

PSALM 51:1–4. (EHV)

For the choir director. A psalm by David.

When Nathan the prophet came to him after he had gone to Bathsheba.

Be gracious to me, God,
according to your mercy.

Erase my acts of rebellion
according to the greatness of your compassion.

Scrub me clean from my guilt.

Purify me from my sin.

For I admit my rebellious acts.

My sin is always in front of me.

Against you, you only, have I sinned,
and I have done this evil in your eyes.

So you are justified when you sentence me.

You are blameless when you judge.

On Ash Wednesday, we heard the prophet Nathan confront David about his sin. Even though God had richly blessed him and he already had many wives, he coveted the wife of one of his mighty men, Bathsheba the wife of Uriah the Hittite, when he saw her bathing. That led to him sending for her and committing adultery with her, and then making arrangements for Uriah to be killed in battle.

In Psalm 51, David expresses repentance after the prophet Nathan has boldly confronted him about his sin. In so doing, David also teaches us about repentance. This evening we are looking at verses 3–4 where David teaches us to recognize against whom all sin is committed.

David writes, “For I admit my rebellious acts. My sin is always in front of me.” Even though right now, David’s adultery is the sin foremost on his mind, he confesses that he always has sins to be aware of; sin is always in front of him.

“Against you, you only, have I sinned, and I have done this evil in your eyes.” When we first read these words, they might appear to be a lie. David didn’t just sin against the Lord. He sinned against his army by electing to stay home and not to lead them into battle, as he had previously done. He sinned against Bathsheba by enticing her to be intimate with him. He sinned against Uriah by giving orders to expose him to the enemy so that he would be killed. He sinned against his general Joab by involving him in his coverup and murder. He sinned against all his officials and the citizens of his kingdom who were or became aware of his sin, by setting them a bad example and giving true religion a bad name. How can David say, “Against you, you only, have I sinned”?

David is first of all teaching us to recognize that no sin escapes the sight of God. God is always watching us, and he sees all our sins, even if they only happen in our minds and hearts. David committed adultery with Bathsheba at night, under cover of darkness. David didn’t just go up to Uriah and stab him with a sword; he tried to make his death look like a casualty of war. He thought that if his sin was hidden to others, that also meant it would be hidden from God. But that is an utterly foolish idea. Every sin we commit, we commit in the full sight of God.

David is also teaching us to recognize that the only reason we can legitimately call something a sin or wrong is if it is sinful in God's eyes. Adultery isn't ultimately evil because people think it's evil. Murder isn't ultimately evil because we consider it to be evil. Adultery is sinful because God says it is. That's why lust is just as evil, even if it never results in a physical act of adultery. God says it is wrong. Murder is sinful because God demands an accounting for every human life that someone takes on his or her own initiative. And God would have seen David as a murderer even if his plans hadn't succeeded, because God regards evil thoughts and plans in the heart the same as the deeds that are being thought or planned.

Nowadays people like to get bent out of shape over not recycling or not being politically correct or using too much of the world's energy or the wrong kinds of energy. And these things can be sins, depending on how they are done and what is in the heart when they take place, but God does not call them sins in and of themselves. But in the meantime, the pornography industry continues to explode through apps, websites, movies, and magazines, and people call it art or they say it's fine if it is used in private and you're not hurting anyone, even though God says it is damnable sin (Matt. 5:27-30). The use of four-letter words is becoming more and more commonplace in the public arena, even when people know they are being recorded, and people say it's just being authentic. But God says there should not be any unwholesome or foolish talk, obscenity, or coarse jokes coming out of our mouths, but only what is helpful and beneficial to those who hear (Eph. 4:29; 5:4).

David is teaching us to recognize: A sin is not a sin if it is just a sin against the sensibilities and opinions of others. It is a sin if it is a sin against God. It is God, and no one else, who determines what is right and what is wrong.

And finally, David is teaching us to recognize that all sin is ultimately committed against God. Martin Luther was correct when he said that the First Commandment, "You shall have no other gods," meant this: "We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things." And then he was also correct when he went on to explain all the other commandments by saying, "We should fear and love God that..." In other words, when we commit adultery, the problem isn't so much that we're violating the Sixth Commandment. The bigger problem is that we're also violating the First. When we commit murder, the problem isn't so much that we're violating the Fifth Commandment. The bigger problem is that we're also violating the First. When you talk back to your parents, when you break the laws of the land, the problem at the end of the day isn't really that your parents or the government are mad. The problem is that you've angered God.

If we all feared, loved, and trusted in God above all things, we would automatically keep all the other commandments too, and conversely, whenever we break any of the other commandments, we do so because we have broken the First.

When we sin, we sin against God.

And as a result, David says to God: "You are justified when you sentence me. You are blameless when you judge."

When the prophet Nathan came to David and told him on the Lord's behalf, "You despised the word of the Lord by doing what is evil in his eyes" (2 Sam. 12:9). David couldn't say, "None of this was Lord's concern." No, the Lord had every right to be angry at him and to accuse him.

When the prophet Nathan went on to tell David that the sword would never depart from his house, and that someone close to David would lie down with his wives in broad daylight (2 Sam. 12:10–11), David couldn't say, "Well, that's not fair. What right does God have to do that to me?"

God isn't just holy. He is holiness itself. Sin isn't just a violation of what he commands. It is a violation of his very existence. So he has every right to break out in wrath against us when we sin. And ultimately, he has the right to sentence us to eternal death in hell for just one sin, not to mention the right to do so for the many sins we commit every day.

But God also had another sentence and judgment. When David confessed to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord," Nathan responded, "The Lord himself has put away your sin. You are not going to die" (2 Sam. 12:13).

How could God do that? After all, he himself says that the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23)!

He could do that because he is not just filled with just wrath over our sins; he is also filled with compassion and love and a desire to save us. And those two characteristics meet in one place, in one person—Jesus Christ.

If you think that God just winks at our sins and isn't serious about them, don't just look at the consequences David had to face. Look at the cross. Jesus isn't suffering and dying for his own sins there. He is suffering and dying for ours. He is suffering and dying because he is taking your place and mine. Everything he suffers, he suffers because we deserved to suffer that.

But if you think that God isn't serious about his love for us, isn't serious about saving us, don't just look at the fact that God didn't give David the immediate death penalty. Look at the cross again. That isn't you or me suffering and dying there, even though that's what we deserve for our sins. It is Jesus, not us, so that our full sentence and judgment has been served already. It is Jesus, not us, so that it isn't just God who is justified in his sentencing, but also us who are justified by his sentencing—declared not guilty and innocent of all our sin for Jesus's sake. We are not going to die.

Since God is the one against whom all sin is committed, forgiveness of sins and salvation from sin must come from him. And in Christ Jesus, the Son of David and the Son of God, it has and it does. Amen.