled, “Pick and Choose Christianity.” There is a cafeteria-style approach to Christianity that is evolving before our very eyes. Today, when it comes to God’s word, we take what we want and leave behind what we don’t desire. And one of the things we are leaving behind is a consciousness of sin. In this article, only 57 percent of those surveyed accepted the notion that all people are sinful. Thirty-three percent said, “Well, they make mistakes, but they certainly aren’t sinful.”

The real problem with casting aside sin is that with it you cast aside the Savior. No sin – no salvation, no Savior.

Scripture says if we say we have no sin, we are a liar.

I remember sharing with one child. I said, “Who sinned? Have you sinned?” And the child said, “Yes.”

I said, “Have I sinned?” – pointing to me. The child said, “Yes.”

I said, “Well, has your daddy sinned?” “Yes.”

“How about your mother?”

“Oh no, not my mother.”

Well, the young man was sure that his daddy and I were sinners, but mom lived above the problem of sin. A wonderful estimation of his mother, but the truth is even his mother – even you – have sinned.

We have to be conscious of our sin.

Look at Psalm 51:3
For I know my transgressions,
And my sin is ever before me.

Not denying. Not hiding. Not covering up. But having a consciousness of sin.

The strongest word for sin is “transgression.” It means rebellion. We are all rebellious children of God the Father.

We’ve all sinned, and the wages of our sin are death.

II. Confession of Sin

A Presbyterian minister told the story about his first year at a certain congregation. His predecessor had abolished the general confession of sins from the Sunday liturgy. One of the first things the new pastor did was try to reinstate the confession. There was a lot of resistance to change in that church – as there usually is in churches. Some members thought the confession of sins was just too morbid a thing to do in church, where one’s spirits were supposed to be lifted up. During the heat of the debate, one woman, an elder in the church, exclaimed, “But I don’t have to apologize to God for anything!” The pastor was dumbfounded. His seminary training had not prepared him for this, he told a friend.

What could she possibly have meant by saying she didn’t have to apologize to God? Did she mean that she hadn’t committed any of the big sins and, therefore, had no real need to apologize? She might have meant that, but she would have been wrong, because anger is God’s concern as much as murder, and lust as much as adultery. So she’d be in trouble on those accounts.

She might have meant that her apology is due to the person against whom she had sinned or transgressed, and she hadn’t sinned against God. Perhaps she had forgotten the cry of the Psalmist when he said, concerning his own sin, “Against you, God, and you only have I sinned and done this evil in your sight.” All sin is sin against God. (Miroslav Volf, “Is it God’s Business?” *Christian Century*, 11/8/2000)

The second C in the process of dealing with sin is confession of sin.

In 1 John it went this way: “If we say we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.” We need to be conscious of our sins, but then it says, “If we confess our sins....” We need to confess our sins. Is there any other way to experience the snow white that David desires – the freedom from sin, the joy of a clean slate – other than confessing the sins of which we are conscious?

You have to be conscious of your sin first. But confession is more than just being conscious of it. There are a lot of people aware of their sin who don’t confess it. “Confess our sins” means that we want to do things differently. We no longer want to do them our way because our way doesn’t work. Rather, we want to do them God’s way. Guilt is not grace, and remorse is not repentance.

It's different. First we have the consciousness, the guilt and the remorse. But then comes the grace with repentance.

Not just consciousness, but confession. Look what David does. He confesses. "God, I have sinned against You. I have done evil in your sight. You're blameless when you judge me, God (v. 4). I am a sinner from way back" (v. 5).

He confesses his sin. He has a contrite and broken heart. Look at verse 17, which we didn't read. "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise."

You don't stand as a stoic when you confess your sin. You might cry. You might laugh out loud. You might groan or fall on your face or shout for joy with relief. But you won't be defensive or angry or proud or bitter, because confession and contrition go together. A contrite heart makes no demands to the Father but, rather, lays out the sin.

III. Cleansing from sin.

John Grisham writes these words in *The Testament*: **The young man [in the pulpit] was praying, his eyes clenched tightly, his arms waving gently upward. Nate [the alcoholic attorney] closed his eyes too, and called God's name. God was waiting.**

With both hands, he clenched the back of the pew in front of him. He repeated the list, mumbling softly every weakness and flaw and affliction that plagued him. He confessed them all. In one long glorious acknowledgment of failure, he laid himself bare before God. He held nothing back. He unloaded enough burdens to crush any three men, and when he finally finished, Nate had tears in his eyes. "I'm sorry," he whispered to God. "Please help me."

As quickly as the fever had left his body, he felt the baggage leave his soul. With one gentle brush of the hand, his slate had been wiped clean. He breathed a massive sigh of relief, but his pulse was racing.

He heard the guitar again. He opened his eyes and wiped his cheeks. Instead of seeing the young man in the pulpit, Nate saw the face of Christ, in agony and pain, dying on the cross. Dying for him. (John Grisham, *The Testament*, p. 306)

There is a final C – cleansing from sin. That's what David really wants, isn't it?

Verse 2.

Wash me from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

Verse 7

Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean.

Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.

He wants to be cleansed. Look at verse 10 – **“Create in me a clean heart, O God.”**

He said it. John said it in 1 John 9, didn't he? “If we say we have no sin we are a liar, but if we confess our sins He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and – here's the word – cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Consciousness. Confession. Cleansing.

You see what happens after confession?

The formula cannot be broken. Every sin we commit must be paid for. Either we will pay for it or Christ will pay for it.

Will you let Christ pay for your sins today? He died on the cross.

How far have you gone in mismanaging your life? However far you've messed up your marriage, however far you've ruined your reputation, however far you've compromised your morals, however far you've gone away from the Father – Christ calls you to the cross for consciousness, confession, and cleansing.

What we need around here is a really good snow storm – the kind of snow David was looking for. A snow white snow storm.

[Pastor reaches down to a heavy duffle bag, pulls it to the edge of the platform, sits down on the platform, opens it up, and takes out rocks in ascending size, speaking about the burdens of sins past – that sometimes, we just don't let go.]

I bet you've got your backpack full of boulders, too. Sins that you refuse to let go. When you hold on to sins of the past, you are discounting what God has done for you in the gift of His Son on the cross. When you continue to carry around the guilt of yesterday, God looks down and says, “I have given the life of My very Son; what more would you require of Me?”

What is it that God would have to do for you to be willing to let go of your sins? To drag your baggage to the foot of Calvary? To leave it there and to walk away?

There is an unmarked tombstone outside of Sidney, New York. It has but one word – three syllables. “Forgiven.”

Forgiven. In reality, that's the only thing that makes God's people different from any other people. Through Christ, we are forgiven. We've acknowledged our sins. We've confessed. And we are cleansed.

We are forgiven.