

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy loving God, we come to your house on this day of worship because we seek to live in your ways. We want to be children of God. We want to walk in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. We want to be those who you lift up as “good and wonderful servants.” But, God, our humanity gets in the way. Our presumption gets in the way. We want all the benefits of the job without any of the work. We want a grace that doesn’t call us to accountability in how we live it out. Holy God, in the midst of our willingness and our weakness, walk with us. Guide us to walk with the footsteps of faithfulness, the footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ. Help us to find compassion in our hearts when we’d rather find fault. Help us to love one another when we want to mock and gossip. Help us to find energy to look deeper when we think we have it all figured out. Gracious God, help us to live into a selfless attitude that reflects your qualities of care and compassion. In other words, God, help us to be godly in our hearts and godly outward in our actions. In that spirit of care, we lift up the prayers of our loved ones, the prayers of those we distantly know, and the prayers of those we will never know. We pray for the wellbeing of those we love and those we’d rather not love, in your spirit, God of all. We pray for those in war; we pray for those in peace. Hear our requests, already said aloud and those within our hearts, as we lift our prayers to you. Fashion us to be your instruments in a world needing your goodness. We pray to be godly as we pray the prayer that Jesus taught us together, in one voice...

SERMON

We’ve all heard it and shuddered. “The Green Bay Packers win the Super Bowl.” Maybe not so much for you as for me. It’s much easier to mock the Packers when our resident fans are not present. But we really do shudder when we hear those who say

“Jesus” in a cursing fashion. Is it crass? Yeah. Is it disrespectful? Yes. But would we go so far as to say it is ungodly? That might be too much of a jump. Saying something disrespectful is one thing, but that word of “ungodly” has a lot more attached to it. It’s a pattern; not a singular act. It’s doing things that run against the very nature of God, those things that seem to prove working against God’s ways in the world today. When you think about it, one word or one phrase is more of an ignorant way of acting, not an ungodly way. It’s something worse and often much more subtle than we imagine. It starts in the heart and it provokes behavior. And, it affects those who are Christian and not Christian.

It’s a big and harsh word: “ungodly.” It’s scary; it feels unforgivable. You might be afraid that you have stumbled into its path at one time or another. Or, you may feel that we cannot be ungodly when we reside in God’s house. But it all comes down to how we understand the idea. How do we use it? It’s most used to call out horrible deeds or blasphemy. It can have an otherworldly feeling to the idea, but when it comes down to it, ungodliness is a type of sinfulness we can all fall into when we least expect or realize it. It’s not a permanent sin but a mode that takes our eyes off what’s really important. Psalm 14 is an important guide for the issues of ungodliness, called by the New Interpreter’s Bible as a “Denunciation of Godlessness.” It begins with a heart that, not in belief but in effect, denies God’s work, God’s power, and God’s direction to faithfulness. It begins not with what we say but by how we live. Let’s look deeply at this psalm and its message of ungodliness, discover what godliness instead is, and find its direction for us today.

So, let’s take apart this psalm starting with the first verse. That sets the tone: “Fools say in their hearts, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is no one who does good.” If we remember a sermon a few weeks ago, there is special

meaning to “heart” in the Old Testament. In their mindset, it called in more than the emotions or the organ that pumps blood; the heart was the deep-seeded part of the self where we are fully ourselves. There are no disguises; there is no way to hide from the truth. That’s where the psalm begins. This psalm leaves room for those who are considered faithful to fall into the ungodly camp through what is in the heart. We can proclaim the goodness of God from our lips while still holding unwarranted rancor and anger in our hearts that does not allow God room to thrive. When we hate God’s creation, when we foster negativity and bitterness in our hearts while still worshipping God in our lips, we do not profess the goodness of God. We are not spreading God’s grace. That is, in effect, saying in our hearts there is no God.

So, it’s about doing, not just about saying. With this in mind, we come back to the phrasing of how this is laid out: “Fools say in their hearts,” not just that “Fools say.” The heart is where everything begins in their mindset; faithful action comes from a faithful heart. Ungodliness is often equivocated with what we say in today’s world, but this says it is much more. This statement adheres to the day’s mindset: faithfulness is lived out, not spoken. For us today, what this is calling out is one of the biggest issues of being human: the difference between what we say and what we do. Let’s admit it, we each have those times when we have a double standard. It’s a very human thing to do. But double standards show a faith that needs growth and examining. It leaves space for those who proclaim God outwardly to be called out for how they live inwardly. It calls out those whose faith is merely skin-deep. Godlessness, then can affect the faithful just as much as those who proclaim no faith because it’s not about whether we believe there is no God but

as if we act as if there is no God even without realizing it. It's a very easy thing to do because we can fall into it without realizing in even the smallest ways.

But moving on from the first image, we can see what that lack of connection in the heart creates. It creates, as the psalm says, corruptness, abominable deeds, not doing good, confounding the plans of the poor. It's in big and small ways. Being corrupt means that one tends to value something or someone at the unfair expense of something or someone else. A judge is corrupt when he or she does not rule justly in a decision, unfairly favoring one over the other. Greed is corrupting because someone values his or her own gain at the expense of those around. Corruption takes us away from our responsibilities to one another, and, as the psalm says, does not allow us to do good. If we're honest, corruption is ungodly because that is not something we see in the image of God we have in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ did not favor one over the other but when he saw issues of ungodliness, he called them out. When one does "abominable deeds," they do deeds that others find abhorrent, disgusting. Looking a few verses later, it gives a specific example of ungodliness: those who would "confound the plans of the poor." All of these things have something similar in idea: they are selfish; they take us away from the community of one another and responsibilities toward one another. They reflect all those things that we affirm is at the heart of God's goodness and care. They are, therefore, "ungodly," even in the smallest ways.

This psalm's very first verse is a dismissal of those we might call "ungodly." It shows that the heart of ungodliness is self-centeredness and one's own desires before the caring of others. With that in mind, we have to figure out what it means to be godly. This psalm, as we said before, follows typical faithfulness to the ancient Hebrews: it's not about what

you say, it's about what you do. Religion is seen, not said. Those who may say that they follow God but do not adhere to the commandments are considered ungodly because they are not valuing what God values. But let's one-up it more. They are, by that day's definition, "atheists," because they live as if God did not exist. Their religious living, a bit strict by our standards, definitely had the "put your money where your mouth is" mentality to it that today's Christianity seems to have lost. Godliness, at its heart, is about what we do. If Godliness, acting in a manner of God's goodness, is attending to the cares and needs of God's creation, God's people, then Godlessness is the opposite of that. It is neglecting the beautiful people created by God, and this psalm hits that nail on the head.

Boy, this is a depressing sermon, I reflected as I was writing it. I'm realizing the message is important but on the negative side. The Psalm doesn't introduce a lot of hope; it calls out much more than it uplifts. It's a good reminder of the problems of ungodliness, but it's a lot of don't's, when, in this world, we need more do's. As we can see, it doesn't really lift an alternative to its examples of being ungodly, but we know from the life of Jesus Christ. After all, Jesus turned the old commandment of "that which you don't want done to you, do not do to others" into a much more positive message of "DO unto others as you would have done unto you." The Gospel is a positive, when we can easily think of goodness being that we don't do bad things. We often have to be shocked out of ways that we know we are better than, and sometimes the reminder can really hurt. But God's people know the truth, and sometimes we need to be reoriented to living out God's ways in this complicated world.

I've talked a lot about doing, but this isn't about works-based salvation; that work is already done. It's all about how we back up the message of God's saving work; this is about

how we tell the world in our living and our doing that there is a God we worship and serve. It's about responding to the grace of Jesus Christ by being grace personified. It's like that 1970's hamburger commercial. The little old lady yells out, "Where's the beef?" Godliness is making sure that the beef of our actions is reflecting the devotion on the inside. Let's face it, the world is a pretty crummy place sometimes. There was another theatre shooting Thursday night by a middle-aged man. They haven't discovered a motive. It could be mental illness, it could be driven by terrorism, or it could be that he was just disenfranchised. It could be that he thought no one cared, and he just lashed out to have some kind of voice in the world. Ungodliness sparks more ungodliness. Sin sparks more sin. We seem to declare who we are as a country and as a world by how much apathy is out there. I see insecurity across the board by seeing how they want to tear down others to feel more whole. Ungodliness sparks more ungodliness. No one feels heard; no one feels cared for. That must be where the church comes in. If we won't be the voice of compassion and caring, who will? If this psalm says anything, it is that faithfulness must be seen because good action follows good belief. If there is no good action, then good belief is lacking, and God is not honored. It's a simple and difficult as that.

What is unique about this psalm, according to the New Interpreter's Commentary, is that it lacks any direct appeal to God. It, nevertheless, calls all the people to account with the wisdom of God. It calls us to be godly by being compassionate with one another, loving as Christ loved. After all, I have a hard time imagining meeting Jesus when all our days are done and the first thing Christ saying to me is. "Well, you did alright, but I have one main issue: you spent too much time loving your neighbor and being compassionate." The Jesus I know would never say that. If we seek to walk in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, we will love

one another as Jesus loved them with God-based integrity. This is the heart of godliness.

This is the heart of faithfulness. Thanks be to God! Amen and Amen.