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If Someone Watched Your Ordinary Life

Reflections on Psalm 15

Reflections Family, Discipleship and the Christian Life 26 September 2026

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“LORD, who shall abide in thy tabernacle? who shall dwell in thy holy hill?”

— Psalm 15:1

In my experience, some questions in Scripture seem simple at first but grow more searching the longer we work with them. Psalm 15 begins with two such questions. David asks who may abide in God’s tabernacle and who may dwell in His holy hill. I have read these words many times as a general description of the righteous person, but the more closely I look at the Psalm, the more I wonder whether David is doing something much more personal. He is not merely describing an ideal of godly life. He holds up a mirror and asks me to look at the person I actually am. The question is not simply, “Do I worship God?” or “Do I belong among His people?” It is, “What kind of person am I becoming as I walk with Jesus?”

David’s answer is striking because it does not begin with religious activity. He does not say that the person who dwells with God is the one who knows the most Scripture, occupies an important position, speaks most eloquently about faith, or is seen most frequently in the place of worship. Instead, he begins with the ordinary business of life: “He that walketh uprightly, and worketh righteousness, and speaketh the truth in his heart” (Psalm 15:2). I find that deeply challenging. The first test of my relationship with Jesus is not what I say about Him, but the way I walk. “Walketh” suggests a pattern of life rather than an isolated action. It makes me ask whether my Christian faith has become part of how I actually live, or whether there are still compartments of my life where I behave as though the Trinity is not present.

The phrase “worketh righteousness” takes the matter further. You can have good intentions without consistently doing what is right. I can agree with righteousness in principle and still find reasons not to practise it when it becomes inconvenient; this is the comfort-zone syndrome at work. David does not describe the person who merely admires righteousness. He describes someone who works it. That makes me think about the difference between knowing what God wants and actually doing it. In the Christian life, there is a danger of becoming so familiar with biblical teaching that hearing truth begins to feel like obedience; this is the familiarity factor. I can listen to a sermon, underline a verse, agree with a devotional thought, and then carry on living exactly as before. Psalm 15 quietly challenges this divided self, the personality in conflict with itself, which hears the truth but does not live it. Truth that does not reach the way I live has not yet done its full work in me.

Then David adds words that seem even more searching: “and speaketh the truth in his heart.” I notice that he does not merely say that the person speaks truth to other people. He speaks truth “in his heart”. There is something here about inward honesty that I find difficult to escape. We can deceive others, and perhaps even become so accustomed to our own explanations that we deceive ourselves. I can give respectable reasons for my actions, defend my motives, or explain away my failures. But God sees beyond the explanation. He knows what is actually happening within me. I find myself asking whether I am willing to be completely truthful before Him about my motives, my resentments, my ambitions, my fears and even my spiritual shortcomings. The person described in Psalm 15 is not merely outwardly respectable. He is truthful within.

David then turns to the tongue: “He that backbiteth not with his tongue, nor doeth evil to his neighbour, nor taketh up a reproach against his neighbour” (Psalm 15:3). It is remarkable how quickly the Psalm moves from our relationship with God to our treatment of other people. Perhaps that is because the two cannot really be separated. I may speak warmly about loving God, but how I treat another person reveals the reality of that love. The tongue is particularly revealing because words can do damage without leaving any visible wound. A person can be injured by something I say about him when he is not even present, and I may never see the consequences. I consider this one of the most damaging aspects of our church community life.

I find the expression “backbiteth not” particularly uncomfortable because it is so ordinary. Backbiting does not always look like deliberate cruelty. Sometimes it appears as casual conversation, a

passing observation, a piece of information that “someone ought to know”, or even something presented as concern. I have to ask myself whether I am sometimes more interested in discussing another person’s weakness than in helping that person. Would I say the same thing if the person were sitting beside me? Would I be comfortable if the person knew exactly what I had said? These are uncomfortable questions, but Psalm 15 does not let me make holiness merely a matter of what I do publicly. It reaches into the conversations I have when other people are absent.

The question put to Jesus by the lawyer, “And who is my neighbour?” (Luke 10:29), which Jesus answered so resolutely in the parable of the Good Samaritan, resonates through what David wrote. That answer came centuries after David, yet David was already reaching towards the same precept, and we, like him, must still work out what it means in our own lives. The Psalm also says that the person who dwells with God “doeth no evil to his neighbour”. Again, the simplicity of the words is deceptive. They remind me that Christian character is not merely about avoiding spectacular sins. It includes the ordinary ways I can inconvenience, manipulate, discourage, embarrass, or take advantage of another person. Sometimes the damage we do is subtle. A harsh response, a dismissive attitude, an unfair judgement, an unwillingness to forgive or a deliberate withholding of kindness may never become a major public incident, but each can diminish another person. Psalm 15 makes me consider whether the people around me are being helped or harmed by the way I live.

David then says, “In whose eyes a vile person is contemned; but he honoureth them that fear the LORD” (Psalm 15:4). I pause here because it raises the question of what I value. Whom do I admire? Whom do I honour? What kind of person impresses me? We live in a world that frequently measures significance by wealth, influence, achievement, visibility and popularity. It is easy for those standards to enter Christian thinking without our noticing it. Yet David presents another measure. The person who fears the Lord is worthy of honour. Here we must distinguish between admiring and honouring. We may admire some accomplishment, but that does not translate directly into honouring.

This does not mean that I should despise people who do not share my faith, nor does it permit me to treat sinners with contempt. Scripture calls me to love people, including those with whom I disagree. Rather, I think David is asking me to examine what I consider admirable. Am I impressed primarily by worldly success, or do I recognise the value of godly character? Do I admire the person who has influence, or the person who quietly lives faithfully before God? Do I value the person

who is noticed, or the person who serves without needing to be noticed? These questions matter because what I admire can gradually shape what I become.

Then comes one of the Psalm's most challenging statements: "He that sweareth to his own hurt, and changeth not" (Psalm 15:4). I find this especially searching because it demands integrity beyond convenience. It is relatively easy to keep my word when keeping it costs me nothing. But what happens when circumstances change? What happens when the promise becomes inconvenient? What happens when I discover that fulfilling my word will require sacrifice? This is a difficult one. Promises or commitments to Christian principles do often become inconvenient or inconsistent with the fast-changing environment. Standing firm may cost me relationships.

If we give way to avoid that cost, we cheat ourselves. David describes someone who keeps his word even when it hurts him. That is profoundly counter-cultural. We live in a world in which commitments can sometimes be treated as provisional. We say yes when it suits us and reconsider when it does not. We can find perfectly respectable reasons for changing our minds. Yet Psalm 15 reminds me that something powerful lies in a person whose word can be trusted.

I find myself asking whether people can rely upon what I say. If I commit, do I honour it when the enthusiasm that drove it has disappeared? If I have given my word, do I look for ways to escape it when circumstances become difficult? There will certainly be occasions when circumstances genuinely make a commitment impossible or when a promise should not have been made in the first place. But the principle remains: Christian integrity should make my word dependable. If I say "yes", it should mean something.

The Psalm then moves into the area of money: "He that putteth not out his money to usury, nor taketh reward against the innocent" (Psalm 15:5). David brings holiness into an area where people often separate faith from daily life. Money can reveal motives that remain hidden in other circumstances. It can reveal whether I see another person's vulnerability as something to exploit or as something that should call forth compassion and fairness.

The precise economic practices David addresses belong to the world in which the Psalm was written, and I do not think I should transfer every ancient economic arrangement directly into modern life. But the moral principle seems clear enough. God's people are not to use their position, resources or influence to take unfair advantage of others. Nor are they

to allow financial reward to corrupt justice. That makes me think about the many ways in which power and money can influence decisions. It also makes me consider whether I am always as fair when money is involved as I imagine myself to be when it is not.

What strikes me most about Psalm 15 is that David has taken me from the presence of God into the most ordinary areas of human life. He begins with the tabernacle and the holy hill, but his answer concerns walking, working, speaking, treating neighbours, choosing whom to honour, keeping promises and handling money. This seems deliberate. The Psalm refuses to allow me to separate worship from character.

As I read these verses, I notice another danger. I could turn Psalm 15 into a checklist and conclude that if I can achieve these standards, I have earned the right to dwell with God. I do not think that is what the Psalm is teaching. Scripture does not present human righteousness as the basis upon which we can boast before God. The Christian understands righteousness ultimately through God's grace and through Christ. The Psalm therefore becomes not a ladder by which I climb into God's presence, but a description of the kind of life that should increasingly emerge from someone who walks with Him.

That distinction matters greatly to me. I am not trying to become acceptable to God so that He will receive me. I am asking what God's transforming presence should produce in someone who already belongs to Him. The question therefore becomes less, "Have I achieved Psalm 15?" and more, "Is God's work in me increasingly producing the character described by Psalm 15?"

David's conclusion is brief: "He that doeth these things shall never be moved" (Psalm 15:5). I notice that he does not say that such a person will never experience trouble. The Psalm does not promise a life without disappointment, suffering, opposition or uncertainty. Instead, it speaks of being "moved". There is a difference between experiencing a storm and being destroyed by it.

Perhaps this is one of the Psalm's deepest lessons. A person whose life is founded upon integrity, truthfulness, faithfulness and justice possesses a stability that circumstances cannot easily remove. Such a person may be shaken emotionally, disappointed by people, confronted by unexpected events and even brought through seasons of great difficulty. But something underneath the circumstances remains firm.

I find myself thinking about how easily I can be moved by things that should not have such power over me. A person's criticism can disturb me. Praise can inflate me. Disappointment can discourage me.

Recognition can become something I crave. A change in circumstances can make me question what I thought was secure. Psalm 15 makes me ask whether my stability is really rooted in God or depends on circumstances remaining favourable.

The Psalm also makes me think about Christian service. It is possible to serve God publicly while neglecting the private character that gives that service credibility. Position, responsibility and ministry can never substitute for integrity. In fact, responsibility makes integrity more important, because other people are affected by the character of the person who leads or serves them.

I find myself asking whether my service points people towards Christ or towards myself. Do I need to be appreciated? Do I become unsettled when my contribution is overlooked? Do I struggle when somebody else receives recognition? These questions bring me back to the heart of the Psalm. A person who dwells with God should increasingly become less occupied with preserving his own importance and more concerned with being faithful.

Another thought stays with me. Psalm 15 begins with the question, "LORD, who shall abide in thy tabernacle?" and ends with the statement that the one who lives this way "shall never be moved". Perhaps there is a connection between the two. The person who desires to dwell with God discovers that God's presence is not merely a place to visit; it becomes the foundation from which life is lived.

That changes the way I understand worship. Worship is not simply what happens when I enter the church building. Worship continues when I leave it. It continues in the conversation I have afterwards, in the decision I make tomorrow, in the promise I keep, in the temptation I resist, in the person I refuse to speak against, in the financial decision I make, and in the way I respond when nobody is watching.

Psalm 15 therefore leaves me with questions that I cannot answer merely by looking at my religious activity.

Am I truthful in my heart? Can my words be trusted? What do I say about people when they are absent? Whom do I admire? What happens to my integrity when obedience becomes costly? Do I use what I have to serve others or to take advantage of them? Is my Christian life changing the way I live with people?

And perhaps the most important question of all:

If someone watched my ordinary life rather than my religious life, would they see evidence that I walk with Jesus?

I want my life to answer these questions.

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