



## Prayers We Don't Pray

### Psalm 51

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*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.  
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from sin.  
For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.  
Against you, you alone, have I sinned,  
and done what is evil in your sight,  
so that you are justified in your sentence  
and blameless when you pass judgment.  
Indeed, I was born guilty,  
a sinner when my mother conceived me.  
You desire truth in the inward being;  
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.  
Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
wash me, and I shall be purer than snow.  
Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.  
Do not cast me away from your presence,  
and do not take your holy spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and sustain in me a willing spirit.*

*Psalm 51:1-7, 10-12*

Have you ever finished a book and realized that the book would never be finished with you? In *The Power and the Glory*, Graham Greene tells the story of a minister he calls a “whisky priest.” During a period of religious persecution, the priest is on the run in one of the southern states of Mexico. He is not a good priest, because—like a lot of ministers—he has learned to compromise.

Greene writes: “The good things of life had come to him too early, the respect of his contemporaries, a safe livelihood, the trite religious word upon the tongue” (Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory*, New York: Penguin Books, 1986, 49).

The whisky priest knows that he has gotten used to making concessions. He points out: “It’s hard for a well-fed priest to speak of poverty” (71).

He recognizes that he has gotten good at appearing religious and wonders: “God might forgive cowardice and passion, but could God forgive the habit of piety?” (169)

After running for weeks, the priest is asked to perform last rites for a dying man. He knows the police will arrest and execute him, but the priest does it anyway.

As he looks back on his life: “He felt only an immense disappointment because he had to go to God empty-handed, with nothing done at all. It seemed to him, at that moment, that it would have been quite easy to have been a saint. It would only have taken a little courage. He felt like someone who’s missed happiness by seconds at an appointed place. He knew now that at the end there was only one thing that counted—to be a saint” (210).

The sentence that has never let go of me is this one: “It was no good praying any longer at all: prayer demanded an act and he had no intention of acting” (30).

He did not pray, because he did not want to do anything different. That has been true for me.

Do you ever avoid praying about things that you have no intention of changing?

The smells of spaghetti, French bread, and corn on the cob fill the kitchen. The person offering grace prays: “God, help us know when we have eaten enough and stop.”

Everyone at the table is stunned. How cruel does a person have to be to pray such a thing? There are some prayers we just do not pray.

Hunger, for instance, is a subject about which we have learned to be careful. If we pray too seriously for hungry people we will end up giving our money away.

After a world hunger offering, one church member admitted that he makes a point of not having cash in his wallet

on world hunger day. He understands that if we are honest with ourselves and God about starving children, then we have to give.

After Jesus told the rich young ruler to sell all that he had and give it to the poor, we can be fairly certain that young man did not go home and pray about it. If we pray for poor people, then we have to help.

That is why most of us are careful not to pray seriously for the homeless. It is awkward to pray for people who have so little when we have so much.

James Forbes, the former pastor of Riverside Church in Manhattan confessed: "If I don't stop just talking about helping the poor and start doing something to help the poor I'm going to be embarrassed to meet God."

If we really pray for poor people, then we have to help. That is why if we have ever given a gift to a charity, then we end up not praying about our mail, because most days we get a request for money. Most are worthy causes: the Christian Children's Fund, Habitat for Humanity, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, Bread for the World, and Alzheimer's research.

The message on the outside of the envelopes from Amnesty International reads, "You can help stop torture." That is not fair. None of us are in favor of torture. If we pray over that envelope we have to write a check.

There are so many situations in which we will not pray. You are in a meeting and your boss tells a sexist joke. You know it is evil and you wish someone would point it out to him, but do you really want to pray, "God, what should I do? Should I challenge my boss who might not take kindly to my helpful words of correction?"

Sometimes we are sure we do not want God's guidance on what we should do. We have been praying about gun violence, but we are careful about how we pray.

If you want gun control it is hard to pray honestly about the sense of moral superiority that may be taking up residence in your heart.

If you are a second amendment person it is hard to pray honestly about God's concern for innocent children who are dying.

At one of the protests after the shooting in Parkland, Florida, one angry person had a sign that read, "We don't want your thoughts and prayers. We want change."

We understand the anger, but real thoughts and real prayers lead to real change. If we pray seriously about gun violence, God will remind us that too many people have died. We will do more than wait around for the next election.

We do not want to pray about our careers. Does the senior pre-law major about to graduate want to pray about whether God would like for her to be a social worker? Does the successful businessperson want to ask God if a lower paying job might make more of a contribution to the world?

We are reluctant to pray about big questions. We know it would be dangerous to pray for orphans who need a family. We are reluctant to pray about small stuff. We are not sure we want to pray about what we should eliminate from our busy schedules.

What if we are going to a movie with some friends when a lonely person calls? If we pray about what we should do, we might miss the movie.

We are careful about praying for people we do not like. Think of the person whose presence bothers you the most, who gets on your nerves and always will. When Jesus said "Pray for your enemies" he was inviting us to the kind of prayer that will lead us to say something kind that we do not want to say.

We are reluctant to pray about the way we gossip. We like talking about whoever is not there. We like using feigned concern as an excuse to feel superior. We know what we are doing and so we do not pray about it.

Prayers should come with warnings. Do not pray about the school system. You may end up tutoring second graders. Do not pray about human trafficking. You may end up buying supplies

for victims. Do not pray about racial justice. You may end up working on bail reform.

We choose a life given to comfort over a life given in prayer. We find it easier to live by the same rules everyone else follows. We strive for the same version of the good life everyone else wants.

We avoid praying when everything is coming our way. We do not want to pray because we would have to admit that we are in the wrong lane, going the wrong way. We like what we have—including the vices we have gotten used to. We do not pray about our addictions—eating too much, drinking too much, and spending too much.

St. Augustine prayed, “God, give me chastity, but not yet.”

We do not want to be healed because healing is change. What we want is to be more comfortable.

We do not avoid praying because our prayers go unanswered. We are afraid our prayers will be answered.

We try not to admit our potential, because we know more of what we should be doing than we do. We know we have unused talents and untapped resources.

We have learned to pray: “God, make me a better person, but not so much better that I have to change the way I live.”

Prayer is hard because we do not want to start doing the good God invites us to do. Prayer is hard because we do not want to stop doing what we have gotten used to doing.

King David goes a long time without really praying. One afternoon he sees Bathsheba, another man’s wife. A look turns into lust. David does not pray about it. The lust turns into sexual assault.

David acts in ways that he never would have considered if he had had the courage to pray. David is able to keep from admitting what he has done or what he needs to do for a long time. David does not pray, because he does not want to face the harsh realities.

Years later a scribe copying Psalm 51 thinks it sounds like David's story. This Psalm is the cry of a person who struggles to find the courage to pray. But the surprising thing about this Psalm is that for all of its agony, there is also a sense of relief. What has been ignored for so long is finally brought out into the open.

Telling the truth about ourselves is not easy for any of us. There is no painless way to stop protecting our easy lives and be honest to God. And yet this painfully honest prayer leads to joy. Purging with hyssop is a ceremony of sprinkling, an herb used for cleansing. The word for purge means *unsin*. This is a new start. Prayer comes from the desire to be clean and fresh, to start again.

When we think about the most courageous Christians we know, the ones who make real sacrifices, do we feel sorry for them or is it clear that they have something we should want?

People who pray passionately do not have easy lives, but they have good lives. God has hopes for us that we have been afraid to imagine.

What might it mean to be totally honest with God, to let go of the foolishness, the arrogance, the fear, the stuff that does not really matter? Could it mean that we would be free? Could it mean joy and happiness? Could prayer lead us to a better life? Could we truly love?

We need to let go of what keeps us from praying. And in praying discover ultimate love, infinite compassion, fantastic generosity, life-giving community, and passionate purpose.

Prayer is letting go of anything that stands in the way of your fullest, most beautiful flourishing in a free and faithful life under God.

If any of us are in our right minds at all, we will give up on our fears and pray fervently for God's life. We will give ourselves in prayer. We will pray weeping, laughing, changing.

For real prayer is like a mighty ocean wave lifting us up higher than we ever thought we would be when we were sitting down there in the baby pool.

What would happen if we prayed for hurting people, our family, and our enemies? What would happen if we made a searching, fearless inventory of how much more we could be if we asked God for courage?

Who is to say exactly what would happen, but we might: know when we have eaten enough and stop; make a donation to world hunger relief; have a conversation with a homeless person; take a bag of designer clothing to the Thrift Store, clothing that we could have kept; write a check to help Syrian refugees; write a letter to our congressperson about gun violence; see our enemy with compassion; listen to someone who needs a friend; stand with someone who is being put down; hear God inviting us to a different life; confess who we are and discover who we are meant to be; end up less comfortable and more saintly.

When was the last time you prayed about anything that makes you uncomfortable? What would happen if you asked God, “What should I do?”

Real prayer is for those who want something beyond the ordinary, a life of sacrifice and great joy.

*Sermon © Rev. Brett Younger*

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