

Psalm 15

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Introduction.

Ever since the creation, one of the foremost questions on the minds of mankind has been, “What can I do to make God/the gods happy with me?” Over the millennia, there have been a lot of different answers given to this question. The ancient Greeks offered all kinds of animal sacrifices. The Aztecs offered human sacrifices. The Christian martyrs of the early church willingly offered their bodies to be murdered. The fundamentalist Muslim jihadists of today not only willingly commit suicide themselves, but try to take as many people as possible with them.

Obviously, some of these approaches are more innocuous than others. I’d have a much easier time killing a cow than killing a human being, although PETA would probably beg to differ. However, in the final analysis, what matters is not what we are most willing to do. It’s what God most wants us to do.

Lots of folks in the religious world question this. They apparently believe that whatever we want to do, as long as we’re sincere about it, is going to please God. Logically speaking, this doesn’t make a whole lot of sense. If what matters is just our sincerity and not our specific actions, we could join al-Qaida as sincere suicide bombers and hope to conclude our career in paradise. Of course, most of the it’s-all-about-your-heart people aren’t willing to go that far. They end up saying that some of God’s commandments are important and others aren’t, and fortunately, they’re blessed with the ability to tell the difference between when God really meant what He said in His word and when He was only kidding. Strangely enough, God’s will always ends up lining up with their prejudices, and they get to do whatever they want.

That might help them sleep better at night, but in reality, it doesn’t do a thing for God. In Scripture, God is quite clear about what He wants, and He expects to be obeyed without exception, not just in our worship, but in our lives. We see some simple commands about daily living in Psalm 15. This morning, let’s see what we can learn from this psalm.

Honest Heart and Honest Dealings.

When we look at the structure of Psalm 15, we see that it begins with a two-line question, and then the rest of the psalm is the answer to that question. We see the question presented in Psalm 15:1. At first glance, this doesn’t appear to be terribly relevant to us. After all, in our religious service, we don’t use a tabernacle anymore, nor is there any hill we would describe as particularly holy. However, underneath the trappings of the Old Law, this verse still asks a relevant question. It’s asking who is fit to dwell in the presence of God, and who is holy enough to abide with Him.

There are two things that we can get out of this. First of all, God doesn’t have an open admissions policy. If we want to be near to God, there are standards that we have to meet with our lives. Second, though, through the wisdom and mercy of God, these standards are attainable. God handed down His law not to prevent us from coming to Him, but to point us in the right direction, and when we stumble, the grace of Jesus is sufficient to take us the rest of the way there.

With this in mind, let’s look at the first part of the answer to the question, in Psalm 15:2. It tells us that we must be both inwardly and outwardly righteous. The first component of this is that we must walk uprightly. As is common in Scripture, the psalmist is using the idea of walking here to refer to an overall way of life. If we want to walk uprightly, we can’t just put on our church faces when we come to the assembly, and then go home and indulge in whatever wickedness pleases us. Instead, we must constantly, consistently, choose to live in a way that pleases God.

Likewise, we must work righteousness. Our walk with God must involve not just the passive avoidance of sin, but the active pursuit of what is just and good. We have to be people that those around us recognize as good people, not just because we don’t drink or smoke or cuss, but because we are uniformly gracious, helpful, and kind. We have to be the people others will count on to help change a flat tire, unload the moving van, or bring a meal over during a family emergency. Our righteousness must express itself not by keeping us from other people, but by helping them.

Finally in this verse, we must speak truth in our hearts. Just as our outward lives must be ordered by the Lord, so too our inward thoughts must be. It’s important for us to nurture the inward voice of truth in this way because sin always involves self-deception. We sin when we become convinced that what is evil is actually good, and what is destructive is actually beneficial and fun. When our hearts speak the truth about sin, it prevents us from that disastrous self-delusion. Even beyond that, if we speak truth in our hearts, it will help us to become just people. When we are able to clearly see what is true and right and what isn’t, what we ought to do in any situation will be equally clear. The unrighteous have a hard time with this, because they’re never sure when to lie, when to tell the truth, and so forth. However, when we live according to God’s ways, the answer to any question of life becomes simple. We trust in Him and do what is right.

This overall righteousness will also appear in the way we interact with others, according to Psalm 15:3. Once again, there are three segments here. First, this tells us that we must not be backbiters. It can be so tempting, especially when someone else makes us mad, to go to our friends and spew out a heart full of venom about the offender. It can

likewise tempting to tear someone else down to build ourselves up. However, as pleasing as such conduct may be to us, it is equally displeasing to God. When we are tempted to backbite, let's remember to bite our tongues instead.

In much the same way, we learn here that we must do no evil to a neighbor. This is an idea of tremendous importance in the new Testament. Paul tells us in Romans 13 that love is the fulfillment of the law because it does no harm to a neighbor, and Jesus, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, shows us that our neighbor is anyone we have opportunity to help. When we read this passage with these ideas in mind, the point is that whenever we interact with anybody, we must do so not merely according to the letter of the law, but according to its spirit, using our obedience to the commands of God as a tool to help them. That's the good that everyone has the right to expect from us.

Finally in this verse, we learn that we must not reproach a friend. This is not a particularly easy idea to figure out, but as best as I can tell from the Hebrew, the idea here seems to be that we must not humiliate those close to us or expose them to disgrace. This is something that we need to pay attention to when it is easiest to forget—in our dealings with our children. I've seen parents who have no conscience at all about speaking scornfully of their children in public, or of rebuking them or disciplining them in the most embarrassing way possible. Brethren, even when our children disappoint or embarrass us, that's not an appropriate way to deal with them. As all of us remember from when we were kids, children are very sensitive to humiliation, and when we humiliate, we leave scars and injure their relationship with us.

Dedication to Principle.

David goes on to describe other manifestations of this same righteous attitude in the first part of Psalm 15:4. This tells us first of all that we must keep a disapproving distance, both physically and mentally, from the wicked. Sometimes, I fear that because of the wickedness of the world in which we live, we've become desensitized to evil. I can remember, back when I was in college, many of my closest friends were extremely immoral people. They drank and did drugs and slept around, and when they told me about it, I laughed. Brethren, that's not the way that we should regard the workers of evil. We need to love them and look to save them, but we can't accept their behavior or their influence.

Instead, those we honor should be the people of God. Our role models, those we look up to, should not be the corrupt and dissolute celebrities and entertainers of our day, nor even those who have made a name for themselves in the world of business. Those we really admire, those we really respect, should be not the cleverest or richest people we know, but the most righteous. They should be our role models; they should be our friends, because they are the ones who can teach us and lead us to please God. We should honor them because they're good at the only thing that matters.

We see another tenet of righteous living that's important to God in the second part of Psalm 15:4. Here, God tells us that the righteous man will remain true to his word, even when he is personally or financially injured because of his faithfulness. This is an idea that has come into particular relevance since the housing bubble popped. The Chicago area hasn't been as badly hit as many other areas, but the latest figures I've read still tell us that housing prices have declined about 25% since 2006. That decline has been enough to put many people "underwater", in a position where they owe more on the house than it is worth. As part of that, they continue to make oversized payments on the mortgage, even though a mortgage for that same amount would buy far more house today than it did five years ago. In the language of Psalm 15, those are people who have sworn to their own hurt. Many of them, though, do look to change. They figure they can make money by defaulting on their mortgage or going into bankruptcy and buying another, larger house. That might seem wise in the eyes of the world, but it's not a financial strategy that a Christian can employ. Once we make a commitment, to a mortgage or anything else, we must do our best to honor that commitment. That's what God expects.

We learn more about what it takes to be financially righteous from Psalm 15:5a. This is another parallel, and it begins by telling us that we can't put out money at usury. In today's language, we can't lend out money and charge exorbitant interest. Most of us aren't moneylenders, but there's still a principle underlying this to which we need to pay attention. We're not supposed to use our wealth or our power or whatever other advantages we have to strong-arm people and exploit them. We're supposed to be fair and just to those with whom we interact, not look to smash them.

We see the flip side of the coin in the instruction not to take a bribe against the innocent. As far as I know, no one here has a position of power in the state government, so people don't normally look to bribe us. However, the broader application here is that we shouldn't let financial considerations influence our perspective on what is right. I suppose the casinos around here pay their employees pretty well, but that doesn't change the fact that casinos are ungodly and evil, and if we work for one, we are abetting their evil. Let's trust in the Lord to provide and not be seduced by Satan.

If we live in this way, we see the result that we can expect in Psalm 15:5b. We shall not be moved. This is a Biblical promise of great importance. It means that come what may, no adversity can injure or destroy us. Even when heaven and earth pass away, the word of God will not, and if we are righteous, it tells us that neither will we.