

How Not to Be a Mule

by John Piper

John Piper's sermon emphasizes the importance of confession and humility in seeking God's forgiveness and experiencing true joy.

Duration: 31:45

Scripture: Psalm 32:1-6, Psalm 32:9

Topics: "Prayer"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on Psalm 32 and explores the argument as a whole. The first five verses of the Psalm discuss the importance of confessing our sins and being forgiven. The main point is that a person who is forgiven is in a happy condition. The speaker emphasizes the need to humble ourselves, come to God in prayer, and acknowledge our sins, rather than being stubborn like a mule. The sermon highlights the importance of cherishing our forgiveness and seeking God's direction and protection.

Transcript

We're in a series called Summer Psalms. Psalm 32. Please open your Bibles.

And if you don't have a Bible, please bring one next time, because we're going to look at this in detail. And what we want to find out from Psalm 32 is how not to be a mule. Which didn't turn up in that nice translation, because it's too corny, I'm sure, but it's in here anyway.

And let's read it, and you watch and see if you can detect how not to be a mule. How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. How blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me, and my vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer. I acknowledged my sin to thee, and my iniquity I did not hide.

I said, I will confess my transgression to the Lord, and thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin. Therefore, let everyone who is godly pray to thee in a time when thou mayest be found. Surely in a flood of great waters they shall not reach him.

Thou art my hiding place. Thou dost preserve me from trouble. Thou dost surround me with songs of deliverance.

I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go. I will counsel you with my eye upon you. Do not be as the horse or as the mule, which have no understanding, whose trappings include bit and bridle to hold them in check, otherwise they will not come near you.

Many are the sorrows of the wicked, but he who trusts in the Lord, loving kindness shall surround him. Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, you righteous ones, and shout for joy all you who are upright in heart. Now last Sunday we looked at Psalm 127 and only took two verses, but tonight what I'd like to do is take the whole psalm and try to understand the argument as a whole, and not miss anything, at least in a summary fashion, and then at the end focus in on what I think moved David primarily to write this psalm.

The first five verses, you notice, form a very distinct unit. They have to do with one thing, namely being forgiven and confessing our sin. And I think the main point in verses one to five comes in verses one and two, and the main point would simply be the person who's forgiven is in a very, very happy condition.

Then in verses three through five, we're told how David moves into that condition of happiness. First, negatively, what not to do in verses three and four, and then positively what to do in verse five. Negatively, don't conceal the fact that you're a sinner.

Don't hide your transgression from the Lord and try to deceive Him. Positively, in verse five, acknowledge your sin and confess it to the Lord. So the main point of verses one to five evidently is you'll be in a very happy, blessed condition if you don't conceal your sin, but rather confess it to the Lord.

Then verse six, the first half of verse six, is an inference that David draws from this good news that he's learned about from his own experience in verses one to five. And the inference is simply this. Therefore, or if this is so, let everyone who is godly pray to you, Lord, in a time when you may be found.

If such blessedness can be had through confessing our sins in prayer, then for goodness sakes, let's all pray. That's what six A draws as an inference. Then in verse six B, that's the second half of verse six, surely in a flood of great waters and verse seven, there seems to be a shift of focus or concern away from forgiveness and confession to the protection God gives His people.

Surely in a flood of great waters they shall not reach Him that is the godly. You are my hiding place. You preserve me from trouble.

You surround me with songs of deliverance. It looks as if he's changed focus a little bit away from his concern with his sin and its forgiveness over to God's protection. But I think the shift is probably not as great in David's mind as it looks at first.

Probably what David intends for us to understand is this. When he says blessed is the man whose sin is forgiven in verses one and two, probably in his mind, part of that blessing is not merely the tremendous joy of having a clean conscience and knowing that God is for you, but also the blessings that flow to the person who's forgiven, including things like protection described in verse six and verse seven. In other words, the blessing that comes to the man who prays and confesses his sin is both negative.

God will not impute iniquity to him and positive. God will protect him. It's not just what God won't do impute iniquity to him.

It's what God will do, namely protect him. God is not merely not against him. He is very, very much for him.

So I think the second half of verses six and seven function as an added incentive to the first half of verse six. Namely, let everyone who is godly pray to thee in a time when thou may be found, because if forgiveness and protection flow from the prayer of confession, then surely we ought all to be about the business of praying at a time when God may be found. Now we come to verse eight in our survey.

God takes the pen, as it were, in verse eight. You find that again and again in the Psalms. All of a sudden you're reading along and David is talking and boom, God is talking, which is something you might expect in a psalm, which is being guided by God's own inspiring will.

Well, as it were, God takes the pen here and says, I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go. I will counsel you with my eye upon you. And here there's been another shift.

No longer is he talking merely about the protection that God gives, but now about the direction God gives. Not just what God guards us from, but what he leads us to. And so this is a third blessing that comes from those or to those who pray when God may be found.

Forgiveness for our sin, protection for our lives and direction for our lives. It just wouldn't be a complete blessing, would it, if all God did was guard us from dangers? Because then we just stand there, wouldn't know where to turn, wouldn't know what to do or where to go. So in order for the blessing to be complete, God not only has to keep us shielded from harm, but also lead us in the direction that we should go.

Protection with direction, care with counsel is the complete blessing that we look for. So the main point in verses one through eight, I think, is still verse six, the first half. Therefore, everyone who is godly, pray, let him pray to thee in a time when thou mayest be found.

And all of the rest is incentive, the incentive of forgiveness, protection and direction. Now, up to this point in the psalm, verse six, the first half is the only imperative we've seen, it's the only command that we've run into. But now in verse nine, we encounter our second command or our second imperative.

And it's my understanding of David's intention here that verse nine is the counterpart of the first half of verse six. That is, verse nine is really saying the same thing as the first half of verse six, only it's saying it in a negative way. And verse six, A, said it in a positive way.

Do not be like the horse or the mule which have no understanding, whose trappings include bit and bridle to hold them in check. Otherwise, they will not come near you. Don't be that way.

Instead, I think, instead, come to God freely in prayer. Don't have to be drugged with bit and bridle. Now, maybe we should try to picture God's people as a farmyard.

OK? We're all animals in the farmyard. I don't think this metaphor is in the Bible anywhere, but we'll imagine all of us are animals in God's animal farm. Now, there's one beast in this animal farm that gives God an awful time, and it's the mule.

He is stupid and he is stubborn, and you cannot tell which is the cause of the other. Sometimes it seems like his stupidity is making him stubborn, and sometimes it looks the other way around. Now, what God likes to do is to protect these animals and guide them.

You've got this barn where they can all have shelter and where they can take refuge. And the way he likes to get them into the barn is by giving them all a name. And then calling them by name so that they freely come and walk into the barn when he calls them by name.

The mule will not respond to that kind of enticement. He is without understanding, according to verse 9. So, God gets in his pickup truck, drives out in the field with the bit and bridle, gets out, and puts the bit in his mouth and the bridle over his head and ties it around the back of the truck, and pulls him, stiff-legged, heel dug in, into the barn to keep him safe. Poor dumb beast.

Now, that's not the way God wants to get his animals into the barn. And that mule better watch out, because one of these days it's going to be too late. He's going to get clobbered with hail and struck by lightning, and when he comes running, the barn door is going to be closed, like the parable says.

Therefore, don't be like the mule. But instead, let everyone come to God in prayer freely and often at a time when he may be found. So, the way not to be a mule, it seems to me, is to humble ourselves, unlike the mule, come to God in prayer, confess the fact that we, in fact, are sinners, and accept, like needy little chicks instead of mules, the direction of God in his protection in his barn.

Now, the main reason that I think verse 9 is really the negative counterpart to the first half of verse 6 is that I see in verses 3 and 4 a description of David the mule, before the bit and the bridle had done their work. See if you agree. David sinned.

When I kept silent, that is about my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. Now, there he is out in the field, in the middle of the field, stubborn, stiff-legged, heels drug in. I am not going to go into that barn where all those crummy little critters are, those little chicks running around under my feet singing songs of deliverance as if there's some great benefit to be in somebody else's barn.

No way. I can handle my own behavior. I can take the consequences.

I am not going to bow my knee and acknowledge I've sinned. And if I've sinned, I'll take whatever's coming. That's David the mule.

So, here comes God in his pickup truck. Verse 4, day and night, thy hand was heavy upon me. My moisture was turned into the drought of summer.

When David acted like a mule, God put the bridle of suffering on him and drug him into the barn, because he loved him. A guilty conscience is a gift of God to an unrepentant person. And not just a guilty conscience, but all those horrible agonies that go with it, and you've experienced those.

If we have a guilty conscience and do not get it right with God, it's not just our conscience that hurts, our whole body bears the brunt of that kind of mule-like behavior. The main point, therefore, of verses 1 to 9, I think, is, let everyone who is godly come to God in prayer in a time when he may be found. Because the contrite heart, which prays and is not mule-like, experiences God's forgiveness, gets God's protection, and receives God's direction or counsel for life.

That's the whole argument of the psalm, except for verses 10 and 11. Maybe they deserve a brief comment. Verse 10 is simply a restatement, it seems to me, of verse 7. You can even see the word surround.

I put a big circle around the word surround with songs of deliverance in verse 7, and surround with loving kindness in verse 10. In other words, here again is the promise of protection. Many of the sorrows of the wicked, but those who trust in the Lord, are surrounded by the love of God.

Verse 11 is a little different. Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, you righteous ones, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart. I think that is the climax of the whole psalm.

That's the result, but maybe we should say this. That's the third imperative. That's the third command that we've seen in the psalm.

The first one was 6a, pray. The next one was verse 9, don't be like a mule. And the last one is be glad or shout for joy.

I think that verse 11, this command, relates to the command in verse 6 both as cause and effect. It seems like this, this is the way it works in my experience anyway. When we come to God in prayer, and experience the benefits of a clean conscience, and guidance for life, and protection, it makes us glad in the Lord.

So prayer becomes the cause of the effect of gladness. But doesn't it work just the other way? When we are delighting in God and experiencing Him in joy, aren't we drawn often to approach Him, and to talk to Him, and to pray to Him? And so joy becomes a cause to the effect of prayer. And the image I get is of a spiral that's moving into heaven.

Joy causes me to pray more. Prayer leads me into the benefits of God, which cause me to rejoice in Him more. And it's like a spiral that leads us ever more deeply into an experience of God's fellowship, of forgiveness, and protection, and counsel, and gladness.

That's the whole argument of Psalm 32 as far as I can tell. Verse 6, it seems to me, is the main point. And all the rest is incentive to get us to pray, so that we can experience the cleansing and forgiveness of verses 1 to 5, the protection of 6b to 7, the counsel of verse 8, and the joy of verse 11.

Now, evidently though, the main thing that moved David to write this psalm was his experience of finding forgiveness, through becoming un-mule-like after God had bridled him and taught him a lesson, and confessing his sins. So I want to focus there for a few minutes here at the end. And three questions came to my mind as I meditated on verses 1 to 5, and they were these.

One, what is the prerequisite of experiencing the forgiveness described in verses 1 and 2? Second, why is it that this prerequisite is necessary? And third, what's so blessed about having our transgressions forgiven? First, the prerequisite. The answer is very clear from verse 2 and verse 5, when you put them together. The prerequisite is, from verse 5, you have to acknowledge and confess your sin.

But I want to add something to that from the last line of verse 2. You have to have a spirit in which there is no deceit. So I put it like this. It's confession or acknowledgement of our sin to the Lord from a spirit free of deceit.

Now, when you put those two together, a very precise definition of confession emerges. And it's a little different, perhaps, than you might expect just reading verse 5 by itself. Confession to God, I think, is not merely admitting our sin, but rather rejecting our sin as repulsive.

Admitting our sin as real and rejecting our sin as repulsive. There's deceit in the spirit of the person who admits with his mind that he has sinned, but feels no revulsion for that sin in his heart. Sins like a bad temper, an irritability, hypercritical attitude, gossiping, a lukewarm love for Jesus, dishonesty on tax forms, failure to discipline your children like you should, etc., etc.

The reason it's deceit to come to God saying, yes, I've sinned, I've sinned, with your mind, and feeling no revulsion in your heart is because sin is repulsive in the eyes of God. And if you claim to be confessing sin before God and feel no revulsion in your heart, you're not really confessing sin for what sin is. So the prerequisite is not merely saying, yes, God, we're all sinners, I've sinned, take it off my back.

It is really hating your sinning and being eager to reject it as repulsive. Second, why is it that God requires that as a prerequisite for forgiveness? Why can't God, in his infinite grace, just wipe everybody's slate clean? Why does there have to be, in every individual case, the prerequisite of confession? That's what I pondered longest on Saturday, and here's what I came up with. Every sin is an insult to God.

It's a slap in God's face. We have to understand that if we're going to understand the dynamics of forgiveness and confession. When two people offer you advice, and they are opposite pieces of advice, mutually exclusive, and they stake their character on the value of their advice, and you choose one and reject the other, you defame the character of the other person.

It's inevitable. You may not want to, but you do it. He staked his character on that advice, and you've rejected it and said, he's not worthy to be trusted as a counselor.

And that's what we do to God every time we sin all day long. It's an insult. It's a slap in his face.

And that's what we have to see. Now, forgiveness is always, in every setting, a desire on the part of somebody to make a relationship good that's been wrecked by somebody's insult like that. God's aim is to bring into being a people who are in harmony with him, in fellowship with him, in tune with him, in union with him.

And we're always rupturing that relationship with our slaps in his face as if his counsel is not worth anything when we reject it and sin. Now, God is willing to forgive. I mean, we'd be hopelessly lost if God were not willing to forgive.

But this is the question that then came to me. Can there be fellowship between two parties when one of those parties is perpetually bent on insulting the other? I don't think there can be. Couldn't God just wipe the slate clean, even though perpetually we went on and on and on into eternity slapping his face? Well, he might be able to, conceivably.

But for what end? His whole goal would be shot. There'd be no fellowship, no union, no harmony. He wouldn't be glorified in our behavior, and we wouldn't have the happiness of union with him.

The only way that God can reach the goal of glorifying his name and bringing us into a joyful union with him is not only to overlook our sins, but to change sinners. That's what God was doing with David then, and that's what he's doing through Christ with us who believe. And I think that's why there has to be a prerequisite for wiping the slate clean.

We have to turn from our sin with repugnance because God is in the business not merely of covering our sins, but of shaping our characters. God is not just interested in ignoring sin. He's interested in getting rid

of it once and for all.

So the person who's going to be forgiven is the person who hates his own sinning and is on the way to becoming like Christ. And if that weren't God's way of dealing with sin and providing forgiveness, there'd be no hope of holiness in heaven, no hope of a company of just men made perfect, no hope of a glory of God unsullied by the insults of men. God must do it the way he's done it, or there's no hope for man, and his purposes have collapsed.

And now my final question is this. What's so blessed about having our transgressions forgiven? Almost a blasphemous question. And yet a needed question in our day, really needed, because there are people who say they are forgiven with a very ho-hum attitude, with very little sweetness of gratitude felt in their heart.

Oh, how we need to cherish our forgiveness more. I'm convinced that until we fear sin and its consequences more keenly, we will not prize our pardon very intensely. The degree to which we feel a sweet gratitude for forgiveness is directly proportionate to the degree that we feel dread at the alternative of being forgiven.

And if you don't feel dread from time to time at the prospect of not being forgiven before a holy God, it's only to be assumed that you won't feel very excited or happy or sweetly grateful about being forgiven, isn't it? The horror of sin and the fearfulness of hell are the only backdrop against which forgiveness will shine with the infinite beauty that it really has. I thought of this image that helped me. If you're on a little raft of sin and you don't see the ten-story tidal wave of the wrath of God bearing down on you, then when the helicopter lifts you out and pulls you in and scrapes your shin, you won't kiss his feet.

You'll grumble that things weren't just the way you'd like. You've got to see the tidal wave coming or you won't kiss the feet of the pilot. And I want us to cherish our forgiveness.

I want us to kiss the feet of Jesus unashamedly. I want big, strong, burly men who make lots of money every year and who rule lots of people in their firms to be willing to get on their knees in tears and kiss the feet of Jesus because they were in such a dire plight. The only reason to preach about sin is to make us love forgiveness.

That's the only reason. And we've been sold a bill of goods in our day, people telling us we've been talking about sin too much. I haven't heard a message on sin in a long time.

I haven't heard a message on hell in ten years. No wonder I'm not very afraid of it. And no wonder I don't cherish my redemption from it.

Here's the way to bring yourself to love the forgiveness of God more. Try this. Sometime when you've got some leisure, compare.

This is an act of self-reflection and self-examination. Compare the affections, the emotions of your heart towards all sorts of things in the world. People, food, circumstance, and how high the affections rise and how low they plummet.

Compare those affections with the affections you feel when you reflect on the fact that you are forgiven by God an infinite death and rescued from hell and given an infinitely glorious future. And if your emotions are not as intense on the latter point, repent. And don't be like the mule.

Don't be like the mule, but repent and run headlong to God in prayer, like verse six says and like David did. Because the contrite heart which prays will find forgiveness and it will be sweet. He will find protection from what God does not want him to experience.

And he will find precious counsel for how to get on in the day's activities. And he will find himself being glad in the Lord.

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