

Psalm 15 Who can dwell in the Lord's presence?

Tim Anderson 19/6/22

What kind of person is acceptable around here?

That's a question that every group of people has to answer.

The kids on the playground might decide that other kids are acceptable if they have the right haircut or wear the right clothes.

Coles will decide you are an acceptable person if you pay for your shopping.

Shoplifters are not welcome.

Lorna Jane will decide that you are an acceptable person if you are woman whose size is about 14 or less.

Any bigger than that and they won't make clothes for you.

Lifestyle village will decide that you are an acceptable person if you are over 55 years old.

And younger than that and you can't live there.

Many of the social problems we face

are because some group of people were or are treated as unacceptable.

The stolen generation were stolen

really because indigenous people were considered as unacceptable.

The LGBT activists are campaigning

because they want to be treated as acceptable people.

We have a war in the Ukraine

because one group of people think it's acceptable to invade another country

and another group don't think it's acceptable.

What kind of person is acceptable around here?

Or to use the psalmist's words,

15:1 "Yahweh, who may dwell in your sacred tent?

Who may live on your holy mountain?"

What does he mean?

Well before the temple was constructed,
while the Israelites were wandering in wilderness,
God lived among his people on the ark of the covenant,
which lived inside the tabernacle.

And the tabernacle was tent.

It was a tent designed according to the specifications
that God gave Moses in the Exodus.

A very particular tent.

But a tent none the less.

Then after the Israelites settled in the Promised Land,
the tent stopped in one place.

First of all in Shiloh,

then God chose a place for his name to dwell,
and that place was Jerusalem.

Or Mt Zion, the holy mountain of God.

So the Psalmist says,

"Yahweh, who may dwell in your sacred tent?

Who may live on your holy mountain?"

He means, 'Who is worthy to stand in your presence?'

What kind of person is acceptable to God?

And since we are currently in the presence of God,
meeting to worship him,

you could ask the question,

"What kind of person is acceptable around here?"

What kind of person is it OK if they come to church?

Who do we include and who do we exclude around here?

And there are a variety of answers that have been given to that question.

Back in the day, there was a view

that only people who dressed and behaved in a certain way were welcome.

Collars starched, children sitting silently and attentively,

Women in their Sunday best dress,
Men in a set of clothes that they didn't do manual labour in.
And you needed to know when to stand up and sit down.
And if you didn't get things exactly right,
then someone would make a snide comment
to let you know that you weren't really acceptable around here.
And to our shame, we still have elements of this view in the church today.
Thankfully it's relaxed a lot.
But even in my time at Holy Trinity,
I've heard stories of people being told off
because they brought a take away coffee into church
or because their children weren't under control enough
for satisfaction of person passing judgement,
or because they needed to use the bathroom
at a particularly sacred moment in the service.
I mean come on, when you've gotta go, you've gotta go.
But no, some controlling people
want to control when other people use the loo.

Somewhat in opposition to the back in the day view,
there is another view that everyone is welcome into the presence of God.
I have more sympathy with this view.
Though it does need to be nuanced.
We mustn't exclude people for trivial reasons.
But we do need standards of behaviour that allow others to participate.
And sometimes we need to give clear signal about what is acceptable
by who we allowed to be present.
So for example Jesus in Matthew 18 and Paul in 1 Cor 5
give some examples of times
when a person should be excluded from fellowship.
That's actually as much about caring for them
as it is about protecting others from them.

They need to be cared for because they are in great spiritual danger.
They need to repent and excluding them
is how the church makes clear the seriousness of their position.

Well what does the Psalm tell us?

It's notable that the psalm says nothing about what clothes you wear.

If you want to dwell in the Lord's sacred tent,
no one is saying you can't wear a Tom Petty tee shirt.

Only people wearing a tie need apply.

In fact the psalm doesn't say anything
about making your sacrifices in exactly the right way.

Or about using the right sombre accent with gravitas.

Holy Holy Holy.

None of that.

Instead of talking about what you do inside God's sacred tent,
it talks about how you live the rest of your life.

Basically if you live your life in an upright way,
then you can approach God.

If you are ripping people off Monday to Friday,
and then you dress up in your Sunday best,
and your kids behave with total manners and courtesy in church,
then you are not acceptable in God's sight.

But if you are living a life of love to your neighbour,
and then you front up to church without brushing your hair,
sipping on your take away coffee during the sermon,
you are welcome!

Let's look at the specifics of the life the psalm calls for.

15:2 "The one whose walk is blameless,
who does what is righteous."

Now the psalmist is going to flesh out what kind of a life is blameless.

But let's say from the start,
there's only one guy whose life was really blameless
or who really did what is righteous.
That was of course Jesus.
And we stand in God's presence only because of him.
That's very true.
One way to preach this psalm
would be to take snippets of Jesus' life
and show how he fulfilled every aspect of it.
And then we finish by praising God that we such a high priest
who clothes us in his righteousness.
That would be a good sermon.

But another way to preach the psalm
is take it as an exhortation to live that way.
Never of course to suggest
that we dwell in God's presence on account of our good works.
Actually we only stand before him through Jesus.
But we are called to imitate the Lord Jesus in our lives.
And measuring our lives up against this psalm
is a good way to work on imitating Jesus.

So the blameless and righteous life.
What is it?
15:2 Someone "who speaks the truth from their heart".
That's actually saying more than don't tell lies.
To speak the truth is a lot more than not telling a lie.
It is always possible to say nothing.
In many situations, it is the easy option to say nothing.
I was walking along High Street with a friend and his wife.
He was being really disrespectful to his wife.
The easiest thing would have been for me to say nothing.

I like the guy.
I barely know his wife.
I could have decided that their marriage is their business.
Sometimes that would be the right thing to do.
But this was just out of line.
So I asked the wife in the hearing of the husband,
"Does he often talk to you this way?"
It was enough to register my feelings.
Sadly her reply was,
"I wish I could say that this is an aberration."
Speaking up when it counts is important.
And as the psalm says,
it needs to be done from the heart.
That means with sincere love.
It's possible to speak the truth in a nasty way.
You can deliberately try to shame and embarrass people with the truth.
Speaking the truth can be a way of putting people down.
But with my friend,
I wasn't trying to embarrass him.
I was genuinely concerned for him in his marriage.
I was speaking from the heart.

Who is the blameless and righteous person?
15:3 Someone "whose tongue utters no slander,
who does no wrong to a neighbour
and casts no slur on others."
I read a thing someone had posted on social media this week.
"The criticism of a narcissist is not an accusation
it's a confession."
Think about it.
I did. And I found it rang true.
A more general comments is,

"When someone criticises,
they are telling you more about themselves than the person they criticise."
Every minister who goes to a new church
is met by someone who wants to give you a character assessment
of other people in the church.
I was in Healesville.
I was here.
I'm not sure what conclusions they expect you to draw.
My conclusion is,
"I can't trust this person.
They are so free in their criticism of others,
they will be free in their criticism of me."
I contrast that with some of the most capable people I've met.
One guy served on our parish council in Healesville.
He's been in charge of businesses
that employed tens of thousands of employees.
Businesses with budgets ten thousand times our church.
He turned up to PC meetings.
Other people hadn't read the agenda before they got there.
And they had no contribution to make.
Trust me, there was plenty to criticise quite legitimately.
He never criticised.
He only encouraged people
and tried to make a positive contribution where he could.
Blameless.

Who is the blameless and righteous person?

15:4 Someone who "despises a vile person
but honours those who fear the Lord."

Despises a vile person.

That one cuts across the grain of much of our culture.

We've become a culture that medicalises evil.

When someone is making wrong choices
we make excuses for them by saying,
"Oh he's got a mental health problem."
Or "Oh, if you had the upbringing she's had,
you would understand how hard it is for her."
Well look it is good to be understanding about someone's background.
But it doesn't give them a blank cheque.
And I could find you people with worse mental health problems,
or who had tougher things happen to them in their childhoods,
who handle it with grace and godliness.
There are people like that in our church.
So when you run into someone who is malicious and calculating,
evil in their intentions,
then don't make excuses for them.
Can we do that at the same time as having tongues that utter no slander?
Well it's a challenge.
What I've found when dealing with vile people
is that if you need to tell other people about what they are up to,
you can just communicate the facts.
You don't need to get worked up about it.
You don't need to embellish the story.
Reasonable people will hear the facts and form their own conclusion.

The counterpoint to despising a vile person
is honouring the person who fears the Lord.
There is a sense in which every single human being is worthy of honour.
Every person is made in God's image
and should be honoured because God made them.
But for the person who fears the Lord,
we can honour their Christian faith.
Our world makes heroes out of self absorbed musicians,
insecure actors, overpaid sportsmen, and anorexic models.

Why not make heroes out of people who care for their grandchildren,
when relationships with their parents break down,
like Nikki Driscoll and Val Dunleavy?
Or people who pray hard like Betty Dalton and Paula Seymour?
Surely they are more worthy of honour!

Who is the blameless and righteous person?

15:4 Someone "who keeps an oath when it hurts
and does not change their mind."

Ray Galea tells the story of a man who found out his fiancé had MS.
She was very happy for him to end the engagement.

He decided to marry her.

Not long after they were married,
she became bedridden and he quit his job to care for her.

It killed his career.

And he nursed her for ten years until she died.

That's keeping your oath when it hurts.

I read a story of a woman

whose fiancé was seriously burned in an accident.

She sent out the wedding invitations from the burns unit of the ICU.

We follow a God who always keeps his promises.

And he carries through even when it costs him his own life.

That's what God thinks of promise keeping.

Who is the blameless and righteous person?

15:5 Someone "who lends money to the poor without interest;
who does not accept a bribe against an innocent."

This is about more than generosity.

Of course it's generous to lend to the poor without interest.

But the point is in not using your wealth

or your positions of power to oppress others.

Part of the problem is that our society sets up systems

where we don't even know we are doing that sometimes.
Have you noticed that fresh fruit and veges are pricey right now?
If you haven't, I'm not sure what you've been eating.
Have you wondered why they are so much more expensive than usual?
Well there are a bunch of reasons.
Prices of fertiliser and diesel are up,
the Lockyer valley in Qld got flooded.
That didn't help.
But there is another reason.
Lots of our fruit and veges rely on seasonal workers.
Islanders shipped in from the pacific.
Tonga, Fiji places like that.
Backpackers on working holidays.
And the pandemic meant that we didn't have access to these people
because the borders were closed.
Australians demand proper wages.
You can't exploit them
in the way you can exploit Islanders or backpackers.
It's worth thinking about when we gasp at how much a lettuce costs.
Am I normally exploiting the powerless?
Are they willing to work for low wages in Australia
because their own homes are so poor,
but we take advantage of that and pay them less
than we'd have to pay an Australian to do the same job.

Now you might think,
there's nothing at all I can do about that.
I'm caught up in an unjust system.
I'm part of it but I can't change it.
That might be true.
But we can at least use that reality
to change our attitude to giving to the poor.

When you give to ARDFA or sponsor a compassion child,
don't think about it as an act of generosity.
Think about it as paying back the poor
because you are part of an unjust system that exploits them.
We are only giving them what we owe them.

What kind of person is acceptable around here?

Well anyone who trusts in Jesus death and lives with him as their Lord.

But what does it mean to live with Jesus as your Lord?

It's not about external trivia.

Too many people get way over excited about trivia.

It's about living a blameless and righteous life.

Speaking the truth from your heart.

Keeping your tongue under control.

Not making excuses for evil.

Celebrating people with exemplary faith.

Keeping your promises even when it costs you.

Treating the poor well, knowing that you owe it to them.

Let's pray for God's help in living that way.