

**A Clean Heart – Part 1**

Ash Wednesday

February 18, 2026



Our series for Lent this year is called “Renewed in Mercy.” During this series we will focus on being made new again and upon the practice of re-encountering something as new again. Through these renewing practices, we will release expectations and preconceived notions, approaching both new and familiar people, events, and ideas with a fresh perspective. Therefore, we will be invited again and again to engage in a spiritual practice of noticing and paying attention to when and where mercy and grace are at work in our lives and in our world.

Tonight, as we first read and work through Psalm 51, we begin to prepare and set the stage for a season of repentance that is not just turning away from sin but towards God’s renewing work in the world. Before reading, though, we begin with some context. David writes these words after being confronted by Nathan about the affair with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah. These words are set in the spirit of repentance and are about being made new by God. As we prepare to do so, hear the words of Psalm 51, verses 1-4:

*<sup>1</sup> Have mercy on me, God, according to your faithful love! Wipe away my wrongdoings according to your great compassion! <sup>2</sup> Wash me completely clean of my guilt; purify me from my sin! <sup>3</sup> Because I know my wrongdoings, my sin is always right in front of me. <sup>4</sup> I’ve sinned against you — you alone. I’ve committed evil in your sight. That’s why you are justified when you render your verdict, completely correct when you issue your judgment.*

In the opening verses, we can feel David’s emotions with our very being. He cries out for God’s faithful love to deliver him mercy. He begs for God’s compassion to wipe away his sins.

David longs to be made clean, to be purified, to be made new again in his relationship with God. We have all prayed this prayer – a thousand times for some of us. We have all felt the weight of our sin, feeling heavy upon our souls. And, like David, we have seen the cost of our sin, paid by others, paid by ourselves. Even though we are well-practiced in receiving mercy and grace and forgiveness, we remain skilled at creating a need for these gifts of God. Like David, we can truthfully declare, *“My sin is always right in front of me.”* Sin is ever there, always ready to wreak havoc and destruction, always ready to bring pain and brokenness.

This reality is why we gather on Ash Wednesday as we begin this season of Lent. We gather to acknowledge our humanness and to pledge to join together for this Lenten journey of faith. We journey in a personal way – through self-examination and introspection we commit to new ways of living, claiming the gifts of forgiveness and salvation. We journey also as a community, seeking to build up the body of Christ, striving to help one another how to walk in God’s ways, gently guiding one another back into the faith when one has gone astray. We worship and we study together – whether by being in a Lenten small group or by committing to deepen your Lenten journey by reading the daily devotion offered online – all to grow deeper in our relationship with God and with one another.

It was with this spirit that David wrote verse 10. The journey begins on the personal level and then it ripples out into the faith community and then out into the world. As we prepare to receive the ashes tonight, we recall these words of David: *“Create a clean heart for me, God; put a new, faithful spirit deep inside me!”* This plea for God to do the work, for God to make his heart clean and for his spirit faithful, this plea is our plea as well. With this plea, we turn now to the imposition of ashes...



*“Create a clean heart for me, God;  
put a new, faithful spirit  
deep inside me!”*

- Psalm 51:10

## A Clean Heart – Part 2



In our second passage for tonight, Paul also emphasizes our need for God’s mercy and grace and for God’s forgiveness. Paul first sets this need in the personal realm, as did David in our Psalm. And Paul also connects our faith to the community of faith, revealing how our personal reconciliation to God impacts, influences, and builds the community of faith. With this, we turn to our Epistle reading from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians:

### 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

*<sup>20b</sup> We beg you as Christ’s representatives, “Be reconciled to God!” <sup>21</sup> God caused the one who didn’t know sin to be sin for our sake so that through him we could become the righteousness of God... <sup>1</sup> Since we work together with him, we are also begging you not to receive the grace of God in vain. <sup>2</sup> He says, ‘I listened to you at the right time, and I helped you on the day of salvation. Look, now is the right time! Look, now is the day of salvation!’ <sup>3</sup> We don’t give anyone any reason to be offended about anything so that our ministry won’t be criticized. <sup>4</sup> Instead, we commend ourselves as ministers of God in every way. We did this with our great endurance through problems, disasters, and stressful situations. <sup>5</sup> We went through beatings, imprisonments, and riots. We experienced hard work, sleepless nights, and hunger. <sup>6</sup> We displayed purity, knowledge, patience, and generosity. We served with the Holy Spirit, genuine love, <sup>7</sup> telling the truth, and God’s power. We carried the weapons of righteousness in our right hand and our left hand. <sup>8</sup> We were treated with honor and dishonor and with verbal abuse and good evaluation. We were seen as both fake and real, <sup>9</sup> as unknown and well known, as dying — and look, we are alive! We were seen as punished but not killed, <sup>10</sup> as going through pain but always happy, as poor but making many rich, and as having nothing but owning everything.*

This is the word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God!**



Almost like he was channeling his inner David from Psalm 51, Paul begins our reading with these words: *“We beg you as Christ’s representatives, ‘Be reconciled to God!’”* It is the same cry of the heart, expressing a longing for a heart to be made right with God. After reminding the Corinthians that Jesus died to forgive them of their sins, Paul implores them to receive this salvation, saying, *“Look, now is the right time! Look, now is the day of salvation!”* Today is the day to receive the Lord into your heart and to accept his forgiveness of their sins.

As we turn to the next verses, Paul gets real. In many ways, he is being clear about what this decision to follow Jesus might mean for the Corinthians. The list found in verses 4 and 5 serve as a measuring rod for faithfulness in a difficult and challenging world. Paul shares that through great endurance, he and his companions dealt with *“problems, disasters, and stressful situations.”* They experienced *“beatings, imprisonment, and riots.”* Paul and his fellow followers of Jesus *“experienced hard work, sleepless nights, and hunger.”* In these trials, their faith in God endured and their trust in God saw them through. The same will be true for us when we remain committed to our faith and when we trust in our God.

To hold to the faith and to trust in God in difficult times can be challenging. In the next verses, Paul shares how faith and trust were revealed in their lives and in their ministry. With a clean and right heart, Paul and his fellow believers *“displayed purity, knowledge, patience, and generosity. We served with the Holy Spirit, genuine love, telling the truth.”*

*“Displayed purity, knowledge, patience, and generosity. We served with the Holy Spirit, genuine love, telling the truth.”*

- 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 6:6-7

To daily live in these ways is not always easy. But in Paul we find a model for how the clean heart is lived out each day. While Paul would never say that suffering is a requirement for faith, he does seem to say that suffering is a frequent result of living daily in these ways. The problems, beating, sleepless night, and hunger? Yes, they were outcomes of faithful living, days after day, serving God and neighbor, loving each to the full. For Paul, as one could argue it was for Jesus, suffering is the consequence of getting into what some call “good trouble.” This good trouble, this suffering for the gospel, it comes when we love those called enemies and when we turn the priorities and values of the world upside down.

Ash Wednesday is a call to getting into “good trouble.” It is a call to walk the road that leads to new life, not just for our own sake but for the sake of the world. Lent is not just personal. It is corporate in nature too. To live into this call to action, we need two things. First, we need to know that we are in this together. There is a community that surrounds you and me, that walks with us and alongside us. We do not walk alone.

**Lenten Call to Action Reminders:**

- 1) We are in this together.

Second, Ash Wednesday reminds us that we need a clean heart, a new and right spirit within us. Through the mercy, grace, forgiveness, and power of God and one another, we enter this

**Lenten Call to Action Reminders:**

- 1) We are in this together.
- 2) We need a clean heart, a new and right spirit within us.

Lenten journey together, beginning our path to the cross. May we go forth together, seeking new life for ourselves and for our world. Alleluia and amen.

**Grow, Pray, Study**

- 1) *Grow*. Spend some time in personal reflection. What part of your life or faith could use a little attention, a little refining, a little cleaning up?
- 2) *Pray*. Seek guidance for how to go deeper this Lenten season. Is it joining a small group? Is it reading the daily postings at pastorjohnb? It is finding a Lenten devotional to read, study, and meditate upon?
- 3) *Study*. Read Psalm 51:7-13. Which of these actions can you experience personally and which can you take out into the community this week?