



**VILLAGE  
CHURCH**  
Presbyterian (USA)

# Create in Me a Clean Heart: Confession and Assurance

SCRIPTURE:  
Psalm 51:1-3,  
6-12

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April 14, 2024 — Sermon by Rev. Chad Herring

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**G**ood morning, Village Church. This has been a wonderful six months with all of you. Though it really hasn't felt like six months. It has gone by pretty quickly. But it is true. I joined all of you the second Monday of October.

I was thinking back to that first week recently—so grateful for Pastor Rodger's way of welcoming me. At one of our first staff gatherings, Rodger had all of us go around and share three things about ourselves, you know, an ice-breaker of sorts. A way to start to get to know all these great people I get to work with now. I learned all sorts of things very quickly. It was my turn and I shared my three things—three things that I'll share with all of you: 1) That I have twin daughters. They're 17 now, about to graduate high school and head off into a wonderful future as adults soon, so very soon. But hopefully not too quickly. 2) That I love chocolate cake. I actually love apple crisp more but Rodger put me on the spot and I said chocolate cake. I can bake a decent one, but my daughters are better bakers than me. 3) Finally, I shared that I studied ethics in Seminary. After I finished my ministry degree, I entered a graduate program in ethics. And did that for awhile before moving here to start work as a pastor.

We did a bit more at that meeting, wrapped up, and as we were leaving, one of my colleagues (I won't say which one), patted me on the back and said, "The cake I get. But ethics, huh? That sounds about as exciting as watching paint dry." What a way to start, right? But it is true. I've spent a good chunk of my adult life thinking about good things—about right and wrong. Or, to be more accurate: How people try to figure out what is right and what is wrong. And how to build a good and a right and a just world.

It's not all that easy. Do you think about what makes for a flourishing human life? Maybe having

enough nourishing food and clean water? Sturdy clothing and a safe place to sleep away from the elements? Access to doctors and a chance to spend time with friends and pets? A good balance between work and play, learning and leisure? Do you take all of that and then try to maximize it for as many people as possible? Or maybe just for you and your family? Or your country? And then work out a system of right and wrong. To try to make everything end up the best that you possibly can for the most people you can. Try to figure out why so many people hoard so many things instead of sharing so that others can thrive, too. That's one way to think about it.

Or maybe you're more abstract and you think about rules. Rules like: Treat people with respect, particularly your elders and your parents. Don't steal from other people, or ruin their lives, or long after their stuff. Don't kill, don't lie, don't cheat. Use honest weights in your store—that sort of thing. Maybe those rules come from God. Or maybe those rules come from some version of the Golden Rule, that notion of reciprocity found in almost every human culture: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Or, "What goes around, comes around."

When you think this way, the rules that are important should therefore be rules that apply to everyone, everyone just the same, in a fair and just world. That's another way to try to work it out.

There are some other ways people have tried to sort all this out, too. But no matter how you look at the task of figuring out what is right and what is wrong, we human beings have been working on it for almost as long as we've been on this planet. As long as we've had other people to share our lives with.

The creation stories in the Bible are a good example. The story of the first couple, and the tree in the garden. Do you remember the name of that tree? That's right: It's not just any tree. It's the tree of the

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knowledge of good and evil. That was always a sort of a warning for the person who studied ethics, I think. Genesis tells us about the fruit of that tree—so tempting, alluring, like a tall glass of lemonade on a warm summer day, but we're not supposed to eat from it, so the story goes. Everything else is good and tasty and nutritious. Just stay away from that one and you might be better off. Stick with the chocolate cake.

What might that Genesis story be getting at, really? There may be no better way to establish a temptation than to tell someone not to take something that's right in front of them. Did God know what she was doing when she did that?

A young couple I knew once told me about a weekend they had spent raking their front yard. It had been a windy week. And the two 30-foot trees on the property, and the three other trees next door, had covered their entire front yard in brown, yellow and red leaves. They had a lot to do. So they got to work: Two rakes, a dozen yard-waste bags, and one of those plastic things you slip inside the bags to keep them open. They had a son. Max was four. He had his own rake, too—this little bright green plastic thing. And boy, didn't Max look adorable trying to help out. Soon the parents had divided and conquered. There were four or five huge piles of leaves all over the front yard, ready to be bagged.

And, as sometimes happens with toddlers, Max got bored. His adorable little green rake was no longer interesting. Jumping in those piles of leaves was fun the first and second time he tried it. But now what? Well, there was still a lot to do.

So mom sat him down on the front stairs and gave him a juice box and some goldfish and said to him, "Max, mommy and daddy have to keep working. You can stay here and enjoy your snack or you can go inside and play with your toys. Or you can help us rake leaves. Just whatever you do, don't set foot in the street."

She looked him in the eyes the entire time she said all this, watching to make sure he understood. Max understood. He nodded. He even repeated it back to her in the way four-year-olds can. "Juice. Play. No street." And mom was satisfied. Back to raking for her. Or so she thought.

She got maybe 10 steps away, back to where

her leaf bag lay waiting. Max saw that she was far enough away and he stood up and started walking, slowly, down their driveway. Max was looking at her the whole time. Direct eye contact. And she was looking back, watching her son walk toward the curb. It was a slow street. Not many cars. She could see a good stretch in both directions—no one was coming. Max was safe. But wouldn't you know it if he didn't walk right up to the edge of the curb, keeping his mother's gaze the whole time. And when he got there, he stepped over and ever so gently tapped the street with the toe of his shoe.

"Whatever you do, Max, don't set foot in the street." So much for that. Max learned about temptation that day and about time-out. While temptation isn't the only challenge in our struggles to do good and avoid evil, it is a good chunk of what we deal with on a regular basis.

What are we to say about the things that tempt us? About our yearnings and desires? Not all of those things are bad. Are they? Wanting to explore, to grow up, to test boundaries and limits? In the wrong time and place, they can be dangerous, that's for sure, and not just because of oncoming traffic or the wrath of your parents.

Another thing that I could have said about me in Rodger's ice-breaker is how I had just completed a year as a chaplain resident at Saint Lukes' Medical Center. Anyone who spends any time around a major hospital knows all too well about the narcotic epidemic impacting our communities these days. The toll that fentanyl is having on families and on the care providers who rush to save them in time with a dose or two of Narcan. I saw far too many of those patients come through the emergency department during my year there.

One of our most troublesome temptations, as human beings, is the impulse to escape—to escape pain or boredom or feelings of inadequacy. To escape through substances that are harmful to us. We know this all too well. Some temptations are harmful.

And we have a lot to confess, collectively, when it comes to how we fail to provide the support so many people need. But in the right time and place, some of our temptations, yearnings and desires can be noble—essential even. The human spirit can be full of these paradoxes.

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A few weeks ago I came across a movie about Neil Armstrong and America's race to the moon, pushing the boundaries on what was possible—on what we could dream or even imagine. It is called "First Man." Have you seen that movie with Ryan Gosling and Claire Foy from 2018? I learned about those Apollo missions in school. They were full of risky, daring ingenuity. Though I'm not sure if I'm tempted to get strapped to the business end of a Saturn V rocket, the Apollo mission worked because we human beings, in our best moments, find a way to balance exploration with protocol, daring with reason, ardor with order. Too much of either can be rather disastrous. But you need both: desire and restraint.

But we bristle at restraint. People often think of rules and ethics and law as restraint—things that keep me from doing what I want or not letting me get ahead. Rather than, when they're working well, when they're just and fair and good rules and laws and norms, as something that helps us all thrive—by setting the conditions for us to live together in community, by helping us take calculated risks, for knowing which things not to try at all (like narcotics) and which things, under the right conditions, might be worth it.

Sure, it might be fun to think of my little side street as the autobahn—that highway in Germany where you can open the throttle and see how fast your SUV can go. But the 25-mile an hour speed limit is probably better. Not just for me, but for those toddlers testing limits in their front yards.

We all have temptations, and in one way or another, we spend our whole life wrestling with the things that tempt us—and sometimes the anxiety we have over our temptations or the guilt we carry when our temptations actively lead us to do harmful things.

The Apostle Paul knew this, too. He wrote about this in the letter he sent to the church in Rome, "I do not understand my own actions," Paul said. "For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."

But it is so important for us to notice, right after he says this, that Paul offers what is maybe his most famous words of comfort and assurance: What are we to say about these things? It is God who justifies. Is God going to condemn us? No. Because nothing, not our temptations, not our actions that hurt others, not the failure to do the good that is ours to do,

not even those times we fall short or fail to live up to our hopes, or actively cause pain or grief for others—not even that will separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus.

This is the second week of our sermon series on the ways we worship. Worship is one of the most important things we do as people of faith. We are called together, as we heard last week, to be in God's presence. To practice how to be God's people together. To learn about God. To sing and pray and ponder. This is formative time. It structures the way we understand ourselves and the world. It impacts how we go about our days, how we treat one another. How we treat ourselves. Worship is important.

And in order for worship to be worship, for us to be in God's presence, we have to truly be here. We have to bring our whole selves to this time before God—everything we've experienced this past week: the good, the bad, the hard, the boring, the anxious, the sad, the petty, the tempting. All of it.

And knowing that God is God and we are not, we marvel at how God can handle all of that. That neither depth nor height nor anything else in all creation can ever separate us from the Love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

That is the pattern of God in scripture: Authenticity leads to honest confession, leads to restoration and God's abundant love. This is the reason our worship always includes a moment for confession. Confession is our reminder that we can be, that we need to be, authentic and vulnerable with God. God can handle it.

It is the kind of contrite spirit that we hear from the 51st Psalm: Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love. Blot out my mistakes. Wash me from my iniquity. Cleanse me from my sin.

I was in Starbucks the other day, minding my own business. There were two guys at a table on the other side of the store. One of them looked like he might break into tears. The other was working really hard to hold his feelings in and just listen. They had been talking at times quietly, at other times, quite loud with phrases like, "I can't believe you did that" and "I was trying to." After a few minutes, one guy said, "Look, I know I'll never be able to make it up to you. I was wrong. I am so very sorry, man. I was wrong. I was so wrong."

And the other guy looked at him for a second and he stood up and went around to the other side of the table. I wasn't sure what he was going to do. He just put his arms around him and they hugged it out. It was so remarkable. This public moment of confession and repentance and what looked like forgiveness. It was an honest, poignant, faithful moment.

This need of ours to not hide from our mistakes, but to speak truthfully about them, it runs through our sacred texts. It is all over the place: Jacob preparing to meet up with Esau, the prodigal returning home, the look Jesus gives Peter having denied him three times. And here, in the Psalms: Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean. You know my transgressions; Create in me a clean heart, O God. Put a new and right spirit within me.

The point is that we are never defined by our worst days—particularly when we seek to do what is good. When I'm honest with myself I know that I have hurt people in my life. And I've known deep and powerful betrayal, too.

One of the most powerful lessons of Easter is that God walks alongside us, in our hurt and our pain, in our grief and our guilt, and shows us that, no matter what, love is there yearning to show the way forward. We catch a glimpse of this when we remind ourselves, every Sunday, through this pattern of confession and, always with it, assurance of God's grace. God's compassion is always bigger than our ups and our downs.

Sometimes we do this in a formal prayer of confession. But we always do it when we say the Lord's Prayer: Forgive us our debts. Forgive us as we forgive others. And lead us not unto temptation (there's

temptation again!). But deliver us from evil. Either way, it is an authentic moment to be present before the God who loves us unconditionally. Love that will never let us go.

God wants us to seek the good. Because it matters. It is what makes us human. And what makes justice and a healthier, more flourishing world possible. This God who reminds us, every time the opportunity falls before us, that yes, we can choose the good that is ours to do today. Yes, we can work for more just laws, rules and norms so that those on the margins can have fair access and opportunity.

Even if we stumbled yesterday, there is always today. And if we stumble today, God is going to be right there, reminding us that we can do the good that is ours to do tomorrow. This is why we pause and confess, in some way, every time we worship.

What is it, in your spirit, that you find yourself saying when we as a church pause for confession? When we say the Lord's prayer? Do you feel it, there in your heart, when those words of assurance are spoken? That Christ came into the world to save and with that salvation is the peace that comes from God's forgiveness and God's amazing ability to take broken places and make them whole again. To welcome the prodigal home, to search out the lost sheep, to fill the hungry with good things, and to reach out to us and invite us to take up this work as our very own because our God is the God of steadfast love, mercy, and faithfulness. And Christ teaches us how to live these values: forgiving as we have been forgiven.

May these moments nurture our lives of faith and help us share the blessings of God's kingdom to all. May it be so. Amen.