

## **Psalm Fifteen**

O LORD, who may abide in your tent?  
Who may dwell on your holy hill?

Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right,  
and speak the truth from their heart;  
who do not slander with their tongue,  
and do no evil to their friends,  
nor take up a reproach against their neighbors;  
in whose eyes the wicked are despised,  
but who honor those who fear the LORD;  
who stand by their oath even to their hurt;  
who do not lend money at interest,  
and do not take a bribe against the innocent.

Those who do these things shall never be moved.

I recently finished listening to a long form interview with Pope Francis that was later published as a book under the title, *The Name of God is Mercy*. Vatican reporter Andrea Tornielli engages him in a fascinating and winding conversation about his experiences and his vision for the future of the Catholic Church.

At various points Tornielli presses Francis on his views of mercy, contrasting them with other stances he has taken while in his role. Because for someone who has chosen to lead the church in a decidedly compassionate and humble spirit, he has also become known for hardline statements he has made, and positions he has similarly taken. Including, perhaps most notably, railing against those involved in organized crime, especially those who do so while also seeking to remain active within the life of the church. He has at various points warned that “one cannot believe in God and be *Mafiosi*,” and publically called for the excommunication of mobsters.\*

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This psalm can be read in a number of ways. It can perhaps seem, at first, like a list of barriers. A set of conditions which are intended to limit access to a holy God, and the places where that God was said to dwell. Like yet another list of restrictions propped up by the community of faith in an effort to maintain a culture of religious purity. Those who lie, speak ill of others, or lash out at their neighbors (vv. 2-3) may not enter. And those who break promises, charge interest on loans, or deal in bribes (vv.4-5) are not to be welcomed.

Read another way, it appears to present a kind of moral ideal, or system of religious merit. If one does the things that they should do, and does not do the things they shouldn't, as we read them described here, then they will be received into God's presence, and will be able to ascend to spiritual heights in life (v.1).

Neither view is likely altogether compelling, from our standpoint. I believe that there is another way that this psalm might be read and understood. One which reflects, I think, something of the spirit that Pope Francis has sought to embody, in his role. It is a call to integrity within a life of worship.

When the writer describes God's tent at the start, it is in reference to the center of worship for ancient Israel – the tabernacle, and later the temple. As when Francis speaks of situations in present-day Italian cathedrals, the sense is that one cannot presume to come and sit down in a pew on Sunday morning, only to then leave and return to a life of deliberate, moral corruption. One cannot presume to kneel and pray to God, only to then turn to prey upon others.

This is the case because the worship that God seeks is more than a brief weekly pause for a pious display. God, we are told, desires obedience more than sacrifice (1 Samuel 15:22). In fact, the Hebrew prophets would later go on to say that God despises any such spiritual show, and would go so far as to demand that it stop, if the vulnerable are being abused and justice is being neglected (Amos 5:21-24, Isaiah 1:12-17).\*

More than a list of exclusions to be maintained, or an ethical standard that must be achieved, then, this psalm presents a call to spiritual undividedness. The ritual practices of the individual and the community are to be paired with an ongoing commitment to right and equitable relationships. This is, of course, precisely what Christians around the world have been wrestling with these past two weeks.

And so, not only a serving as a rebuke directed at underworld criminals, this text sets a pattern of self-reflection, confession and change for *all of us*, as we seek to approach God. As James Waltner writes, “in preparation for worship, worshippers would do well to take inventory: what might we need to clear up regarding words spoken, lifestyle, relationship to others, or misuse of money as citizens of the kingdom?”\* - NS

\* <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45532906>

\* *For this meditation, I relied on Waltner's commentary on the Psalms (Herald Press).*