

Integrity

Psalm 15

Third of series: Developing Mature Character in the Psalmic School of Prayer

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Let us bow in prayer. In this place, in our hearts, in our relationships, Lord, may you sweep us clean by the power of the Word that you speak to us from ancient times. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Today we look at the question that's asked in the Psalms about integrity. To bring some integrity to our worship pattern on a snow and icy day, we normally have three hours of worship. We have three services – each an hour. I suggest we consider continuing the integrity of three hours of worship today! I didn't hear much of a laugh on that.

But on the way, I wonder how many of us lost our integrity as we drove today? Did you lose your sanctification? Did you lose your salvation as you were driving these roads, and you almost came in contact with somebody you haven't met before?

Friday night I was driving home after a wonderful day here at the church, when I got to the place where I was staying, and I discovered I did not have the key. There was no one home. My daughter, who is normally there with me, was not home – she had driven to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. I was outside in the cold without a key and no way to get in.

It was freezing outside, and I was beginning to lose my integrity. I wondered what I should do. Those are the moments when we tend to lose our integrity, by the way... when we are in hyper- stress... when things are not going well. I started to blame myself, I even had a moment when I blamed my daughter, and I blamed God. What happened to that key? I always have it in my pocket. I decided to go to a movie and in the movie – after being in 10 degree wind chill – it was 87 degrees in the theater! I lost my integrity again.

I believe that this is a metaphor for the psalm that God has given to me through pain and wrestling – and that is, there needs to be a key to getting in God's house. And the key is integrity.

We have lost the key. We lose our integrity and our sanctification on a regular basis. So if we are not people of integrity, and we are not people without sin, then how do we get into God's house according to Psalm 15? I believe it's because of what happened the other night that I have a clear understanding of that: I had to call the owner of the house and she let me in. We have to call upon the owner of the house and God lets us in. It is not our integrity that brings us to this place today. It is God's integrity in Jesus Christ.

This is a psalm that seemingly does not say that, but when we look underneath it, it is the only conclusion we can come to. Another translation says this:

Yahweh, who shall be a guest in your home? Who may dwell in the Holy Place with you? He who walks with integrity and practices justice and speaks the truth from his heart. She who does not trip over her tongue; who does no wrong to friends and who casts no slur on neighbors. He who rejects the evil person from his presence but invites the God-fearer to dinner; he who swears to do no wrong and does not waver from that. She who does not charge interest to the poor; that is literally, does not 'take a bite' out of the poor. She who does not take bribes from the hungry or the innocent. These who do these things will never be shaken, on the solid rock of God's foundation.

There are temptations to misuse this psalm. We may be tempted to avoid using Psalm 15 at all because it doesn't fit into our nice, packaged Reformed theology. It seems to be very "works- oriented." It suggests that one has to be morally perfect before one can come into the church; and we know that's not true.

We may be tempted to misuse this psalm by reducing it and only using the verses that fit us at the right time – that those moral boundaries really don't apply to us and therefore, we don't have to worry about it. We might even be tempted to supplant it with New Testament 'Jesus-centered' theology and say, "Well, that psalm no longer works because Jesus has come and that psalm is no longer relevant to the faith." Walter Brueggemann in his book, *Praying the Psalms*, says: "Let us beware that we do not reject Jewish psalms because they don't sound very Christian." This psalm doesn't sound very Christian.

The Hebrew word for integrity is the word: tom. If anybody here is named "Tom," you have the name "Integrity." It is the kind of thing that was worn on the ceremonial breastplate of the high priest – the thuman... the tamen... close to the heart – a list of things that you needed to do in order to have integrity with God and with each other. These listings of perfections and integrities required perfection. And of course, the high priest wasn't perfect. And since there was no perfection, there had to be sacrifice to build a relationship with God, to bring God's integrity into their lives.

This word is used in Genesis 20 in the context where Abraham and Sarah do not tell the truth to Abimelech, King of Gerar. Abraham says, "She's my sister." and Sarah says, "He's my brother." And Abimelech says, "I want her to be my wife." And God shows up to Abimelech's life and says: "Abimelech, you take this woman... she's another man's wife... I'm going to wipe you and your people out." And Abimelech's response has this word integrity in it: "Lord, will you kill a righteous people? Abraham said to me, 'She is my sister,' and Sarah even said 'He is my brother.' In the integrity of my heart and innocence of my hands, I have done this thing."

Integrity – the belief to do what is right, as best one can see it. In Webster's International Dictionary, integrity is summarized this way: an uncompromising adherence to a code of moral or artistic values.

Integrity is consistent with the value system's source. Where do you get your values with which to have integrity? Is it your own value system that you've decided and created on your own? That you have pretty much decided that these are the values I will live by, and therefore I will build my integrity around myself. That's the American pattern of life.

Or maybe it's your family values. Maybe it's your corporate values. Maybe it's the values of the town that you grew up in. You'll have integrity because you live into those values. But this scripture is very clear, along with others, that integrity for the people of God comes from one center set and source: it is the presence of Almighty God who brings the core values to which we will have integrity.

The third temptation: What I believe has nothing to do with what I do. This is often found in research done on Christians in America – that there is little connection between what we believe and what we practice.

The fourth temptation: Well, I'm a good person. I don't need to have faith in God to have integrity. I have faith in myself. Where do you find your center of integrity? You cannot have integrity unless you define it in correspondence with a source of integrity. Integrity in saying what is true, and doing what we say; saying what we mean and meaning what we say. Keeping our promises and our vows. On what basis are you doing that today? On what basis do I preach, and try to live up to my own preaching?

As Bill Heybels, pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, says, "Who are you when no one else is looking?" Integrity is being the person in private that is consistent with the person that is in public. Integrity is living a life consistent with a set of beliefs and values that are centered in the Living God – thought, word and action. The public and the private worlds are held in correspondent alignment so that we have integrity in all places.

Integrity covers everything in our lives – it's all connected... it's correlated... it's concurrent... it's aligned. And if it's not aligned or if it's out-of-line, we are recognizing our sinfulness and we do not have integrity.

It's not just personal; it's also communal. If our relationships are not in line with God's value system and God's presence, then we do not have integrity in our community. It's fascinating – there are two interpretations that are classically used for this psalm. One has to do with: it is the psalm used as people

come into worship – it's the "entrance psalm." It's the list of qualifications for those who can get in. It's the key that unlocks the door.

Another interpretation is: this is the psalm that's sung in the middle of worship and it is to teach people about what it means to become people of integrity. It's a listing that's symbolic, a representative of a greater listing of things that are right to do.

No matter which one we assume, this psalm is connected to worship. It is not a psalm that is to teach us primarily about the list of rights and wrongs. It is a psalm that invites us, in worship, to allow God to make us people of integrity. James May, in his Old Testament commentary on Psalms, says this: This psalm is liturgy – it's not law. It is not a text for some sort of judicial procedure to exclude the unqualified. Rather, it is a rehearsal of a purpose and a possibility. This kind of person says that the psalm is what the Presence intends. This Presence is the power that makes this kind of person possible. The Presence calls, and commands, judges and redeems.

To be in the place of the Presence means: to be at a point where the purpose and power of God can come to bear on a person's identity and formation. We are formed in worship into the character of the Living God, whom we worship.

There's a second aspect of this psalm that is also a part of its interpretation. There is a list of ten dimensions of ethical responsibility here. There are five positive and five negative. In Scripture, particularly in the Old Testament, the number ten means "community" – that this psalm is actively experienced in Christian, faith-based community. It is in worship we experience it. It is in the gathering of the people of God that we experience it. It's a poetic symbol, but it cuts to the quick of how we get integrity: because we worship, and because we live in accountability and affirmation with one another in Christian relationships.

The ten points go a little bit like this: walk with integrity; do right; speak the truth; don't lie; don't do evil; and don't attack anybody. Despise people who do evil, but be with those who swear to do good. Don't give in to usury or bribery, particularly when it relates to the poor. It's not a moral directive -- that you will, from God's perspective, expect exact moral obedience. It is a picture of a balanced life in the presence of God. Life ethics are brought into alignment with the very character of God, as we worship and as we live in Christian community.

In worship and community, God helps us to become the people that we can become if we are influenced and formed by the very presence of God. We can't do it on our own. Liturgy is about how our worship is connected to our work – the integration of worship and work. Who we are on Sunday and what we experience here should lead us to become a different kind of people on Monday. If there is a dis-connect, we are failing to fulfill what we experience in worship.

There is a connection between the temple and our conduct... between worship and life... between sanctuary and sanctification... between the Holy Place and the righteous people... between the Psalms and the Prophets... between justification and justice... between what happens on Sunday and what happens on Monday... between what happens at the Sabbath and what happens when we work. There is always, out of the presence of God, a commitment to persevere and do things of integrity.

Isaiah 6 is an example of this moment, when Isaiah is in the midst of God's presence and he sees God high and lifted up, and he cries, "Holy, holy, holy." And he hears that cry from the angels gathered. But he says to himself, "Woe is me. I am lost. I am a man of unclean lips. I live among a people of unclean lips." "I have no integrity," Isaiah says. And what do we do in worship every Sunday? When come into the presence of God and we cry, "Holy, holy," the very next thing we do is confess our sin because we realize in that moment that we are people without integrity: "Here I am, Lord. I'm a person of brokenness and sinfulness. I have no integrity."

And God brings a hot coal and places it on the lips of Isaiah and says, "Your sin is forgiven." In worship, we pronounce that Jesus Christ has given us the power to experience the forgiveness of sin, because Jesus has paid the price. In our Reformed order of worship, adoration always leads to confession. And after we

confess our sins, we listen to God's Word because in worship, the liturgy leads us to confess and to receive what God has for us to hear.

It's all done in mutual community. Worship without community is a dangerous thing. Now I'm liable to rub a few people the wrong way right now – if you worship regularly and you have no Christian community – beware. If you have Christian community and you don't worship regularly – beware. If there's anything this psalm ties together, it's the communal/ethical responsibility with the event of worship. It is important that we have a group of people with whom, among whom, we can live life, they can see our life, they can hold us accountable... they can give us affirmation... they can hear our confession of prayer. And they can act in forgiveness and help us live well.

Parents: when we baptize children in worship, it is an affirmation of this psalm – that the integrity that you don't have in raising your children can be remedied by the presence of a powerful God who loves you. Do not expect that your children will grow up with integrity just because they get your value system. No—today we declare that they grow up with integrity because they will receive God's value system.

Our National Presbyterian Church says that we are “a ministry of grace.” We have declared that we want to have integrity with that statement – that what we do needs to be gracious and kind. I had someone tell me the other day that they came to visit this church last summer. They came to the first service, went downstairs to Stone Hall, and not one person talked to them. Not one person recognized them. Not one person paid attention to them. He said, “What happened to the ministry of grace? I felt shut out.”

Now, that's the contrast with the dozens of people who are greeted... who are cared for... who are treated with grace when they come. But when we go downstairs to Stone Hall today, our ministry of grace must have integrity with our actions – because God is in them.

We list the staff in the bulletin today. That's a point of accountability because we, as staff, need to be held to the pattern of a ministry of grace in our relationships, in our actions and in our service, along with officers of the church. If we are not gracious in our actions, then the community needs to say: “that's not right.”

Psalm 15's structure is a question, and an answer, and a promise. It moves from the general to the specific. And it's interesting to note, the specifics get very personal: how do you relate to your money? The psalm ends with financial values. It ends on a specific focus: that our finances need to have integrity and be connected to what God is doing, especially with the poor. And that's where we have accountability. When God is present, we are being invited to become like God, who cares for the poor; like God, who is abundantly generous and kind and gracious.

God is developing in us hearts of generosity. And in the Old Testament pattern, a heart of generosity just started at 10% of their giving. It went on to 20%, 25%, 30% of their giving, and then generosity was on top of that. In America we have a long ways to go to become a generous people with integrity.

Law says become the person of integrity before you walk through the door. But the love of God says: you will never be an integrity person before you walk through the door. I will, through Jesus Christ, make you a person of integrity when you worship me and you are formed in community and discipleship with me.

Everything counts. The summary of this action of God changing us to become people of integrity is that we can never muster and complete and perfect our own integrity. Being in God's presence in worship and community empowers us to be people that are different – with different value systems. Jesus, by the power of the Spirit, shows us, leads us, and lives in us... changes us to become people who have His integrity. Worship and discipleship are intimately inter-connected. They have integrity with each other. To be in worship without discipleship is not a point of integrity.

Hear the question: Who can be in God's house? Only those who have integrity. And who has integrity? None of us; only Jesus Christ.

I come back to my opening metaphor: if you are locked out of this house... you do not have the integrity to

get in, who's got the key? Only the Living God who is present here when you enter, who has given to us Jesus Christ, who has the keys of the kingdom of heaven... who has given to us the keys, because God is present and can change our lives. We don't have to be locked out of integrity. God has included us in, through Jesus Christ, to become people who do the right thing, who live by God's value system because we are in God's presence in worship and we are in God's presence in community.

May our Lord Jesus Christ help us to be in worship and be in community, and to have our integrity transformed because of who we are in relationship to Jesus Christ. Amen.