

SERMON OUTLINE 1

“HONEST TO GOD”

PSALM 139 AS A MODEL FOR HONEST PRAYER

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. Everyone has secrets. People have secrets. Families have secrets. Churches and countries have secrets. And there are now websites like “Secret Confessions” that make it possible for you to confess your sins anonymously.
- B. For some people, their secrets are about an addictive behavior. For still others it is a racist prejudice, a traumatic experience, or a struggle with mental health—like the world's most decorated Olympian Michael Phelps, who in 2017 admitted that he struggled with suicidal thoughts. “I remember sitting in my room for four or five days not wanting to be alive,” he confessed, “not talking to anybody.”
- C. Whatever our secrets may be, they invariably result in one thing: the desire to hide. We hide from others, we hide from our self, and ultimately we hide from God. What happens when we hide? We lose touch with reality, our sense of self becomes warped, and we become desperately lonely.
- D. The psalms understand the human condition all-too well. In them we see a mirror of humanity at its best and at its worst. The psalms are in this way a brutally honest text. And the psalms would tell us that if we want to be free, we have to tell our secrets to God—we have to be wholly honest to God.
- E. Psalm 139 shows us what it looks like to be honest to God in our prayers.

II. TEACHING

- A. The psalmist invites God to see it all.
 - 1. “You have looked deep into my heart, oh LORD,” he writes, “and you know all about me” (v. 1 CEV). To be known by God in this way, through and through, nothing hidden (v. 15), nothing excused (v. 23), is beyond the psalmist’s capacity to fully grasp. “It is more than I can understand,” he says (v. 6).
 - 2. Or as the poet Laurance Wieder translates the first three verses of Psalm 139:

*Look in:
My soul is glass*

*To you, no veil
Or bone unseen,
But you know
All I pass through,
All I do, ahead
Or inside me,
Before I do.*

B. The psalmist discovers his true identity by standing wholly vulnerable before God.

1. "I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (v. 14). In psalmist's waking hours and asleep at night, the Lord is there (vv. 2-3). No height, no depth, not the darkest night, not a secret thought, neither heaven nor hell, can hide the psalmist from the Lord's searching gaze (vv. 8-12). "I cannot escape your presence," he confesses (v. 7).
2. Brené Brown says this in her book *Daring Greatly*, "Vulnerability is not weakness. Vulnerability is the birthplace of love."

C. In standing exposed before God, the psalmist feels deeply cared for.

1. "Investigate my life, O God," he writes, "find out everything about me; cross-examine and test me, get a clear picture of what I'm about" (v. 23). The psalmist welcomes the Lord's thoughts towards him (v. 17). He feels secure in the Lord's sovereign care (v. 16). All the days of his life are seen by God.
2. This is similar to the language that we find in Psalm 17:1-3 (*The Message*):

*Listen while I build my case, GOD,
the most honest prayer you'll ever hear.
Show the world I'm innocent—
in your heart you know I am.
Go ahead, examine me from inside out,
surprise me in the middle of the night—
You'll find I'm just what I say I am.
My words don't run loose.*

D. The psalmist describes the experience of keeping silent about his secret sins like the experience of disintegration.

1. His bones turn to powder (v. 3). His energy dissipates, "the very pith of my body decomposed as if baked in the summer heat" (v. 4). He risks returning to the dust (Ps. 22:15).

2. This is similar to how Carrie Fisher, aka Princess Leia, once described her experience of manic depression: "It's very painful. It's raw. It's rough...your bones burn...when you're not busy talking and trying to drown it out."
- E. When the psalmist honestly confesses his sin, not holding back, not denying, not making excuses, the Lord forgives him.
1. Instead of "covering up" his sin, God covers his sin (Ps. 32:1, 5). Instead of hiding from God, God becomes his "hiding place."
 2. Jim Cutter captures this idea in his translation of Psalm 32:

*Even in times of overwhelming distress,
With the thunder and force of waters in flood,
Your grace is for me like a temple of rock,
Standing firm in the face of the powers,
Ordering the discord and chaos within,
Preserving my life from utter destruction.
In the eye of the storm I hear the whisper of mercy,
The peace of those who are completely forgiven.ⁱ*

- F. When we pray the psalms with Jesus, we can be honest to God about the best and worst parts of our lives, because we have abandoned ourselves to a gracious God.
1. We can be confident that the grace of God precedes our honest confessions, the grace of God undergirds our honest thanksgivings, and the grace of God follows our honest laments.
 2. What happens when we pray the psalms under the light of God's grace? We feel no need to hide from this God because we are so confident in *his* grace. Because Jesus comes to us "full of grace and truth" (Jn. 1:14), we too can be confident that we shall be found and filled with grace. And we too can pray daringly honest prayers because we trust that Jesus himself prays them with us and in us.

III. APPLICATION

- A. What are you afraid will happen if you are fully honest to God? What feelings come up in you when you think about no longer hiding from God?
- B. Read Psalm 139. Read it several times. Meditate on it. Pray through it. Consider memorizing a portion of it in order to carry the words of the psalms in your heart.
- C. This week find a moment to go for a walk and to talk honestly to God in the way that Psalm 139 models for us.

ⁱ Jim Cotter, *Psalms for a Pilgrim People* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1998), 68, "Psalm 32."