

## Sermon 21, The Prayer of Righteousness, Psalm 17

**Proposition:** The king prays righteously for God's judgment, with special reference to the prosperity of the wicked and the righteousness that results in seeing God's face.

- I. The King's Plea: Hear My Righteous Cause, vv. 1-2
- II. The King's Faithfulness, vv. 3-5
  - A. Heart
  - B. Mouth
  - C. Feet
- III. The King's Further Plea: Save Me from my Enemies, vv. 6-8
- IV. The King Threatened by the Wicked, vv. 9-12
- V. The King's Closing Plea: Deliver Me from the Prosperous Wicked, vv. 13-14
- VI. The King's Confidence: Righteously Seeing the Face of God, v. 15

### Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the prayer before us is highly instructive. It is a prayer that goes where few of ours dare to go. I was highly surprised to see one of the 19th century commentators say that few psalms are so commonly sung as this one; indeed, in all my years in psalm-singing churches I cannot recall having ever heard the 17th Psalm rendered musically. What can we learn about prayer and our king from this psalm? I will highlight especially the righteous character of this prayer, and of the beholding of God's face with which it closes. This is a prayer of righteousness, a righteousness that defies the prosperity and enmity of the wicked; it's a prayer that our king delights to pray and that we must also delight to pray.

#### **I. The King's Plea: Hear My Righteous Cause, vv. 1-2**

The king's plea is for God to listen to righteousness. We have moved from Ps 4, "Answer when I call, O God who justifies," to the king becoming righteous like the God he worships. The king has been exposed to God's righteousness, and that righteousness has been transferred to him. Because his complaint against the wicked is righteous, he asks God to vindicate him and fully expects God to do so. He says "Let my judgment come forth from thy presence." God makes a decision in His heavenly court, and that decision takes effect on earth. If God simply looks at the case fairly, He will vindicate the king.

Is this how you pray? Again, the psalms are not saying that all God's people are in the right all the time. You are probably wrong sometimes. But when the fat wicked are ready to tear you like lions tear their prey (compare Ps 7), you can and should cry out to God to judge between you and them, and to spare the righteous but condemn the wicked.

So the king's plea is that God would listen to his case and judge him, that is, render a verdict in his favor. Be my judge, God, and tell the world that I am right!

To buttress his case, the king spends the rest of his prayer highlighting the righteousness of his own character and the ethical defects of his enemies. Thus, I would suggest that you first use this prayer to learn about the king. As you grow in knowledge of his righteousness, then you can begin to imitate it. And as you begin to imitate it, and as you grow in appropriating the righteousness that God gives you in Christ (Ps 4), then you can and should pray for vindication in the same terms the king uses here.

## **II. The King's Faithfulness, vv. 3-5**

The king describes his faithfulness in glowing terms. Is this to brag? No, it is to make the case that God ought to vindicate him over against his enemies. Notice that the king doesn't seem to be of the "poor-me" school of Christianity, the kind of believers who think they see legalism lurking every time someone even reads the law, much less preaches it. He seems to have a muscular understanding of righteousness, and to locate it in specific actions and abstinences that he takes with his body. He names three body parts in particular that he has given as instruments of righteousness to serve His Father.

### **A. Heart**

The first is, almost of course, the heart. Notice that his appeal is not to his own knowledge of his righteousness, but to God's. "You have tried my heart." That's the true believer's prayer. You can and should have a clean conscience. But the king does not start by saying "I have a clean conscience; I know I am not guilty here." He starts by saying "You know I am not guilty here." In other words, he pulls a really daring move, the kind of move you can only pull if you're absolutely sure of yourself. He appeals to the judge as his witness.

That's bold. The judge is the arbiter, the one who will decide whether you are as innocent as you claim. To say to the judge, "You know I'm innocent; you've already evaluated and made the decision," especially when you are coming to the judge for relief from your enemies, betrays a remarkable, indeed, an incalculable level of trust.

Your king has this kind of trust in His Father. Jesus Christ already knows God's verdict on Him. He can appeal to God as His judge because He knows what God knows, and He knows that God's verdict on Him is already "Not guilty."

This is a righteous man with a righteous cause. The righteousness here is, and should be, breathtaking. Your king's heart is so faithful that he can appeal to the judge immediately and say "You know my heart."

So now, let me apply this to you. Do you have this kind of trust in God, even if you lack this kind of trust in your own heart? You and I know that if God examined our hearts, He would find a lot of problems in them. We can find a lot of problems in them ourselves, even when our eyes are not looking with equity the way His do. But can you trust that His verdict will be right? That He is the God who justifies, as Ps 4 says — the God who can set you right with Himself and then vindicate you because He just set you right? Can you trust that your king has this kind of righteousness, *and* that He has given it to you by His Spirit? God is not only the searcher of hearts, but the purifier of hearts: "God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; and He made no distinction between us and them,

cleansing their hearts by faith” (Act 15:8-9 NAS). And guess what? After God has purified your heart, you can say with confidence, “You have tried my heart, tested me and found nothing wrong.” Now, I know I just said that we know of many things wrong in our hearts. But though sin remains in us, it is also true that we are clean in Christ. The very inmost core of the heart is the first thing that He cleanses, changing it from stone to flesh. The rest of the Christian life is simply the working out of that cleansing through the fingertips, the brain, and all the rest of the members of the body.

This is why and how we can pray this prayer alongside our king. His heart was clean from birth; ours is clean from rebirth.

### **B. Mouth**

Proverbs emphasizes over and over that there is a direct link between the heart and the mouth, such that out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. What comes out of your mouth reflects only too accurately who you are and what’s in your heart. Hence the king’s statement that just as his heart is clean, so his mouth will not transgress. His mouth is free of deceit; nothing false has ever come out of his mouth.

Again, marvel at the pure mouth of your king! From His pure heart pure words issue, and always have and always will. He has never had to go to someone and say “You know that comment I made? I shouldn’t have said that.” If anyone can bridle his tongue, he is a perfect man and able to control his entire body. That’s Jesus, and only Jesus in this life. The tongue can no (fallen) man tame.

Nonetheless, we can and must imitate our Lord in this. He was entirely free of guile, but like Him, we should purpose that our lips will not transgress. Decide now that you will only speak the truth, cost what it might. A lie is not a cost-saving measure that you are willing to adopt. If it isn’t true then it isn’t spoken, at least not by you.

How do you control your tongue? By seeking the Spirit to purify your heart. Don’t even think about keeping off your tongue the words that you form in your heart. It isn’t going to work. But if your heart is pure, your tongue will be too.

### **C. Feet**

The final body part that the king mentions is his feet. He has stayed off the paths of the violent. Blessed is that man who does not walk in the habits of the wicked! Rather than assaulting and killing those who get in his way, the king says that he has stayed away from all such paths. He has not joined a gang, not kept brass knuckles in his pocket so that he can beat anyone who displeases him. Notice that the king further says that he kept his feet off that path by means of God’s word. How shall a young man cleanse his way? And so forth.

The application to you is obvious, brothers and sisters. Do you want to avoid the ways of the violent? I know you do. The way to avoid them is to listen to the words of God’s lips. What you’re doing right now helps you resist the impulse to attack and beat those who cross you.

The king walks down God’s paths, and his feet do not slip there. Fools stumble on that path; those who refuse to fear God cannot stand or walk there. But those who fear the Lord and

listen to His word have sure footing. They don't fall, and if they do, they get back up and keep going towards heaven. But if the wicked fall on that path, they are down forever.

### **III. The King's Further Plea: Save Me from my Enemies, vv. 6-8**

Well, the king is asking God to vindicate him and condemn his enemies. He has already appealed to the judge's knowledge of his heart, and testified to his own righteous tongue and feet. Now he once again asks for God to save him. In v. 6, he speaks about the effectiveness of prayer. He says "I have called, because you will answer." The calling has already happened, and the answer is coming. When you ask God for help, He helps! The king asks again then that God would incline His ear and listen. When you are calling out to God, ask Him to listen to you. He will; He does. The next verse contains the king's further plea, this one based not only on God's listening ear but on His steadfast love and His identity as Savior. At the right hand of God are pleasures, Ps 16 informed us. Now Ps 17 reminds us that there is safety there too. Do you pray for God to show you His steadfast love and save you from those who rise up to kill you? Is prayer your first and best strategy for dealing with enemies? Prayer is how the king counsels you to deal with enemies. You won't find a single psalm in which the king shares his exercise program and his favorite brands of swords and spears. But you will see a lot about calling on God. Specifically, the king compares himself to two highly precious things. The first is the pupil of the eye. If anything is coming at your eye, you close it and if you have the slightest opportunity, you put up your hand. You would much rather lose a hand than an eye. You protect that eye at just about all costs. In the second comparison, the king compares himself to the baby birds that the mother bird protects. Now, this is a little bit of a cross-species comparison, but I read a few days ago about a mother moose that killed a tourist who was trying to photograph her calf. Mama Moose just stomped the would-be photographer into oblivion. Believe me, mama birds are no less serious about their chicks.

Again, learn who your king is! He doesn't say "Protect me like you would a valuable vinyl record still in the original box." He doesn't say "Keep me like the US Government keeps the gold in Ft. Knox." It's way more personal than that. He asks to be kept the same way you keep your body parts, the same way you keep your precious children. That's the relationship that our king has with our God. He regards himself as a top priority and he's not afraid to ask for that kind of special treatment and protection.

This also tells us something about our God. We would not let the pupil of our eye out of our sight, if you know what I mean. To speak less punnily, we would not allow our pupils or our children to go get threatened in such an aggressive way by the wicked. But God does. He let His precious only Son go into this wicked world, and thence into the hands of a traitor like Judas, a corrupt religious establishment like that led by the Sanhedrin, and a corrupt political system like that of Pontius Pilate. The way God kept His king is the way that He very well might keep you, even if He keeps you as the apple of His eye and hides you under the shadow of His wings. Don't expect an easy life in this world. God will answer this prayer for protection, but clearly, at least some of the time He is going to answer it by means of a vigorous and hazardous conflict

with the wicked. The king wants to be vindicated, and he wants to be protected, but he still has to deal with the wicked as they confront and attack him. It is to that topic that his song now turns.

#### **IV. The King Threatened by the Wicked, vv. 9-12**

These four verses give us a mini-portrait of the wicked. They are described as devastating or ruining the king, as deadly enemies, many in number, who want to kill him and are more than capable of doing so. They are enclosed in a disgusting casing of fat. That means that they are prosperous, that they can afford to eat a lot and get big. Their prosperity also shows how little they care about others, especially the king and anyone righteous like him. They also demonstrate their wickedness by the proud words that pour out of them. Ps 10 spoke of the pride on the face of the wicked; now, Ps 17 speaks of the pride on their tongue. Do you want to know who the wicked are? They are marching in pride parades, giving proud speeches, and generally thinking, looking, and talking like they are extremely impressed with themselves. Their goal is to throw the king on the ground. If they can take you down, they have effectively won. I think of my seminary landlord, who was struck on the head with a baseball bat by a bunch of gangsters in his hometown of Rochester, New York. He didn't go down. He couldn't see; he was blind with the impact and the pain and the stars in front of his eyes, but he took off running away, and to this day he credits his ability to stay up with saving his life. If they can get you to the ground they can beat you to death at their leisure. That's what the enemies want to do to our king. Again, for review, the enemies are the world, the flesh, and the devil. There are plenty of representatives of the world, plenty of people and institutions within it that set themselves against God from time to time. These people and institutions want to take the king down. They are as aggressive as hunting lions, and every bit as dangerous. You need to beware of these wicked enemies and their wicked plans.

#### **V. The King's Closing Plea: Deliver Me from the Prosperous Wicked, vv. 13-14**

The king, having profiled the wicked, now asks again that God would deliver him from the wicked by His hand and by His sword. To be delivered from the wicked, as we have commented before, is above all to be saved from becoming like them. It means being saved from an eternity in hell. It means being saved from a life of being aggressively evil like they are. The king once again profiles the wicked: their inheritance and portion is right here, under the sun. They have everything that heart could wish, as Ps 73 says — everything that is to be had within the immanent frame, within the temporal horizon. They do not have deliverance from death, but they get to where they think that's a good thing: "Son, someday all this will be yours." They actually teach and preach and seem to believe that "death is a natural part of life" and that leaving everything to your children is really as good as enjoying it yourself.

The king wants to be delivered from that kind of worldly thinking, that kind of fleshly thinking, that kind of devilish thinking. He is ready to flee from their prosperity if he has to, because he does not want to walk in the paths of violence with a deceitful heart and a proud mouth.

The same should go for you. You should imitate your king in this. You should be seeking to be delivered from being like the wicked — even if that means being delivered from their prosperity as well as their wickedness.

I'm not saying that poverty is a beautiful bride like St Francis thought. But I am saying that being satisfied with riches, and only riches, is a mark of worldliness, not of godliness!

#### **VI. The King's Confidence: Righteously Seeing the Face of God, v. 15**

What the king holds onto is the prospect of seeing the face of God. This is the greatest of all those “pleasures forevermore” that are at God's right hand. You can call it pie in the sky by-and-by, and yes, it is admittedly outside the immanent frame. But that's because it is a transcendent joy, a joy that makes life worth living in a way that no amount of sexual intercourse or number of beach vacations can. The king will see God's face *in righteousness*. That's good, because to see it in unrighteousness is to be struck dead immediately. This is where the classical myths are lying to you. In the myths, people are struck dead by the hideousness of the Gorgon's face, but in truth, it is the hideous beholder looking upon the beauty of God who will be struck dead.

Like your king, plead with God for righteousness. Ask that He would deliver you from being like the wicked. And then, in the strength of that deliverance, resist the wicked and walk the path of righteousness with the Lord before you and at your right hand.

Prayer is your best weapon for fighting evil and vanquishing enemies. Use it; wield it like your king does, and you will look upon God's face. Amen.