

## Psalm 15

A psalm of David.

<sup>1</sup> LORD, who may dwell in your sanctuary?  
Who may live on your holy mountain?

<sup>2</sup> Those whose walk is blameless,  
who do what is righteous,  
who speak the truth from their hearts;

<sup>3</sup> who have no slander on their tongues,  
who do their neighbors no wrong,  
who cast no slur on others;

<sup>4</sup> who despise those whose ways are vile  
but honor whoever fears the LORD;  
who keep their oaths even when it hurts;

<sup>5</sup> who lend money to the poor without interest  
and do not accept bribes against the innocent.  
Whoever does these things  
will never be shaken.

We are a people in Exile. Though we were born and raised in this world, each one of us who follows Christ knows in our heart that this world is not our home. As aliens and strangers to this world, we will often be disoriented. Some of us will try to locate ourselves in what we do: we are accountants, we are mothers, we are health care workers, we are pastors. Some of us will try to locate ourselves in what we have: cars, houses, clothes, bank accounts—even a good reputation. Yet the call of this hymn today is to remind us of where we truly can orient ourselves: as the exiled community of God living this life, but waiting for real fulfillment in the next.

Scholars believe that many of the Psalms were gathered and organized after Israel's monarchic period, while the people were exiled to Assyria and Babylon. Although Psalm 15 is attributed to David, there is a good chance that this song was reinterpreted in light of Israel's internment in foreign lands. We who live in a society where people move from one country to the next with relative ease don't think much about this, but for a nation of farmers, the loss of connection with the land was a deep wound for the people. Add to this Israel's belief that Canaan was given to them by Yahweh, and you now have a people who are dealing not only with geographical disorientation, but with feelings of spiritual abandonment.

The question that Psalm 15 begins with is one of place: *"now that we are strangers in a strange land, we remember the hill upon which we worshipped. We remember the Temple that has been torn down. Now, if we cannot go to these places and be defined by where we worship, how can we be called the people of God?"* A people in exile ask: who are we if we are not sons and daughters of Israel *in* Israel?

Psalm 15 asks what we all have asked at one time or another: Who *really* is one who is a part of Yahweh's people? We see celebrities clutching Bibles on their way out of prison and think "is she really a follower of Christ?" We have colleagues who faithfully attend church but tell racist or sexist jokes in the lunchroom. We have people who dutifully tithe ten percent of their gross income, but who wouldn't lift a finger to help a man get some bread.

Our bewilderment is not new, for as much as we are a people in exile from our culture, Israel asks the same question here: are we who no longer can go to the

mountain or worship in the Temple truly God's people? As if to accentuate the feeling of being displaced and in exile, the psalmist uses the Hebrew word "guhr", which is translated by the NIV as to "dwell." However, the root meaning of "guhr" is not just to dwell, but to sojourn in a land as a stranger. In the Ancient Near East, one who sojourned was one who was completely dependent on the hospitality of the host. A sojourner was a stranger who was welcomed into the land. It is as though the Psalmist is asking "who among us strangers can enjoy the hospitality of God?"

The answer is swift: the walkers, the doers, the speakers—those are the people who may enter the sanctuary and worship on the mountain. In Hebrew, each of these actions is presented as a participle. That is, they are constant, continuing actions. Those who are walking blamelessly, those who are doing what is righteous, those who are speaking the truth from their hearts—these are the ones who are the true worshippers of Yahweh. It is not just a show when the cameras are on and everyone's looking, but the acts of walking, doing, and speaking are constant because they are consistent with the character of the person performing them.

By now, many of you might be tired of how we seem to repeat that the heart is what God is concerned with. However, we have emphasized the inner self because the paradigm we work from is that truly being a follower of Christ means first being transformed from within and then having that change speak of itself in transformed lifestyles. Many of us get it wrong. We often think taking on a transformed lifestyle is what will please God. Yet while our hearts are still corrupt, what point is there in taking on practices that are just shallow attempts at self-justification?

Though our inner lives are where we begin, we need to keep this in tension with the idea that “faith without deeds is dead.”<sup>1</sup> This is the Psalmist’s point: that those walkers, doers and speakers are walking, doing, and speaking out of who they already are before God—hence the emphasis on integrity in speaking “from the heart.” There is no deception here. No hypocrisy. No attempts to make ourselves look love-worthy or admirable. Those who may enjoy the hospitality of God are those who simply act as they are becoming; who live out their inner transformation.

What follows in vv. 3-5 is an expansion. Once again we may ask, “who is a right worshipper of Yahweh now that we are in exile?” The answer is “those who live in communities predicated on honesty and justice.” The ones who can be identified as Yahweh’s people in exile are those who love their neighbour, for the love of God is made evident in how we love each other.

We had started out asking “who worships rightly?”, but this unexpected answer turns us away from huddling in the Temple or on the mountain and forces us to face each other. It is not only a psalm of worship as though worship were just the twenty minutes we sing before the sermon. It is a psalm that bids us pay attention to the fact that acceptable worship of God is expressed in the quality of our lives with each other and with the world. Reverence of God leads to living reverently with our neighbours.

It is easy to get lost in the hundreds of little ethical decisions we make every day. Will we buy clothing from companies that have unjust labour practices? Will we spank

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<sup>1</sup> James 2:26

our children? Will we crank up the central heating and further global warming? We are under constant strain to do right by our neighbour for the love of God. While it is true that we are justified by faith alone<sup>2</sup>, how does our faith work out in our lives together?

Individualism is often seen as a virtue in Western countries. We idolize those who flip off the establishment and go against the grain. However, even as the exaltation of the individual can be a powerful catalyst for change, we often forget that individualism when it comes to faith is often disastrous. We live in an increasingly consumerist culture that picks and chooses what it likes from different local churches. We prefer music in this church or the teaching in that church or the small groups in another; all the while ignoring the reality that we are shaping the Church in our image instead of allowing one group of Spirit-filled people to form and love us. The real community of God is not what we make it to suit our tastes; it is what the Spirit of God is making it, according to God's desire for his people in that place. The community of God is not invited to a buffet, but to a feast that has been prepared by the host.

If we truly desire to follow Jesus, we cannot submit to the lure of a shopping cart religion. If we want to embrace Christ, we must learn to embrace the Church—something that many cannot do because *their* judgmental spirit tells them that Christ could never love such a backward and narrow minded people. Yet Jesus loves the Church because it is his Bride.<sup>3</sup> If we would be like Jesus, we too must learn to love His Bride. St. Cyprian of Carthage once said that *"No one can have God as their Father*

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<sup>2</sup> Rom 3:27-28

<sup>3</sup> Eph 5:22-23, Rev 21:9-10

*unless they have the Church as their Mother.*” Yet we are not just speaking of some theological fantasy church that comes out of textbooks. In order to be lovers of Jesus, we must learn to embrace his wounded Body, the same one that struggles together in living out inner transformation.

We might have illusions about the Church— that it is some fairy-tale community holding hands and singing kumbayah—but the sooner we are rid of these rose-coloured glasses the better. For as any married person will tell you, real love is not in how you look and behave on your wedding day, but the test of love is at six in the morning with sweatpants and bad breath. The work of the people of God is that we are to be lovers, but not just lovers of diffuse emotion, but lovers of people: the wretched, the poor in spirit, the forgiven sinners that are sitting with us.

The Psalmist asks how we might determine who the people of God are now that we are in exile. The answer comes to us as we turn and face each other. Though we are saved individually, we are transformed corporately. As each one of us learns to listen to and obey the voice of Jesus, we are turned away from mere private piety into becoming the people that God is making for himself. The Church is not a consumerist option, but is the wounded, exiled Body of Christ trying to work it out together. And that is how we can tell who the people of God in exile are: those who live in communities of honesty and integrity before God and before each other.

- 1.) How does being exiled inform your lifestyle?
- 2.) What does a loving community look like? How can you love someone today?