

August 9, 2020

THE LIFESTYLE OF ONE WHO DWELLS IN GOD'S PRESENCE

Psalm 15

*(4 of 8 in a series of selected Psalms)*

The story of the Bible can be told along the lines of a return to God's presence. In the Garden of Eden, it was paradise. Adam and Eve dwelt in the very presence of God, glorifying him and being blessed by him. Therefore, the fall was not simply the introduction of sin and death into the world—as terrible and devastating as those things are—but an expulsion from the blessed presence of God. When the couple was driven from the garden they were also driven out of the blessed presence of God.

But as soon as God's word of judgment falls in the garden, so he begins speaking of a promise of redemption. He speaks of the serpent's head being crushed through the offspring of the woman. And just as God's judgment meant a removal of his blessed presence, so his work of redemption means a return to God's presence. It's not by mistake that John's glorious announcement of the incarnation in John 1 builds up to his proclamation that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). This was man's long-anticipated hope—a return to the presence of God. And not only do we, as believers, enjoy the presence and blessing of God now, but we are heading toward a day at the resurrection when our salvation will reach the climactic announcement that we find in Revelation 21:3, "Behold the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God."

But in tracing out that blessed storyline of redemption, culmination in a restoration of God's people to God's presence, there's much that I left out. You see, throughout the Old Testament, God foretold of this glorious blessing of dwelling with his people in signs, types, and shadows. He spoke of a day when all nations would come to Mount Zion (Isa 2:2-3; Micah 4:1-2), which he referred to as his holy hill (Psalm 2:6; 3:4). This "holy hill" of Mount Zion was a picture of the promise we see fulfilled in Revelation 21. Similarly, God gave instructions for the building of a tent right in the middle of the people of Israel as they wandered about in the wilderness. The tent was called the tabernacle, and the purpose for this tent was so that the Lord might dwell within it, right in the middle of his people. Later the tabernacle was replaced by a more permanent structure—the temple—but the purpose was the same. It was a means of God dwelling in the midst of his people. And—like his imagery with Mount Zion—it was a sign or type of things to come. It was a reminder of the promise that pushes the reader of the Old Testament to keep reading—to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and the culmination of all things in Revelation 21—so that we might see how God fulfilled and will fulfill this promise of restoring people into his very presence.

With this in our minds, then, I think we can make sense of the question raised in the beginning of our text this morning—Psalm 15. When David opens the psalm by asking, "O LORD, who shall sojourn in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy hill? (v. 1), he is asking the Lord what kind of

person will enjoy God's presence? What characterizes the person who will enjoy that glorious vision in Revelation 21 of enjoying and dwelling in God's presence forever? In other words, we might simply ask it this way: "O LORD, what characterizes your redeemed people?" And the reason is because it's only the redeemed who will dwell in the Lord's blessed presence forever in eternity (as those who have not bowed the knee to Jesus will be cast into the lake of fire). Therefore, we should see this psalm as laying out for us the qualities and characteristics of someone who knows Jesus Christ as Lord.

Now, when I say that, I want to draw some distinctions. This psalm isn't suggesting a path to meriting our place in God's blessed presence. The psalm isn't saying to us, "Do these things and do them well, and you'll earn salvation." No. The only one who has lived a life worthy of dwelling in God's presence in the God-man, Jesus Christ. He is the only one who has lived out the qualities that we'll see in Psalm 15 in an absolutely perfect way. And our only hope of salvation before a God who demands perfect righteousness is that we place our faith in Jesus so that his perfect righteousness is credited to us and counts for us before God. We will stand in Christ's righteousness on that day, or we will not stand at all.

But this psalm isn't about what we can do to earn God's presence. Rather, this psalm is showing us what characterizes the life of one who knows the Lord. In other words, just as Jesus told us that you'll know a good tree by its fruit because a good tree bears good fruit and a bad tree bears bad fruit, so we can say that you'll know a justified person by how that person lives because a justified person will inevitably bear the fruit of righteous living and repenting in the face of sin.

So the way for us to approach this psalm is as a reminder of what needs to characterize our lives. And if you're a believer—who's been given a new heart and has the Spirit within you, causing you to desire obedience—I assume that you'll hear this list of characteristics or qualities not as an oppressive burden but as something you *want* to do and imitate in your own life. This psalm can, therefore, serve as an opportunity to repent and bring our lives more in line with Christ or to be encouraged in areas and encouraged not to grow weary in doing good. So, let's approach the text as an answer to this question—What should characterize you and me? What should someone be able to say about you and me?

### **We desire righteousness, with hearts directed toward obedience**

Now, that is a longer and more complex point than I wanted to make, but I'm burdened to communicate the beginning of verse 2. David begins his answer of who will dwell in the Lord's presence by saying, "He who walks blamelessly and does what is right." By this, of course, we don't mean someone who walks in sinless perfection. That doesn't characterize any of us. Rather, the idea of being blameless and doing what is right is the idea of wholeness or soundness. That is, the disposition of our hearts is toward righteousness and obedience to the Lord is the dominating characteristic of our lives. In other words, your life and my life should be characterized by obedience to the Lord. It's what we desire, and it's what seek to do.

Negatively, if someone is not characterized by a desire for righteousness and a life of obedience before the Lord, then we have good reason to question whether or not that person actually has a saving relationship with Jesus. We rightly acknowledge that we're justified by faith alone and rightly celebrate that one of the promises for the believer in Christ that God will forgive our iniquity and remember our sins no more (Jer 31:34). But it is also true that a believer is one who is being moved by God to obey. The Lord said in Ezekiel 36:27, "I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules." Therefore, if someone professes to be a believer but is in no way being caused to walk in accordance with God's commands and being careful to obey God's rules, then we should be rightly perplexed. It would be like someone claiming an animal is a dog that doesn't bark, wag its tail, or chase cars. We would be tempted to ask, "Is it really?" So too with the person whose heart isn't bent toward righteousness and who isn't seeking to obey the Lord. If that is you this morning there is hope. You can come to Christ this morning in repentance and faith, and he will save you, and those who come to him he will never cast out.

Positively, if you desire righteousness and you're seeking to obey Jesus, then be encouraged and don't grow weary in it. Repent where you sin and keep pressing on, being encouraged that your seeking obedience before God does not flow from a sinless, dead heart but a new heart and the Spirit of God within you. We must be characterized by a heart that longs for righteousness and a life that seeks to be obedient to the Lord. Second, we must speak truthfully and for the good of others.

### **We speak truthfully and for the good of others**

David continues in his description of the one who will dwell in God's presence by saying that he is one "speaks truth in his heart; who does not slander with his tongue" (vv. 2b-3a). Now, it may at first be surprising to us that after describing someone as blameless and doing what is right, the first thing he moves to is the person's speech. After all, if I tell you to think of someone who acts most *unrighteously* my guess is that you're not first thinking about how that person uses his or her words. However, David is thinking in an utterly biblical fashion to move first to our use of our tongues. "The tongue is a truer gauge of inner health than any other single factor" according to the Scripture.<sup>1</sup>

If you think that's overstated, think back to Jesus' illustration of a good tree bearing good fruit again. Here's what he says in full: "For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks" (Luke 6:43-45).

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<sup>1</sup> Dane Ortlund, "Reflections on Handling the Old Testament as Jesus Would Have Us: Psalm 15 as a Case Study." *Themelios* 42.1 (2017): 84.

Did you catch that? After saying that it is out of the treasure of our hearts that we produce good or evil, he adds, “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” In other words, just as the fruit on a tree tells you what kind of tree it is, so our speech reveals the goodness or evil of our hearts. Thus, if you want to know a person’s heart, you simply listen to his or her speech. That’s why David goes from a general description of one who will dwell in God’s presence as blameless and doing what is right to one who speaks truthfully and for the good of others.

The way we speak reveals our hearts, and David specifically tells us that the blessed one he’s describing “speaks truth in his heart” and “does not slander with his tongue.” As those who belong to God, we should be those who speak truth. We’re not those who propagate lies. We can be trusted. Later he’ll describe this person as one “who swears to his own hurt and does not change” (v. 4).

A number of years ago at our old property, we needed to put in plumbing line from our building to the street. We got a few quotes on the job, and one was a great deal lower than the others, so we went with that guy. He estimated the job to be a pretty quick one. After noting that his crew had been out there working a lot longer than anticipated, Nathan and I went to inquire with the man about why the work was taking so long. He noted that he hadn’t realized that under our asphalt parking lot was about a foot worth of concrete. He noted that if he had known that, his quote would have been a lot higher, but then he said to us, “But I quoted you a price, and I don’t go back on my word.” That is what swearing and not changing, even to your hurt means. Now, Nate and I countered by paying him more than his quote, but what the man voiced there is what David is saying should be true of believers. We speak truly and are trustworthy.

And we’re also reminded that we don’t slander. I wonder how much we think about slander. As I noted earlier, if I were to ask you to think of unrighteous living, you probably wouldn’t think of speech, but we’re probably in more danger of sinning with our speech than we are a hundred other actions that we put much more effort into avoiding. It is good and right to guard what your eyes see on the computer or television, to have someone hold you accountable in your dating relationship, and to ensure that we’re limiting time in lazy activities that take us away from hard work or genuine rest. In fact, we should be more vigilant in those areas, not less. But we need to be equally vigilant to make sure that we aren’t people who slander others, who speak ill of them behind their backs and tear them down with our words. That behavior should be seen as unacceptable to us as stealing, or physically harming another, or committing sexual immorality. Slander can destroy others and entire churches, and if it persists in our lives, it will only serve to reveal our evil hearts. Let’s make sure at Cornerstone that with our speech, we speak truly and are trustworthy and that we don’t slander others. That will go a long way toward giving Satan fewer places to attack us or discredit our witness in this community. Third—and this is similar to the last one except broader than speech—we seek to love and do good to our neighbors.

**We seek to love and do good to our neighbors**

As David continues to comment on the nature of the one who will dwell in God's presence, he notes that he "does no evil to his neighbor nor takes up a reproach against his friend" (v. 3b). In other words, not only do we not slander others with our speech, but we also don't entertain slander against them. It's not as if it is only doing evil to your neighbor to gossip about them but also to entertain gossip about them. My prayer for us is that others would be slow to approach us in gossip because they know that we'll not listen to it or steer the conversation away from it.

Now, let me apply this one to us as a church. My guess is that in the history of the church, the most divisive thing the enemy has used is one believer slandering another and one believer happily taking in that slander of his neighbor. One of the aims that we can have as a church is that we develop a culture where that's not seen as what we do. And when you can be among a people whom you know aren't slandering you or even entertaining slander about you—but rather seeking to love you and build you up—then it frees us to love, serve, and care for one another as Christ commands. Fourth, we line up our desires with the Lord's.

### **We line up our desires with the Lord's**

Next, David writes something we might not anticipate. He writes, "In whose eyes a vile person is despised, but who honors those who fear the LORD" (v. 4a). Again, my guess would be that if we were charged to think of characteristics of a believer that we'd not think of despising the vile person. However, if we just take some time to think about it, I think it makes sense. Perhaps it makes most sense as we think of our children. There's, I think, a God-given desire in each of us to have heroes—people we admire and want to imitate. It's why children can be tempted to put posters on their walls and why adults will start fashioning their dress and behavior after someone.

Now, if you have children, my guess is that you've hoped that your children might choose to admire, associate with, and emulate individuals who fear the Lord rather than those who are vile. We probably hope their heroes aren't necessarily the latest pop star, and we rightly express concern when our children are drawn to vile people for their friends or those whom they want to emulate. We're grateful for times when they look up to someone who is godly and want to emulate them. And the reason why it's such a big deal to us is that those whom we make our closest friends and those whom we look up to affect our behavior.

The believer doesn't long for, admire, and want to emulate the godless person. To do so reflects a lack of Christian character and maturity. So, one of the things we do is rightly align our affections and desires with those of the Lord's. Does God say this should be desired? I'll desire it. Does God say this should be despised? I'll despise it. That's what we do when we think of choosing a desirable spouse especially, but it's what we do throughout life. We align our affections and desires with the Lord's. Finally, we value people more than wealth.

### **We value people more than wealth**

David continues, “Who does not put out his money at interest and does not take a bribe against the innocent” (v. 5). Now, when the text speaks of not putting out money at interest, it’s not condemning the actions of a banking institution or the like. Those institutions can be a rich aid in society, allowing individuals who buy houses, etc. Rather, what it is condemning is knowing someone who is needy, and instead of helping them, you see it as an opportunity to increase your wealth. So, you meet their need only under the promise that they’ll pay you back with interest. That’s valuing wealth more than people, and the believer doesn’t do that.

Or similarly if you’re in a position of judgment and you were to take a bribe against the innocent person, you’d be valuing wealth more than loving this person enough to make sure he receives justice. And much of the world works that way, but we don’t.

So, this has been the question—what characterizes those who will dwell in God’s presence forever? The answer is that we have hearts that desire righteousness and seek obedience, that we speak truthfully and for the good of others, that we seek to love and do good to our neighbors, that our affections and desires are lined up with the Lord’s, and that we value people more than wealth. Certainly this list isn’t exhaustive, but it does serve as an opportunity to bring our lives more in line with Christ in these areas.

So let’s examine ourselves this morning. If we need to repent, don’t be discouraged. Repentance is a glorious opportunity to be more conformed to Christ. And the reason we can know forgiveness as we repent is because of the one who lived out these characteristics perfectly. Because of his perfect life, death for sin, and justifying resurrection, we can be certain that we are forgiven through faith in him. But we can also know that he will strengthen us to live out these characteristics in our lives, even if imperfectly. And with each imperfect step it’s a reminder to us that Christ is at work and will never cast us away. That’s what David is saying to us when he says, “He who does these things shall never be moved” (v. 5c). We can look at the evidence of God’s grace in our lives and be encouraged. As he shapes our hearts, it’s a reminder that he has made us his own, and he will not let us be lost. So, let’s give thanks this morning, repent and grow in areas where we need to do so, and rejoice in the glorious work of our God for us. Amen.