

CITY LIMITS

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Psalm 15

When I was young, I was a Boy Scout. I was a member of Troop 2 in Mobile, Alabama. We met in the basement of the Presbyterian church—Government Street Presbyterian Church in downtown Mobile.

One thing about Boy Scouts is that they have a lot of rules. And that is a good thing. These rules differentiate the scouts from boys that are not scouts. So, what is a Boy Scout? That is easy. The scout is described in the Scout Law which every scout must memorize and recite at every troop meeting. The Scout Law has twelve points. It goes like this: “A Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent.”

There are other sayings and practices that help scouts apply the Law in their daily lives. One of these is the well-known slogan “do a good turn daily.”

My personal favorite, however, is a saying that is not an official saying but is part of scout lore. It's handed down from boy to boy. And as this rule commands, a scout is to “Leave a place better than you found it.” This rule appears to be based on a statement by Robert Baden-Powell, scouting's founder. His full quote goes like this, “Try and leave this world a little better than you found it, and when your turn comes to die, you can die happy in feeling that at any rate, you have not wasted your time but have done your best.”

Scouts normally learn this rule when they are camping. Say the troop has gone camping for the weekend. It is Sunday and time to break camp. The tents are rolled and the gear is stored. The last thing to do is to police the campsite for litter. Invariably, something will be overlooked, and the scoutmaster may point to the ground and instruct a boy to “pick up that gum wrapper.” An experienced scout will quietly follow the command. A less-experienced scout is likely to say something foolish. They may object and argue that “the gum wrapper was there when we got here.” At this point, the other scouts know to back away out of the blast zone that is going to occur when the scoutmaster explains that scouts are to leave a place better than they found it. That means picking up other people's litter.

As I got older, I came to understand that this rule applied to more than just camp sites, it applies to everything we may do. Imagine if everyone made the effort and just did something small to leave each place better than they found it.

It is living by these rules that differentiates scouts from non-scouts.

The purpose of today's scripture reading is to differentiate the faithful from the non-faithful. To do so, Psalm 15 begins with a question. Actually, it is a pair of questions, but since this is Hebrew poetry, the second question parallels the first. The question is this, *O Lord, who may abide in your tent?* When we think of God and tents we should think of the tabernacle—the great tent that housed the ark of the covenant as the Israelites journeyed across the wilderness. The ark was God's throne; the tabernacle God's house. So, the question raised by the psalm is, *Who may abide in God's tabernacle?* The word abide might be better translated as sojourn. To sojourn means “to stay somewhere temporarily.” *Who may reside temporarily in God's tabernacle?* The tabernacle is God's house. No one lives there but God. *Who, however, is allowed to stay as a guest in God's house?* That is the opening question.

The parallel of this question is the second line of the psalm, *Who may dwell on your holy hill?* The word for dwell in Hebrew is related to the word for tabernacle. The psalmist is asking a question that would make the listener consider it this way with tabernacle as a verb, *Who may tabernacle on God's holy hill?* This holy hill, of course, is Jerusalem, specifically, the temple at Jerusalem. The psalmist is not asking who may be allowed to tour or visit God's house, but who is worthy to stay as a guest of the Lord?

Because of this particular opening question, scholars believe Psalm 15 was part of an entry liturgy for the temple. Imagine there is a religious festival in Jerusalem. Pilgrims have converged on the city to celebrate. At the appointed hour, they gather in the courtyard of the temple. The priest opens the doors from the inside and calls to the crowd the words from the psalm: *O Lord, who may sojourn in your tabernacle? Who may dwell on your holy hill?* The rest of Psalm 15 is the response offered by the worshippers answering this question. The rest of the psalm outlines the characteristics of the believer who is worthy to enter the temple and sojourn with the Lord. The psalmist provides ten characteristics or virtues describing who is worthy.

It would be convenient if we could correlate these ten characteristics with, say, the Ten Commandments. There is some overlap, but these are different lists. The psalm offers an answer to the question, *Who may be the houseguest of the Lord?* I don't intend to spend much time on this list. I encourage you to read and reflect on it later.

Those who may sojourn in the house of the Lord are those who do not stray from God's paths, the ones who are doers of what is right, those who speak the truth that is in their hearts, those who do not tell lies about other people, those who do not bring harm to their friends, those who are not vindictive to other people, those who look upon wicked people with revulsion, those who lift up the people who honor the Lord, those who keep their commitments even if it causes them distress. The next item on the list may be confusing for us today. It says that those who may enter the

temple include those *who do not lend money at interest*. This refers to a specific type of loan. It is not a business loan, but a loan made to someone who is in distress. For example, if a neighbor's house burns, you should lend them money but never at interest; you should not profit off their misfortune.

The final characteristic of the person worthy to enter God's house is the person *who does not take a bribe against the innocent*.

The early Christian theologians—the ones that we call the church Fathers—referred to Psalm 15 as the Ladder of Jacob. You will recall that Jacob had the dream of a stairway or a ladder between earth and heaven. The church Fathers considered each virtue in the psalm as a step on that ladder. A person could climb this psalm into heaven.

Psalm 15 begins with that question by the priest about who is worthy to worship in the temple. The psalm continues with the response of the people. The psalm concludes with the priest affirming, *Those who do these things shall never be moved*. You know who is not moved? God. God is like a mountain. God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. People, on the other hand, are moved. As the Apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians, people can be *tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine* (Ephesians 4:14). God is not moved like that. According to the psalm, those who match the characteristics that it outlines, they will not be moved either. They will be like God.

However, as we know, although we can appear to meet the requirements of the Psalm, we know we do not. We can never be blameless; we can never stop hurting others, and more. Even when we loan without interest, we are always calculating what that person will owe us in return. Despite how hard we try, despite how much we appear truly worthy, we are never worthy to sojourn in God's house.

Nonetheless, that is the promise given us in Jesus Christ. There are many ways to understand this—Christ becomes our advocate, Christ is our substitute, Christ is the sacrificial lamb. What it means is that although we are not worthy to sojourn in God's tent, Christ is. And he takes us with him. We become God's guest through Christ.

At this communion table, there is a feast set out by God. We are not worthy to eat of it. But because of Christ, we are invited to sit at this table, to commune with the Lord.

Finally, there is one more way we can approach this psalm. Instead of looking at it as a list of strict requirements of who is worthy to be with the Lord—as a boundary that keeps people out—maybe we could understand it as a description of where we will find God.

God is not just in the temple; God is not just on a holy hill; God resides in the community where people strive to live Godly lives, where they attempt to walk in God's path, where people seek to treat each other selflessly, where the Lord is held in honor. The boundaries of this community don't forbid entry, but welcome it. Because Christ escorts us to this city, we can reach out to others. As Christians, we can open the door and invite the world to be with their Lord. And in doing so, maybe we can make this world a little better than we found it.