

HOMILY ON PSALM 51: "WASH ME THROUGH AND THROUGH", ASH WEDNESDAY SPLC By. Pr. Daniel

The great British preacher Charles Spurgeon calls Psalm 51 a matchless psalm well-suited for an assembly of those poor in spirit. This psalm is most loved because it is an epitome of God's great mercy and great confession of King David. There are languages in it that can still be used in our confession.

Psalm 51 is the Psalm we know for sure that it was composed/sung by King David. We also know that it is mainly a song of repentance, not a song of praise or thanksgiving. It is very deep, meaningful, and powerful song of confession. We all know that David committed sin. He is a singer and has many songs. Some of them are songs of praise, joy, and victory, some are songs that come out of dark nights, broken hearts, and great failures. Psalm 51 is one of them. This has been the experience of the people of God. There is no book like the bible that shows both strength and weakness, success, and failures of people in a very honest manner. We read not only the great things David has done, but also the great mistakes he has made. All the great figures in the bible have their own share of failures. We are encouraged by their strength and learn from their failures. The bible is not just the book of praise. Even the Psalms are not all the songs of praise: 65-67 of them are called Psalms of lament. There are all kinds of songs that we may need to sing along the way: songs of joy, lament, affliction, etc. There are seven penitential psalms, but Psalm 51 seems to be the chief one of the seven.

Psalm 51 is full of tears and sighs. David feels the depth of his sin before God. He says: "Wash me through and through." This means wash me again and again and again. I do not see any other text in the whole bible that may teach us what it means to come to grips with one's sin, to confess and repent with whole heart and deepest humility. What a confession when the king of Israel cries for his sin. God looks at the internal than external.

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In the gospel text assigned for today, Jesus cautions against doing anything to be praised by others, to be seen by others, and to show ourselves. Jesus strongly criticizes the sin of hypocrisy, doing things for a show. Of course, David has not come to this point easily. He was confronted by a prophet Nathan who boldly told him that he had sinned. The divine word awakened his conscience and made him see the greatness of his guilt: "For I know my offenses". This Psalm was written after that. Even repentance itself is not a purely human act. We need divine help to see, confess, and repent of our sin. Finally, he acknowledges his wrong actions: "For my sin is ever before me."

David cries out for God's mercy: "Have mercy on me." We need to ask for forgiveness to receive forgiveness: "No one who conceals transgressions will prosper, but one who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy." It is God's forgiveness that enables us to stand before God to worship, pray, sing, preach, etc. Forgiveness is the gate of heaven. There is no other way around. This forgiveness is not based on our good works. Good works are the outcome of the forgiveness. Good works may not come before forgiveness. The change of mind or direction follows confession. Repentance comes from the Greek word, *metanoia*, which means a change of mind or direction: "..., one who forsakes them..." It is about learning a new way of thinking and changing our behavior to accord with the new understanding.

Then he starts to confess the depth of his sin: "A sinner from my mother's womb." As we know, in our liturgy, we start with confession: we are in bondage to sin and we cannot free ourselves; if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. Then David asks for God's cleansing: "Remove my sins with hyssop." It is a metaphor for the cleansing power of God's mercy. He is confident that God's mercy is far greater and deeper than his sin. This reminds us of the power of the blood of Jesus Christ – the Paschal Lamb.

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David does not try to blame anyone else for his sin. He does not try to give an excuse for his sin. When he says I am a sinner from my mother's womb, he does not mean to shift the blame to his mother. He does not blame God either: "Against you, only you, have I sinned." He places the blame squarely on himself even though there are links in the chain leading to his sinful actions. It is as if he said, not only have I sinned this time, but I am in my very nature a sinner. We sin because we are sinners in our nature. Lent is a solemn moment of confession and devotion. We start that journey today. In hymn 319, we sang "Throughout these forty days ... teach us to overcome our sins and close by you to stay." May God give us strength to finish this journey with victory and joy. Amen.