

Without Pretense

Series: Repentance for the Rest of Us **Date:** October 11, 2026

Primary Scripture: Psalm 51

Key Principle: *God has never met the fake you.*

Good morning, Menlo Church, and welcome back. Last week, we had a special weekend highlighting what we are celebrating about what God has been doing around here, and this week we are going to jump back into the final message of our series, Repentance for the Rest of Us.

Over this series, we've talked about reclaiming the concept of repentance, or turning back to God. In recent years, it has become something some religious people have used to target what irreligious people should do, but that wasn't always the case.

We've discovered that in the early church, followers of Jesus embraced this label as the people of repentance. I think remembering that, and making it our posture again, could really help us grow.

Today we're going to move beyond where we've been so far and finish with what living as people of repentance, with real vulnerability, looks like from the worst moment of the life of one of the most revered people in the Bible.

Before we dive in, though, I'm going to pray, and if you've never been here before or heard me speak, before I speak, I pray kneeling, and part of the reason that I do that is to remind myself that this vulnerability isn't just for other people; it's for me too.

Vulnerability is a funny concept right now because we have gotten really good at faking it, I know...pretty ironic. Maybe you think that's not you, but how many photos did it take to get the 'just woke up like this' photo for that text or post?

Instagram turned sixteen this week, and if you were on it early, you might remember some of the filters: Earlybird, Toaster, Lord Kelvin, X-Pro II. Every image looked like it had been left in the sun on a hot day. We thought we were so cool back then, but look at how those photos have aged.

It turns out that nothing ages faster than a filter. So somewhere along the way we got subtle with the filters, trying to make it look like we weren't using them at all. In fact, the #nofilter trend a few years ago, when plain photos were popular, had a little secret.

Researchers discovered that about one in eight of those #nofilter photos did indeed have a filter. And then the stats showed that the ones with filters were much more likely to be viewed and commented on...the filter worked; fake had fans.

The 2026 version of this is AI use, with a global study showing more than half of people admitting they hide their AI use at work. I get it, I use AI extensively, but if I let it replace my own thought, wrestling with God, prayer, study, and care for you...I'm showing up with a filter that isn't true either.

It's never been easier to present a finished product without going through the process. The product might fit the moment, but the process is what grows us. The masks have never been easier to wear or harder to spot.

And underneath them is a fear many of us have carried for a long time...if people saw the real version of me, they'd leave me or decide they couldn't love me. Maybe you were vulnerable once, and it ended badly, so you learned to fake it.

For a lot of us, we have been faking it for so long we have even convinced ourselves that the fake version is the only one left, but what we're about to study together is that God has never met the fake you. That might sound scary, but it's actually really good news.

The fake you might have a lot of fans, but the real you has a Father who loves you and wants you to live in the peace of that love more than the pace of trying to earn it from everyone else.

The clearest picture of this in Scripture comes from a song written by a man who got caught in something that he couldn't excuse or escape.

Psalms 51 is a psalm that kind of lives in infamy if you are familiar with the story that surrounds it. King David wrote it, and the heading tells us the exact circumstances: "...when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba."

This framing is true, but incomplete. The backstory is that King David had been reigning over Israel for decades and had experienced incredible success during those years. Then, well into his reign, he stayed home when kings normally went to war.

He leveraged his power to abuse and victimize another man's wife, and when she got pregnant, he went into damage control mode. First, he tried to keep it a secret; then he hatched a plan to bring her husband home from war to be with her so the pregnancy could be explained.

When that didn't work, David had him placed on the front lines so he would be killed. Then David kept feeding the fake story by marrying Bathsheba and going back to life as usual. It was almost a year wearing a mask that he knew wasn't an honest picture of who he was and what he had done.

Then a prophet walks in, tells a story that enrages David because of the injustice it describes, and the prophet says, 'You are the man.' This moment reveals something about masks: they never fit as well over time. David had to keep doing damage control, and things got out of control.

David could feel it too. In Psalm 32:3, he describes the internal feeling of the season this way: "For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long." It might have seemed managed on the outside, but inside it felt anything but.

Some of today's exhaustion is less about a full calendar and more about a divided heart. You are managing multiple versions of yourself when God longs for you to be an undivided follower, even when that gets messy.

That kind of switching gets exhausting because you weren't made to do it. It also costs relationships. Think back to the filters that got more views and comments.

The filter can get you admired or liked from a distance, but nobody really gets to know the filtered version of you because it doesn't really exist. Remember, God has never met the fake you.

And this cycle creates a bigger problem: when people admire your filtered and fake self, your real self gets better and better at hiding. You don't feel loved, no matter how much you are admired, because you've convinced yourself they'd never love the real you anyway.

But David is in a place where he can't stay hidden, and in the middle of the Psalm, he discovers God's greater love.

In verse 6, he wrote these words: "Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart." God wasn't interested in David's fabricated, curated public image, no matter how good he got at managing it.

The inward being, the secret heart, the hidden place. These are the exact parts that our filters are designed to hide. David is saying that God delights when those hidden places are honest before Him...He DELIGHTS in truth there...even when it's messy.

What an amazing gift from God; everyone in our life works from the outside in, from how we present externally to a slow drip of our internal self. God works from the inside out; He doesn't start with the filter and eventually discover you. He starts with you...why not? He made you.

Remember, God has never met the fake you. You have been introducing the fake you to everyone in your life: your friends, coworkers, even your family, but every time you go to God, even if you go to Him with a mask on, it's invisible to Him; He DELIGHTS in the real you.

Even when the first people in the Bible sinned all the way back in Genesis 3 it produced a cover-up; they went looking for fig leaves, not quite masks, but the closest thing they could find. When God asked where they were, He wasn't looking for information; He knew where they were.

He wanted their honesty. Adam responds, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself." The same fear we started with today was born back then: if God really sees me, He'll leave, but God shows mercy.

A few verses later, God would make them clothing; He replaces what they made with what He made; we'll come back to that later. Now I get that this idea that God has never met the fake you can sound scary...He knows all the good stuff and the bad stuff, but think about this...

In Romans 5:8, the Apostle Paul puts it this way, "but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." God didn't wait for us to get cleaned up or manage our image before He paid attention. God saved us knowing the very worst of us.

That means that all that energy you've been spending to show up or prove to God that you're serious isn't working the way you thought.

That's why David writes these words in Psalm 51, "You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise."

I grew up in a church tradition where I learned to preach in a different tone and intensity than what I normally spoke in, and it took someone I respected to coach it out of me. I wasn't doing it to be fake, but it created an approach that built a barrier to people connecting.

Maybe you've been in a setting where someone shifted in a 'tone' within a conversation where you didn't feel like you were talking to the same person anymore, or they started praying, and it almost felt like they were doing an impression of what they thought God wanted to hear.

David tells us that God delights in our inner being, not our religious performance. Instead, a broken spirit and contrite heart are what are really on His wishlist from us. Now this approach can easily become a pendulum swing.

“God loves the real you” can easily become “God is fine with you staying exactly the same.” That isn’t the way of Jesus or the message of the Gospel. God loves the real you too much to leave you unchanged.

David saw this clearly in Psalm 51 when he wrote, “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.” The word he used for create is the same word from Genesis 1 that describes how God created the world. We can make things, but God is the one who creates.

David wasn’t asking for a plan to help himself get better; he was asking God to provide something he is admitting he can’t generate and only God can. And where does God target this most important work? The heart; in Hebrew, this is the core of who we are.

Then David asks for a renewed right spirit, pointing to steadfastness. Think about how unsteady we are when pretense is our default attitude. You’re a different person depending on your surroundings, always on alert to switch, and getting more exhausted each time.

The other thing that this unsteadiness creates in us is a cynical spirit toward people and a bitter attitude toward God. If you find yourself disinterested in time with God or resentful toward people in your life...you might want to start with David’s prayer, your heart and spirit made new.

At one point David begs God not to cast him away from His presence or remove the Holy Spirit from him and to David this wasn’t poetic language. He had watched his predecessor, Saul, endure these very consequences. It’s the same fear from Genesis 3 and ours today; “If I’m exposed I’ll be expelled.”

But here’s the hope in it for us today. Most of us fake certainty about ourselves and live uncertain about God. We act like we’ve got it all together and deep down we wonder whether God is actually for us. David does the opposite. He has no confidence in himself and full confidence in God’s love.

That’s why he starts this Psalm with, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.” David isn’t posturing anymore, no pretense, just honesty and full dependence on God, that’s where grace shows up.

David never got to see the full picture of this but nearly a thousand years later, Jesus would cry out from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

The only person who never wore a mask had to be treated as if He had worn all of ours. Remember the Garden of Eden? God took away the fig leaves, and He covered Adam and Eve Himself. At the cross, He does it for good. Jesus is cast out so that you never have to be.

Then, in verse 12, David says, “Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.” Notice David doesn’t ask for his salvation back; he asks for the joy back. Living a filtered life doesn’t usually go after our faith first.

It goes after our joy first. It’s easy to believe lots of the same things but still feel exhausted because you’re spending all of your energy holding that image together, thinking that living honestly and openly probably makes sense for somebody else, but not somebody who’s carrying what you are.

A willing spirit carries the sense of something free and generous, the opposite of a performer. It's someone who has nothing left to protect. That's what grace does. It doesn't make you impressive. It makes you free. It makes you honest.

Maybe the most unexpected part of David's Psalm comes in verse 13. "Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you." Notice David's first word. He uses the word "then," not "before." The witness comes out of the restored person, not the polished or filtered one.

David is saying that his qualification to teach sinners about God is that he is one. And the word for "return" that he uses here is the repentance word. It's the U-turn that we've been talking about for four weeks, so watch what happens.

David's repentance becomes the occasion for other people's repentance. His honesty becomes someone else's U-turn. His vulnerability is an invitation for other people's vulnerability. We tend to think people are drawn to Jesus because of our success stories.

Mostly, success stories create admiration, but stories of struggle create hope because they tell people grace can reach someone just like them. I've heard it put this way: people admire your strengths, but they learn and grow from your weaknesses.

Think about the woman that Jesus met at the well in John 4. She came to draw water at noon, when the well was empty, and after one conversation, she runs back to town. She tells people about this man that she met who knew everything that she'd ever done. That's it.

Her witness was her exposure, and the town came out to see Him. Paul does the same thing. He calls himself the chief of sinners, and he says that Jesus showed him mercy so that others could see how patient He is. Paul's resume didn't convince anybody. His rescue did.

In the next verse, David specifically asks for deliverance from his bloodguiltiness. He names the worst thing he's ever done. Being a Thoughtful Witness doesn't mean oversharing with everyone you meet, but it does mean that you don't edit grace down to something small, something manageable. If God rescued you from something real, you're allowed to say it.

In verse 15 David says, "O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise." For about 1,500 years, the church has opened its daily prayers with this line. The Rule of Benedict starts the night office with it. The Book of Common Prayer still opens morning prayer with it.

Every morning, all around the world, the church begins its worship with words from a man caught in the worst year of his life. That's what God does with an honest heart.

So, what does it look like for you to take this with you into the week ahead? I'm not asking you to confess everything to everyone. That's not honesty. That's just a different kind of performance. I want to give you one question to carry with you into every room this week: "Am I trying to be admired or known?"

At work, it might mean saying "I don't know yet" in a meeting instead of bluffing your way through it. At home, it might mean telling your spouse or your roommate that the one thing you've been smoothing over for weeks isn't the way you have been talking about it.

Here at church, it might mean that when someone in your group asks how you're doing, you give them a real sentence rather than the polite one. Before you post something, it might mean asking yourself whether you're sharing it to be known or to be admired.

Some of you might benefit from just repeating a few phrases, like "I don't know," "I was wrong," "I need help," or how about, "that hurt?" They sound simple, but for a lot of us, they're really hard words to say once we get into the week.

And make sure at least one person in your life knows the unedited version of how you're doing. It doesn't need to be a crowd, just somebody in the core of your life. It's not a confession booth. It's just a real friendship with someone who actually wants to know.

Then I think there's a step from this whole series: sometime this week, tell somebody a struggle story instead of a success story. Tell them where you were really stuck, and then tell them what God did. You have no idea whose own U-turn might start with your honesty, even if it's not complete yet.

I know this series has been hard in places. And I know the temptation when a series like this ends. We take everything we've heard and aim it at somebody else. Repentance becomes a weapon we point at other people instead of a mirror we hold up to ourselves.

That temptation is about to get a lot stronger. Over the next few weeks, a lot of us will spend a lot of energy deciding how other people should think, and especially how they should vote. And repentance will start to sound like something the other side needs.

Here's what I've noticed in myself. In seasons like this, we don't just filter ourselves. We filter each other. We take the angriest clip from the other side and decide that's who they all are. We build a fake version of the people we disagree with, and then we're sure they're beyond hope.

But if God has never met the fake you, He has never met the fake them either. He isn't looking at the caricature. He sees the neighbor, the coworker, the family member across the table from you, and He loves the real version of them as much as He loves the real version of you.

That's where we'll pick up next week in a series called Beyond the Ballot. We'll look at what following Jesus frees us to focus on, and how we can show up well in a season as divided as this one.

But before any of that, there's something more personal. Jesus said the truth will set you free. Most of us aren't in bondage to a lie someone else told us. We're in bondage to the image we keep managing and the filter we need everyone to see us through.

So before you point that mirror at anybody else, hold it up for a second. What you see probably isn't what you'd post. That's okay. He's never met the version you'd post. That's the real you, the one He knows and the one He died for.

In the garden, God asked a question that He's still asking this morning. "Where are you?" Not the filtered you. Not the one with fans. You. Would you pray with me?