

July 23, 2023

A PICTURE OF A HOLY LIFE

Psalm 26

(2 of 2 in a series of selected Psalms)

In his book *Desiring the Kingdom*, James Smith talks about the power of what he refers to as the “cultural liturgies” around us that are meant to shape us. He notes, for example, that you do not walk into a clothing store in a mall and simply see the clothes they’re attempting to sell you displayed on a mannequin. You may well have that, but you will probably also see scenes of an alluring life played out all around you. There’ll be a group of attractive young men and women who’ve been tossing around the football, and now they’ve all tackled one of the guys who’s lying on the ground smiling, as everyone around him is smiling too. And they all happen to be wearing the same kinds of clothes that you see around you. And without explicitly saying it, that scene that you’re looking at is saying to you, “You know you want this kind of life. And in order to have it, one necessary element is the outfit in front of you.” That’s the power of advertising, right?

But if a poster can be that powerful, affecting us at the point of our deepest desires, what kind of power does living in and being immersed in our culture have on us. You and I are surrounded by people living a certain way and chasing after certain lifestyles, and many that are out of line with the Scripture. And because of the power of television, the internet, and social media, you’re not limited to the culture that’s immediately surrounding you. From where we sit here, we can feel the enticing lifestyle of the investment banker, walking the streets of Manhattan, or the couple showing us pictures and videos of their tropical vacation. And as we witness those things, we can feel the pull, can’t we? Perhaps we feel the pull of chasing riches, or prestige, or the seeming pleasure of sexual immorality. Again, after all, we’re immersed in a culture that is constantly selling us the pleasure of such lifestyles.

And that would be overwhelming enough, but that’s not all there is. We have enemies in this world. Paul tells us that we wrestle against “the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12). There is a spiritual enemy—with armies of demonic forces—who is seeking to pull us into hell. And if the culture out there and the spiritual enemies seeking our demise weren’t enough, we also have our own sinful desires that come from within so that James tells us that we are “lured and enticed by [our] own desire” (James 1:14). Let’s just say that the forces against us—from without and within—pulling us toward rebelling against our Lord are strong.

At the same time, however, the Bible makes it unmistakably clear that you are I are to live holy lives. Peter, for example, tells us, “As he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Pet 1:15-16). Our lives should bear testimony to the glory, beauty, purity, and holiness of our God. We’re to shine as lights in the midst of darkness, glorifying our Father who is in heaven. But how?

That is, how do we live holy lives in the midst of an alluring culture that is in the grasp of the evil one, with principalities and powers seeking our demise, and with our own sinful desires surfacing in our lives more than any of us would like to admit? Doesn't this feel overwhelming? Well, we have an answer in Scripture as the Bible addresses this directly. In Romans 12:2 Paul tells us, "Do not be conformed to this world." Now, that's what we want. But how? Paul continues, "But be transformed by the renewal of your mind." In other words, one key mechanism that we have in our pursuit of holiness in this present darkness is found in stopping and renewing our minds again to what the Lord has done for us, what he commands, what our lives are to look like, and so on as we look at the Scripture. And Psalm 26 gives us an opportunity to do just that this morning. Psalm 26 gives us a picture of what a holy life looks like. Therefore, this morning I want us to renew our minds to what a life of holy living looks like by examining what David writes in Psalm 26.

Unlike last week, where the psalm we looked at gave a very extensive superscript, this psalm simply tells us that it was written by David. So we're left in the dark in terms of the setting in which David was writing. But we can gather the gist of what's going on by looking at the psalm itself. David begins by asking the Lord to vindicate him (v. 1). This is a repeated plea that we find in the psalms, but typically when we see it there is mention of the psalmist's enemies. The idea would be that David's enemies are saying he's wicked or deserves to die, and David is asking God to vindicate him, showing that he is in the right. But on this occasion, David mentions nothing about his enemies. Therefore, it still may be that his enemies are attacking him, and David wants God to show them that he is in the right. Or, it may be that David simply wants God to search his heart and confirm what David believes is true about himself, namely, that he's walking in holiness. Either way, after David asks the Lord to vindicate him, he launches into a description of his life, specifically noting how he's walked in holiness. And the benefit for us is that by looking at David's description of his life, you and I get a chance to renew our minds to what holy living looks like. I want to note five things David does that gives us a picture of holy living. First, David wholeheartedly trusts in the Lord.

### **David wholeheartedly trusts in the Lord**

There are a number of ways I could have worded this, but I think this best puts together all the elements of what we see in verses 1-3. After asking God to vindicate him, David begins listing reasons why he feels he should be vindicated, and the first thing he mentions is that he has walked in integrity. The idea here very much what we noted last week while looking at Psalm 18. David is not claiming to be sinless or morally perfect, but he is claiming that his whole heart is committed to the Lord. He's not trying to serve and worship God with part of his heart and trying to worship Baal or another false god on the side. He's committed to the Lord with his whole heart. That's why I include the word "wholeheartedly." But also note how much of David's claim to holiness is built upon his trust in the Lord.

He adds, "I have trusted in the LORD without wavering" (v. 1), and then, after asking the Lord again to prove him, test him, and try him, he notes, "For your steadfast love is before my eyes, and I walk in your faithfulness" (v. 3). Now, let's break this down a bit. David says that he trusts

the Lord without wavering. But then he adds why he does that, or perhaps better, *how* he's able to do that. He says that he keeps God's steadfast love before his eyes and that he walks in God's faithfulness.

In other words, it seems that the logic goes as follows. David consistently meditates on God's faithfulness and love for him, and as he does so, it highlights the reality that God can be trusted. Therefore, David is enabled to trust without wavering.

Building on what we noted last week, you and I actually have more evidenced of God's steadfast love and faithfulness. Unlike David, we can name his great Son who lived, died, and was raised for us. He is the God-man, Jesus Christ. Moreover, we've been given more revelation than David. We have not only the entirety of the Old Testament but the New as well. Consequently, we can open our Bibles at any time and read that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, that no one and nothing can snatch us out of the Lord's hand, that he who began a good work will bring it to completion, and so on. Therefore, if David can say with confidence that he trusts the Lord without wavering, surely we should as well.

Holiness requires nothing less than this. If we do not trust God, then we will not obey him in the midst of a culture against us, our own sinful desires which threaten to draw us away, and an enemy who wants to see us pursue hell. So, are you trusting him now? Are you obeying him, even if you can't see your way forward as clearly as you'd like? Are you constantly gripped with anxiety, fretting, and restlessness? Maybe you need to make a characteristic of your life to keep the steadfast love of the Lord and his faithfulness on the forefront of your mind (as well as on your lips) so that you might grow in trusting him. Again, this is the starting block for holiness. David wholeheartedly trusts in the Lord. Let's ensure that this characterizes us as well. Second, David turns away from evildoers and pursues righteousness.

### **David turns away from evildoers and pursues righteousness**

As David describes his holy lifestyle, he not only lists what he does do but what he doesn't do. He writes in verses 4-5, "I do not sit with men of falsehood, nor do I consort with hypocrites. I hate the assembly of evildoers, and I will not sit with the wicked." Even as he considers final judgment, he asks the Lord in verses 9-10 not to treat him as those whom he keeps himself from, as he writes, "Do not sweep my soul away with sinners, nor my life with bloodthirsty men, in whose hands are evil devices, and whose right hands are full of bribes."

When David says that he doesn't sit with men of falsehood or with the wicked, he is saying that he doesn't participate in their activities with them. He doesn't assemble with them and pursue the wickedness that they pursue. In fact, he hates their assembling together in their evil devices. In our modern vernacular, David would hate the assembly of young people getting together pursuing their drunken parties or individuals gathered around a movie screen, fixing their eyes on things they shouldn't view or enjoy. David keeps his feet far from those scenes.

And I know that our first thought could be, “But didn’t Jesus hang out with notorious sinners?” Yes, but there are a few things we can say about that. First, when the Scripture says that Jesus ate with sinners, that doesn’t mean that he gathered with him in their pursuit of sin. In other words, though Jesus might have eaten with a man who’d abused others, he didn’t gather with the group as they plotted their abuses. Second, as Jesus gathered with sinners, he did so to point them to hope in him if they would repent. So, Psalm 26 is not discouraging us from taking the gospel to sinners or from loving them as ourselves. But we do not make them the community of those with whom we want to fellowship. That kind of path will lead you to join with them in unholy living. Too many believers have deceived themselves into thinking that constantly hanging out with those who pursue rebellion against Jesus is somehow good for them and have ultimately found their hearts and minds hardened and blinded toward the truth of Scripture themselves. Ultimately the evil crowd keeps pursuing what they’re pursuing, and the professing believer finds himself confused on matters like sexual ethics or the authority of Scripture and wanders from the truth. Holiness requires a hatred of wickedness, even as we lovingly call those in rebellion to Christ.

But David also loves righteousness. While hating the assembly of evildoers, David adds in verse 8, “O LORD, I love the habitation of your house and the place where your glory dwells.” As David considers the saints gathering at the temple to worship, he loves it. This should be the heart of one walking in holiness—we hate and separate ourselves from wickedness but love and pursue righteousness. We love and minister to the wicked while distancing ourselves from their thoughts and pursuits, and we bind ourselves with the righteous and are drawn ever closer to them. Holiness requires both. So cultivate both of these things in our hearts. And on that note of wickedness, we also see that David deals with his sin.

### **David deals with his sin**

I say this because of David’s language in verse 6. There he writes, “I wash my hands in innocence and go around your altar, O Lord.” Now, I realize I’m cutting off the sentence, but I want to focus on that first part about David washing his hands in innocence. With the way that the phrase is written, it seems to be tied to David preparing himself to enter the sanctuary so that he washes his hands and proceeds. But David is not merely saying that he goes through the ritual motions. He’s claiming that his conscious is clear. In other words, he’s not harboring sin in his heart that he’s refusing to deal with. He’s dealt with his sin.

As we pursue holiness, we will necessarily deal with our sin. Now, hopefully there are sins we put away entirely as we go through life, but it’s also the case that as we mature in holiness, our eyes are often opened to see sins that we were previously blinded to. And so there are constantly sins to deal with—whether sins you’ve deliberately chased after or that have become increasingly clear to you (maybe in response to your prayer for the Lord to search you and know you, as David prayed in Psalm 139:23-24). And in each case, the response of a believer must be to confess that sin and turn from it.

One thing that we're going to encounter in our day is a charge from the world that we're addressing sins selectively. So, for example, as we speak against the evils of so-called homosexual "marriage" for children who are brought into that home, some might protest that we're addressing the sin of homosexuality while ignoring sins in our own lives that perhaps feel more acceptable to us. And part of our answer to that should be that you and I stand ready to address any sin and to repent of any known sin in our lives. In other words, if an unbeliever said, "Why are you addressing my sin when you should address your own?" our response can be, "Name my sin, and I'll repent of it right now. Will you do the same?" Believers will not be characterized by never sinning, but we must be characterized by repenting. And that's what David shows us here. His conscience is clear. But there was something he proceeded to do after washing his hands in innocence. We also see that David proclaims thanksgiving and praise to God.

### **David proclaims thanksgiving and praise to God**

David writes, "I wash my hands in innocence and go around your altar, O LORD, proclaiming thanksgiving aloud, and telling all your wondrous deeds" (vv. 6-7). The idea of thanking the Lord and praising him as an act of worship is common in the Scripture. In Psalm 100:4, we're commanded, "Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him; bless his name!" The believer's life should be marked by thanksgiving and praise to God—which only make sense if we recognize that every good and perfect gift comes from above. It is simply sub-Christian to pray, see God's answer prayer, and not respond by thanking and praising him.

Also the fact that David is pictured as offering this thanks and praise with the assembly of others in the sanctuary is a reminder to us that the pursuit of holiness is a corporate pursuit. We all know of the vice lists in the Bible where the New Testament author will say something like, "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity" and on, like we see in Colossians 3:5. There are numerous such vice lists. But there are also virtue lists in the Bible where the biblical author will command us to put on or adorn ourselves with certain godly actions. And in each of these it seems that either love begins the list (most often) or is the climactic conclusion to the list, such as in Colossians 3:12-14 where Paul writes, "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience . . . and above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."

What this means for us is that the chief characteristic of holiness is love, and therefore love is a pursuit that necessarily involves your brothers and sisters in Christ. Were we to say to a New Testament author, "I'm pursuing holiness. I'm just doing it in isolation from others in a monastery," the brother would no doubt answer, "Well, how are you then pursuing the most important element of love?"

And it is love for our brothers and sisters that is seen in gathering with the assembly and thanking and praising God for his goodness toward us. The reason this is so is because your praise and thanksgiving to God communicates to me a reminder that God can be trusted in my

life as well—which is where this psalm begins. And so you trust God wholeheartedly, pursue righteousness while turning from wickedness, deal with your sin, and then praise and thank God, and it triggers these same realities in my life as well. That’s how Paul pictures the pursuit of holiness; it is a corporate pursuit. And so the believer pursuing holiness must thank and praise God. And, finally, David perseveres in holiness.

### **David perseveres in holiness**

As the psalm ends, David switches the tense in which he speaks as he looks forward to continuing in these actions.<sup>1</sup> He writes, “But as for me, I shall walk in my integrity; redeem me, and be gracious to me. My foot stands on level ground; in the great assembly I will bless the LORD” (vv. 11-12). The idea seems to be that David sees the description of his life that he’s given to this point as an ongoing reality in his life even as he goes forward. He has walked in integrity, and he’ll continue to do so. He’s loved the assembly of the righteous and praising God there, and he’ll continue to love the assembly and praise the Lord there. That is, he perseveres in holiness.

Holiness mandates endurance. In fact, those who do not persevere in holiness are judged not to have belonged to Christ (1 John 2:19). Jesus will warn of those soils where the seed is planted and life sprouts up quickly only to wither over time and not persevere. And so, you and I must make this our pursuit for the long haul.

And if that looks overwhelming, then we can look back, look around, and look forward. Here’s what I mean. We can look back at many who have come before us. Consider even loved ones we’ve lost. They persevered in faith. And we can look around. We’re not alone. We don’t persevere on our own but with the aid, help, and encouragement of others. We keep our hearts from being hardened by the deceitfulness of sin by exhorting one another every day. Praise God that he plucks us out of this world for himself but then places us in the body of Christ as we join local churches which are the means of our perseverance. And we look forward, remembering that this life will not go on forever. At death we’ll meet our Lord, or he’ll return and take us home. And as we await that day, knowing that Christ has done everything necessary for us to stand in righteousness on that day, let us pursue holiness, even as we see pictured here in Psalm 26. And let’s look back, around, and forward now as we come to the table. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> In verse 1 David uses the qal perfect form of the verb (translated here “I have walked”), while in verse 11 he uses the qal imperfect form of the verb (translated here “I shall walk.”).