

**SERMON TITLE:** “The Gift of Forgiveness”

**TEXT:** Psalm 32

**PREACHED AT:** Neighbourhood Church

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### Introduction (Why Sermons?)

We have spent eight weeks looking at the Gospels, and Jesus’ parables announcing the kingdom of God. We have seen how Jesus used stories to invite people into a new reality, to announce a new way of living and thinking and loving and hoping than many were expecting.

Last week, our guest speaker David Warkentin looked at several passages from 1 John, and talked about choosing to live in love and unity in the context of a world saturated by choice and competing ideologies.

So where to next?

As I was thinking about how to approach this Sunday, I thought another question worth asking might be *why* to next? Many of you have listened to a lot of sermons. I certainly have. Why? Why do we do this each Sunday morning?

What is the point of a sermon, anyway? Is it to entertain? To impress? To inspire? Motivate? To provide three principles to apply to your life in the week ahead? Is it just twenty-five minutes to endure on Sunday mornings?

In many ways I see living a life of faith as like learning a new language—a new way of looking at the world. Except this language takes a lifetime to learn fluently!

A few weeks ago, I mentioned a phrase I recently heard at a wedding. As the pastor was praying for this couple that was embarking on their first steps as husband and wife, he prayed that they would be drawn together, strengthened, and united by the “slow wheel of intimacy.”

I like that picture: “the slow wheel of intimacy.” For me, it serves as a good picture of the life of faith. We are not conformed to the image of Christ in an instant. We do not learn how to inhabit an alternative worldview in a single sermon.

In life, very few things worth having are obtained quickly or come easily!

Instead, over *time*, we are trained to think biblically, to see the world through different lenses—to see as Jesus did and does—and to discern and embrace the kingdom of God in the midst of the kingdoms of this world.

Sermons play a role in this. Is every sermon brilliant or inspiring? Well, much as I would love to think so, the answer is, obviously, no. But over time, they play a role in the “slow

wheel of intimacy” by which God binds us to himself and his purposes.

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### Repent!

We’ve been talking about the kingdom of God a lot over the last little while and one of the words that frequently accompanied Jesus’ announcement of the kingdom was **repent**.

When Jesus announced the kingdom of God, he did not just say, “God is doing this incredible new thing and you’re so fortunate to be around to see it!”

The invitation to participate in the kingdom of God was open to everyone—we’ve seen this throughout our series on the parables—*but* it was accompanied by a call to repent, to turn around, to acknowledge sin, to change your life and align it with God’s purposes.

So today, given that we’ve been spending a lot of time in the gospels and in the NT in general over the last little while, and given that Lent is upon us—a season of repentance and self-assessment—I thought today we would take a trip back to the OT—to the Psalms in particular, and focus on Psalm 32 (from last week’s readings).

So, we’re rewinding a bit—we’re no longer with Jesus, hearing his teaching in the first century Roman-occupied Palestine. We are going back about a thousand years. Israel is not an occupied territory but a nation with a kingdom and a king—David. And King David writes these words in Psalm 32:

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<sup>1</sup> Blessed is the one  
whose transgressions are forgiven,  
whose sins are covered.

<sup>2</sup> Blessed is the one  
whose sin the LORD does not count against them  
and in whose spirit is no deceit.

<sup>3</sup> When I kept silent,  
my bones wasted away  
through my groaning all day long.

<sup>4</sup> For day and night  
your hand was heavy on me;  
my strength was sapped  
as in the heat of summer.

<sup>5</sup> Then I acknowledged my sin to you  
and did not cover up my iniquity.  
I said, “I will confess  
my transgressions to the LORD.”  
And you forgave  
the guilt of my sin.

<sup>6</sup> Therefore let all the faithful pray to you  
while you may be found;  
surely the rising of the mighty waters  
will not reach them.

<sup>7</sup> You are my hiding place;  
you will protect me from trouble  
and surround me with songs of deliverance.

<sup>8</sup> I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;  
I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.

<sup>9</sup> Do not be like the horse or the mule,  
which have no understanding  
but must be controlled by bit and bridle  
or they will not come to you.

<sup>10</sup> Many are the woes of the wicked,  
but the LORD's unfailing love  
surrounds the one who trusts in him.

<sup>11</sup> Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous;  
sing, all you who are upright in heart!

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### Nature, Nurture... and Sin

Sin is not a very popular word in 2011. We don't hear it used very often—even in church! We do not like to think of ourselves as “sinners.” It sounds so gloomy and judgmental—maybe even a bit simplistic!

We know that the causes of our behaviour and thought patterns and choices in life are many and varied and complex. At the most basic level, the current version of you and I is understood to be the product of a combination of “nature” and “nurture”:

- **We know that we are the product of our genes.** Each of us is dealt a very specific “biological hand.” Our dispositions and tendencies often look very much like those of our biological parents. Our biology says a lot about who we are and who we become.

One of the most memorable examples I ever heard of this was in a psychology class in my first year of university. There was a set of identical twins who, for some reason I can't recall, were separated at birth. Thirty years later, these twins were found to have chosen the same careers, had the same number of children, had married women with the same first names, and the list went on, and on...

Biology clearly matters!

- **We know that we are the product of our upbringing.** All of us are the product of the environments in which we were raised. The homes we were raised in, the

siblings we negotiated life with, the schools we went to, the friends we had (or didn't have), the options that were open to us based on our socioeconomic standing, the events that happened to us that were beyond our control, etc, etc, etc

So given this complex mixture of factors that influences the behaviour and choices of each and every person who has ever lived, what are we to make of this "sinner" language?

I mean, sure, we all do things that aren't good or right or helpful or productive, but our behaviour is just the result of our genes and/or our environment anyway, isn't it?

Can't we just blame either our parents or our church, or the bully that tormented us in school, or the dictator-like teacher we had in grade 5, or those painful rejections when we first started looking for a job or that illness we had, or the crippling financial realities we faced when we or our spouse lost our jobs, or the social pressures we faced in university, or the rigid and graceless church we grew up in, or... fill in the blank?

We can't really help ourselves.

Many people think this is true. When I was in university, human behaviour was often explained according to a very clear hierarchy: our choices were the result of social forces beyond our control, social forces were the product of individual choices, which were the product of our biology and our environment, which were just the results of our biological instincts.

It wasn't often explicitly stated, but the picture was one of **determinism**: all behaviour could be explained by biology if you went "down" far enough.

### A Different View of Human Beings

**In Psalm 32, David gives us a very different understanding of human beings than this.**

David may not have had the same understanding of biology and sociology (nature/nurture) as we do, but I don't think he would have denied much about this picture. He knew that bloodlines were important, that children were influenced by their parents' choices, that there was a deep connection between behaviour and context.

Yet David knew that this doesn't tell enough of our stories as human beings. He knew that when we still need to speak of sin.

It is often thought that the more we progress in our understanding of human beings and the influences on human behaviour, the better a picture of human beings we get.

But, perhaps ironically, I think that this Hebrew poet from a thousand years before Christ had a much more dignified and realistic view of human beings than is often found in the most sophisticated universities and academic journals.

Why? Because even though we know that our behaviour is influenced by factors beyond our control, these do not *determine* us. We are still free. And with freedom comes moral responsibility and accountability.

On one level, we don't always like this. We don't like to be told what to do or to be warned that there are consequences for choosing poorly.

**But on the other hand, there is no higher compliment that we can be paid by God than to be told that we are free and that our choices matter. We are not slaves to our genes or our environment!**

We see that our choices matter every day. We are free to sin, and this is painfully obvious. The effects of our freedom are all around us—broken marriages, alienated children, destructive habits, etc, etc

And on a larger level, also, the effects of our freedom continue to reverberate. We see it in oppressive dictatorships in places like Libya and Egypt. We see it in consumerism, the prevalence of pornography, the crudity and nastiness of popular culture and discourse...

We even see it in situations of global catastrophe like Japan, most recently, but also Haiti, Indonesia, India, China, and the list goes on...

Of course we must *never* say that these tragedies are the result of specific sins committed by specific people (although this is done tragically often).

But the Christian story is that somehow the exercise of our freedom, and our sin, has led to a rupture—a fall—that includes nature itself. Creation groans, says Paul in Romans, and even if we don't understand how human sin could possibly have anything to do with plate tectonics and geology, we know at least this much: **the world is not as it ought to be.**

And, more relevantly, David reminds us that **we are not as we ought to be either.** The world is not as it ought to be because we are not as we ought to be and these two truths seem locked into a cyclical, mutually reinforcing death spiral!

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### Anatomy of Confession

But Psalm 32 doesn't just show us that we have (and have taken!) the opportunity to sin. David also models for us that we have the freedom to confess our sins, free to seek (and find) forgiveness.

“Confession” is a word that may have unpleasant connotations. It may bring up images of a tiny little booth where you were supposed to tell someone all of your secret sins. But even if the word has been misused, it is a word that we cannot do without as Christians.

A walk through Psalm 32—a kind of “confession map” (emphasis upon v. 3-5):

- **Verses 1-2:**

Forgiveness leads to happiness, or *blessedness*—seen and even envied by others as blessed or favoured. It a state of affairs that is desirable! Why?

- **Verses 3-4:**

David shows us the effect that unconfessed sin has upon us (physiological and emotional)

I often think of an experience I had on the farm when it comes to the heaviness of sin. I was probably 17-18 years old, and our farm had these irrigation wheel lines that were about a quarter of a mile long each. They were powered by a motor in the middle, and we just moved them across the field bit by bit, every eight hours, to make sure the whole field got covered.

When we finished a field, they had to be rolled ALL the way back to the other side. So one day, my job was to shepherd two of these wheel lines across a field. It took 2-3 hours for one wheel line to make it back across.

Now, I was supposed to make sure that these wheel lines stayed relatively straight as they moved (sometimes, if the crop was a bit taller, the ends lagged behind), and generally make sure everything was working properly.

But what I decided to do *instead*, was to start up the motors, start them both moving, and then go have a nap on the quad! It was a nice sunny day, and it was so boring to just watch these long wheel lines creep across the field... I'd check how things were going in 15-20 minutes.

The only problem with my plan was that one wheel line happened to move faster than the other one. And the one that moved faster was behind the one that moved slower.

So, after a leisurely nap on the quad, I rubbed my eyes and looked out to see how my wheels were moving along, imagine my surprise at discovering that the back line was climbing over top of the front line! What I saw was, basically, two quarter mile long wheel lines becoming one giant tangled metal pretzel!

I have rarely felt that terrified.

I remember the drive back to the farm where I would have to tell my father and my uncles what I had done. The dread was heavy.

I like how Leslie Brandt puts it in his paraphrase of Psalm 32:

Every time I attempt to handle my own guilt—  
by ignoring it, rationalizing it,  
or just running away from it—  
some unseen power or pressure  
from the depths of my being

squeezes my life dry, leaving me empty.

An agricultural example may not be the first that pops to mind for you, but I'm sure that you can think of an example from your own life. Sin is a burden we carry that weighs us down.

- **Verse 5:** The *relief* that comes when we unburden ourselves, when we acknowledge our wrong, when we are honest before God

Back to my farm story. I was expecting to receive a blast of anger from my employers (who happened to be my dad and two of my uncles). And I did, from one of my uncles, who let me know in no uncertain terms how painfully stupid, irresponsible, lazy, etc I was.

But my dad simply looked at me and said, “well, I guess we’ll have to go see what we can do! It’s OK. Everyone makes mistakes.”

This was probably a three-four thousand dollar mistake. But he forgave me.

“I acknowledged my sin... You forgave the guilt of my mistake.”

Miroslav Volf (*Free of Charge*):

*Confession is hard. When I confess that I've committed an offense, I stand exposed, pointing an accusing finger at myself and at the guilt of my offense. Almost instinctively, I want to clothe myself with denials and... explanations. Yet we know that confession is wonderfully freeing. After we confess, we have nothing to hide, nothing to run away from.*

From there on, David explains the benefits of this restored relationship and the importance of maintaining it through confession.

- **Verses 6-7:**

Here we have a reminder to make confession a pattern of living in relationship with God. We are called back to the truth that that God is our refuge, and that safety is to be found in him.

- **Verses 8-9:**

These verses exhort us to learn—to not be like dumb animals!—and to follow instruction. To be *led* by God.

- **Verses 10-11:**

God’s love surrounds those who put their trust in him; right relationship leads to praise and joy!

Confession is not just about dealing with the wrong we have done, but going forward and living in right relationship with God.

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## The Gift of Forgiveness

I heard a sermon last week that talked about the difference between justice, mercy, and grace.

- Justice: Getting what we deserve
- Mercy: *Not* getting what we deserve.
- Grace: Getting what we don't deserve

Forgiveness is a gift. Forgiveness is grace.

Some of may be so familiar with the concept of forgiveness, that we forget just how radical and unnecessary it is.

What sin *deserves* is punishment.

When a wrong is done, a penalty is to be paid. I got a lesson in this yesterday driving home from Victoria when a man in a fluorescent green with a radar gun jacket jumped out from behind a tree and gave me a speeding ticket. I had done something wrong, and now I have to pay a penalty. End of story.

I got justice.

And this is what the sins we commit deserve: justice.

But if we follow David's example of repentance, we get more than justice. We receive mercy and grace—mercy, in not getting the punishment our sins deserve, and grace in being restored and renewed and strengthened to live according to God's purpose.

Ultimately, of course, forgiveness is possible because of Jesus and what he has done in paying the price for our sin on the cross:

John 1:5-9

*<sup>5</sup> This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. <sup>6</sup> If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. <sup>7</sup> But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.*

*<sup>8</sup> If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. <sup>9</sup> If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*

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## Conclusion

So, where does this leave us? What is the “take home value” of Psalm 32? Well, as is the case throughout Scripture, **we are told the truth about God the truth about ourselves, and we are given something to do.**

Three things:

- **The truth about God?**
  - God is gracious and good
- **The truth about ourselves?**
  - It offers us a reminder of our true nature as human beings, loved by God, called to goodness, and *held accountable* for our behaviour.
  - We have been paid the compliment of freedom and accountability
- **The task?**
  - It is a call to repentance—whether we've been walking with God for years or only just considering it for the first time this morning, whether we're In the middle of Lent or the middle of July. We need to be people who confess our sins
    - a. To *not* keeping silent and allowing our sin to consume and burden and destroy us;
    - b. To not be like dumb animals (mule) who don't learn from our mistakes
    - c. To take refuge in the God who longs to protect and sustain us, to instruct us in the way we should go
    - d. Ultimately, to rejoice in the Lord, to be glad that we are loved and forgiven by a God who does not see us as simply the inevitable products of our environment or our genes, but as free moral creatures who can listen for God's voice, who can respond to his invitation to love and obey him, and to serve others.

Thanks be to God.

