

Who May Enjoy the Presence of God?

Psalm 15

1

Main idea: Holiness in life is not optional for the Christian, for without holiness God's people cannot expect to enjoy His presence.

A Psalm of David.

O LORD, who may abide in Your tent?

Who may dwell on Your holy hill?

² He who walks with integrity, and works righteousness,
And speaks truth in his heart.

³ He does not slander with his tongue,
Nor does evil to his neighbor,

Nor takes up a reproach against his friend;

⁴ In whose eyes a reprobate is despised,
But who honors those who fear the LORD;

He swears to his own hurt and does not change;

⁵ He does not put out his money at interest,

Nor does he take a bribe against the innocent.

He who does these things will never be shaken.

Introduction:

Across the world, different cultures have different expectations of guests who visit their homes. For example, in many countries in the eastern world like Japan or South Korea, it is expected that you will remove your shoes before entering someone's home or place of worship. To waltz right in with your big and dirty American cowboy boots would be viewed as a shocking offense in these places. In China, it is considered very rude to blow your nose in public, especially at the dinner table. In Ghana, West Africa, it is expected that when you enter a home, you absolutely must greet every person in that home with a handshake, starting with the eldest and ending with babies, lest you disrespect that whole family. Then you repeat the process when you leave. In Thailand, you must never touch anyone other than children on the head. There are any number of cultural faux pas we can make when visiting someone's home.

Once when I was in Nepal, I was eating a meal with a group of church leaders. The women there fed us well—too well. When I finally couldn't eat any more rice and dal, I noticed that one of my Nepali friends next to me had cleaned his plate and clearly wanted more. I promptly, and in my mind, kindly, began to scrape some of my food that I could not eat onto his plate (from an untouched section of my plate). He just stared at me, and then fairly seriously leaned in and said to me, "I know you are American, but here, we do not do that. We can share our food immediately after it's been served, but once we start eating, no more." I was guilty of not knowing what was expected of me.

Psalm 15 is all about what God expects of anyone who would draw near to Him—of any who would come into His presence. We are taught in this psalm that it is no light matter to enter into the presence of God

Almighty. It is not something we should ever do casually. It requires self-reflection of our whole lives. We cannot presume to have communion with the living and holy God if our own lives are devoid of holiness.

Main idea: Holiness in life is not optional for the Christian, for without holiness God's people cannot expect to enjoy His presence.

Psalm 15 tells us that if we want to enjoy the presence of God, we must do three things:

- A. We must ask the right question. (*v.1*)
- B. We must listen to the Lord's answer. (*vv.2-5b*)
- C. We must hold fast to the sure promise. (*v.5c*)

Context:

Psalm 15 is another psalm ascribed to David. And many of you will immediately notice a shift in tone compared to the psalms that have preceded it. Those are full of lament, suffering, anguish of mind and soul because of the oppression and persecution of the wicked against the godly.

But Psalm 15 comes along, and it feels very different. Psalm 15 is more of a wisdom psalm, like Psalm 1, that describes how the wise person lives in contrast to the wicked. And having these two types of psalms in proximity to one another teaches us that even while God's people do suffer in this wicked world, and it can be hard just to get by, we are still called to live holy lives before God and others. This is who we are supposed to be in this world—lights in the darkness. Where the rest of the world runs away from God's presence, we are called to run into His presence and delight in His presence.

But if we want to enjoy the presence of God, then first we must ask the right question.

Exposition:

A. We must ask the right question. (*v.1*)

David asks the right question. And he asks essentially the same question twice—using Hebrew parallelism.

¹O LORD, who may abide in Your tent? Who may dwell on Your holy hill?

This question is very serious for David and should be for all God's people. Who may abide, literally sojourn, in Your tent? This was before the temple had been built, so the ark of God, the symbol of God's presence among His people, was kept in a tent. And once the ark had been brought to Jerusalem, it was placed there on Mt. Zion, God's holy hill. Although the Israelites knew that God could not be contained in one place, this tent that held the ark on Mt. Zion was the place most associated with God's presence. It was where He dwelled among His people.

Some scholars think that this question was literally recited by pilgrims who made their way up to Jerusalem for certain festivals, such as Passover. They may have asked this, possibly, as they came to the temple precincts on Mt. Zion. Perhaps a Levitical priest stood at the gate ready to answer their question, "Who may dwell here with the Lord?"

Of course, David knows that no one can live physically in the tent beside the ark. In fact, access to the most holy of holy places was limited to one man, the High Priest, once a year. What David is doing, then, is using a physical symbol to express his spiritual longing, “O Lord, who may enjoy your presence always?”

This question is of utmost significance because it gets at our ultimate purpose for existing and living. God created mankind to be in relationship with Him. He created mankind to enjoy His presence. Do you remember how it was in the Garden before sin entered the world? Adam and Eve walked with God and talked with God and enjoyed intimate fellowship with Him. They lived in His presence, before His face, unashamed. It was perfect fellowship with God.

But then our first parents sinned; they believed the lie about God, and as a result, they were cast out of the Garden—out of His presence. And since then, the human race has forgotten their chief end—to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. In our natural, sinful hearts, we don’t want to be near God; we don’t want anything to do with Him.

But for the regenerate—for those whom God has graciously given a new heart; for those who are new creatures in Christ—we want nothing more than to be with Him, to know His nearness, to enjoy His presence. That desire comes from God and is given to every believer, because we are being remade into the people we were created to be—true worshipers of the one true God.

This is what Jesus Christ has accomplished. He was sent by the Father to restore that broken relationship—to turn the sinner who is running away from God into a saint who wants nothing more than to be with God. Jesus came into the world to reconcile us to God. And He did it through His blood—by giving up His life for sinners.

- **Ephesians 2:13**—But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

Application

Do you have this desire, this deep longing in your heart, to be near God and enjoy His presence? Or does the thought of it bore you, or even scare you? If so, you need to do a deep spiritual examination of yourself. Every true Christian has been given a love and desire for God by the Holy Spirit. But if we are entertaining a pattern of sin in our lives, then this desire will dampen, our love will grow cold, and in the end, we will have no assurance of our salvation.

But David did have this desire that all of God’s children have—to be in and enjoy God’s presence. So, he asks this ultimate question that we should all be asking, “Who may abide in Your tent? Who may dwell on Your holy hill?” But after asking the right question, we must also listen to the Lord’s answer.

B. We must listen to the Lord’s answer. (vv.2-5b)

The answer to David’s question consists of ten descriptions or expectations that the Lord has of all those who would come into His presence to worship and serve Him. Now, before we say anything about the specific expectations, we need to say something about them generally. The first thing we must say is that, for many evangelical Christians, the answer to David’s question is unexpected—even shocking.

How so? Notice the verbs: “walks,” “works,” “speaks,” “does not slander,” “does no evil,” “does not ...,” “does ...” What are all these words talking about? Works! The answer to David’s great question about

enjoying God's presence is "do works." For many evangelical Christians, that word "works" has almost no place in their vocabulary because they are scared it will detract from grace. We are not saved by works, but by grace. If we are honest, many of us probably wish that David would have answered his question, "Who may live in and enjoy Your presence?" with something like, "Only the one who has faith, and trusts not in any of his own works."

But David doesn't say that. Why not? Did he believe that we are saved by works—by being righteous enough? Absolutely not! Of all people, David knew and had experienced salvation by grace alone through faith. What David is saying is exactly what James would say 1,000 years later:

- **James 2:19-20, 26**—What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? ¹⁷ Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. ¹⁸ But someone may well say, "You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works." ¹⁹ You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. ²⁰ But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?...²⁶ For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.

And, in fact, isn't this how Jesus, Himself, talked? Later today, read the Sermon on the Mount (*Matt.5-7*), and you'll be amazed at how similar Jesus' preaching was to David's. In that sermon, Jesus was describing what God expects from the citizens of His kingdom. It is not what saves them, but what comes out of a saved person. These are evidences of true salvation by grace through faith.

And they are necessary. They are not optional. This is how a citizen of God's kingdom, of Christ's kingdom, looks, acts, and talks. This is what God saved us for. This list in Psalm 15 is not exhaustive, but it is representative of what God expects of us. Notice how he goes back and forth between positive and negative descriptions—what that person does and does not do.

1. We are to live consistently holy lives. (v.2)

David begins with three positive general descriptions of what this person looks like:

a. "He who walks with integrity" (v.2a)

This word "**integrity**" (*tamim*) means complete, sound, blameless, without defect/blemish. It is used quite often in the Old Testament to describe animal sacrifices that were acceptable to God—those that were without defect. In a spiritual sense, it did not mean sinless perfection, but was used to refer to the integrity of a person—a person whose life was pleasing to God because they sought to do His will despite the prevailing lifestyles of the culture.

This word was used to describe Noah:

- **Genesis 6:9**—These are the records of the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his time; Noah walked with God.

- b. *"And works righteousness" or does what is right (v.2b)*

"Righteousness" (*sedeq*) is used almost synonymously with "integrity/blameless," as it was in Genesis 6:9 (*Noah was righteous and blameless in his time*). It means that the citizen of God's kingdom has a pattern of life in which he does what is right; he lives righteously—he consistently, though not perfectly, does what God has commanded. He turns from the wide path and keeps his feet on the narrow path, careful to live his whole life righteously in the eyes of God and man.

- c. *"And speaks truth in his heart" (v.2c)*

For the Jewish person, the heart was the control center of their life. It included the mind, the intellect, the will, and the emotions. One of the requirements of those who would enjoy God's presence is the person's whole life is saturated with and based on God's truth, which then makes them a person of truth in their speech. To speak truth in the heart is for the heart and the mouth to match. There is no double-talking, no hypocrisy in this person.

- o **Luke 6:45**—The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart.

Now, put these first three general descriptions together, and what do you have? You have a person whose whole life is characterized by holiness, by godliness, by loving and doing the will of God. Next, David gets more specific. The person who walks with integrity/blamelessly, works righteousness, and speaks truth in his heart looks something like this:

2. **We are to treat others with respect. (v.3)**

- a. *"He does not slander with his tongue" (v.3a)*

Just as he speaks truth inside, he controls his tongue on the outside. To slander is to gossip, to talk behind someone's back, to tear down with words. Somehow gossip has become a "respectable sin" among Christians—a sin that is we rarely recognize in ourselves, and when we do, we laugh it off as no big deal. But for God, it is a big deal; it is a big sin. The word "devil" means slanderer. Slander is his specialty. And unfortunately, it is the specialty of many today, even within the church. God's people are hurting because of gossip and slander in the church.

But one who wishes to enjoy the presence of God, the citizen of His kingdom, refuses to slander or gossip about anyone. He knows that such talk has no place in the church that Jesus is building, because we are to be about building one another up, not tearing one another down.

- o **Romans 14:19**—So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.

- b. *"Nor does evil to his neighbor" (v.3b)*

A neighbor was thought of as anyone with whom you had frequent interactions. Jesus widened this to include anyone whom you had an ability to help. Here, the person who has communion with God—a citizen of His kingdom—simply does not wish for, nor actively participates in any

kind of evil or hurt to their neighbor. Think of the second half of the Ten Commandments. What is the positive implication? Do good to your neighbor. Help those you can. Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan is the perfect example of the kind of person described in Psalm 15. Those who walked by the beaten man were doing evil to him, simply in their avoidance of him; but the Samaritan did good by doing what he could to help this man—a man he didn't know, but whom Jesus calls his "neighbor."

- c. *"Nor takes up a reproach against his friend" (v.3c)*

The citizen of God's kingdom does not throw slurs or reproaches against his friends. Nor does he receive them when others do so. So, when you hear gossip or slurs about someone else, how quick are you to listen?

This kind of sin—gossip, slander, reproaches, slurring—has always been around, but has grown exponentially since the advent of social media. Seemingly everyone is a potential victim. Online bullying, gossip, spreading of rumors is devastating our youth. And here the Bible says that this kind of thing has absolutely no place among God's people. One thing that should distinguish Christians from the rest of the world is our complete non-participation in this kind of talk and gossip—in person or online. It's something we need to take seriously, and we need to make sure our kids are taking seriously.

3. We are to admire the right people. (vv.4a-b)

- a. *"In whose eyes a reprobate is despised" (v.4a)*

A reprobate is someone whose life is characterized by evil deeds. In our world, often, these kinds of people are venerated and set up as role models. How many celebrities, actors, and musicians are held up by our culture as "great," but they live completely godless lives full of debauchery? Somehow, they have become people we want to be like. But the one who has fellowship with God—the citizen of His kingdom—has no interest in honoring that kind of person. It doesn't mean we hate them or treat them without dignity, but we are careful not to honor them with our admiration.

- b. *"But who honors those who fear the LORD" (v.4b)*

There are people we are to admire, look up to, and give special honor to—those who fear the Lord. We spend a lot of time reading about and learning about those who revel in sin in our culture. We need to learn to honor our brothers and sisters who are persevering in the faith. We need to pray for one another and do good to one another. Every day we should ask ourselves, "How can I bless or honor a brother or sister today?"

4. We are to spurn selfish gain at the expense of others. (vv.4c-5b)

- a. *"He swears to his own hurt and does not change" (v.4c)*

The citizen of God's kingdom is a man or woman of their word. When they promise something, they follow through, though it may cost them financially or otherwise.

b. *"He does not put out his money at interest" (v.5a)*

This is talking about lending money. The term for charging high interest on loans is called usury. In some cases, because of high interest rates, people had to sell themselves or their children into slavery because of the debt. The Law of Moses stated that Israelites were not to charge fellow Israelites interest (*Ex.22:25-27; Deut.23:19*). It was a protection within the family of God. Within the family of God, we are to be generous and not seek to gain at other's expense.

c. *"Nor does he take a bribe against the innocent" (v.5b)*

Bribery was, and still is, a big problem in the world. It is one way that the rich take advantage of and oppress the poor. But God hates it. So, this was really another protection of the poor by God. The rich would often take the poor to court and would then simply pay a bribe to the judge in order to win their case. There was no winning for the poor and innocent. This kind of behavior simply has no place in the presence of God.

We come now to the end of this list, and David gives us a concluding statement—a promise from God.

C. We must hold fast to the sure promise. (v.5c)

⁵ He who does these things will never be shaken.

What a wonderful promise. Or is it? This is the promise to the person *"who does these things."* And it doesn't say this is for the one who does these things most of the time. What God requires for anyone to dwell with Him, in His presence, and to enjoy His fellowship and love is perfect consistency in all these things and more. Jesus said the same thing in His Sermon on the Mount

- **Matthew 5:48**—Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

As I went through this list, I kept saying to myself, "So often, that's not me. How often do I fail to walk with integrity, work righteousness, and speak truth in my heart? How often do I fail to live a consistently holy life like this? How can I ever expect to enjoy the presence of a holy God when I am so often unholy; when I look more like the wicked fool of Psalm 14 than the holy man of Psalm 15?"

That's why, in the end, we have to see that Psalm 15 is not perfectly fulfilled in me, or in you, or even in David. David knew he was not consistently this holy person. Psalm 15 is ultimately and perfectly fulfilled in only one person—the Lord Jesus Christ.

Only Jesus is worthy to abide in the tent of God; to dwell on His holy hill. Only Jesus is worthy of enjoying the presence of His Father and the Spirit. Jesus came to earth to live as one of us, but to live as none of us ever could—perfectly. He lived in perfect obedience and conformity to God's Word and God's will.

Every waking moment of every day, Jesus walked with integrity, worked righteousness as God desired, and spoke truth in his heart. He never played the hypocrite; never played faces; never double-talked. He never slandered or gossiped about anyone—never said anything untrue about a friend or enemy, and never received a reproach. He took every opportunity He was given to help those neighbors in need. He hated everything that God hates and loved everything that God loves—in perfect harmony with His

Father. He never once sought to gain at someone else's expense, but rather gave of Himself completely so that others might gain.

So then, we come back to the promise at the end of the psalm, and ask again, "Is this promise wonderful for us?" Yes, it is! Because there is One who did all these things perfectly, as God requires—the Lord Jesus Christ did it. And by trusting in Him and His life and His works and His death and His resurrection, we can be assured that we will never be shaken. Christ is our sure and steady anchor; we are rooted and grounded in Him so that whatever storms may come, nothing can move us away from the presence of God.

And when we place our trust wholly in Him, guess what happens? He works in us to will and to work for His good pleasure (*Phil.2:13*). The good works that we were created to do start flowing in our lives (*Eph.2:10*). They are the evidence that He is in us and that we are in Him. But He is the One who motivates us to "*work out your salvation with fear and trembling*" (*Phil.2:12*). And over time, with many ups and downs, we start to look more and more like the person of Psalm 15—who enjoys the presence of God here and now in part, but looks forward to the unhindered, unfettered, unrestricted joy of God's presence in eternity to come!

Amen.

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