

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on July 16, 2017 at Victory of the Lamb on Psalm 51.

Series: Prayer Is Powerful
Today's Focus: Create in Me a Clean Heart

“Ask God to Do in YOU What Only God Can Do!”

1. Cleanse... 2. Create... 3. Cultivate....

As a parent I find myself often saying, “You can do it!” when confronted with the attitude “But I just can’t do it.” I want my kids to learn how to overcome fears and bounce back from failures. I want them to learn the joy of overcoming challenges with persistence and effort. I want them to discover self-confidence in seeing hard work and effort pay off after trying something new. I think about all the things in my own life that I didn’t think I could do...like I was sure I could never talk in front of a group of people, yet here I am! I grew up in late 80s and 90s so my generation childhood’s motto was essentially Nike’s slogan which I find myself repeating to my kids, “Just do it! Try!”

I think in general that’s pretty good advice (and it helps when we parents let our kids actually try and then fail sometimes without swooping in to just do everything for them). But on the other hand, it’s also undeniably true that there are some things you and I just cannot do because we are powerless to do them. And that’s why we need prayer. We need God’s power where we are powerless. We need the power of a God who answers the prayers of his people. I read a quote in a book this week that said, “Prayer is acknowledged helplessness.” In other words it’s a way for me to say, “I can’t do this, God. Only you can.”

And if you’re skeptical because you believe that you really can do anything you put your mind too, then consider an example like this where it says in the Bible, **“Who can live and not see death, or who can escape the power of the grave”** (Psalm 89:48)? So if you can introduce me to someone you know who has figured out how to cheat death through the power of positive thinking, do-it-yourself religious strategies, or using just the right combination of diet, medicine, exercise, essential oils and technology than I’ll concede the premise of this message today. But if we truly live in a world where there are some problems so big that even the smartest humans cannot fix them and ultimately we cannot keep ourselves alive...then perhaps we all need to re-consider our deep need for God and the power of prayer. That’s what we’re going to do today as we get acquainted with Psalm 51 where we learn: “Ask God to Do in YOU What Only God Can Do!”

Let me share a little bit about Psalm 51. It was written about 3,000 years ago by King David of Israel. Historically it’s the most frequently used Psalm in the liturgy of the church. Yet it is as relevant as ever. You see, David had it all so to speak. He figured he had it made. But then he got spiritually complacent, forgot how much he needed God, and he blew it. Big time. He lusted after another man’s wife. He used his position to arrange a scenario where he could have sex with her. And when he found out that she was pregnant he schemed to have her husband murdered because this whole affair was entirely inconvenient for him now. In his arrogance and selfishness David thought he could cover up his sins of adultery and murder and no one would ever know. And in the meantime he would continue to go through the motions of publicly worshiping the Lord, saying prayers, singing songs, and offering sacrifices. In this way he hoped to pull a fast one on everybody.

But anybody here think you can pull a fast one on God? Certainly you can fool earthly justice systems once in a while. You can fool your boss. You can fool a pastor or teacher or hide stuff from your parents and you might think you're pretty smart and the people that you're fooling are pretty stupid. But you cannot fool God who instantly, effortlessly, and comprehensively knows all things. Fortunately for King David, God in his mercy sent him a prophet named Nathan, someone like a pastor, who boldly and tactfully showed David the stark reality of his sin—against not just Bathsheba and her husband Uriah whom David had killed, but against God himself.

Do you realize that it is sheer grace when God sends you someone who has courage to speak the words of God's law which uncovers your guilt and bring it into the open? David needed this. We need this. Because as soon as David realized he couldn't cover up his sins anymore, then his heart was ready to go to God in prayer asking God to do something else that David knew couldn't do himself. And that's expressed in the first part of this Psalm where David says, **"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin."**

In other words David understood that both by nature and by choice he was a desperate sinner who could not save himself. Someone who rightly deserved a sentence of damnation for violating God's will. But when he recognized this, then he was ready to ask God to do in him what only God can do. "God, I'm helpless here. I need you. Blot out my sins. Scrub them out. Wash them away. Cleanse me from my sin."

And did you notice on what basis David makes this plea? **According to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion.** So notice that it's a prayer based purely on God's grace. David understands that forgiveness could not be acquired by making a bargain with God whereby David would try and make reparations or earn forgiveness by the intensity of the remorse he showed. Only on the basis of God's grace was David moved to ask God to do in him what only God could do. Cleanse me from my sin.

This would be a great prayer to ask of God every night when you lay your head down on the pillow, wouldn't it? "God, I blew it again today. I lied. I lusted. I lashed out. My sins are like a stain I cannot scrub out on my own. Please blot out my transgressions. Cleanse me from my sins. Deep clean my conscience." And God testifies by His Spirit to your heart in answer to your prayer, "I have and I will. Through holy baptism I have washed away your sins. I have clothed you with the righteousness of my Son. Everything that is his by right has become yours by grace. I forgive you. I love you. I have an inheritance waiting for you here with me in paradise. For the blood of Jesus, my Son, has purified you from every sin" (1 John 1:7)." This is the victory that Jesus achieved for us through his sacrifice on the cross, guaranteed by his empty tomb, and given to you and me through the cleansing power of promise of our baptism!

But David's not done asking God to do in him what only God can do. Not only does David pray, **"Cleanse me from my sin."** He goes on to pray, ¹⁰**Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.** Create in me. You know what I find especially interesting here? That word "Create" in Hebrew is used of something only God can do. For example, any of you remember how the Bible begins? The very first verse of the very first book of the Bible, Genesis, says, "In the beginning God *created*..." In other words before there was anything else there was God—the timeless, infinite, unlimited God who always existed in eternity and then in the first moment of time created the heavens the earth out of nothing. And do you remember how God created? By his word. He spoke into existence what came to

be and from those raw materials created man and woman and breathed into us the breath of life. To create something out of nothing is mighty impressive.

I'm reminded of a fun little story about the future that goes something like this. A man approaches God and says, "Listen God, we've decided we don't need you anymore in our modern, advanced society. These days we can clone people, grow new organs and do all sorts of things that used to be considered miraculous." God replied, "Don't need me huh? How about we put your theory to the test. Why don't we have a competition to see who can make a human being like you, just like I did in the beginning." So the man says, "That sounds good" as he bends down to scoop up a handful of dirt. Until God says, "Whoa!" shaking his head in disapproval. "Not so fast. You gotta get your own dirt."

So you see what's David praying for when he says, "**Create in me a pure heart, God?**" He's praying for a miraculous act that can only be performed by God alone. Such is our faith, isn't it—a miraculous gift? Faith to believe that God not only exists but that he is graciously disposed towards us in Christ so that our sins have been washed away and that we are truly saints in the sight of God! Faith to trust God's guidance and direction in our lives and to now have the desire to carry out his will, not ours. Faith that will keep us emotionally steady and sustain us through all the peaks and valleys of life so that we don't lose heart and give up. What does this take? It takes the work of God the Holy Spirit working miraculously in us. That's why David doesn't just pray, "Change my circumstances, God." He prays, "Change *me*."

And that's important. Are there changes to your life circumstances that you're trying desperately to make through your effort alone? Improvements in your relationships that you think you ought to be able to make if you just work at them hard enough? Maybe you're even trying really hard to change some other people? Now God can certainly change your circumstances and he invites your prayers for him to change other people too, but start by asking God, "Change me." Maybe what you need the most is for you to let go of some personal bitterness or anger or unforgiveness that's been poisoning your soul. Perhaps it's something that feels impossible to do. But it's not impossible for God to do in you. Ask.

"¹⁰Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. ¹¹Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me."

So if you're taking notes today we've asked God, "Cleanse me from my sin." "Create in me a pure heart." And my third one-liner prayer for God's power is "Cultivate in me the right attitudes and actions." David prays, **12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. 13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to you. 14 Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, you who are God my Savior, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness. 15 Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise. 16 You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. 17 My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.**

Cleanse, create, cultivate in me. Things only God can do. I used that word 'cultivate' because I think it describes pretty well what David is getting at with this final part of his prayer as part of an ongoing process. "Cultivate in me, God, the right attitudes and actions in life. Cultivate in me a life filled with ongoing fruits of repentance. A changed life. Instead of crushing guilt – joy through Jesus and his victory! Instead of a spiritual complacency – a willing spirit that is patient and kind and self-controlled and wants to do your will in every situation. Instead of arrogance – a genuine humility that recognizes my ongoing

need for God's grace. Instead of just going through the motions of worship putting on a façade – a desire to praise God and share his word with others so that they might one day join their songs with mine to become a chorus of praise and thanks for God's deliverance. Cultivate the desire to daily keep asking you, God, to do in me what only you can do: cleanse me from my sins, create in me a pure heart, cultivate in me the right attitudes and actions."

Friends, today I'm super excited. I've got my Bible back. You see over the years the cover was getting worn. There were tears and fraying edges. The cover was falling apart. Maybe you can personally relate to that. Guilt has been tearing you apart. Or the experiences of your life have left you with a worn out cover, some fraying edges, and torn pages so to speak. And perhaps you don't know if there's anything



you can do. But I told you I've got my Bible back and as you can see {show pic} it has been beautifully restored by a friend with a very unique and special skill. My confirmation Bible now has a beautiful hardwood bamboo cover and a supple deer skin leather binding riveted to the cover. The pages are all securely fastened. It's incredible, isn't it?

But of course if I had tried to rebind it on my own, it never would've turned out like this. It would've probably looked something more like pastor Bill's Bible here {show pic} where as you can see he's just trying to keep it held together. Nice tape job huh! (I can say that because Pastor Bill is gone this weekend preaching for a wedding in MN 😊) And the other thing is when he tried taping it he actually put the cover on upside down! The reality is that neither he nor I are very good at restoring a Bible on our own. Neither are we capable by ourselves of being able to hold your lives together or restoring them.



Do you see my point? Just like it took the special skill of my book binder friend to restore my Bible, so too it takes the special work of God to restore you and me. God is our mender, our healer, our restorer. He alone can bind up our broken hearts with his forgiveness, undo the damage our sins or another's have wrought, and completely renovate us so that we can be re-repurposed for carrying out his will in our lives. And unlike a book binder, God doesn't just restore the outside cover, he reaches in deep to restore and renew us from the inside out.

When you ask God to do in YOU what only God can do you are placing your life in the hands of the most powerful and tender craftsman, your Creator / Redeemer / Sanctifier God. Where your resources and skills are limited, God's are unlimited. So let's not overcomplicate it. There is a lot you and I can't do, but we can most certainly pray. Ask God to do in YOU what only God can do. Here are three one-liner prayers for God's unlimited power and perhaps you want to write these down in your notes today. Make these your own or come up with your own based on Psalm 51. 1) Cleanse me from my sin. 2) Create in me a pure heart. 3) Cultivate in me the right attitudes and actions. Amen.