

Don't Be A Mule
Psalm 32
ABC 7/23/23

I was recently asked why we have to confess our sins if they're already forgiven. It's a good question. David knew how it felt to have God as his displeased Father. He also knew the joy & relief of experiencing God's forgiveness. He teaches us this in Ps 32 so we too can know the blessings of God's forgiveness. As Christians, our sins are forgiven. Those who've put their faith in Jesus are freed from the guilt of their sins & are clothed in His perfect righteousness. Our justification before God is an accomplished fact that nothing can change. Paul says, **There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:1)**. He goes on, **Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? (Rom 8:33-34)**. Christians are forgiven. From God's perspective, the Christian's sins are forgiven even before they're committed. God as Judge has punished Jesus for our sins & He refuses to hold those sins against us in judgment. Paul quotes Ps 32:1-2 saying, **Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, & whose sins have been covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account (Rom 4:7-8)**. This is true of all believers, OT & NT. But it isn't the full truth. Don't think that because of our justification God doesn't care about our sin. Christians who think they can sin without offending God & without seeking His forgiveness are deceived. Jesus Himself teaches us to pray, **forgive us our sins (Lk 11:4)**. Why are we to ask for God's forgiveness if He's already justified us & we are forgiven? If justification takes care of sin past, present, & future, so that there's no condemnation, why do we need to pray for forgiveness? Aren't we praying for something that's already ours? The Bible clearly teaches saved people are to confess their sins & to ask for forgiveness. Ps 32 says this along with & many others psalms (6; 38; 51; 102; 130; 143). It's also clear in the Lord's Prayer & in 1 Jn 1:9. As long as we live in a sinful world, with our sinful tendencies, there's a sense in which Christians, though eternally cleansed by the washing of regeneration (Titus 3:5), still need daily cleansing from the effects of our sins. The perfect illustration of these 2 kinds of cleansing is found when Jesus wanted to wash Peter's feet. Peter was reluctant to have Jesus serve him in such a humiliating fashion. He told Him, **Never shall You wash my feet!** Jesus

replied, **If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me (Jn 13:8)**. Peter then decided a foot-washing wouldn't be sufficient: **Lord, then wash not only my feet, but also my hands & my head (9)**. Jesus' reply draws the distinction between 2 kinds of cleansing. Jesus says, **He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; & you are clean... (10)**. Bathing illustrates the forgiveness of justification. Those who are justified are forgiven the penalty of sin forever. They don't need to be justified again. But the day-to-day effects of sin need to be dealt with. Sin needs to be confessed regularly. 1 Jn 1 teaches this. A literal rendering of vs 7 reads, **The blood of Jesus His Son keeps cleansing us from all sin**. Vs 9 is also a continuous action: *If we are continually confessing our sins*. Neither the confession nor the cleansing is a one-&-done thing. These vss don't support the idea that we don't need to confess because we're already forgiven. So why do we need to ask God's forgiveness if He's already given it in our justification? The answer is that God's forgiveness has 2 aspects. One is His judicial forgiveness as Judge. This is the forgiveness that was purchased by Jesus' death & resurrection for us. This forgiveness frees us from any threat of eternal condemnation. This pardon is complete & never needs to happen again. The other is a parental forgiveness God gives as our Father. He's grieved when His children sin. The forgiveness of justification takes care of judicial guilt, but it doesn't do away with our Father's displeasure over our sin. He chastens those whom He loves for their own good (Heb 12:5-10), right? The forgiveness we seek in our daily life isn't the pardon of an angry Judge but mercy from a grieved Father. This is the forgiveness Jesus taught us to pray for in the Lord's Prayer. The opening words, **Our Father**, shows a parental relationship is in view. Judicial forgiveness deals with the penalty of our sins. Parental forgiveness deals with sin's consequences to our relationship with our Father. Judicial forgiveness frees us from the condemnation of an omnipotent Judge. Parental forgiveness sets things right with a grieving but loving Father. As Judge, God is eager to forgive sinners & as a Father He's equally eager to keep on forgiving & cleansing His children from their sin. **1 Jn 1:9** says, **If we confess our sins, He is faithful & righteous to forgive us our sins & to cleanse us from all unrighteousness**. Forgiveness & cleansing are the 2 aspects of that promise. Forgiveness refers to parental forgiveness, not the forgiveness of justification. It's a relational restoration to the place

of blessing in the eyes of a displeased Father. Likewise, cleansing isn't salvation or the new birth. It's the washing to rid us of the defilement caused by sin in our daily lives. This type of cleansing is what Jesus was illustrating when He insisted on washing Peter's feet. We're not to think that the pardon of justification eliminates our need to confess, ask for forgiveness, & deal with the reality of sin in our lives. Scripture teaches us to be continually confessing our sins & seeking God's daily forgiveness & cleansing. He is both faithful & just to forgive. Faithful because it's His promise & just because the penalty has been paid through His Son. John, who tell sus to confess our sins, also says, **I am writing to you, little children, because your sins *have been forgiven* you for His name's sake (1 Jn 2:12).** He used the past tense to emphasize the fact that the eternal question of our forgiveness is forever settled. The threat of condemnation for our sins is gone (Rom 8:1). But ongoing, continual confession is something that's to be true of every Christian. When we don't confess our sin, we suffer because our relationship with God is strained. We forfeit our joy & experience His chastening. But when we confess & forsake our sin, we're guaranteed of God's compassion & forgiveness (Prov 28:13).¹ Hopefully, that helps set the stage for Ps 32 which speaks directly to the devastating power of unconfessed sin in the life of a believer. David knew that unconfessed sin brought discipline to him. He also knew when he confessed his sin there was a resurgence of joy in his relationship with God. Confession of sin is a vital part of vibrant, victorious Christian living. This psalm is a *maskil*, meaning it was intended to instruct & teach. Specifically, this psalm was written by David to teach God's people to confess their sins to the Lord.² Ps 51 was written by David 9 months or so after his sin with Bathesheba & Uriah. It's thought that Ps 32 was written a considerable time later with David thinking back on the forgiveness he received for those sins. Ps 32 may be the fulfillment of David's promise in Ps 51 when he said, **I will teach transgressors Your ways** (13). Ps 32 seems to be David's teaching of the way to respond to our sin. **Ps 32:1-11**

1. Cleansing From Sin (1-2) This psalm begins with celebration because of the forgiveness of David's sins. Like Ps 1 & the SOTM, it begins with the word **blessed**, which can be translated as

¹ Adapted from John F. MacArthur, *The Freedom & Power of Forgiveness*, pp 56-74

² Steven Lawson, *Psalms 1-75*, ed. Max Anderson, p 171

happy, joyful, or exuberant. It's in the plural which intensifies it. **How abundantly richly blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven** (1). David's announcing & proclaiming the joy he discovered in God's forgiveness. He uses 4 different words for *sin* in the 1st 2 vss of this psalm: **Transgression, sin, iniquity, & deceit.** These words are placed side by side & cover the entire spectrum of what sin is. **Transgression** means a going away from, departure, rebellion, or defiance. It's a willful act of rebellion against God's sovereign authority & refusing to acknowledge His right to rule the lives of His people. A **transgression** isn't merely against other people but is always a treasonous act against God. The 2nd word is the word is **sin**, which means to miss the mark, to go wrong, to go astray. It's an archery term picturing a hunter who comes up short & misses the shot (Rom 3:23). This is what **sin** is, coming short of what God intends for us. The 3rd word for *sin* is the word **iniquity** which means corrupt, twisted, bent, or crooked. While **transgression** describes sin in view of our relationship to God & **sin** deals with our relationship to God's Word, **iniquity** focuses on a person's relationship to himself. All sin is a twisting of one's character. To the degree a person sins, he becomes twisted within his own soul. When David confessed in **Ps 51:2** he says, **Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity & cleanse me from my sin.** A few vss later he pleads, **Create in me a clean heart, O God** (10). David's sin had defiled, polluted, & twisted him. The 4th word used for sin is **deceit** which means a self-deception, a cover-up, falsehood, & hypocrisy. It's presenting a false front so you look good even when you know you're not. This is what David did for months following his sin against Bathsheba & Uriah. He lived with sin's deception within his own heart as he attempted to cover his sin, rationalizing it, causing him to live a lie. The key to the Christian life isn't our personal perfection but our regular repentance & continuous confession.

In the 1st 2 vss David also gives us 3 words for forgiveness: **Forgiven** means to bear, carry off, take away, to have one's sin lifted off. Our sin is a burden which God Himself bears or takes away. We all know a *scapegoat* takes the blame so others can go free. It comes from the Hebrew sacrificial system where the high priest would select a goat, lay his hands on its head & confess the sins of the people, ceremonially putting their sins on the goat. The animal was then released into the wilderness as a picture of how God carried their sins away from Himself. Of course, this pointed

ahead to Jesus who was the perfect & final scapegoat for sins. He bore our sins away once for all, so that when we put our trust in Him our sins are gone. **Covered** means out of sight. God puts our sins out of His sight, which means He'll never bring up our sins as a matter of judgment between Him & us. If we're in Christ, our sins are covered by His blood! The 3rd word for forgiveness is **does not impute**, which means it's not charged to our account. This is the word used of God's dealings with Abraham: **Then he** (Abraham) **believed in the LORD; & He** (God) **reckoned**, credited, imputed **it to him as righteousness** (Gen 15:6). As Paul argues when he quotes these vss, this is the righteousness which comes from faith alone & not from works (Rom 4:5-8). God writes our sin on Jesus' ledger & punishes Him while, at the same time, writing the righteousness of Christ into our ledger & counting us as justified because of His merit. That's why Paul quotes these vss in Rom 4. There's no greater blessing than to know that our sin has been forgiven & covered by the blood of Christ & is no longer counted against us. Do you know that blessedness? If so, testify to it. If not, come to Jesus which is the only place that forgiveness can be found. It doesn't matter what you may have done. David committed murder to cover up adultery. You have done other sins. No matter what they are God can & will forgive & restore you. The forgiveness of God is for everyone & for every sin, & the blessing that follows forgiveness is the greatest of all joys.³ David knew that blessing would come to those whose sins are forgiven & covered. The sins David committed were now covered by God & his relationship with God was restored.

2. Concealment of Sin In vss 3-4 David recalls when he refused to confess his sin & experienced the chastening hand of God. David had suppressed his sin against Bathsheba & Uriah when he **kept silent** & refused to confess his sin to God. With unconfessed sin David said his **body wasted away** & he was groaning **all day long**. His strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. He was emotionally & physically distraught. Why? Because the Lord's **hand was heavy upon** him. It was God inflicting this upon David. His failure to confess his sins led to a debilitating & draining weakness. He was depressed & downcast. This was all part of God's loving discipline of David. His peace was taken away & the weight of his guilt affected him. His unconfessed sin ruined the

³ James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 1-41: An Expositional Commentary*, pp 279-280

sweetness of his fellowship with God. The problem wasn't that God refused fellowship with David but that David's unconfessed sin kept him from seeking God as he had when his conscience was clear. In Ps 51 David wrote, **my sin is ever before me** (3). Sin obscured his view of God & became a barrier to the rich joy of the fellowship he'd earlier enjoyed with the Lord. When we sin we wish God would ignore our it. But God cannot & will not ignore sin. He brings pressure on us until we acknowledge, confess, & return to Him. Remember what David said when he was pure before God? **I have set the Lord continually before me... therefore my heart is glad & my glory rejoices** (Ps 16:8-9). While David's sin remained unconfessed, it was the sin that was always before him, obscuring his view of God. For God's part, He was **displeased** with David (2 Sam 11:27, NIV). But it was God who sought David's restoration through discipline & the prophet Nathan (2 Sam 12). Notice the **Selah** immediately following this. It seems to mean pause, take notice, think about this. It's a break in the flow of what's being said. When we have unconfessed sin it affects us & our relationship with God.

3. Confession of Sin In vs 5 things turn around as David stops deceiving himself & acknowledges, uncovers, & confesses his sin. This is the pivotal vs of this psalm. David states the same truth 3x in 3 different ways using 3 of the same words for *sin* found in vss 1 & 2. In vss 1 & 2 the words were chosen to cover the whole scope of sin. Here they show that all David's sins were confessed. He didn't hold back, resulting in that all his sin was forgiven. David confessed it all & God forgave it all. The slate was wiped clean.⁴ David **acknowledged** his sin, **did not hide** his iniquity, & **confessed** his transgressions. **Acknowledged** means *to make known*. It emphasizes the recognition & declaration of a fact that's a known reality. David wrote, **my iniquity I did not hide**. He was no longer attempting to conceal his sin when Nathan confronted him. It's the same word used in vs 1 which is translated **whose sin is covered**, but here it's in the negative, *did not cover up*. Our confession is the uncovering of our sin before God, exposing it for what it is. David then said, **I will confess my transgressions to the Lord**. To **confess** means to speak out openly, to declare one's sin to God, & to agree with God about our sin. David knew he'd transgressed the sovereign rule of

⁴ Boice, p 280

God over his life. After David's repentance, he declared, **You forgave the guilt of my sin** (5). Before the sin is confessed, it's a heavy burden on him. It isn't David who lifts & removes his sin but God. God rolls the burden of our sin away when we confess them to Him. David admitted he was guilty & deserved whatever God saw fit to bring against him. To confess our sins is to say the same thing as God says about our sins. Confessing means acknowledging that God's perspective is correct. It's not just admitting our sins. We can admit our sin without truly agreeing with God's view of sin. Acknowledging guilt isn't confession. To **confess** involves despising our sin, being grieved by it, judging it, & turning from it. This is to be our constant attitude. There's to be a constant, perpetual agreeing with God about our sin. When we find ourselves ignoring or hiding our sin, the only way to restore joy & harmony in our fellowship & relationship with God is through repentance & confession, although our salvation is eternally secure. Notice the 2nd **selah** here. **'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,' & You forgave the guilt of my sin. SELAH.** Pause & reflect on that. There's no pause between the confession of sin & God's forgiveness of it. The **selah** comes after this amazing statement. I can't read this without thinking of the story of the prodigal son. The son had sinned & eventually thinks, *I'll go & confess* (Lk 15:18). He plans to confess to his father, asking to be received merely as one of his dad's hired men. He starts his confession but before he finishes his father's already calling out to the servants, **Quickly bring out the best robe & put it on him, & put a ring on his hand & sandals on his feet; & bring the fattened calf, kill it, & let us eat & celebrate; for this son of mine was dead & has come to life again; he was lost & has been found** (Lk 15:22-24). That's an insight into God's nature & should be a great encouragement to us because we're all sinners. God is ready & eager to forgive & restore us fully, if we'll confess our sin & come to Him believing in Jesus Christ, who's made atonement for it. & God will forgive us immediately.

4. Counsel About Sin In vs 6-11 David instructs us on how we should go about acknowledging our sin to God. **6-7**

The same man who complained he was oppressed by God's hand (4) now declares God is his **hiding place** (7). Whereas he'd feared God as his Judge, he now takes refuge in Him as his Protector who surrounds him with **songs of deliverance**.

In a time when You may be found contains both a promise & a warning. The promise is that today is such a time. God's heart is open to us through His Son. The warning is that this time won't last forever. The door will close & those outside will remain there forever. It's a great thing to be living in a day of grace, in a time when God **is not far from each one of us** (Acts 17:27). **Now is 'the acceptable time,' behold, now is "the day of salvation'** (2 Cor 6:2). God's grace won't last forever. The day of judgment is coming, & on that day it will be too late to repent & find forgiveness. Do not wait until then. Come to Jesus today. There's a time when He may not be found. Therefore, confess your sins now. Are you experiencing God's conviction right now? Then respond, right now. Confess right now. Who is to say whether you'll experience God's conviction tomorrow? Cry out to God while He may still be found. There's a window of opportunity for repentance, when God is actively appealing to our conscience. If we refuse to turn to Him, we may be hardened in our sin (Prov 29:1). Those who've experienced God's forgiveness don't need to fear the flood of God's judgment. What a blessing that, instead of having to run from God, we can now run to God & know we're safe.

The story is told of a wagon train crossing the prairie, which came over a hill & was terrified to see a prairie fire racing toward them. It seemed as if they'd be engulfed in the flames. But the leader quickly rode to the rear of the caravan & lit the dry grass behind them on fire. The same winds blowing the flames toward them fanned this fire away from them. Within minutes they all moved to the burned-off area. As the heat & smoke became more intense, a little girl cried out, *Are you sure we're safe? Oh, yes,* said the wagonmaster, *we're safe because we're standing where the fire has already been.* If Christ has taken the fire of God's judgment, then we're safe if we take refuge in Him⁵ because we are where the fire of God's wrath has already been.

In the storms of life, David could say of his God, **You are my hiding place** (7). God was David's hiding place from God Himself. It was God who was chastening David. It was His hand that was heavy upon him. Forgiveness for the believer is a deliverance from God's chastisement. David then exclaimed, **You preserve me from trouble** (7). To **preserve** means *to guard, hide, protect or conceal*. While protecting David, God surrounded him with **songs of deliverance**. From the depths of despair to the heights of praise, this psalm is a song of deliverance. **Selah**.

In vss 8–9 God speaks. **8-9**

⁵ Told by Steven Cole <https://bible.org/print/book/export/html/21940>

God exhorts us not to be like the obstinate horse or stubborn mule that refuses to go where He leads. Instead, the **godly** should respond promptly to God on their own accord. David was like a wild horse that rushed into sin. When it came to confessing his sin, he held back like a stubborn mule. Don't be a mule! We're not to be a stubborn or self-willed mule so God has to put a **bit & bridle** on us to direct us. Rather, we're to be sensitive to His Spirit & His Word, developing a tender conscience & continually confessing our sins. We're to be responsive to God, obedient to His word, & anxious to walk in His ways. We're to **walk by the Spirit** (Gal 5:25). As we do so we won't be like a rebellious mule which must be forced to do the will of its owner.⁶ Don't be a mule. Instead come to God in confession & experience His forgiveness. When David acted like a mule God put the bridle of suffering on him. A guilty conscience & all the agonies that go with it are a merciful gift to the unrepentant mule to get us to the point of confession & restore our relationship with God. Is your conscience growing more tender toward the Lord? Do you confess your sins regularly & quickly? We're not forgiven to go our own way but to go God's way. Those who understand God's gracious forgiveness won't continue in sin but grow more sensitive to the ways of the God who has freely pardoned him. The warning is clear for those who won't humble themselves before God's sovereign rule. If we don't submit to the Lord, we'll be controlled by **bit & bridle**. If believers act as stubborn mules, God will use severe means to get their attention (Prov 26:3). Persistent disobedience will lead to the chastening hand of God (Heb 12:5–11). But God will teach & guide the person who's sensitive to Him. If we confess our sins & grow in sensitivity to His Word, He'll direct us in His ways. **8**

This is talking about the direction that God gives us. We're not left to our own designs as if we're on our own. Some of you may remember the 2003 playoff game between the Trailblazers & the Dallas Mavericks. What coach Maruice Cheeks does in this video is a picture of God keeping His eye on us & instructing & counseling us. **VIDEO**⁷

⁶ Donald Williams & Lloyd J. Ogilvie, *Psalms 1–72*, p 259

⁷ www.youtube.com/watch?v=2dSzjIKtVcA&ab_channel=PortlandTrailBlazers

That's what I picture here in vs 8. Ever experience that? Ever been there? *I don't know what to do, Lord. I don't know what the next step is. I've done everything wrong, it feels like, & I'm not sure where to go from here.* Look at David's words in **vs 10**.

This is a picture of God's abundant **lovingkindness**. It's a picture that He'll provide exactly what we need at exactly the right time. Because David was trusting in the Lord, he knew God's unfailing love would surround him. This unfailing love (*hesed*) is God's unconditional commitment to those who trust Him. The thought of God's mercy to sinners who don't deserve it causes David to break out with joy as he concludes. **11**

The Judge of the universe has pounded His gavel & proclaimed of His people, *Not guilty!* You're free from the weight of your sins, free from condemnation, & free from slavery to sin. Why? Because Jesus has paid the penalty. There's no greater joy than that of knowing that your sins are totally forgiven. This call on the part of David is a call to all believers to rejoice in the Lord's forgiveness.

In applying this psalm, we're reminded of the seriousness of sin, even in the life of a believer. Every sinful attitude, thought, or act is a rebellious revolt of a stubborn mule against God. It's a direct defiance of His rule over our life. Sin is a conscious choosing to rebel against God's authority in order to go our own way. Therefore, we must never minimize or trivialize sin as a small, trifling matter. Don't be a mule. We must deal with our sin with the same seriousness with which God sees it. That for which Jesus died is never trite or insignificant. With deep sincerity & godly sorrow, we must acknowledge & confess our sins, never presuming on God's grace, but humbling ourselves in His presence & seeking His forgiveness. When sins are confessed to God, **He is faithful & righteous to forgive us our sins & to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 Jn 1:9)**. You can be free from guilt before God today & every day. There's no greater blessing than that of having your transgressions forgiven, your sins covered, & your iniquities not counted against you by God. That blessing is available to you right now if you will confess your sins. Maybe you haven't sinned as David did. Adultery & murder may not be on your list. Perhaps your sins are more subtle & less public. Whatever the case, your only hope, David's only hope, is the unfailing love of God in Jesus

Christ. Have you experienced His eternal justification of you & are you experiencing the blessedness & joy of your relationship with Him as you continually confess your sins?