

Create in Me a Clean Heart

Psalms 51

October 4, 2026 — New Baptist Church
Pastor Trent Eastman

Introduction

We are currently working our way through the book of Psalms, and today we come to Psalm 51 — one of the great psalms of the Bible. In it we encounter the theological themes of mercy, holiness, and justice. But it is also a psalm that holds up a mirror to the human condition and, in doing so, reveals our need for a Savior. The superscription tells us the context plainly: *“To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.”*

A Man After God’s Own Heart

We are told that David was a man after God’s own heart. I believe we see that truth most clearly in this psalm. What defined David as a man after God’s own heart was not that he never sinned, but that he trusted the Lord even in his sin.

If you know the story of David, you know that trusting God with his sin was not his first instinct. After his sin with Bathsheba, David tried to cover it up — and his cover-up led him to arrange the death of her husband, Uriah. Technically speaking, David stood guilty of adultery and murder, two offenses that carried the death penalty under the law. After Uriah died, David apparently believed he had gotten away with it. But then Nathan the prophet came and told a story so skillfully that David exposed his own guilt before he knew what was happening. The confession that followed is recorded in 2 Samuel 12:13:

“David said to Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the LORD.’ And Nathan said to David, ‘The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die.’”

David writes this psalm after being told his sin is forgiven. He is grateful for that — genuinely and deeply grateful. But as a man after God’s own heart, he realizes there is something more that he needs. He needs what is in him, his very heart, to be made right. With that in mind, let us read Psalm 51.

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

Notice how David approaches God — not on the basis of his own merit, but on the basis of God’s character. David knows who the Lord is. He has heard those words from Sinai: that the LORD God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, that he forgives iniquity and transgression and sin (Exodus 34:6). So David comes to the Lord carrying his own iniquity and transgression and sin, and he prays: *blot out my transgressions, wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, cleanse me from my sin.*

Have you ever stopped to think carefully about what those words actually mean? In Scripture they are often used interchangeably to describe wrongdoing in general. But sometimes — and I think Psalm 51 is one of those times — the distinct meaning of each word gives us an important glimpse into our own souls.

Three Words That Diagnose the Human Condition

The Hebrew word for *sin* is *chata*), and it means “to miss the mark, to go wrong, to fail in one’s duty.” There is a standard, and sin is what happens when my actions do not line up with that standard. It is almost a technical term of measurement. The law tells me what is required: do not lie, do not steal, do not covet, do not commit adultery, do not take the Lord’s name in vain, worship the Lord your God alone. This is the standard against which we are measured, and when we fall short of it, we have sinned.

The second word, *transgression*, is *pesh’a*) in Hebrew, and its basic meaning is revolt, rebellion, or the breaking of trust. Consider what makes David’s sin so particularly ugly: Uriah, the man David had killed, was one of David’s Mighty Men — someone who loved David, trusted him completely, and would have died for him willingly. David betrayed that trust, and Uriah died because of it. That is transgression: the violation of a bond of trust and faithfulness.

And this is not a narrow concept. Every relationship we have functions on some basis of trust. Every conversation, every financial transaction, every time we get behind the wheel of a car — we are operating on some level of trust in other people. We trust people to keep their word, to drive safely, to be honest, not to cut the line. When they fail to do so, when they are reckless or dishonest or careless, their actions negatively impact others. That negative impact through the breaking of trust is the idea behind transgression. Applied to our relationship with God, a transgression happens when we break faith with the Lord — when we reject his rightful authority or act unfaithfully with what he has entrusted to us. David transgressed against God

when he used the authority God gave him to govern his people and turned it to take another man's wife and arrange that man's murder. Not only was that a sin — a falling short of the standard — it was a transgression: a breaking of faith.

The third word is *iniquity*, עֲוֹנוֹ (ʿāwōn) in Hebrew, and it takes us deepest of all. The root of this word means “to bend, twist, or distort.” Sin describes falling short of the standard. Transgression describes breaking faith or violating trust. But iniquity describes something within us that is no longer straight. Think of a piece of metal that has been bent. You can see it immediately, because it no longer conforms to what it was designed to be. In the same way, iniquity describes the distortion of our desires, our loves, our motives — even the way we see the world. We do not simply do wrong things; something within the human heart has become disordered.

And this is exactly what we see in David. His adultery with Bathsheba did not appear suddenly out of nowhere. Before there was adultery, there was a desire that had become twisted. Before there was murder, there was a heart willing to value David's own reputation and desires above the life of another man. His actions were sinful, and they violated trust, but beneath those actions lay something deeper: David wanted the wrong thing, in the wrong way, and was willing to distort everything around him in order to have it. That is iniquity. And it is the human condition.

Against You Only

With those words in mind, we read on.

Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.

Many people ask: how can David say he only sinned against God? He sinned against Bathsheba and Uriah. As king, his actions rippled through the entire kingdom. And I think David would agree. He would say, yes, I have wronged many people; I have broken trust with those I was anointed to serve. He would not deny that.

But when it comes to *sin* — when it comes to the question of a standard — who sets the standard? We live in a day when many people say something is only a sin if someone else gets hurt, that is, only if it is a transgression. If what I do doesn't harm anyone, what is wrong with it? And coupled with this view is the assumption that different people operate by different standards, that the standard is ultimately personal.

I am sure there were people whispering to David: you are the king; you set the standard. Be true to yourself. But David says otherwise. The only true standard against which a life can be

measured is the one set by God, and that is the standard he has fallen short of. *Against you, you only, have I sinned.*

And then he tells us why this is so.

| *Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.*

David is not throwing his mother under the bus or blaming his upbringing. He is saying something far more sobering: from the moment of his birth, he has carried this condition. A distorted heart. A twistedness that causes him to shun God's law and do what seems right in his own eyes — which is precisely the wrong standard. His problem is more than a record of wrongdoing, as serious as that record is. He suffers from a condition of iniquity. And it is this twisted heart that he needs the Lord to change.

| *Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.*

Create in Me a Clean Heart

And so he prays.

| *Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice. Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.*

Notice what David is praying. He describes his iniquity as a stained garment — something unclean that needs to be washed, a condition he cannot change on his own. He is praying for forgiveness, yes — *hide your face from my sins* — and he already knows God has granted it. Nathan told him: “*The LORD also has put away your sin.*” David knows God's forgiveness. But David longs for more than the removal of guilt. He wants God to change the heart from which his sin came.

It is as if David is saying: Lord, I am so grateful that you forgive my sins, over and over and over again. But I am tired of failing you. I am tired of falling short. And so I am asking for something more than forgiveness. I am asking you to change my heart. Make it clean, make it new, make my life a home for your Spirit to dwell in.

Today, perhaps David's prayer needs to become your prayer. You love the Lord — you really do. You are grateful for his forgiveness. You know that Christ died for your sins. And yet there are places in your life where you are simply tired of coming back to God with the same confession.

Lord, here I am again. I lost my temper again. I said something I wish I could take back. I went back to something I promised I would leave behind. I let jealousy get hold of me again. I worried myself sick. I looked at something I should not have looked at. Lord, here I am again.

Create in me a clean heart. Renew a right spirit within me.

Notice the verb David chooses. Not *restore*. Not *repair*. Not *help me clean up the mess*. He says *create* — the same word used in Genesis 1 for what only God can do. He is not asking God to give him a little more willpower. He has realized that he cannot untwist what is twisted in him. Only the God who spoke life into darkness can make a clean heart in him, in me, and in you.

And he does.

This is the gospel. David's prayer is answered in Christ. Jesus did not come merely to forgive the bad things we have done; he came to make us new. At the cross, he took upon himself the guilt of our sin, our transgression, and our iniquity. He bore the judgment that was ours, and through his resurrection he opened the way to a new life. The gospel is not that God wipes the slate clean and sends us back out to try harder. The gospel is that in Christ, God gives us a new heart, a new Spirit, a new life. What you cannot untwist, Christ can redeem. What you cannot cleanse, Christ can wash. What you cannot recreate, Christ can make new.

And in Christ, when the Holy Spirit is given, he is not taken away. David had watched the Spirit depart from King Saul, and he feared the same for himself — *take not your Holy Spirit from me*. But for us, the Spirit has been given as a guarantee. What David prayed God not to take away is, in Christ, secured forever.

Then

The second half of the psalm turns on a single word: *then*.

Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you. Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.

Everything David desires to do — the teaching, the singing, the praise — flows out of what God has done first. *Then*. Because of. In response to. And in case we missed it, David says it again.

For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; build up the walls of Jerusalem; then will you delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

So which is it, David — does God delight in sacrifices or not? The answer, of course, is that the worship God delights in is not the outward action but the heart from which that action flows. A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. That is where worship begins. Not in what we bring, but in who we are before him when we bring it.

The Table

There is a reason I wanted to preach this psalm today. Today is Communion Sunday. And it is here at the table that we see God's answer to David's prayer — answered fully and finally in Christ.

Jesus alone met God's standard. Jesus alone never broke faith. He was obedient to the Father even unto death. His heart was never twisted. As he said to the rich young ruler, only God is good — and he is God.

And yet, as Isaiah says:

But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.

Did you hear it? Our transgressions. Our sins. Our iniquity. Everything David confessed in this psalm, and everything you and I bring to God, was laid on Jesus at the cross. And by his wounds we are healed — healed all the way down to the deepest thing wrong with us. Not only our guilt before God, but the twisted heart from which our sin flows. This is the healing David was praying for.

You may be thinking: Pastor, I have prayed the prayer. But I still struggle with the old me, the old heart. Why? There is a great deal of answer packed into two words: regeneration and

sanctification. A new heart does not mean the absence of struggle; it means there is now a new power, a new desire, and a new direction within the struggle. Regeneration is God's decisive work of making us new; sanctification is his continuing work of conforming that new life to Christ. And so, even with a new heart, we never stop needing him — we depend on him all the more.

This is why we come to the Lord's table. It is a time and a place to confess our need and to trust him in his saving, life-giving provision for us. It is here we are reminded again: his body was given for us, his blood was shed for us, and the God who forgives us is still at work renewing us.

So as we come to communion, let David's prayer become your prayer once more:

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.