***DO THE RIGHT THING!***

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Texts: Psalm 15 and Romans 7:15-25a

The psalm that I just read begins with a couple of questions for God: *Lord, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?* I don’t think the psalmist really expects an answer from God; there are a lot of questions posed in the psalms that are more rhetorical than anything. So the psalmist asks:

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (Psalm 22)*

*What are humans that you are mindful of them,*

*mortals that you care for them? (Psalm 8)*

The questions express the angst or wonder of the speaker rather than seeking a divine answer. Similarly in this 15th psalm, the psalmist doesn’t really expect God to answer. In the questions he poses, there is an underlying question that the psalmist hopes to answer for the reader: Who is worthy to live in God’s presence and abide with God? Or put more simply: Who is righteous?

Again and again in the pages of Scripture we hear the humble response to those questions: *none of us is worthy, none of us is righteous, not one!* Compared to the holiness and righteousness of God, we are unholy and unrighteous people. We fall short of God’s hopes and expectations for us. We all are sinners in need of God’s redeeming grace; even those described as righteous have their flaws! Martin Luther came to that realization as he began to despair over his futile attempts to earn his salvation. Despite his best efforts to do good, he was getting further and further behind on the divine scoreboard. Then one day while reading Paul’s letter to the Romans he discovered grace, and his despair was eased by the recognition that God does not expect us to earn our salvation. Salvation is a divine gift freely given. It is that reality that gave him hope and gives us hope, for though we are not worthy, nor righteous, nor perfect, God loves us anyway, and saves us anyway. It is what God does that saves us by grace, not what we do!

Tony Campolo tells of an elderly preacher who was sitting, half asleep in the airport, when a zealous young Christian came up to him and boldly asked, “Sir, are you saved?” Startled from his siesta, the preacher replied, “why yes, I think so.” “When did it happen?” asked the young man. “Exactly when were you saved?” “Well,” the preacher replied, “it’s hard to say exactly. It happened almost two thousand years ago on a cross on Calvary.” The preacher got it right! We are saved by the grace of God, not by our own profession of faith or good deeds, for none of us is that righteous!

That does not mean, however, that we give up striving to be the righteous people God calls us to be. Paul may say that he does the very thing he hates to do, but he still wants to do the right thing, still strives to do the right thing even if he is not wholly successful. Repeatedly falling short of God’s hopes and expectations for us is not an excuse for no longer trying. John Calvin suggests we do good works, not to earn our salvation, but in gratitude to God for what God has done for us! We try to live as God calls us to live, to be the people God calls us to be. What then is it that we should be trying to do?

In one sense it is perhaps all 66 books of the Bible that seek to answer that question. But over the next several weeks I want to explore the psalmist’s answer by diving deeper into the text of this 15th Psalm. It is not a long psalm as psalms go; you might even try memorizing it – or not! The psalm seeks to answer the question: What should we do in order to be the righteous people God calls us to be? In response, the psalmist lays out a relatively brief ethic for righteous living. Today we start where the psalmist starts:

Q: Who is righteous?

A: *Those who walk blamelessly and do what is right.*

Walking has long been a metaphor for living, and the hazards of walking metaphors for the challenges we face day-to-day. When I was in elementary school I had not yet grown into my big feet, and my compassionate classmates would count how many times I tripped on the way back and forth to the cafeteria for lunch. By high school I was much better at walking, but still found myself sprawled on the basketball court from time to time with no one around, no doubt due to thicker paint on the lines of the court in those spots! There are obstacles that challenge our walking from time to time – like my clumsiness or toys in the living room or curb stops in the parking lot or the classic banana peel on the floor. There are dead ends and rocky roads and steep ascents that test our endurance and patience. And so walking and the challenges of walking serve as fitting metaphors for our life journeys.

One of my favorite quotes of that great philosopher Yogi Berra is: “*If you don’t know where you’re going, you might not get there*.” Destinations matter, and the destination is the starting point for identifying a path to it. Scripture suggests that whether the destination you are seeking is happiness or peace or meaning in life, the path to follow is the righteous path upon which God leads you. There are a host of other paths that claim to arrive at the same place – the path of greed or gluttony or hedonism or selfishness, but they are rabbit trails that end in dead ends. And if your desired destination is fame or fortune, power over others or revenge for some wrong, then you will be sorely disappointed, for righteous paths do not lead there, and the paths that claim to lead to those destinations are also dead ends, and the destinations themselves prove to be endlessly unsatisfying. In the familiar words of the 23rd Psalm, the Lord leads us on paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. But while the Lord may lead us on such paths, we don’t always follow. We have our own ideas of where we want to go and how we want to get there, and all around us there is a cacophony of voices offering alternate paths: *God helps them who help themselves. Do what feels good. You deserve it* – and they will gladly sell you the “it” you deserve.

*Walk blamelessly! Do the right thing!* That is the alternative the psalmist encourages for those who want to live righteous lives and abide with God. It is not always an easy path. It is not always a popular path. But it is the path that we are called to walk as children of God and disciples of Christ.

One of the soldiers who participated in the abuse of prisoners in the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq was quoted as saying about his actions: “The Christian in me says it’s wrong, but the corrections officer in me says, ‘I love to make a grown man [humiliate] himself.’”[[1]](#endnote-1) Obeying that corrections officer in his head led to persecution and humiliation of Iraqi prisoners, acts clearly contrary to God’s call to love our neighbors and our enemies. Instead of following a righteous path, he chose what he thought was a path to power over his prisoner, and in the end, came to regret his choice. God’s call to follow faithfully, to walk blamelessly, to do the right thing, is not suspended in time of war or fear or anger. In fact, in such times following a faithful path is more important than ever, even if it is the more difficult path!

There is a Native American story of an old Cherokee woman who was teaching her grandchild about life. “A fight is going on inside me,” she said to the child. “It is a terrible fight between two wolves. One is evil – he is anger, envy, jealousy, greed, arrogance, self-pity, lies, resentment, inferiority, superiority, and false pride. The other is good – he is joy, peace, love, hope, humility, kindness, truth, generosity, compassion, and faith. This fight is going on inside you and inside every other person too.” The grandchild thought for a moment and then asked, “Which wolf will win?” The old Cherokee woman replied, “The one we feed.”

Each and every day we make choices about which wolf to feed, which path to walk, whether to do the right thing or not. We make those choices in our work and our play, in what we say and what we fail to say, in what we do and fail to do, in how we spend our money and time, and in how we use our talents. Some are momentous choices and some are small choices with momentous consequences and some are small choices that alter the landscape of our lives very little. But we choose, because in God’s wisdom, God decided that was a good thing – to let us choose the right or the wrong, the good or the evil, a faithful path or a wayward way. In Jesus Christ God has offered us a clear path to choose – a path of loving, forgiving, self-sacrificing, faithful service. It is a path to a fulfilling life, a path to peace that passes our understanding, a path that leads to the Kingdom of God. But we choose whether to follow that path or not. So, choose well, my friends! Choose well! Amen

1. Spec. Charles A Graner Jr. quoted by Spec. Joseph M. Darby in “Punishment and Amusement”, Scott Higham and Joe Stephens, *The Washington Post*, May 22, 2004, p.17 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)