

PLANTING A SEED

Psalm 15

Intro

So, this may sound strange, but it's what was running through my head as I was trying to deal with these passages. The two passages that we are about to hear are not able to be achieved.

In part? Yes?

To a majority? I think that is possible as well.

In totality? I don't think so, certainly not on our own.

And unfortunately, I think that is how many of us view the follow of God's Law: that they are things that we've got to do and we've got to do them right...and we can't.

The following passages, depending on how we hear them, can very much fit into that channel of thought.

But is that the end of the story? The scripture reads this way.

Psalm 15

¹ O Lord, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?

² Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak the truth from their heart; ³ who do not slander with their tongue, and do no evil to their friends, nor take up a reproach against their neighbors; ⁴ in whose eyes the wicked are despised, but who honor those who fear the Lord, who stand by their oath even to their hurt; ⁵ 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.

James 1:17-27

Intro

Again, our second passage is one that causes us to think, 'I can do that...well, most of it...okay, I can definitely do some it...some of the time', which then leaves us feeling like some level of a failure...when we are willing to pull our head out of the sand to actually look in the mirror.

I know, I'm really bringing the positive stuff so far (please, hold on!).

But is that the end of the story? Thank God, it is not.

However, in order to access the shift that we desperately need, we do need to look in the mirror, recognizing what we have done and what we have left undone. There are more than a few times when such a look can feel, not only demoralizing, but immobilizing, calcifying us in that place of failure and sometimes shame.

Please,...please, please, please do not buy into the lie that that is the end of the story. Because regardless of who you may see in the mirror, because of the Jesus, God sees you in a new way. The scripture reads this way.

James 1:17-27

17 Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. ¹⁸In fulfilment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

19 You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. ²¹Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

22 But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. ²³For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; ²⁴for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. ²⁵But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

26 If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. ²⁷Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

'Planting a Seed'

Rules are important.

How do I know this? Because I live in and around Flemington, NJ...which means that I get to drive the Flemington traffic circle on a rather regular basis...and we all know that thing is seven shades of dangerous and that's even when you follow the rules: can you even picture what it would be like if there were no rules?

Have you ever been to a demolition derby? Yeah, like that.

Now, is that an extreme example? Maybe it is.

But I don't think many of us would advocate for a world without some kind of rules (Anarchists are not viewed the way they are for no reason at all!). This doesn't mean that we don't recognize that there are times when too many rules have been created (after all, we do live in New Jersey), or when rules need to be changed for one reason or another (because as the culture changes, so should the rules that it sets in place).

For example, in the state of New Jersey, no person shall drive a horse attached to a sleigh or sled on a highway 'unless there are a sufficient number of bells attached to the horse's harness to give warning of its approach.' Well, now we know (by the way, how many are 'a sufficient number of bells'?).

So, we are able to abide in the land that rules are necessary and that, by and large, they are good.

But when we get into that place of following the law of God (and I mean that regardless of whether you tend toward thinking the 10 Commandments, or the Summary of the Law that we hear on a weekly basis), we, as individuals who have been blessed with this gift of faith, end up recognizing that we fall short: really, really short. This, as we talked about prior to each of the readings, leaves us in places that tend to not be so positive.

Some of the negative directions that we head?

Maybe we go to a place where we feel ourselves to be failures.

Maybe it shows up where we try and minimize the misstep that was taken, saying or thinking that whatever was done (or not done), 'really doesn't matter', 'it didn't hurt anyone', or maybe even that 'no one was watching.

Maybe that negativity manifests itself in that we just give up because there is nothing that we can do to meet the rule that has been established.

Or maybe, and this may sound odd being described as a negative, but I think that it very much is, maybe we try and perfect ourselves by creating patterns and structures that have us always meeting the letter of the law.

In each of these cases, there was recognition that God wants us to live a certain way, that there are rules that are established by the Creator of all,...but we're just not meeting the mark.

Now, back to the line that I brought up prior to each of the readings: do you believe that's the end of the story? Maybe more appropriately asked should you believe that it's the end of the story?

Said differently, how do you think God sees you?

Do you think that He sees you are the person who screws up and can't get it right?

Should you?

If you dabble anywhere near that pool of reflection, please hear this: you are precious; you are loved, and God sees you as the individual you are in Christ. God sees you as unblemished; God sees you as pure; God sees you as worthy of being in His presence for all eternity...and that means now, too.

I know what is said in the passages that we have heard this morning...and we do need to strive to let the light of Christ shine (over the last few weeks, we have talked about how that needs to be exhibited in a minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day reality).

That is true.

And it is also true that you are precious; you are loved, and God sees you as the individual you are in Christ.

One does not negate the other.

And even more than that, your missteps, however unintentional or intentional they may be, your sinfulness does not change how God sees you: you are precious; you are loved, and God sees you as the individual you are in Christ.

Yes, you've got to own the mess-up, the sinfulness: that's why confession is a regular part of our worship.

But do not allow that confession to become another building block of negativity that ends up driving us away from a healthy connection with God and neighbor. 'O, here I am again. I screwed up again.'

Stop it!

Now ask it again, how does God see you?

Not how would we see ourselves if we were God (that's one of those falsehoods that too many of us end up meandering around if not out and out buying into it).

How does God see you?

Look at the religious constructs that are before us. What do you see? There is the centrality of the Word. There's the cross. There are the tables holding up candles that allow light to shine. There's the communion table with the elements there to remind us of the sacrifice that Jesus made on that cross.

How does God see you?

You are precious; you are loved, and God sees you as the individual you are in Christ.

How do we know this?

Because of what we hear in God's Word. Because of the reality of not only Jesus sacrifice on the cross (taking on the burden of our sin), but then his resurrection from the grave (thereby releasing us from the fear of eternal separation from the Almighty). Because the first fruits of the Spirit are able to shine through even those of us who do fall short in sin.

It is who God was. It is who God is. It is who God will always be.

You are precious; you are loved, and God sees you as the individual you are in Christ.

Yes, my friends, we are called to follow the law of the Lord, obey His rules for our lives.

And yes, we will miss the mark, sometimes it will feel like we miss it more than we make it.

But do not allow that to become the guiding principle by which your life is lived!

Instead, allow this seed to be planted. Please allow this seed to be planted. You are precious; you are loved, and God sees you as the individual you are in Christ.

The end of the story is already written: God sees you as the individual you are in Christ and He sees you that way forevermore.

Let that seed be planted.

After Sermon Prayer

Holy Lord, when we look in the mirror, there are many times when we do not like what we see...not one bit. Unfortunately, many of us end up responding in ways that keep us spinning in that place of negativity. Lord, allow the seed of Your truth to be planted this minute, this hour, this day that we are precious; that we are loved, and that you see us as the individuals we are in the cleansing blood of Your son. Lord, let that seed take root...right now. It is in Jesus' name that we do pray. Amen.