

Keeping It Real

Psalm 26
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Church historian Lloyd George Patterson was once asked how he accounted for the endurance of the early church, when so many of the tools of communication associated with growth either did not exist or could not be used in a hostile environment – they couldn't even have church buildings, let alone publicity campaigns.

He responded by saying that the early Christian communities were characterized by unusual integrity, and some people were attracted to that.¹

Our Old Testament lesson today is a study in integrity – what it is, why it matters, and how to maintain it.

Tradition has it that King David wrote this Psalm as he was struggling with how he and the Israelites were faring in the world, all the threats to safety and prosperity they faced. They felt surrounded by evil forces that were undermining their core beliefs, all that made them a great nation of loving families and faithful people.

What it was that made the Israelites so great back then was their reliance on God. They were the only nation that trusted in the One True God to guide and protect them, provide for them and bless them.

Today, we as Christians can feel like we're surrounded by threats to our very being – threats to the faith we hold dear, the values we try to live by, the family of faith we've come to love. Even our desire and ability to devote ourselves to the church, to our families, and to our community seems under attack by contrary influences.

When David felt this way, he turned to God in examining his own life, the things he held dear, the values he lived by, the people he associated with, and the activities that filled his days.

In turning to God, David cries out saying, "Vindicate me, O Lord, for I have walked in my integrity...."

The Hebrew word that we translate as "integrity" connotes wholeness or completeness. David sees himself as someone whose entire life revolves around a single principle – his trust in the Lord. "... I have trusted in the Lord without wavering," he declares!

¹ Rev. David B. Rivers, in *The Living Church*, August 20, 2000.

That's a powerful statement, a powerful place to stand. I think we all trust in the Lord, don't we? Sure, we do; that's why we're here. But do you trust in the Lord without wavering, do I? That's another matter altogether.

To measure the degree to which we truly trust in the Lord – the degree to which we align ourselves with the protections and blessings of the Lord – we have to evaluate our lives, as David did.

The first thing David did was look at the people he associated with, saying, "I do not sit with the worthless, nor do I consort with hypocrites; I hate the company of evildoers, and will not sit with the wicked."

That seems like an easy enough statement to embrace. And yet, let's look at it more closely, just to be sure. The word used for worthless means empty or idolatrous – thoughtlessly putting people and things before God.

So much in life these days is designed to just take up space, to give us something to fill our time with, in between the things we have to do or want to do. The practice of just sitting with God, turning to the Lord in our downtime – it's a lost art for too many people.

Think about it. How much of your downtime is filled with useless endeavors or distractions, when those moments could be used to sit in the presence of the Lord, seeking his guidance, blessing, and peace.

Consider how you spend your time and ask yourself is it in keeping with what you profess to hold most dear, what you desire to become, who you desire to be, as a child of God. Imagine yourself this week sitting in the presence of God asking these questions; Where would you do that? When, this week, would you carve out some time to do that?

Next, David looks at what he's made of his life. He looks at the work of his hands in comparison to those who've turned away from the Lord. "Do not sweep me away with sinners," says David, "nor my life with the bloodthirsty, those in whose hands are evil devices, and whose right hands are full of bribes."

Boy, we can relate to that – feeling like we're being swept away by a society that has little regard for the family of faith or godly behavior, a society that rewards evildoers with power and money, a society in which the mighty dollar holds more sway than doing what's right.

We're talking about failing to acknowledge and turn away from our sinful nature – the things that tempt us to do what's not good, not good for us or for others.

We're talking about getting caught up in the warring ways of the world – coming to expect and accept senseless violence on our streets and across the globe, not to mention the anger and outburst we tolerate in ourselves and in our homes. It's a matter of holding ourselves and others to a higher standard.

In ancient China, the people wanted security against the barbarians to the north, so they built the Great Wall. It was so high they believed no one could climb over it and thought nothing could break it down. They settled back to enjoy their security.

Over the next 10 decades, China was invaded three times, and yet not once did the barbarians break down the wall or climb over it. Each time they bribed a gatekeeper and then marched right through the gates. The Chinese were so busy relying on walls of stone they forgot to raise children of integrity.²

There's no integrity in looking to your high morals and Christian values while failing to nurture them in others, and in yourself. There's no integrity coming to church on Sunday and then leaving all your good intentions behind when you go. No, we have to take our Christian values and practices with us, and nurture them in ourselves; in our homes, schools and workplaces; among our friends and those we meet.

This is why David is bold to ask that God would test him, saying, "Prove me, O Lord, and try me; test my heart and mind. For your steadfast love is before my eyes, and I walk in faithfulness to you."

David was known as someone after God's own heart, someone who constantly sought to align his life with godly values and practices, someone who took his own sin and temptations seriously and sought to overcome them, with God's help. Are you that type of person?

Or do you get swept up in the culture around you, do I get swept up and swept away. Sadly, we all do. But this does not mean we have to give in to such hypocrisy – saying we believe in faith-based, godly living while failing to work on it in our lives and in our world.

What's one thing that you profess to believe and yet fail to act on or hold yourself to? Think about it? Whatever that is, whatever comes to mind, that's a good place to start. Lift it up the Lord – that thing you do or fail to do – and then pray for the strength and guidance to turn it around.

² Retrieved from www.homileticsonline.com; source unknown.

Such an act of self-examination is the first step – for all of us – in standing alongside David in a place of integrity, David who is bold to say, “My foot stands on level ground; in the great congregation I will bless the Lord.”

So yes, bless the Lord – all of us – in all you do, in all you say, in all you are living your life in, in keeping with what you profess to believe and hold dear as a follower of Christ, a child of God. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Most gracious God, we come to this place of prayer ever grateful that you offer us a safe refuge – if we would but remember. Remind us that it is our choice always to be restored, renewed, and recreated through the power of Christ, who is love made manifest.

Grant us the wisdom and the courage to release the things that separate us from you – like our willingness to settle for earthly pleasures and distractions at the expense of spending time with you, or our tendency to be less than honest and fair in our dealings with others.

Fill us instead with integrity and honesty. Grant us the grace to treat each person we meet as we would want to be treated.

We know that to bear the cross is to bear witness to a commitment to a way of life. Grant us the grace to carry the cross proudly as a people restored, renewed and recreated in your image and spirit.

We pray for those recovering from surgery and for all those dealing with the limitations and challenges of health issues. We pray for our country and for this world. May all be guided by your spirit of wisdom, discernment and peace. We pray all this in the name of Jesus and in the spirit of love and blessing, as we pray the prayer that he taught us, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.