

Prayers

To God

Gracious Lord, who brings sunshine, wind and rain to every part of this planet; send Your gifts upon us so that we may radiate the joy of Your presence, be energised by the power of Your Holy Spirit, and be saturated in the love of Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. Then, as the weather nurtures life, may Your church nurture faith. AMEN

For myself

Weekly theme: Feelings about 'church'

Pray for those who you find difficult at church, because of their views, their manner or because of their appointed role. Rejoice before the Lord at the vitality of His people and search within your heart to see whether the Spirit has given you peace with your brothers and sisters.

For others

Pray today for the underprivileged who need the help of others to stay alive and

Meditation

Decide for truth, and free your mind.

Be ready for the wind of revelation
to invigorate your flagging soul
with godly wisdom and perception.

Decide for joy, and be ready to dance.

Let the Spirit free those tired limbs
to leap and praise your Saviour
with true freedom and with gladness.

Decide for trust, and open up your heart.

Feel God's covenant love begin again
to warm your soul towards your neighbours
with honesty and love outpouring.

Decide for vision, and look to the future.

See the glorious plan of God unfold
to liberate the sinners of the world
with undeserved and never ending love.

Decide for Christ, and place your faith in Him
Find your freedom in this real salvation
to live and love and speak and do
with purpose, praise and worship everlasting!

Bible Passage

Psalm 15

A Psalm of David.

- 1 O LORD, who is allowed in Your Presence?
Who may live on your holy hill?
- 2 Those who walk without blame,
who do what is right,
and who speak the truth from their heart;
- 3 who do not slander others,
who do no evil to their neighbours,
and who do not put others down;
- 4 who look with scorn on anything vile,
but honour those who fear the LORD,
and who stand by their oath whatever the cost;
- 5 who do not lend money
over the rate of interest,
nor take a bribe against the innocent.

Those who do these things
shall never be shaken.

Review

What a delightful and yet challenging psalm. It begins with a simple and penetrating question; who is entitled to enter into God's presence and remain with Him on His '*holy hill*' (15:1)? In other words, is anyone righteous enough to stand in God's presence? This challenging question is followed by four answers grouped within the psalm's central verses (15:2-5). The last two lines then confirm God's blessings on those who '*do these things*' (15:6), and offers a promise; they '*will never be shaken*' (15:5).

Christians today might well respond to this by saying that no one can do anything to 'please God', because everyone is a sinner. Moreover, Jesus alone is the way to the Father and to life with Him, and the Holy Spirit enables people to live as Jesus' disciples (John 14:25-31). Surely we can do nothing that pleases God, as yesterday's psalm says, '*no one does what is good ...*' (14:1,3)! But we must be careful not to confuse the subject of salvation with that of walking in faith. The first says indeed that no one is good before God, and we therefore need a Saviour, Jesus Christ. In the pathway of Christian life, however, Jesus Himself teaches that God requires many things, including loving neighbours and enemies (Matt 5:43, John

15:12,17), and doing the work of evangelism (Matthew 10:1f. 28:19)! He is pleased when we do His will, though obviously, the work we do for Him does not 'save' us.

Our Psalm is not about salvation, but about the pathway of life for the faithful, who want to do what is pleasing to God. We can imagine David saying this, not to try to justify himself, but wanting simply to do everything possible to do what is right, for God. From his perspective and from that of a Christian, this Psalm identifies characteristics of faithfulness and service pleasing to God. Its teaching can be placed alongside that of Paul, who writes, for example, to urge the church at Corinth to abandon selfishness at the communion table (1 Corinthians 11), or to call the Roman church to '*be renewed in the mind*' (Romans 12:1), and show love within the fellowship (Romans 12:9f.). Psalm 15 is Scriptural teaching about what God wants of His people to live the life of faith.

The opening verse speaks of Old Testament times, when God's people believed He was 'present' with them, living in the sanctuary of the Tabernacle, the Temple, or "*on Your holy hill*" (15:1); so this was where worship was conducted. But this is not how we experience God today now that Jesus is our Saviour. For us, God's presence is found in the fellowship of the church, in the Holy Spirit who has been given to His people, and in our worship. Buildings are not strictly necessary because God is with us where we are. The Christian can therefore interpret verse 1 roughly like this;

*'O Lord, who is worthy of Your Holy Spirit,
and who can come into Your presence to worship You?'*

We must now look at the four things mentioned in Psalm 15 as acceptable to God. We might expect this psalm to answer its opening question with reference to ritual requirements or ceremonies. For example, someone is acceptable after sacrificing a goat and having sins ritually forgiven (Leviticus 4:23f. 5:5, 7:23f.). But wonderfully, the Psalm contains plain teaching about earnest and good behaviour, and having a right attitude towards God.

Verse 2, says that those welcomed into God's presence are people who '*walk without blame ... do what is right, and speak the truth from their hearts*'. We do not have to interpret this, it is plain enough! We either do this or we don't! Of course such advice may appear rather humanist; advice to 'be good' is relatively abstract. But what is wrong with this when so many of us struggle to sustain such commendable goodness? Surely we must strive to be like this if God is good? It is our duty to ask for the power of God's Spirit to fulfil this high call.

Verse 3 calls on God's people to refrain from '*slander*', and to hold back from speaking evil of people. The second half goes further, warning not just about speaking evil, but doing it; '*do no evil to (your) neighbours*'. Intriguingly, the last line adds weight to the idea by identifying the heart behind such malice, which wants to '*put others down*' (15:3). We all know how easy it is to do this when we should not, but this is why the psalm challenges us. Our task is to seek to follow our Lord and God, who does not act like this. As Jesus says, like God, we are to '*love our enemies*' (Matt 5:44).

Verse 4 teaches God's people to reject '*what is vile*', but '*honour those who fear the Lord*'. The Hebrew of this verse is obscure, but at its heart, it suggests that a godly person should actively reject what God rejects, and accept anyone God accepts. Again, this sounds simple, but can be very challenging to do, which is why it is necessary and godly advice. The verse ends with a call to be consistent, but the psalm refers to the ancient practice of making 'vows' or 'swearing' on God's name in order to show intent. All that is meant here is that God wants His people to be faithful and consistent in their dealings with others.

Verse 5 is fascinating, and offers a practical example of godliness in what is one of the most contentious areas of human life and interaction, that of money. What it says raises issues that are extraordinarily pertinent to our day. It reflects the ancient Jewish law that forbids the taking of interest on loans given to fellow Jews, and also forbids what we might call 'shady

dealing', that is *'take a bribe against the innocent'*. While it is hard to equate ancient practices with modern finance, the message is obvious; God hates financial manoeuvring that oppresses the poor and benefits only those with wealth. The lessons for today are obvious.

Psalm 15 then ends with this promise, *'He who does these things will never be shaken'* (15:5). Whatever it meant to David, if we hold fast both to the moral teaching of the Old Testament and the means to live by them provided for us by Christ, then we will not suffer the trials of doubt and fear that beset so many in today's turbulent world. Many are buffeted by the storms of life and ask about the secrets of the Christian life, they want peace on earth. In truth, this psalm teaches that we will find this not only by being God's servants and followers, but by faithfully doing His will while we live. Those who stay close to their God, their Maker and Redeemer, will want to do His will and will find some measure of peace even in this world.

Discipleship

Application

Putting holiness into action

It is of course rather too simplistic to say that the path of Christian life can be made easy. However, we should not make it more complicated than it is, and practical Christian discipleship is not intended to be something done only a few special people. Remember, God does not doom people to failure, He seeks to empower people to faith.

To this end, the plain preaching of simple truths such as those found in Psalm 15 is surely a part of a preacher's task. It is also the responsibility of all God's people to hear such words and heed them. There is no part of this psalm that is not penetratingly relevant. For example, speaking the *'truth from the heart'* is not an abstract concept, it is a direct challenge, and we know when we are being truthful or lying.

Another plain requirement of Christian living is that of *'standing firm by ... oath'*, something which roughly means keeping one's word and honouring all promises. In today's world of electronic communication, I have found that many do not honour others by replying to emails or following up messages sent; it feels that for some, a message delivered electronically does not contain the force of a personal request and can be ignored if inconvenient. Of course, this does not describe everyone, but surely, God's people can aim for a higher standard of honest working relationships.

Psalm 15 asks the reader to consider where he or she stands against its plain standards of godliness. No one can stand back and claim personal purity; all should be careful and consider what is said by Psalm 15, which is God's Word to us.

Ideas for what to do

- Make a list of those things that challenge you personally within this psalm. Work out which of them is the most important, and resolve to work at them one by one. Work at them by making them a subject of prayer, and then following what you believe is the right and godly way to deal with each issue.
- Prayerfully ask the Lord to help you live a life of transparent holiness to His glory. Make this a regular prayer and be bold. The Lord wants to fulfil your heart's desire because it is His as well!

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Holiness is a contentious subject amongst some Christians. Is it possible or wise to talk of 'being holy'? How can we safeguard ourselves from the accusation of hypocrisy when pursuing holiness?
2. To what extent do you think that the instructions of Psalm 15 are common sense, and what are religious requirements?
3. Is it really possible to live up to what God requires of us? How can we make sure practically and spiritually that we live 'in the Lord's presence'.

Final Prayer

Purify my life and make me holy O Lord. Show me the path I must walk to be in Your will. Give me courage and strength for a life of holiness, O Lord; and where ignorance or blindness holds me back, set me free, and heal me in body, mind or spirit. Thanks be to God for his incredible blessings. AMEN