

Sermon for Sunday, November 15, 2009
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THE CURE FOR ROTTEN BONES

Jessica Pressler is a writer for *New York* magazine and a reader of The New York Times, and she often reads the marital or relationship announcement section called “Vows.” In a city and metro region, there are thousands of marriages, thousands of relationship milestones each week. So, “Vows” is a pretty exclusive column. You have to write a compelling application or have a famous last name to get into the column.

Well, Ms. Pressler observed a very peculiar feature of many of these notices. Often the notices would say things like:

“the couple faced many obstacles to happy romance”
Or, “[t]heir relationship was complicated.”
Or, “[t]heir road to love was bumpy.”

What these folks were saying, and what was often perfectly clear in the notices themselves, was that one of them had the “obstacle” or the “complication” or the “road bump” of a significant other—whether a spouse or a boyfriend or girlfriend.

Think about that for a second. Some of these couples are basically auditioning to be in “Vows.” And when they get in they tell about how they found true love by cheating on their husbands or wives or boyfriends or girlfriends.

This is a very strange commentary on our society’s understanding of guilt. Some of us believe that, as long as we meet our soul mate or otherwise get what we want, we have no reason to be guilty and no reason to hide what we’ve done. Guilt is a problematic concept in our culture.

But, it is not a concept that is completely gone. Ms. Pressler’s story suggests that no matter what these couples told themselves, no matter how they rationalized their decisions, they should have felt guilty. And this sense of guilt should have led them to be—at the very least—more cautious in how they described their paths to “true love.”

This little story brings up all kinds of questions for us:

Is our guilt real?
If guilt is real, what should we do about it?
Is there any hope for the guilty?

As we look at Psalm 32, we will get a clear picture of guilt and its consequences. I have three points for you this morning:

1. God forgives the guilty.
2. God forgives the guilty who repent.
3. God forgives the guilty who repent so that they might rejoice.

1. God forgives the guilty

Look with me at verses 1 and 2:

Psalm 32:1 Of David. A maskil. Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. ² Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit.

David's thesis is that the "happy person" is the forgiven person. Now, we might define the happy person a bit differently than this. We might say:

"Happy is the person who has a good job"

Or, "Decent health"

Or, "A good family"

Or, "A good education"

Or, "Good friends"

And I don't think the Bible would object to any one of these. But, the picture is incomplete without this Psalm. Our basic problem is not that we don't have enough money, or that our families are messed up, or that we lack the skills or education we need, or that we've been abandoned by our friends. These are all big problems. But they are really symptoms of a larger problem.

David twice calls the problem "sin" and once "transgression." These are our big enemies. How so?

Do a little thought experiment with me. Imagine if you will that you are the guest of a man who owns a large house and because he is generous and kind he allows many people to stay in his house for free. You are a guest, but you have no money, no family, no prospects for a job, no friends. You are completely dependent on the hospitality of the master of the house. Now then, imagine that the homeowner is a wise man who runs his house well with good and wise traditions and rules. What would your position be were you to rebel against the homeowner, flouting his generosity and ignoring the rules of his house? What if you sought to kick him out and run the house in his place?

We are guests in God's world. And everything that is good in the world comes from Him. Yet, we rebel against God and His ways. This is what the Bible calls sin. And, through sin, we throw God's world into chaos, and we risk losing our place in God's creation.

Yet, God forgives the guilty. David shows us this in three ways.

- God "lifts our transgressions." We go beyond boundaries, placing ourselves in danger. Yet, God forgives. He removes.
- God "covers our sin." He doesn't pretend it isn't there. He removes it from His sight, erasing it from memory. If God can't see it, it doesn't exist.
- God "doesn't count our sins against us." Sin is like a debt. But it is a debt that God cancels.

The "happy person" is the one who is forgiven by God.

2. God forgives the guilty who repent

Look with me again, beginning in verse 3:

³ When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. ⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Selah ⁵

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. Selah

David's thesis is that the happy person is the forgiven person. Now, he turns to his own experience. Because, as easy as it is to say that God forgives, it is much more difficult to experience his forgiveness.

The first challenge for us in experiencing God's forgiveness is that we would rather not face God. David says that he "kept silent." That is perfectly understandable, is it not?

When things are not right, we don't want to face it. A recent example for me is Peter's potty training. We were trying our best to help him with frequent potty breaks, treats, everything. Sometimes when I walk into a room, though, and he puts his hand up, before I even say anything and says, "Stop, daddy. I no poo poo. I no pee pee." Let me just say that the evidence in these cases is typically overwhelming.

We know what David's talking about here. When we do something that damages a relationship, we anticipate something of the pain of restoration. We know that it is going to cost us something emotionally to reconcile. We are going to have to admit what we've done. We're going to have to risk the sadness or the anger or the despair of the person we've damaged. So, it is much easier, at first, to keep silent, to pretend it never happened.

David kept silent, but it wasn't easy. The evidence was overwhelming. God was after him. David says that his bones rotted within him as God pursued him. God sought David out. He did not allow him to keep silent, but he afflicted his conscience, seeking to get him to deal with the breach in their relationship.

Two fold strategy for dealing with guilt without God: 1) deny guilt; 2) numb pain

This is the aspect of forgiveness that we have the hardest time with. It hurts to be pursued by God. It is humbling to acknowledge fault. It is scary. We fear that, if we really acknowledge what we've done, we'll be rejected.

So, we keep silent. We hide. We are ingenious hidiers. We hide by changing the subject. When someone challenges us on our sin, we say, "You're hurting my feelings. You just want to hurt me. You're judging me." Of course, only people who love us are willing to tell us hard truth, truth that hurts. Just because it hurts doesn't mean that it's unloving.

We hide by telling half-truths. We confess to part of what we've done, but we won't acknowledge all of it.

The ache of sin does not go away until you deal with it. Without repentance, our bones will continue to rot. You can numb the pain, but you can't get rid of it. We numb the pain with success—as though more and better will cover up our guilt. We numb the pain with drugs and alcohol and food and shopping and pornography and relationships. We tell ourselves, "If only I give myself to pleasure, to the things that make me feel good, then perhaps the pain will be bearable, perhaps it will go away."

But these things become problematic themselves. As we give ourselves to them, they satisfy less and less. They are like steroid shots to an injured athlete. You take the shot to numb the injury so that you can play, but you risk further damage to yourself because you cannot feel what is going on in your body. When the medication no longer works, you find that your soul is broken, unable to feel.

David felt the pain because God, his true friend, pursued him. He kept silent. He tried to deny it. But, he couldn't, and so, finally, David confessed.

⁵ 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.

If you are guilty before God or before anyone else, repentance is the only cure for your rotting bones. Notice what David did:

- He acknowledged his sin. He stopped his silence. He stopped pretending that his guilt, his iniquity wasn't there.
- He confessed his transgressions to the Lord.
- And God forgave his guilt.

Repentance requires the end of hiding, the end of half-truths, the end of changing the subject, the end of pain-management for your heart. It requires a frank acknowledgement of as much of the truth of our sin as we understand. If you are guilty before God or someone else, you must say clearly, "I have sinned." You must be specific and complete. Stop playing games. Stop pretending. Find relief and rest by acknowledging what you have done.

And the wonderful truth is that God will forgive you.

I have a sharp tongue and I grew up in a family full of people with sharp tongues. But my wife is sweet and gentle, as is her family...for the most part. So, on occasion I slice and dice my wife's heart with some cutting remark or sarcastic retort. I can see right now the faces she makes in response to me and my words. Two common ones: 1) wrinkled forehead, puffed out lips, sad face; 2) slightly squinted eyes, firm jaw, pursed lips, angry face. Now, these little episodes rarely last for more than a few seconds. And I can tell you why. In those brief seconds after I've sinned against my wife, I am miserable. I can see that, even if only in a slight way, I've damaged our relationship.

If you are miserable, if you know that you are guilty before God or before someone else in your life, stop hiding. Acknowledge what you've done. God will forgive you. There is no sin so great that God cannot utterly remove it. Remember, David wrote this psalm. David stole a man's wife, got her pregnant, and had the man killed. Then he kept silent for a whole year! God forgave this man. He will forgive you. Stop hiding. Acknowledge. Confess. Believe.

David strengthens this lesson in verses 6 and 7, when he writes:

⁶ Therefore let everyone who is godly pray to you while you may be found; surely when the mighty waters rise, they will not reach him. ⁷ You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance.

That phrase "while you may be found" reminds us that now is the time to pray to God. Now is the time to deal with our sin. We do not know what the future holds. And, so, we should deal with God today.

Yet, David reminds us that, inevitably the future holds trouble for those who live in this fallen world. The mighty waters will rise. There will be times of trouble, and, ultimately, we must all face the day of our own death. But, for the one who trusts in the Lord, He is a hiding place, a protector. He surrounds His people, not with mourning and weeping, but with songs of deliverance.

Ultimately, these songs of deliverance find their proper theme in Jesus. He is the great deliverer of God's people. If we fear God, if we doubt His goodness and His willingness to forgive us, we need only look at Jesus. God is not stingy with us. He is not waiting for us to fail so that He can destroy us. He so cares for us in our brokenness that He sent his Son to deliver us from our sin. We have this forgiveness that David talks about, ultimately, because Jesus wins it for us. He obeys God all the way to the Cross, and through the Cross he defeats sin and death so that we can sing songs of deliverance. We need no longer doubt God's mercy and his justice. Both have been clearly seen in the world. We need no longer fear God because in Jesus, our Father welcomes us back into life with him.

3. God forgives the guilty who repent so that they might rejoice

Look with me at the remaining verses beginning in verse 8:

⁸ I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD's unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him. ¹¹ Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!

Our passage ends with a warning and a reminder of the central truth of the psalm. David is saying here, "Don't be a fool, like the horse or mule that has to be forced in the direction it should go." Listen to God's reason. Listen to His counsel. Trust him, the path of denial of your guilt and sin is one that only leads to misery.

"Many are the woes of the wicked..." means here "many are the woes of those who refuse to acknowledge their guilt to God." That is the difference between the righteous and the wicked. Both sin, but one wastes away in his sin, refusing to acknowledge it before God, refusing to deal with it. The other, though she is tempted to hide, though she is tempted to pretend that she is OK, she relents. Despite the pain of experiencing forgiveness, she confesses her sin to God and she receives the forgiveness He offers.

All of this leads to joy. There is nothing quite like the relief of being forgiven. Whether we've been hiding from God all our lives or just in the last few days. God will forgive us. The pain that we feel in our rotten bones is a sure sign that God is calling us back to him. He will deliver us from our guilt. He will deliver us from the pain management strategies that leave us numb and despairing. He will heal our rotten bones. Because, when we come to Him, trusting in Jesus, our deliverer, we are forgiven.

So, we rejoice, we sing, because we belong to God, and through Him we have everything restored.