

We have a strange way of pitching the gospel message to the faithful. Many preachers only seem to know how to target their message to the lost. In the presence of sincere believers who have come to worship, these preachers assume the worst of the gathered congregation. “You may look all put together,” the preacher says, “but inside you are filled with deceit and guilt.” The preacher is in the habit of addressing sinners, hard-hearted evil doers, who are strangers to the grace of God, and who have no history of forgiveness and sanctification. He preaches this way even though his congregation has just finished singing songs and hymns with gratitude in their hearts to the Lord.

The seeker in the congregation who has yet to come to Christ must wonder at the power of the gospel to change lives if this seemingly vibrant congregation is so lost and in such need of saving. Psalm 26 defends the sincere worshiper against the well-meaning but misguided preacher who knows no other way to present the gospel than by turning believers into unbelievers at least for the duration of his sermon for the sake of his evangelistic effort. Because of the grace of Christ the worshiper does not feel like damaged goods or estranged from God.

I attended the memorial service for a wonderful saint who modeled for many of us over many years what it meant to walk in integrity before the Lord. His gospel-saturated life had a huge impact especially on young adults. The pastor chose for his sermon text the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). He explained that he did so in order to evangelize the many unbelievers who came for the memorial service. The pastor however fell into an awkward trap and confused many when he equated my friend with the prodigal son, “because everyone knows that at some point he was lost.” It never occurred to the pastor that the saint we knew and respected was best represented by the loving Father in the parable. He was neither like the prodigal nor like the self-righteous older brother, but because of the power of the gospel he was like the compassionate, waiting father. Instead of seeing the possibility of that relationship, the pastor had to reduce him to his pre-conversion state and ignore the power of his grace filled testimony. In a more generalized sense this happens on a regular basis in many congregations. The testimony of the redeemed is squelched and the congregation is reduced to rife with need of salvation.

Examine Me

*Vindicate me, Lord,
for I have a blameless life [for I have walked in my integrity -ESV];
I have trusted in the Lord without wavering,
and have not faltered.
Test me, Lord, and try me,
examine my heart and my mind;
for I have always been mindful of your unfailing love
and have lived in reliance on your faithfulness.*

Psalm 26:1-3

Psalm 26, like Psalm 15, is a “liturgy at the gate,” dedicated to all the sincere souls who come

before the presence of God with humility. These true worshipers have experienced the sweetness of forgiveness and the beauty of redemption. They are seeking vindication and affirmation based on God's redeeming love. The concluding theme of the previous psalm, "May *integrity* and *uprightness* protect me, because my hope, Lord, is in you" (Ps 25:21), introduces the opening theme of Psalm 26, "Vindicate me, O Lord, for I have walked in my *integrity*, and I have trusted in the Lord without wavering" (Ps 26:1). The words, "integrity," "uprightness," and "blameless," describe a state of grace and a way of life rooted in the righteousness of God and received as the gift of God. The person asking for vindication is the same person who lifts his soul to the Lord. She walks in integrity and trusts in the Lord. The concern expressed here is the same as the plea in Psalm 139, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Ps 139:23-23). The apostle Paul captures a similar desire in his prayer: "May your love abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God" (Phil 1:9-11).

Spiritual maturity is not a hopeless ideal but a real possibility. Sadly, we have developed the fine art of self-deprecation in order to win the favor of those who have little intention of growing in Christ. Ironically we put ourselves down to raise ourselves up; we belittle ourselves to impress people with our humility. The psalmist refuses to play the game. Like metal refined by fire, David prays to be tested and tried.

The apostle Peter likened "grief in all kinds of trials" to a refiner's fire that tested the genuineness of faith (1 Pet 1:6-7). Peter admonished believers, "Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ" (1 Pet 4:12-13).

The psalmist is not ashamed to say that he has walked in integrity, that he has trusted the Lord, and that his feet have not slipped. This is not a egotistical boast, but an edifying testimony. To say, "I have always been mindful of your unfailing love and have lived in reliance on your faithfulness," is not patting himself on the back, but witnessing to the Lord's faithfulness. The New Testament equivalent to this speech may be testimony of Paul when he said, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that bring salvation to everyone who believes. . ." (Rom 1:16).

Psalm 26 offers an Old Testament profile for a New Testament reality. The author of Hebrews exhorts believers to approach the presence of God "with *confidence*, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Heb 4:16). The author's focus is not on self-confidence or a winning attitude. The confidence or integrity he calls for is a confidence in Christ that spreads across all personality types and emotional ranges. To "hold firmly to our confidence" (Heb 3:6) means embracing wholeheartedly "the hope in which we glory" (Heb 3:6); it means holding "our original conviction firmly to the end" (Heb 3:14); it means holding "firmly to the faith we profess" (Heb 4:14). Confidence is not just an attitude but a way of life lived in anticipation of God's great reward in heaven (Luke 6:23).

Separation

*I do not sit with the deceitful,
nor do I associate with hypocrites.
I abhor the assembly of evildoers
and refuse to sit with the wicked.
I wash my hands in innocence,
and go about your altar, Lord,
proclaiming aloud your praise
and telling of all your wonderful deeds.*

Psalm 26:4-7

These words are reminiscent of Psalm 1: “Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night” (Ps 1:1-2).

Hopefully, we will not misinterpret the psalmist’s testimony and cry, “Self-righteous!” The psalmist is not like the proud Pharisee in Jesus’ story of the repentant tax collector (Luke 18:9-14). Nor is he like Pilate washing his hands in innocence (Matthew 27:24). The heart of the psalmist checks the popular bias against spiritual maturity. He does not claim “authenticity” as an excuse to disregard God’s will. Like Job he is faithful to his understanding of God’s righteousness and he seeks it with all his heart. Integrity and self-preservation cause him to keep his distance from the deceitful, the hypocrite, the evildoer, and the wicked. He is morally sensitive, not morally superior. He shuns moral pain, but he does not evade his moral obligation.

The line between the assembly of the wicked and the sanctuary of God is clearly felt by the psalmist. He loves the household of faith. His heart’s desire is to “proclaim aloud” the Lord’s praise and tell of all his “wonderful deeds” (Ps 26:7). His “separation” from evil does not shy away from ministry to the lost and needy; it demands it. Jesus and his followers are not of this world but they are *for* the world. Spiritual discipline and moral integrity are coupled with compassionate evangelism in the world. Jesus said, “For the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost” (Luke 19:10). But if we hope to help the world we cannot become like the world. The Danish Christian thinker Søren Kierkegaard believed that Christians were assimilated into the culture so completely that there was no real difference between a Christian and a non-Christian. Everyone was a Christian, because no one was a Christian. Christians cannot be at home in the world and at the same be “a stranger and a pilgrim in the world.”¹

Household of Faith

*Lord, I love the house where you live,
the place where your glory dwells.
Do not take away my soul along with sinners,
my life with those who are bloodthirsty,
in whose hands are wicked schemes,
whose right hands are full of bribes.*

¹ Kierkegaard, *Attack Upon 'Christendom,'* 42.

*I lead a blameless life;
deliver me and be merciful to me.
My feet stand on level ground;
in the great congregation I will praise the Lord.*
Psalm 26:8-12

The psalmist finds his refuge in the glorious sanctuary of God. The image of the house of God invites reflection on the Church. Early Christians had a sense of place, a feeling of being at home, not in a facility but in a family of shared faithfulness to the Word of God. There was no outward temple or tall steeple to symbolize their place, but as they met together there was a powerful presence of the risen Lord Jesus. The early Christians knew that “the Most High does not live in houses made by men” (Acts 7:48). The relational and spiritual character of this “house” built by God *of people* is no less material, temporal, spatial, and concrete than if it had been built with stone and steel. The good news is proclaimed and lived through the household of faith. In a world of hostility the church is an alternative society, a visible sign of the kingdom of God in a fallen world.

Only the Lord can save him. He pleads for assurance that he will not be swept away in judgment along with the violent offenders, the perpetrators of wicked schemes, and the white collar crooks who bribe their way to the top. As confident as he is in his blamelessness and in his resolve to trust in the Lord, he throws himself on the mercy of God. His plea is simple, “Deliver me and be merciful to me” (Ps 26:11). His humble plea for vindication depends upon the grace of God. His integrity and unfaltering trust evidence his earnestness. David serves as a type pointing forward to the assurance of salvation that will be found in Jesus Christ, who has reconciled us to God by his physical body through death and presented us as holy and blameless and above reproach in his sight (see Col 1:22).² For now, the psalmist pictures assurance as standing tall on level ground in the company of God’s people and he is praising the Lord. The conclusion forms an *inclusio* with verse one. Trust in Yahweh prevents his feet from slipping and the promise of redemption gives his feet a firm place to stand. Yahweh has made his faith secure and he declares his praise openly in the great congregation. Calvin writes, “It is highly necessary that every one should publicly celebrate the experience of the grace of God, as an example to others to confide in him.”³

² Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 50.

³ Calvin, *Psalms*, 449.