

Sermon for May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2026  
SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

READINGS

Ezekiel 36:22-29

**22** “Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. **23** And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Lord GOD, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes. **24** I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. **25** I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. **26** And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. **27** And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. **28** You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. **29** And I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses. And I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you.

Psalm 51:1-17

- 1** Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy  
blot out my transgressions.
- 2** Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin!
- 3** For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is ever before me.
- 4** 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.
- 5** Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,  
and in sin did my mother conceive me.
- 6** Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being,  
and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.
- 7** Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
- 8** Let me hear joy and gladness;  
let the bones that you have broken rejoice.
- 9** Hide your face from my sins,  
and blot out all my iniquities.
- 10** Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and renew a right spirit within me.
- 11** Cast me not away from your presence,  
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.
- 12** Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and uphold me with a willing spirit.

13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways,  
and sinners will return to you.  
14 Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God,  
O God of my salvation,  
and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.  
15 O Lord, open my lips,  
and my mouth will declare your praise.  
16 For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;  
you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.  
17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

1 Peter 4:7-11

7 The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. 8 Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. 9 Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. 10 As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: 11 whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

John 15:26-16:4

15:26 “But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. 27 And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning.  
16:1 “I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. 2 They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. 3 And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me. 4 But I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you.

Our meditation for this Seventh Sunday in Easter is on our Psalm.

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

**Introduction: The Despair Machine**

When are you allowed to feel like you are forgiven? When is it that you can say your sins are in the past, nailed to the Cross, no longer applicable to you or how people treat you? When do you get to breathe in the fresh air of redemption, freed from the chains of guilt? The answer to this question is one which is crucial to your soul's fate, and it is one that the Church has almost always answered incorrectly.

Sadly, throughout most of her history the Church has acted as a despair machine, grinding the faithful in torment by the turning of its horrendous gears. People would get drawn in with the promise of salvation, forgiveness and eternal life, only to find themselves in a devastating loop of neverending penance. They were promised deliverance, but received a to-do list. The Church would proclaim that Jesus is Savior, but then censure any man claiming he was saved.

Allow me to give one example with two applications.

These days in our Lutheran churches, if a man commits the sin of fornication with his girlfriend, to be forgiven he must repent of that sin and confess to God. If his conscience continues to assail him, he can be confident that the absolution he hears at the beginning of the Divine Service is true. And if his conscience is \*still\* troubled, we have Communion, where our Savior arrives with His Body and

Blood to deliver even more and greater pardon. The Lutheran answer - the Biblical answer - to the question, "when can I feel like I am forgiven," is "right now and even more on Sunday." With this, the soul of the believer is refreshed and strengthened to renew the struggle against sin.

In the early Church though, a fornicator would not see such mercies. Typically, if a man confessed to such a sin he would not be allowed to receive Communion for ten years. For two of those years at least he would be required to stand outside the Church during every service, weeping and lamenting. For a number of years he would be permitted into the sanctuary but told he must kneel or prostrate himself the entire time. Then he may stand, but he does not get to take the Sacrament. Such a man, after his ten year penance process, may then be considered in full union with the rest of the Church. But if he commits a mortal sin once more, there are no second chances: he would be pronounced damned and forever be barred from even entering the sanctuary.

### **How the Machine was Built**

At first, these strict penances were only reserved for the "big three" sins as listed by Tertullian: apostasy, adultery and murder. So it would be strict, but if you did not leave the faith, cheat on your spouse or kill anyone then you were fine. But over time people started asking about the "lesser" versions of these sins: what about fornication, what about involuntary manslaughter, what about fighting, what about heterodoxy or false beliefs? So the Church added smaller (yet still harsh) penances. Then came more questions about other sins. Then came more penances. The list of "mortal sins" went from three to such a pile that the Church gave up counting. Eventually it became clear that the body of Christ was under the dreary delusion that our works not only *can* merit forgiveness from God, but that this is the sole means by which we obtain forgiveness. The forgiveness offered in our Baptism and the Lord's Supper were theologically *downgraded* in their effectiveness, to such point where eventually institutions taught that Christ's Body and Blood only rendered absolution for forgotten and unintentional sins, Baptism became a status we had to maintain rather than a repository of God's promises. Everything was penance, and the Christian Church preached a religion with no salvation; forgiveness was always something you had to earn, never something you could earnestly say you had obtained.

So one hard rule for three deadly sins became an endless Byzantine system of laws, punishments, and penances. What was the fruit of this mad spiral? The despair machine, full of millions who knew nothing about God's mercy. As our Confessions detail, by the time we reach the end of the medieval era people were only concerned with working to save themselves. The flagellants walked around ripping their flesh apart with whips, husbands abandoned their families to live in monasteries, and yet others simply gave into despair - giving in to the discouragement of the cruel system and deciding that they were to be damned. And if a man went to his priest with his feelings of despair over the shackles of works placed on him...the priest would reassure him that his sorrows were also damnable sin and he had to work those off too.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Vanity of the Machine**

The greatest sorrow in this is that it never had to be this way. The despair machine never had to be built, nor was there any need for the pressure the early or medieval Church to place people under such heavy burdens. Our God is a God of radical, incomprehensibly infinite mercy. King David wrote Psalm 51 after committing adultery with Bathsheba and murdering her husband Uriah – *two* of the "big three" sins that the early Church identified as the worst. While there were certainly earthly consequences to his sins, what did it take for him to be forgiven by God? Repentance, a confession, and belief that God would pardon - that is all it took! Yes, he suffered, but that was a consequence of his sin – not a prerequisite for his forgiveness. King David did not have to avoid making offerings at the Tabernacle. He was under no burden to tear his flesh apart with a whip, he did not have to go join a monastery, he did not have to fast and he did not have to say a single "hail Mary." Literally all he did

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04755a.htm>

was confess, and the prophet Nathan proclaimed his forgiveness.<sup>2</sup>

Psalm 51 presents us with a great truth: God Himself fulfills whatever requirements there would be for penance. After his conscience had been defiled by his grave sins, what does David ask in his prayer? "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me." David did not need to spend ten years away from engaging in worship, nor did he have to whip himself to the point of bloodshed. To the contrary, he knew that none of that would do anything to bring redemption to him. For that matter, no amount of animal sacrifices would do it either. "For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering." Only God Himself can merit forgiveness *for us my friends*, and the Psalmist knew this fact well.

### *The Objections*

Now, the same machine that produces so much terror and despair may make noise in protest against what I am saying. Someone might say "well of course that applied to David – he was the king of Israel, the anointed ruler who could not do penances because of his office, but we must!" Ah, but my friends you must understand that God is no respecter of persons.<sup>3</sup> If a king is forgiven in this manner, then so too is a commoner. Another objection might say that David faced consequences for his sins, and that this sufficed as penance, but this is not the Biblical witness either. Yes, he faced consequences as we all do, sometimes from the deed itself and other times God disciplines us directly, but these happened after David was forgiven already. He never had to earn pardon, and truth be told he never could in the first place – I must repeat myself: only God Himself can merit forgiveness for our sins.

A more harrowing objection is that the radical forgiveness offered freely by our Lord results in people sinning freely. The Church became less convinced of the Gospel over time, and because of this she became more and more frightened that people grasping forgiveness would result in more sin. But nothing could be further from the truth. The fact is, people who know they have been forgiven of their sins, being freed from a requirement of penance, are free to move forward in repentance. They can let that sin go more easily, for it no longer sticks to their soul with a guilt adhesive. They can face the consequences of their actions with a clear conscience, make amends without fear, and face the future with confidence that God loves them.

### **Conclusion**

*Only* God Himself can merit forgiveness for our sins. And what a blessed truth, He did just that by sending His only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, to die for us. Instead of saddling us with the burden of penances and sacrifices, Jesus says to us that His yoke is easy and His burden is light,<sup>4</sup> and He says this knowing full well that it is only because He took the burdens away that we could never bear. Every sin at every time and place, from David's adultery and murder to St. Peter's threefold denial of Christ to that lie you told your boss the other week, Jesus bore the penalty for all of these and took the debt away from us, so that He could nail it to the Cross.<sup>5</sup> Our Psalm reading is absolutely *saturated* with this recognition, for David knew that nothing a sinner can do will ever pay off our debts. There must be *someone* that took care of it, that he may repent with true contrition but be met with true mercy. Otherwise all the king has would be despair, but as it stands he writes triumphantly, "14 Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness." May we sing the same as we receive the same pardon and experience the same joy, for *right now* my friends you may confirm that you are forgiven.

Now the Peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

---

2 2 Samuel 12:13-14

3 Acts 10:34

4 Matthew 11:28-30

5 Colossians 2:13-14