

West Van Baptist, August 16
Summer Psalms: The Place Where Worshippers Live
Psalm 15

I. Songs that stick in your head

Forty-one years ago this week, Diane and I had to work through our first conflict as a newly married couple. It was a conflict over music.

Before we married, I used a stereo for my alarm clock. I liked to wake up to music. It wasn't as annoying as a "beep, beep, beep!" next to my head, and I didn't worry about turning it off and falling back to sleep. So ... for our first morning back to work after our honeymoon, I set the stereo to play a nice, gentle sound track that began with quiet bells then added violin and vocals.

I thought it was a good idea. Diane didn't. She sat up with a puzzled look and said, "What??!! What on earth is that noise?!" It turns out she hates waking up to music. She complains that the song sticks in her head all day, driving her crazy. So I quickly learned that we would need to use a "beep, beep, beep!" alarm clock. (I also learned the value of listening to my wife.)

Diane has a point. Music does stick in your head, doesn't it? You hear a catchy song in the car or in a store, and for the rest of the day you find yourself humming it. Of course, that can be pleasant if you like the song and its message. It's not so good if you find yourself singing words that are embarrassing or inappropriate.

Advertisers understand this, and they put it to good use. I can still remember jingles from commercials for carpet stores, types of gum, and A&W root beer from when I was a teenager.

Educators understand it, too, and they often use music to teach. Many of us can still sing the "ABC" song from grade 1. Diane used this with our own kids; she made up a song to help them remember our phone number when they started school. Songs help us to learn and remember.

So if I tell you there are educational songs in the Bible, it shouldn't be a surprise. Why wouldn't God's Word use music to help His people learn and remember? You and I may not notice this, because the Bible doesn't come with a sound-track, and it's poetry is harder to see because of translation. But if you're looking for them, you can find educational songs in the Psalms and all the way through Scripture.

This summer we've talked about how the Bible's psalms come in different flavors and styles. Some are happy, some are sad; some call for loud public worship and some are for private prayer; some shout praise and some cry for help. So far we haven't said much about "educational" or "instructional" psalms—the ones designed primarily to teach us. Yet there are quite a few of these. (By my count, at least 1 of every 10 of the Psalms.) The longest psalm, Psalm 119, is a good example. So is the short psalm we're considering today: Psalm 15.

II. Instruction and worship

Did you notice: Psalm 15 doesn't contain a single "Praise the Lord!" or "Shout joyfully to God!" This surprises some people. We think of the Psalms as a book of worship, and we expect to find shouts of thanksgiving and praise in every song. Those are the lines we quote most often in church. So what do we do with songs like this, which are filled with instruction but no "Hallelujah's"?

To get the most out of instructional psalms, we need to take a step back and think about what worship actually is.

We gather to worship every week. Hopefully we all take time to worship every day. But what is worship at the heart—at the very core? It's not singing or playing music. We do worship by singing, but the two aren't identical. It's not shouting praise or thanks, though these are also parts of worship. It isn't defined by whether you stand or sit or kneel, whether your hands are up or down, whether you're alone or in church, or by what you feel. All these things can be parts and expressions of worship, but none of them define what worship actually *is*.

Here's my favorite definition. ***Worship is an appropriate response to who God is and what He does.*** That response may take many forms, but it is *the response* that lies at the heart of worship.

Most of human life is responding: to circumstances, other people, to God and His work. We like to think of ourselves as creating and initiating, making things happen and controlling our destinies. In a small sense we do, because God has made us in His image. But really, we're tiny creatures swept along by factors much bigger than us, all created by a God far greater and stronger and wiser. So we spend much of our time responding.

When we worship, we embrace this fact. We acknowledge that God is greater than we are. He is the light and we are the reflection; He is the original and we are the image. He leads and we follow. This is why the ability to worship separates those who love God from those who reject Him. You can't walk with God without being willing to *respond* to Him; and if you try to ignore God or to put yourself in His place, as Adam and Eve did when they first sinned, you become unable to worship.

Worship is an **appropriate response**. It fits the situation correctly.

Some responses aren't appropriate. When I meet a couple with a newborn baby, it's not appropriate for me to respond with "Ugh, what an ugly child." When I take a walk in the forest, it's not appropriate to think to myself, "Hey, what a great place to dump my garbage." When I see the glory and majesty of creation all around me, it's not appropriate to respond: "Who cares? I'm the only thing that's important here."

This isn't just cultural sensitivity, though that's important. We all have a fundamental, God-given, inborn sense of the way things ought to be. We just know that if there really is a God who made us, who loves us and who is the source of our life, then we ought to respond to Him in some ways and not in others. A right response will involve amazement, appreciation, thankfulness, trust, obedience, and delight. And song, and praise!

Notice that worship is an appropriate response **to who God is and what He does**. Worship is a response to truth! Sometimes people treat worship and learning as though they were opposites: as

if worship is a wonderful feeling while learning is a dull exercise of cramming facts into your head. That's not how the Bible sees things. Biblical worship is a response to truth about God. Because of who He is and what He does, it is right for us to respond with praise and adoration and joy.

This is why we have instructional psalms. Instructional psalms are not worship-less. They are an important form of worship, and they help us to understand what we're doing when we worship. They help us to see that even those "Praise the Lord!" psalms are full of truth about God, with invitations to respond well.

Psalm 15 doesn't invite us to shout and blow trumpets. It's an instructional psalm. But it has important lessons for us about what worship is, and how we can worship God in a way that is truly pleasing to Him.

III. A quick overview

Let's take a quick look at Psalm 15. It's only 5 verses long, so we can easily get a sense of the whole song.

(1) It begins with a question: *Lord, who may dwell in Your sacred tent? Who may live on Your holy mountain?* In other words, who can live in God's presence?

In David's day, people who wanted to meet God went to the tabernacle in Jerusalem. So in a sense this psalm asks what kind of person is welcome to come and worship at the alter in the holy city.

But God's presence isn't limited to a little tent. So really the question is much larger. Psalm 15 invites us to ask ourselves: what kind of person can live where God lives? What kind of person would God welcome into heaven, to spend eternity with Him?

(2) The psalm answers:

- God welcomes *the one whose walk is **blameless**, who does what is **righteous*** (2).

The answer begins with a general summary statement of what a person should, and should not be like. We should be "blameless," avoiding things that offend our Lord, free from sin and wrong-doing. And we're called to be "righteous," living in line with His standards and expectations.

This sounds simple, but it sets an incredibly high standard. If this was the only thing the Bible said about what God wants from us, it would be very bad news, because we all fall short of this calling. Fortunately, this psalm doesn't tell the whole story. The Bible also reminds us that God loves us in spite of our sin, that He is gracious and forgiving, and that He can and will transform us if we allow Him to have His way. Still, we need to see how high the bar is set.

- More specifically, the person God welcomes is one **who lives in right relationship with others**—*who speaks the truth from their heart; whose tongue utters no slander, who does no wrong to a neighbor, and casts no slur on others* (2-3).

God made human beings in His image. Among other things this means that the way we treat each other is a reflection of our attitude toward Him. As 1 John 4:20 reminds us, it makes no sense to talk about loving God, whom we have never seen with our eyes, if we don't show love to the people around us who we can see and touch.

Obviously, if we keep the Lord's command to love those around us, then we will "do no wrong" to our neighbors. This applies to every part of life and every way we interact with each other. I find it interesting that of the 4 lines in this part of the psalm, 3 have to do with the way we speak, perhaps because the easiest way to hurt other people, and the most common, is by our speech. So we're told that a blameless, righteous person speaks the truth. He understands that God hates all lies—even those so-called "little white lies"—because every lie harms our relationships. Such a person does not slander and "casts no slur" (another translation says, "does not take up a reproach") against others. He doesn't hurt people directly by what he says to them, and he doesn't injure them indirectly by listening to gossip or passing it along.

- The person God welcomes **has her values in the right place**. She *despises a vile person, but honors those who fear the Lord* (4).

One of the ways we show our values is in the things, and the people, we praise and admire. Who gets our "Two thumbs up; that person really impresses me"? Sadly, people sometimes admire individuals who are terrible examples, whose character is awful. They look at so-and-so, who has a lot of money, or who is smart and highly educated, or who is athletic or really good-looking, and they have strong words of praise, even though that same so-and-so is openly selfish and deceitful and unkind and ungodly. They choose to overlook the character problems, showing that what they really value are not the qualities God values.

Psalm 15 describes a better way. The blameless, righteous person admires those who are good and godly. She is not unkind to those with openly evil character (because she does no harm to a neighbor), but she recognizes and treats them as bad examples.

- The person God welcomes is also **reliable and faithful**. Such a one *keeps an oath even when it hurts, and does not change their mind* (4). This goes beyond speaking the truth. It means keeping one's promises and commitments, not only when it's easy and convenient, but even when it comes at a personal cost.
- And finally, the person God welcomes is **generous, compassionate, and committed to justice**—one *who lends money to the poor without interest; who does not accept a bribe against the innocent* (5).

In the ancient world, it was not uncommon for poor people to find themselves needing to borrow money in order to buy food and other necessities. The rich person who had no such need could offer loans at extremely high interest rates, becoming even richer while the poor went further and further into debt. Such loans were not helping anyone; they were oppressive, so they were forbidden by the Old Testament Law. The Law also condemned all favoritism in the legal and political system, which gave preference to those who could pay bribes instead of doing what was right.

The person God welcomes isn't just careful to avoid hurting others. He has a heart to care for the needy, and to treat everyone with fairness.

That's the kind of person God welcomes. But don't miss this point. If you know your Bible, you'll immediately see that all these qualities are qualities in God Himself. God is blameless and righteous, free from sin, instinctively doing what is good. God always speaks the truth, His words to us are always helpful and life-giving, and—though we don't always fully understand His ways—He never wrongs anyone. God values what is good; He approves of those who are good and is not impressed by a person whose life and character are evil.

God keeps all His promises. He keeps them even when it costs Him. Remember, God's promise to bring forgiveness and healing and salvation to our world was fulfilled at the greatest cost, by sending His Son who gave His life for us. And from one end of the Bible to the other, we read that God is generous, compassionate, and just, caring for the needy and never showing favoritism to those who are rich or powerful.

Why do we need to grow in the qualities described in Psalm 15? Because this is what God is like. If we want to live with Him, our character needs to be compatible with His.

(3) Finally Psalm 15 ends with a promise: *Whoever does these things will never be shaken* (5).

Have you ever climbed to the top of a shaky ladder? It feels unsafe, as though you could come crashing down at any moment. It's even worse to find yourself in a shaky building. And it's frustrating as well as scary to try to walk on shaky legs after a surgery.

Psalm 15 tells us that there is safety in godly character. When we live in harmony with our Lord, we don't need to be afraid that He will suddenly reject us or let us come to ultimate harm. He is truthful, kind, faithful, generous, and just. He will be a source of help and comfort and safety for those who worship Him.

IV. Making this relevant for us

Psalm 15 is very practical. But if you have trouble remembering all those points, let me suggest 2 "big ideas" that can help us to live out the message of this psalm.

(1) Use Psalm 15 as a heart-check

Whenever the Bible gives us a list of things we should and should not do, there's always a risk that we'll turn it into something legalistic. "Do these 10 things and you'll get into heaven; miss one of them and that's it, you're out!"

It's an easy mistake to make. But it's not how biblical faith works.

The Bible has many lists of do's and don'ts, yet they're not all the same. And if you try to mix them together, you end up with a list that's far too big to be useful. Besides, the Bible consistently tells us that what God really cares about is a person's heart. The Old Testament Law ends with a call to "circumcise your hearts" (Deut 30:6). God tells the prophet Samuel, "I look at a person's heart" (1

Sam 16:7). Jesus teaches that the evil and good we do flow out from our hearts (Mat 15:19-20). And Paul insists that the gospel isn't about rules, it's about faith, love, and obedience from the heart.

Those lists are helpful tools. They teach us what God is like, and what kind of people we should be if we want to walk with Him. But the lists are like a blood pressure monitor. They're not an end in themselves. They are designed to help us check to see that our hearts are healthy.

It's good to read Psalm 15 and do a point-by-point check. If the Spirit convicts you for not speaking the truth, or for gossiping, or not keeping a promise, by all means make it right! These things are important.

But don't get lost in the details of the list. Let the psalm be a tool to help you check the health of your heart. Let it prompt bigger questions. *What kind of person* can live in God's house? *Am I* that kind of person? Do I *want to be* that kind of person? Where do I most need to grow to be more like God, more ready to live with Him? Then let it be a good motivator to pray and invite His Spirit to work in your heart, shaping you into the person He wants you to be.

(2) Let Psalm 15 expand your view of worship

Generally Christians enjoy worship, and we want to grow as worshippers. We recognize that God deserves our praise. We discover that it is good, and satisfying, and delightful to lift Him up both individually and together. And we want to be worshippers because we look forward to spending eternity with our Lord—and we understand that heaven is a place filled with worship. Heaven is the place worshippers live. We want to fit in there.

Instructional psalms like Psalm 15 help us to understand that worship is more than singing, kneeling, lifting hands, or holding a church service. At the core, *worship is an appropriate response to who God is and what He does*. We also worship when we speak the truth, avoid slander and gossip, show kindness to neighbors, honor the godly, keep our promises, help the needy, and live honestly. Whenever we live right because we understand who God is, we worship.

So, when you read passages like Psalm 15, which talk about what God wants from us, don't take them as a threat or some troublesome hoop you have to jump through to be a Christian. The psalm asks: "Who can live with God?" In the process, it's also asking: "What does it mean to worship?" How do we respond appropriately to our Lord's nature and work? This psalm is an invitation to worship God with all of our lives, not just in song on Sunday morning, but in every word and act, every day. And it is an invitation to let our lives today be a foretaste of what heaven will be.

Heaven is where worshippers live. The better we learn to worship right here, right now—with all of our lives—the more prepared we are for heaven, and the more we get to taste heaven here on earth. That's worth working on this week!

V. A bus ride to heaven?

As many of you know, our church has a book club which has been reading various books by C.S. Lewis. This year we studied one of my favorites: *The Great Divorce*. It's a work of fiction, but it has some great insights.

The Great Divorce is about a group of people who take a bus ride from hell to heaven. (I said it was a fiction book!) One day a bus arrives on a street in hell, and this group climbs on board for the trip up to God's country. That's a surprise. When they arrive, we get an even bigger surprise: all but one member of the group hate heaven. They hate it so much that they get back on the bus and ride back down to hell.

Why would anyone hate heaven? Simple: they don't fit in.

Some of the people like to be in control. When they find out they're not in control in heaven, they're disappointed. Some are unforgiving; and when they learn that God loves, forgives, and welcomes people they hate, they don't want to stay around. Some are proud, and completely upset when they learn how little and unimportant they are in God's country. Some are liars. They've spent a lifetime deceiving themselves and others about how things really are. But in heaven, God's bright light shines on everything, showing what is really true, which makes them feel naked and embarrassed.

You get the picture. These people have lived without God. Now, confronted by what God is really like and what it means to live with Him, they're unhappy. Their hearts are dark, and they're unable to respond appropriately to who God is and what God does. Put another way: they do not have the ability to worship. So instead of being delighted by heaven, they hate it. It's too big, too bright, too real, and they'd rather live in hell than learn to worship the Lord who is greater than they are.

It's a fiction story. I don't believe there are any busses that run between heaven and hell. Neither did C.S. Lewis. But Lewis studied the Bible, and he helps us to appreciate an important part of the Bible's message. Heaven is a place where worshippers live. *Who can dwell in God's sacred tent? Who can live on His holy mountain?* Those who respond appropriately to who He is and what He does.

God is amazingly gracious. He can forgive our sins, and cleanse us from our failures. He can give us a brand new start and help us to grow into the kind of people we could never be on our own. He can make it possible for us to live with Him. That's what He wants to do. That's why Jesus gave His life for us.

But grace doesn't change who God is. He is holy, truthful, kind, faithful, generous, and just. If we want to live in His house, we need to let Him shape us into worshippers who are also holy, truthful, kind, faithful, generous and just.

So we need the message of Psalm 15. May God use this wonderful song, and the rest of His wonderful Word, to help us grow as worshippers. As we do, we will experience the joy of heaven, and we will never be shaken.

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Lord, what kind of person can live with You
in the place where Your holiness and glory are clearly revealed?

The person who lives blamelessly, who does what is right in Your eyes.

That person speaks the truth from the heart,
They don't slander or harm others or listen to and repeat gossip.
They honor people who are like You, not those who live evil lives.
They faithfully keep their promises even when it's hard.
They help the needy rather than taking advantage of them,
And care more about justice than personal gain.

People who are like that will confidently live with You forever.