

**“What is a Christian Life?” Psalm 32**  
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In these occasional sermons, I have been enumerating and considering some of the fundamental teachings and convictions of our faith; such convictions as the sin and guilt of all human beings; of the incarnation of God the Son; of the new birth, and so on.

Tonight, I want to remind us of the nature of the Christian life and its experience. What does it mean to be a Christian in this world? What is the characteristic experience of a true follower of Jesus Christ? What is different about us at bottom? How can you tell a real Christian from a fake? *That is an important question because the Bible teaches us, as does the observation of life, that a great many people who claim to be Christians aren't really.* We call those people *nominal* Christians, which is to say, Christians in name only. There were a great many such people in Israel's history; indeed, for much of the time the real believers, the real followers of Yahweh, were what the prophets called “a remnant,” indicating that that they amounted to only a small part of the population. The rest thought themselves the people of Yahweh, but by his prophets and then by his judgments the Lord rejected them as his people. The main body of the people were Israelites only outwardly, not by a living faith in God. The problem of an only nominal faith raised its head already in the age of the apostles and it has bedeviled the church ever since. The last number I heard was that Europe is losing 7,000 Christians per day by death. But few of those 7,000 would be people whose lives stood out as the lives of the followers of Jesus Christ. Most of them would have been Christians in name only. Their Christian faith had very little to do with the life they led day by day; they may rarely have even gone to church on Sunday; and, in many cases, their convictions and practices would have been obviously and even proudly contrary to the teaching of the Bible.

But more important for you this evening, by having a very clear idea of what characterizes a truly Christian life we are put on our mettle always to live that life and no other, never to content ourselves with less.

*So, what is it that marks a true, authentic, genuine Christian life? How is it recognized? How does the person himself or herself know that the life he or she is living is life in Christ, is eternal life already in this world?* The number of wrong answers to those questions is legion. What is the right answer?

Well, consider this well-known psalm. Before I read Ps 32, let me remind you that many have supposed, and for obvious reasons, that in this psalm David reflects on the saddest and most sordid episode of his life. If that is the case, this psalm would have been written after the baby, who was the product of David's adulterous tryst with Bathsheba, had been born, some nine months after David had conspired in her husband's death, and after Nathan the prophet had confronted him with his sins. For nine months David hid his sins from everyone, including himself. But finally he had been brought to real repentance, to that anguished recognition of the evil he had done and that desperate plea for forgiveness that we read in Ps 51.

Many have supposed that Ps. 32 is his considered reflection on that personal history: of his terrible sin, of that almost year-long period without repentance, and of his confession and God's forgiveness. Franz Delitzsch, the great 19<sup>th</sup> century German evangelical commentator on the Bible, took this view of Psalm 32.

“For a whole year after his adultery David was like one under sentence of condemnation. In the midst of this fearful anguish of soul he composed Ps. li., whereas Ps. xxxii. was composed after his deliverance from this state of mind. The former was written in the very midst of the penitential struggle; the latter after he had recovered his inward peace.”  
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Now, to be sure, the psalm does not *actually say* this. There is nothing in the title about the circumstances out of which it was written, the kind of information we are sometimes given in the psalm titles. Psalm 51 is identified as a prayer uttered by David after Nathan's confrontation with him. Psalm 32 is silent as to the circumstances of its origin. It is possible that the psalm originates in another chapter of David's life. We cannot be absolutely sure that it originates in that episode of David's life. But there can be no doubting its perfect and immediate relevance to that time of terrible sin and great forgiveness and, all things being considered, I think it very likely that Delitzsch is right; that this psalm was written after the prayer of Ps 51 was heard and answered. *Is it any wonder that Ps 32 was Augustine's favorite psalm!*

v.2 In the first two verses we have three terms for sin and three for God's forgiveness: transgression, sin, and iniquity; forgiven (literally “carried away”), covered (which is to say, no longer visible to God), and no longer counted. This makes for powerful emphasis: our sins are gone, completely gone, so far as God is concerned, and, so far as our sins are concerned, God is the one who matters!

Paul, remember, makes important use of this text in his exposition of justification by faith alone in Rom 4:6-8. For this full and free forgiveness there is a condition: the sincerity of faith in God, a true and active faith. The deceit David speaks of would be the deceit that denies or hides one's sin, extenuates or excuses it; refuses to own up to it, and refuses earnestly to seek its forgiveness from God.

v.7 The second half of v. 6 and the first line of v. 7 inspired the lines in Wesley's hymn, “Jesus, Lover of My Soul,”

While the nearer waters roll,  
While the tempest still is high;  
Hide me, O my Saviour hide,  
‘Til the storm of life is past.

You will notice that the opportunity is at God's disposal, not ours. When the Spirit convicts, we must immediately confess. If we resist, we may find that the Lord will not return, and we will be left in that debilitating hardness of heart that David suffered for long months.

- v.9 Commentators disagree as to whether vv. 8-9 are the Lord's reply to David and to us (for the pronoun "you" is plural in v. 9), or, as is perhaps more likely, David speaks now as the teacher of the lesson he has learned. He said in Ps 51:15 that he would teach transgressors the Lord's ways, and here he makes good on his promise.
- v.10 There are many such statements as vv. 10 and 11 in the OT but here it has the special character of a personal testimony.

Psalm 32 has long been numbered among the seven *penitential psalms*, an artificial collection of psalms that includes 6, 25, 32, 38, 51, 130, 143. These are the psalms that Augustine is said to have had written on the wall beside and above his bed so that he could recite them as he lay dying. Some of these psalms have other things in them beside confession of sin and other psalms have as much penitence in them as do these. Still, there is no doubt *this* is a psalm about sin, the confession of sin, and the forgiveness of sin. Luther is said to have been asked which were the best psalms and he is said to have replied *psalmi paulini*. Being asked then to name the Pauline psalms he listed: 32, 51, 130, and 143; in other words, the psalms having to do especially with sin and forgiveness.

Now, remember, we are seeking to define the characteristic of a genuine Christian life. And here we find it. *From the beginning to the end of the Bible what identifies the genuine life of faith is its personal engagement with the Lord.* Salvation is not a series of transactions, or a set of habitual behaviors, as it is in other religions and as it always is when Christian faith has gone to seed. It is not a business arrangement in which one sells and the other buys. It is not a system of laws or regulations according to which rewards and punishments are dispensed accordingly. All of this is what religion was in the ancient world and what it is by and large for vast multitudes today. *Do ut des*; people saying to God, to the gods, or, for atheists, to themselves or to the culture: "I give so that you will give." The ancient gods, or so it was thought, were hardly good or loving. They were certainly not holy. So there was never any confidence in the gods or love for them. They cared not a fig for how their worshippers lived their lives; they were only interested in what gifts they gave.

But not so with us! The true faith has some aspects such things – that is, it obeys Gods, it seeks and expects his reward, and so on – but at heart it is something very different. It is not a business, it is a love affair; it is not a system of transactions, it is the life of a family: children with their father, with their brothers and sisters. It is not a scheme of regulations by which to calculate one's rewards and avoid punishment, it is the reign of a much loved King and his loyal subjects. It is personal from beginning to end and inside and out. It engages the heart, the emotions, as well as the mind and the will. It is a personal relationship based on truth, honesty, confidence, and loyalty; a relationship that defines and imparts meaning to everything else in one's life. It is knowing God as a person; it is loving him as a Father and a Savior; *it is living one's life in his company.*

This is one reason why the Psalms are so important. They are the expression of a genuine faith in its intensely personal character. They are a conversation with God; intimate, honest, heartfelt. They are the sort of things people say to people they trust; the sort of things real Christians will always be talking about with their heavenly Father. When David says that he prays to God seven

times a day; when Paul tells us to pray without ceasing; we are being shown and taught what the life of faith is: it is personal engagement and conversation with God.

Now, let's see from Ps 32 how this is so; even so in a way that many real Christians often fail to appreciate. *After all, why do Christians who have received the forgiveness of their sins – and those who have put their trust and confidence in Jesus Christ have that full and free forgiveness – I say, why do they then still have to confess their sins to God and seek the forgiveness of them.* Remember, justification by faith was the gift God gave saints in the ancient epoch as he gives it to us today. Paul reminds us that when Abraham believed in God, or when David did, they were justified; their sins were forgiven, they were declared righteous in God's sight. So why must David have to plead for his forgiveness as he did in Ps 51, as he tell us he did here in Ps 32? Would it not be the case, as some have thought, that to continue to ask for forgiveness would amount to an admission that he didn't believe he had received it before.

Did not Paul say that being justified by faith we have peace with God, and didn't he say to those who have faith in Christ, "There is therefore no condemnation for the man who has faith in Christ Jesus"? David had faith in Jesus Christ, just as we do. When he came to his senses after Nathan had confronted him, why didn't he simply thank God for his forgiveness? Why did he, a believing man, a justified man, plead with God to be forgiven, and why does he say that in response to his prayer he had been forgiven?

Well, it is no doubt true that forgiveness comes to the believer in Christ once and for all when first he or she is united to Christ by faith. That is very clear, emphatically clear in the Bible. But it is equally clear that believers must continue to confess their sins and seek the forgiveness of them from the Lord's hand. After all we continue to sin; we sin all the time; every day and all day long; sins of commission and, still more, sins of omission. Whenever have you and I loved God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind? Whenever have we kept all the commandments of God from our heart?

1. The psalms themselves are evidence of this duty to confess and seek forgiveness. There are many confessions of sin in the Psalms, many pleas for forgiveness. Pss 51 and 32 are representative of a large number of psalms.
2. What is more, in the Psalms you find new confessions even of long- ago sins, sins that must have been confessed many times before. Take, for example, Ps 25:7, where David asks God "Remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways..." Here is David, now the King of Israel, still bringing to mind and still asking forgiveness for sins committed when he was a boy or young man. He never got over those sins, never ceased being ashamed of them, never quit asking God to forgive them.

A tender conscience can rightly be troubled by the recollection of sins long since confessed and even long since forgiven, and so be led to confess them once again. I remember a particularly poignant episode from the First World War. An English soldier, one private James Smith from Liverpool, was executed for desertion on the Western front. Among those who were ordered to take part in the firing squad was a private Richard Blundell, who knew Smith well. After the Firing Squad had shot Smith, it was discovered that he was still alive. The officer in charge, who by tradition would then have shot Smith with his revolver, could not go through with it. Instead,

he gave his revolver to Blundell and ordered him to fire the shot. Blundell did as he was ordered. As a reward for his action he was granted ten days' home leave. It began that same day. Seventy-two years later, as Blundell lay dying, he repeated again and again, in the hearing of his son: "What a way to get leave, what a way to get leave." [Martin Gilbert, *The First World War*, 359] I don't know whether Richard Blundell was a Christian, but, even if not, how much more should a Christian, who knows only too well against whom we have sinned, have a conscience of past sins? As surely as Peter knew he was forgiven, how many times do you suppose he apologized to and sought forgiveness from God and Christ in his prayers for having deserted the Lord Jesus so terribly in his hour of greatest need? Among the 10,000 times 10,000 sins of my past life, my conscience insists on my remembering a number of them. It never allows me to forget them entirely. And so it is that I too must ask God again and again not to remember the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways. I suspect it is so with many of you.

3. And it is the same when we come into the NT. Our Lord, in giving us a model prayer, the Lord's Prayer, taught us that confession of our sin and pleading with him for forgiveness ought to be a part of our daily life. "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."
4. In 1 John we find the Apostle telling Christians that when we sin – which, he reminds us, we all do every day – we should confess our sins to God in the confidence that he will forgive us and purify us.

Years ago, in another part of the country, I had a sweet Christian lady complain to me about the confessions of sin that they used in the worship service in her church. She felt that they were not proper because they made it sound as if they weren't already forgiven. But, while a Christian confession should have some distinctive marks – for example, it should be a prayer in Christ's name, it should appeal to what we know of Christ's work on our behalf, etc. – in the Bible the confessions of sin uttered by believing people are, in fact, always uttered in such a way as to suggest that if God does not hear, they will not be forgiven. Indeed, the Lord says this explicitly *to his disciples, to his true followers, that they must not only pray for forgiveness of their sins, but do so sincerely, by which he meant that in praying for their forgiveness they must be willing to forgive those who have sinned against them. Otherwise, they will not be themselves forgiven.*

How are we to understand this? If we have been forgiven once for all, why must we continue to confess our sins for them to be forgiven? There have been different suggestions. One that did not find much support was the proposal by the Reformed theologian of 18<sup>th</sup> century Holland, Wilhelmus à Brakel, that while our justification, our acquittal and vindication in God's judgment, is, *in principle*, once for all, immediate, perfect and final, it is in fact, pieced out to us, day by day, as we pray for forgiveness. So, in his view, our sins of tomorrow have not yet been forgiven and won't be unless and until we pray for their forgiveness. To almost all Reformed theologians that explanation failed to do justice to the emphatic statements of Paul about our peace with God and there being no condemnation, or to the nature of justification itself as God's declaration of our forgiveness, acquittal, and our righteous standing before him. No one in the Bible is justified time and again; the believer is justified but once.

Better is the suggestion that in justification God is dealing with us as our judge and he does that but once, at the moment we believe in his Son. In the continuing forgiveness we receive from him as we ask for it day by day, God is dealing with us as our father. We can trouble our

relationship with our father without ever being thrown out of the family! Our continued sinning as God's children disturbs our relationship with our Father and our confession and his forgiveness mend that disturbed relationship. So one forgiveness is judicial and once for all; the other is relational and repetitive. Though the Bible never actually says this and never explains the relationship between once-for-all and repeated forgiveness, we must believe both to be the case and I think this is a fair way to think about the distinction. In the Bible, like it or not, forgiveness is spoken of as both a once-for-all grace and as a day-by-day grace. It is after all, exactly what happens in a family. We must confess our sins against one another and be forgiven, but we were never in danger of being kicked out of our home.

But, remember now, we are asking ourselves: what is the essential characteristic of a genuine Christian life? Apply all of this to *that* question. The Triune God is not some absent, distant figure with whom we are barely acquainted. *He is a presence in our lives! He is here; right next to us; fully engaged with our lives, no matter in what shape or condition our lives may be at this moment.* David's error for those long nine months was to have forgotten this. His deliverance came when he was made to remember it. And as soon as David began once again to talk to God, as soon as he looked up and saw his God and Savior, as soon as he was made to realize how he had betrayed the one who loved him and gave himself for him, as soon as he remembered that God was standing and knocking at the door of his heart, David was healed and restored and made once more to rejoice in God his Savior.

This psalm was originally David's very personal testament. But it soon became a hymn of the church, as the title indicates. In other words, it was never David alone who was the sinner; but here David is everyone of us. Every Christian sins; every believer suffers the spiritual desert when God's presence has been withdrawn; every Christian then comes to his or her senses, pleads for forgiveness, and receives it in a paroxysm of relief, flooding peace, and the joy of salvation. That has been the experience of God's people throughout history; and that has been your experience and mine, even if, alas, sometimes we hardly realize it. Open the eyes of your imagination: and think of your life as it would be if you could see the Lord walking beside you when you stumbled, when you embarrassed yourself as a Christian. What would you do? Red in face, you would look at him, you would apologize profusely, you would ask his forgiveness, and you know he would grant it. You would look again at the scars on his hands and feet and know why and it would move you again as it would have so many times before. And so it is that every day we prodigals can return home and every day our Father will run to meet us and receive us again.

If you ask me, "Why do we confess our sins together every Lord's Day?" My first answer will be because if we do not, there will be too many Christians who never, or almost never, confess their sins to God. But my second answer will be because that conversation, that honest acknowledgement, and that plea for forgiveness is the stuff of the life of faith; it is what Christians do and must do; it is how they live, in an honest, open conversation with God: one person talking to another person about how his or her life has been going, and what he or she must tell the one they love and trust, since he knows it anyway, and what he or she must ask from the one who is always ready to give us what we need. And we confess our sins for this reason also: we want what David got when he confessed his sins. We want the renewal of our peace with God, we want a new experience of the joy of our salvation, and we want the

confidence that all is well again between ourselves and the one who loved us and gave himself for us. *Divine worship on the Lord's Day is nothing other than our Christian life compressed into an hour!*

The fact that *do ut des* is so universally the religious principle of human life, the fact that vast multitudes of folk who think themselves Christians are not really, should alert us to the unhappy fact that nominalism, a thoughtless denaturing of true faith and true Christian life, *is the default position of the sinful human heart*. It is what you and I, therefore, must always be alert to; we must always be quick to see the evidence of an impersonal relationship with God growing in our hearts and lives. We face that temptation every hour of every day. We slip into that way of being a Christian every day. That is why it must be so very clear to us what a true Christian is and so what you and I must be: people who are personally, vitally, intelligently, emotionally, and intentionally *engaged with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit*, every day, throughout the day. How easily we forget this; how often our Christian life is more habit than living faith, real hope, and heartfelt love, our eyes always lifted to Him.

That personal engagement *is* the Christian life, its fundamental characteristic. And it is so, not only in the matter of sin and confession and forgiveness, but also in gratitude and thanksgiving, in expressing our love, and in seeking from our Father provision, guidance, the healing of our hearts, and the happy peace that comes from knowing that if God is with us and for us, all is well.

In all of this and in so much more the Christian life is, as the Bible so simply but meaningfully describes it: *walking with the Lord, talking to him, looking to him, counting on him, thinking about him, and being aware of him all of the time about everything!* In all these ways the Lord is to be, we are to take steps to be sure that he is, a power and a dominating presence in our lives. He is as really *there* as your husband or wife, your parents, or your children, or your very best friends. Indeed, he is more *there* in your life than anyone else ever is or could be.

What, after all, would you like to be true – obviously true – of your own life? What would you like to be the defining characteristics of your daily living as a Christian? Well, wouldn't you want it to be what it was here for David? I want to be and I want to be seen to be a person who knows his or her own sin and is humbled by it and made gentle and loving toward others as a result; I want to be a person who loves God for his mercy and is always enamored of Jesus Christ for the redemption that made my forgiveness possible; I want to be a person on whose tongue is always to be found the praise, the happy and cheerful praise, of God my savior. I want to be a person living under a sweet constraint to serve the Lord in return for his love for me. I want my life to be empowered by the joy of salvation. I want to be a man or woman who is always talking to God. Well, such a man was David in Ps 32 and he got there, that spirit, that life was formed in him through the intensely personal engagement with the Lord in confession of his sin and his prayer for God's forgiveness. And it was that personal engagement that led to the wonderful peace, joy, and active service with which the psalm concludes. *That's what honest and heartfelt conversation with God is and that is what it does. And that is a Christian life.*