

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church
“Blessed is the One Whose Sin is Forgiven”
By Eric Howell
Psalm 32
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Blessed is the one whose sin is forgiven.

If you are a Bible reader, you might recognize the common sort of phrase that begins with ‘blessed.’ And you probably know it from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, what we call the beatitudes. Blessed this one, blessed that one. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven; blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted; blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:2-5). It seems that all sorts of people are blessed in Jesus’ eyes. It’s usually the most unexpected sorts of people—that’s part of Jesus charm—who would have thought before Jesus that the poor in spirit, the mourning, the meek, the merciful, the persecuted would be called blessed? But this is how Jesus starts the Best Sermon Ever Preached—by saying the most unlikely people are those that are blessed by God.

The book of Psalms starts the same way—with a ‘blessed’ statement. It raises the question whether Jesus thought about that when he started His Sermon on the Mount—like it was an echo of the psalms.

The opening of the psalms, Psalm 1:1, “Blessed is the one who walks not in counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners nor sits in the seat of scoffers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on His law he meditates day and night.”

Blessed is that person. Happy is that person. That’s what blessed means. It means happy, not in the passing emotional sense, but in the satisfied, made complete, fulfilled, joyful. It’s a happiness that only comes from living into your purpose, a satisfaction that comes from within, in some deep places in the soul’s ocean.

The person reading the Bible straight through will realize that Psalm 1 immediately follows the comedic tragedy, the tragic comedy, the story of Job. Job was a good man whose life and faith was challenged in just about every way imaginable. He was, in the language of Psalm 1:3, a man planted by streams of water. But the water dried up. And he stayed planted there. The Lord knows the way of the righteous. And Job was a righteous man.

Psalm 32 also begins with a ‘blessed’: “Blessed is the one whose sin is forgiven.” No truer words have been spoken, but contrast that for a moment with Psalm 1. Psalm 1—blessed is the person who doesn’t walk, stand, or sit anywhere near anyone who is wicked, sinful, or scoffs at God. Happy is the one who is a good person, who does what is right, associates with people who make him or her better, plants himself or herself in God’s word and meditates day and night on it. That person is going to be very deeply satisfied. We would expect religious literature to encourage us toward goodness and promise rewards for the achievement of being good. That’s pretty much classic Old Testament theology. If you are good, good things happen to you. If you aren’t good, bad things happen to you. Life pretty much works on this simple algebra.

But now Psalm 32. Blessed is the one who sinned and is forgiven. This is the theme of all of our scripture passages on this Sunday. In Joshua, a disgrace is rolled away and a new time of life has begun; 2 Corinthians declares that if anyone is in Christ a new creation happens: the old has passed away and the new is born. In Luke, Jesus tells the haunting story of the young man who takes his inheritance and squanders it and then returns home with his tail between his legs to the unexpected embrace of a grateful, loving, forgiving father. Usually when we think about sin, we think about the unhappiness it produces, but here there is this thread of scripture that speaks of sin in the most glowing terms. The person who needed to be forgiven . . . and is forgiven . . . is the happiest kind of person, the most blessed kind of person there is.

So you have two kinds of people both of whom are happy—the one who lives right and godly all the time and the one who goes wrong and was rescued from it. If the guiding stories of scripture are any indication, we are all of us at some point in our lives, the second kind of person. We go wrong.

This is the human condition, the human experience. The hard news of humanity is that we are broken, fallen, sinful people whose eyes are not trained on God, whose hearts are not completely His, whose ways are not His ways, whose devotion is not full and complete. We don't WANT to be that way, but like a sheep nibbling its way across a field of enticing clumps of grass, we follow our own ways and our own hearts until we find that we have wandered far away from the good shepherd and from the other sheep and we are lost.

This is what it means to be a sinner. To wander away from where you are supposed to be. Kids understand this. They are constantly being corrected, shaped to be obedient to the rules of life and to live in right relationship with the people that love them most. Mommies and daddies sometimes forget that they make mistakes, too. But not really. Most mommies and daddies, most adults know full well that they are terribly far from perfect. Most people are shackled somewhere by some deep regret and guilt that binds their spirits from being free. To hear, "your sins are forgiven" would be the most joy-filled liberation imaginable.

"Blessed is the one whose sin is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the one against whom the Lord counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit" (Psalm 32:1, 2).

It's the last little phrase that hinges everything else—the happiness and the forgiveness. It's about the deceit. It doesn't hinge on whether you are a sinner. That part is already settled. It all hinges on whether you are honest with yourself and with God about who you are.

This is a major theme in the interactions of Jesus in the gospels. People present one image of themselves, and then they meet Jesus who sees right past that to the truth of their hearts. But it's not like He's running around hurling sin-stones at everyone. He's not the guy with the bullhorn shouting you down. His presence in people's lives just revealed the truth about them.

Take Zaccheus for example.

Or consider the woman at the well.

It's when people in the presence of Jesus were able to see themselves for who they were that they were set free from the shackles of false religious self-assuredness and embrace their need for grace. And once they did that, they were utterly transformed beings.

There were people of course who couldn't see themselves the way Jesus saw them. The religious leaders never accepted Jesus' description of them as whitewashed tombs. Sometimes, we don't want to admit who we are. In Psalm 32, the contrast is stark between the blessed experience of a forgiven person and the suffering of a person harboring unconfessed sin. The very power of the Psalm is in the contrast that we experience.

“When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me: my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer” (Psalm 32:3, 4).

This is what unconfessed sin feels like. It's what unreconciled relationship feels like. It's what an unrepentant spirit feels like. It's not the silence of a peace-filled contemplative; it's the silence of a reluctant sinner who suffers the consequences of unrepentance because she doesn't want to suffer the consequences of repentance.

Think of the vivid picture of the son who left his father to squander his life away, to walk in the counsel of the wicked, to stand in the way of sinners, to sit in the seat of scoffers. His whole life's project was about uprooting himself from the streams of water by which he had been planted and wander off to find forbidden drink in some sweeter stream. His is the picture of a man who had separated himself from those who loved him, cared for him, and that which was good in his life.

His is the story of the whole human race. Is there any hope for him? For us?

I read recently an account of a young man who visited a Lutheran church for the first time. The service began with a confession much like we practiced today. No welcome to worship, no opening hymns, just “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.”

At first he thought this was outrageous that a group of several hundred people would confess sins and receive forgiveness, but also profound. He writes, “I have to respect the bold and forthright way of dealing with the most unpleasant aspect of our relationship with God, namely our sin. When you worship in this way, it's serious business and not given to levity or entertainment. It's not a show for the visitors and unbelievers. It's about receiving God's gifts, and praying, praising, and giving thanks in return. This was something I really needed, having washed up on the shores of the last church I was ever going to try, a bruised reed and smoldering wick. Finally, here were a people who said, ‘Enough . . . Repent!’ and called sin for what it is, and urged the real biblical solution—repentance and forgiveness.”

Taking on the question of whether a liturgy like this might be just vain repetition, “True enough, some people may not mean it, but if you repeat those words every Sunday, someday you will be in a fight for your life against a besetting sin, and they'll mean something then. To those of us who pay attention, those words mean something every day; they are life and death. They allow me to tell the truth about my life to God, my

neighbor, and to myself, and allow me to hear God's gracious reply with my own ears." Your sins are forgiven.

Another reluctant Christian tells his story, "I was attending church sporadically and my pastor was teaching on the subject of individual confession. I was hesitant to go. Another friend urged me to go, and when I protested that my sin was really bad, he rebuked me for having such pride in my sin, thinking that it was too great to be forgiven." He went and literally confessed his sins to his pastor. He later said, "It saved my life and faith."

The psalmist makes the same move from stony silence to admission in verse 5: "Then I acknowledged my sin to You, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,' and You forgave the guilt of my sin."

The prodigal son returned home with a heartbroken confession on his lips ready to recite to the one he hurt the worst in all the world. The one he hurt the worst was now the only one who could rescue him, and bring him back from being as good as dead.

2 Corinthians 5:18, "All this is from God who reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ."

In the words of Thomas Merton, "Each [of us] must undergo a transformation by the Holy Spirit. [Each] must undergo a renewal in the depths of his being This renewal is to be seen from many points of view: as renunciation, as pardon, as conversion, as 'justification,' as self-surrender, as thanksgiving, 'eucharistia.' The word 'love' in the sense of Agape perfectly covers and includes them all" (*Seasons of Celebration*, 224-225).

Just as the father greedily embraced his wayward son, so we are welcomed into God's loving arms when our hearts are penitent, when we confess our sinfulness, and throw ourselves on God's mercy. It is a mercy God does not give reluctantly, or measure out by the spoonful. It is an ocean of love that God pours out freely, joyfully, graciously, abundantly. And that is why I can say to you today, and pray that you can say to yourself:

In the name of Jesus Christ, your sins are forgiven.

In the name of Jesus Christ, your sins are forgiven.

In the name of Jesus Christ , your sins are forgiven. You are blessed.

Amen.

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