

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Fear God: More Moral-Ethical Implications

LORD, who shall abide in thy tabernacle? who shall dwell in thy holy hill? He that walketh uprightly, and worketh righteousness, and speaketh the truth in his heart. He that backbiteth not with his tongue, nor doeth evil to his neighbour, nor taketh up a reproach against his neighbour. In whose eyes a vile person is contemned; but he honoureth them that fear the LORD. He that sweareth to his own hurt, and changeth not. He that putteth not out his money to usury, nor taketh reward against the innocent. He that doeth these things shall never be moved. (Psalm 15)

Simultaneously this psalm confronts, rebukes, and encourages me. It forces me out of my comfortable, private view of Christianity and demands that I look within to the deepest recesses of my mind and conscience. If we look that deeply within, none of us will like everything that we see. How does it comfort me? It reminds me that true Christianity, a true and Biblical God-honoring life, does not consist of mystical ideas. James reminds us of the same truth as he defines "pure religion" (James 1:27). Once again the Hebrew poetry concept of rhyming ideas enlightens this psalm. Let's try to isolate the various parallel ideas that appear in this psalm.

1. *Who shall abide in thy tabernacle? who shall dwell in thy holy hill?* Rather than asking two distinct questions, David states one question in parallel form. God's "tabernacle" and His "holy hill" are one and the same. The probing question of the psalm has to do with the characteristics of the people whom God shall allow access to authentic fellowship and blessings.
2. *He that walketh uprightly, and worketh righteousness, and speaketh the truth in his heart.* An "upright" walk means righteous work in our conduct and decisions. It also invades that innermost bastion of our carnal inclinations, how we use our tongues, our speech. The verbally abrasive person cannot rightly claim Biblical authority for hurtful words. "I call it the way I see it" more expresses an over-sized ego than mature Christianity.
3. *He that backbiteth not with his tongue, nor doeth evil to his neighbour, nor taketh up a reproach against his neighbour.* David digs deeper into our speech. What does the Bible

mean with this term "backbite"? Talking critically about a person to others constitutes the equivalent of a vicious animal sneaking up behind you and clamping its powerful teeth into your back. It paralyzes you. When a person demeans you to others, if they believe it—and they often do—you become effectively paralyzed in that person's eyes. You can say or do almost anything, but, however right and noble your deeds, that person will view you with suspicion. Often the "backbiter" will question your motives. They can't reject your conduct, so they resort to imputing low motives to your actions. David then adds two parallel thoughts to this basic premise. The person whom God honors will not engage in any evil action toward his neighbor. Obviously in this setting evil action focuses on words as well as overt actions. The final parallel thought takes us to the heart of the evils of gossip. He will not take up a reproach against his neighbor. This thought drives us to consider how we react to "backbiting" words from people. If we allow their gossip to influence us against someone, even if we never repeat the gossip, we have taken up the reproach. Perhaps the best response to inappropriate gossip is to either confront the gossip ("How do you know what motivated him/her to do this?") or to simply walk away and leave the gossip talking to himself/herself. It isn't enough simply not to repeat the gossip's tale; we should take actions to stop the process. If a gossip learns that you will not listen to their tales, they will stop talking to you about others. Sometimes gossips refuse to see themselves in this light. They might defend their conduct with righteous sounding motives. "I only speak the truth about them. Everyone knows it."

Or they might repeat an even more blatant rationalization, "I'm only telling you so that you can pray for them." A great response to this kind of rationalization might be this. "If that is truly your motive, I need to ask a favor of you. Please simply pray for this person and their needs, but the next time you or someone in your family has a similar experience, will you immediately tell me so that I can pray for you and yours?" Gossips will never apply their rationalizations to themselves.

4. *In whose eyes a vile person is contemned; but he honoureth them that fear the LORD.* How often do you hear both Christians and non-Christians alike defend the worst of moral sins with "The Bible says that we must not judge lest we be judged"? "Judging" moral sin has become the greatest of all sins in our relativistic, valueless culture. It has invaded many Christians' thoughts no less than non-Christians. How many of these folks have bothered to give serious and contextual study to Jesus' words? If they did so, they would not embrace such amoral ideas. Jesus spoke these words in the Sermon on the Mount against harsh and inappropriate judgment of others. You judge others more severely than you judge yourself or your special friends. Jesus used these words to warn such people that God would apply the same grounds of judgment against them that they applied to the people whom they judged harshly and inappropriately. The context of this lesson doesn't imply, even remotely, that Christians should never in any way judge the conduct of others. Do not forget that Scripture does not contradict itself. What David wrote in Psalm 15 does not contradict what Jesus spoke in the Sermon on the Mount (For purposes of this study, read Matthew 7:1-5.). David clearly teaches that the servant of God whom God honors condemns a vile person. His/Her eyes do not look the other way or attempt to rationalize sinful deeds. The believer in God should give all diligence to avoid self-righteous or unjust, finger-pointing criticisms of others. However, this passage leaves no doubt that the acceptable servant of God does not hide his/her disdain of vile sinful conduct. Conversely, the parallel thought affirms that the servant who honors God—and whom God honors—honors people who demonstrate by their lives that they "fear" God.
5. *He that putteth not out his money to usury, nor taketh reward against the innocent.* The

God-honoring servant applies his faith to his wallet. He does not worship money. Take some time to make a written list of the many decisions that we make on a regular basis that involve some consideration of money. Do these decisions ever hinder us from attending public worship? Do they influence our decisions regarding how much we give to the church and related ministries? Do they encroach on our need for regular study and meditation? If so, we are guilty of unlawful use of our money.

6. *He that doeth these things shall never be moved.* The psalm concludes with a reassuring affirmation that God will add stability and blessing to the person who lives life in this manner.

In the "Homiletics" section of the *Pulpit Commentary* J. Wilcocks makes an insightful observation. "THE PRINCIPLE BY WHICH WE SHOULD BE GOVERNED IS THE 'FEAR OF GOD.' This is the root from which the goodly leaves and choice fruit of a religious life will spring. If the word 'fear' had been used in this passage only, and we had not been at liberty to understand it in any other than its ordinary sense, one would be forced to admit that such a low motive could not be the mainspring of a vigorous and healthy religious life. But all through the Scriptures the phrase, 'fear of God,' is used as synonymous with a genuine, heartfelt service of him, and as rather indicating a careful observance of the obligations we as creatures owe to him, than a mere dread of his anger at disobedience. It is not to be denied that fear, in the ordinary sense of the word, is reasonably a motive by which sin may be restrained, but it is no stimulus to that kind of service which we owe to God." Not only does Wilcocks give us a highly functional definition of the fear of God, but he also takes this concept to the Biblical idea that we see in Psalm 15. To honor those who fear God is to give credit to the fact that our service to God will never rise to what He expects and will approve unless it is motivated by this concept of fear, not the low view that sees the fear of God as merely a desire to avoid punishment, the just consequences of sin.

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