

23 February 2023; Psalm 32; 1 Lent; Pastor Fraser Pearce

In the Scriptures,

The difference between the wicked and the righteous
Is not the difference between those who have sinned,
And those who have not:

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Romans 3:23

The difference is between those who will not admit to God
That they have sinned,
And those who confess to God, and trust in his mercy.
The wicked keep their mouths shut,
The righteous come clean: they admit their need;
They ask God for help.

Today I'm proclaiming good news from God's word:
Since our Lord Jesus has paid our debt with God,
Since he has born the penalty for our sin,
We are free to be honest with ourselves and God,
We are free to confess our sins,
And we are free to live with the hope
That God will work out his saving justice in our lives
As individuals and as a congregation.

Let's get into the Psalm.

Here's how it starts:

**Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.**

**Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.**

'Happy' seems like a light word to use for such serious subject matter,
But it might be helpful to remember that this is the same word
That Jesus uses as he begins the Sermon on the Mount:

Happy are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Happy' here does not necessarily mean that we are smiling,
But that we are on the right track in our life with God,
And so that we can face difficulties and trials and weaknesses *joyfully*.

Now, the psalmist is saying that those whose transgression is forgiven
Are on the right track, that they are living life with God well.
And to make clear what he means, the psalmist talks about
How life was before he found the freedom
To speak honestly and truthfully:

While I kept silence, my body wasted away

**through my groaning all day long.
For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.**

One way to understand what the psalmist is talking about
Is to think about how 12 step groups, like Alcoholics Anonymous work.
They understand that the first step
In being free from slavery to alcohol
Is to admit that there is a problem.

So, here's what you get if you google the first step:

We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.

But what if people won't admit there's a problem?

Then they remain enslaved,

They can even literally waste away *in the body*,

And it can feel that the more they drink, the drier they become.

And the imagery of drying up in the heat of summer

Is easy for us to picture after the last week that we have had.

Of course, it's not as if we humans are only vulnerable

To being enslaved by things like alcohol.

We can be enslaved by the love of money, or reputation,

Or even by things like our ethnicity or gender, or class,

Insofar as we think that these things are the most important markers

Of our identity.

We can even be enslaved to our own need to be righteous:

To think that we can keep the law in such a way

That God must accept us.

If we remain silent about our enslavement to any of these things,

Then we will feel the consequences,

We will feel God's hand heavy upon us.

Now, listen to how the psalm changes gear:

Then I acknowledged my sin to you,

and I did not hide my iniquity;

I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD',

and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

Does that sound familiar to you?

That last part we take on our own lips as a congregation,

As we prepare to confess not simply that we have

Thought, said, or done certain wrong actions,

But even that we are born enslaved to sin,

And that we can't free ourselves.

Our problem is worse than being enslaved to things like alcohol,
Although if that is the case for us, we do well to admit it,
Our problem is that we naturally don't fear, love, and trust God.

So, what brings us the freedom to admit the truth -
To be honest with ourselves, others, and God?
It's the Good News that in Christ God has covered the cost,
That the punishment that we would face
Has been taken away.

Think about it this way: Imagine a young person drives their car uninsured,
And they drive uninsured because they are more or less broke.

But then, as they're distracted on the road,
They run into the back of an expensive car.
They're alright, but the cars are wrecks.

What will hinder them speaking honestly about the crash?
What will keep them quiet on admitting the truth about their fault?
It will be the fact that they can't cover the cost,
And that they are fearful of the consequences into the future
If they come clean.

The sort of things is a human reality,
And now doubt every day in our courts
People become forgetful, or silent, or accusatory of others
When confronted with their own guilt.

That's how it is with us in God's courtroom.
As long as we think we have to justify ourselves before God
We will not be honest with God, or ourselves, or anyone else.
But as we hear the truth from God -
That he covers the cost, that he has a remedy at hand -
Then God frees us to be honest,
And to receive the healing and hope that only he can give.

That's why the psalmist can pray these words:

**Therefore let all who are faithful
offer prayer to you;
at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters
shall not reach them.
You are a hiding-place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.**

I'll just pick up on the last line.

When we can't be honest with ourselves, or others, or God,

Then we live in a sort of solitude,
And even if we are with others,
We can't talk freely about how things really are; we are isolated.
But the faithful, those who are honest,
Those who live with the forgiveness that God gives
Are surrounded by glad cries of deliverance.
This is not simply an idea or an image,
It's something that we can experience in church,
Think of what it's like to be with other Christians,
Even in a small congregation, together admitting our need,
And singing together
With gratitude and joy to the God who created and redeemed us.

The isolating reality of the wicked,
And the joy of the righteous is developed
As the psalm draws to its conclusion:

**I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.
Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,
else it will not stay near you.**

The unbroken horse and mule only come near under compulsion:
The first chance they get to flee, they take.
This is like our first parents in the garden:
In their sin they felt shame and tried to cover themselves,
To hide themselves from each other, and to hide from God.
It's my understanding that experiencing this shame and guilt
Is what it means to die,
And that we human beings carry this death with us,
Until God brings us into his life.

The psalm ends with these words:
**Many are the torments of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.
Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous,
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.**

We receive these words as people
Who share in the righteousness of God:
We are baptised into Christ Jesus,
The One who covers our shame, who bears our guilt,
Who frees us freely and honestly to speak with our Creator,
And so live with the joy that he gives.
May God keep us in this life of openness and joy. In Jesus' name. Amen.