

Psalms for the Summertime: Psalm 112

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Psalm 111-112

We continue our sermon series on the Psalms, Psalms for the Summertime, and we are in the middle of a stretch of Psalms that form us for life in the world. When we pray these psalms, they anchor us in habits of faith, hope, and love that help keep us steady in the face of adversity. Last week in Psalm 27 we studied a psalm that formed us in the habit of worship because worship is the place where God shows us his face. Today in Psalm 112, we will be formed in a different habit of faith.

Actually we won't just be formed by Psalm 112, we will be formed by Psalm 111 and 112. In my study of Psalm 112, I realized that Psalm 111 and 112 go together. They are partner psalms. They are almost certainly written by the same person and they are meant to complement each other. More importantly, the way they are related is both interesting and instructive, so I want to explore that today. That means I'm going to get into some pretty Bible nerdy stuff this morning, but stick with me here; the trail is going to be a bit rocky and steep but I think you'll like the view at the end.

How are Psalm 111 and 112 related? Well, if you turn in your pew Bibles, you will see that the two psalms are about the same length. They have 10 verses each, and they seem to have about the same number of lines within the verses. That's because both poems are alphabetic acrostics. These poems are structured around the Hebrew alphabet, so each line of the poem starts with another letter of the alphabet. The first line of each psalm starts with the Hebrew letter aleph; the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The second line of the psalm starts with the letter beth, the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and so on, all the way down through the 22 letters of the alphabet. So the two psalms are related in their form.

The two psalms are also related by their subject matter. They are both psalms about righteousness. They each approach the subject from a different angle, but they are talking about the same thing. Psalm 112 is a picture of a righteous person. It shows the goodness, and faithfulness of a righteous man, a righteous woman. Psalm 111 is a picture of the righteousness of God. His goodness. His faithfulness. His glory. You could think of these psalms as two portraits hanging next to one another in a grand room, maybe over a fireplace. These paintings are hung side by side and they're meant to be presented together. Psalm 111 is a portrait of the Lord God in his righteousness. Our heavenly Father is looking right at you, overwhelming in his goodness and faithfulness. The painting is full of glory and gravitas. Right next to it hangs the portrait of a child of the Father, a son or a daughter, and you can see the similarities between the two pictures. The child is not looking out at us; the child has his eyes, her eyes firmly on the Father. The painting of the Father is more weighty and magnificent, but in the portrait of the child you can see that the child is a chip off the old block. Some of the same attributes and qualities of the Father show up in the portrait of the child. As we look from portrait to portrait, we can see that the child is made in the image of the Father.

I've talked about these psalms enough. Let's look at the portraits. We are going to read them in a unique way. I will read Psalm 111, and you will read Psalm 112, and we will do it antiphonally. In our bulletin insert, I've arranged each alphabetic line of Psalm 112 to follow the corresponding alphabetic line of Psalm 111. So, I'll read a line of Psalm 111 and then you will read a line of Psalm 112 all the way down the line through the alphabet. You'll notice that each of us will have 22 lines, one for each letter of the Hebrew Alphabet. I wanted to do it this way because it shows how the two portraits relate. Overall, as we read, you will see the same themes in both portraits and sometimes you will see the parallels in the same line. Let's read. This will seem a little stunted, but it follows the alphabetic form of the psalm and I think it will help you see the parallel.

I think you can see the parallels, and I wanted to show you that because I think it's cool, but I also want to show you that because it has something to teach us. The way these two psalms relate to each other forms us into a certain habit of mind and habit of faith. What are these psalms forming in us? Both these psalms, both these portraits, are teaching us the path of righteousness. They do that in a couple of ways.

First, both psalms teach us that there is a way of righteousness in this world. There is a moral order. Both these psalms proclaim the way of God, the commandments of God, the righteousness of God. Both these

psalms tell us that, in this world, there is good and there is evil. There is a right way to live in this world and a wrong way. There is a way that leads to life and flourishing, and there is a way that leads to death and destruction. So, if you pray these psalms and meditate on these psalms you will be inoculated against relativism. There is a way of looking at the moral life which says that everyone should be free to choose how to live their own life and we should just live and let live and I'm OK and your OK. "Follow your bliss man! Choose your own adventure man!" There are books and songs and movies that proclaim that moral view of the world, that form you in that moral view of the world. These psalms are forming you in the opposite direction. These psalms say, 'no, there is a moral order to the universe.' Even the ordered, acrostic structure of the psalms suggest that moral order.

And, second of all, not only do these psalms tell us that there is a moral order; they urge us to follow it. They are written so that we will seek the path of righteousness. They are calling us to seek the righteousness of God, to learn his precepts, to meditate on his commandments, to find his ways. So that's the most straightforward way these psalms form us; they proclaim God's moral order, and they urge us to follow it.

But these psalms do more than that. They also suggest a way to pursue righteousness. The two psalms together suggest the best way to have God's goodness and righteousness fill us. And here's where having both psalms together and reading both psalms together is so important.

If all you had is Psalm 112, you might be tempted to think that righteousness and goodness and blessedness were something you achieved by your own effort. What could happen is something like this: in Psalm 112 the psalmist paints this attractive portrait of a righteous person and so you meditate on that portrait, and you like what you see. The righteous man is steady. He's fearless. He can go through the middle of a crisis and not panic. He's generous, he scatters his gifts to the poor. He's compassionate and gracious; he notices when people are hurting and helps them. He conducts his affairs with justice; he's scrupulous and honest in his relationships with people. He's great with his kids. His faith is real and authentic. You see all these things that the psalmist has painted into his portrait of the righteous man and you think, "Yeah! That's how to live life! That's what I want my life to look like. He's compassionate, I know I've got a long way to go there. He's generous, I'm embarrassed about how little I gave last year. He's not afraid of bad news, I feel like I'm always worrying and fretting. I want to be like Mr. Psalm 112."

And then what do you do? You go into, "I'm going to DO this!" mode. You grit your teeth and you clench your fists and you say, "I'm going to do this. I'm going to work harder on those things. I'm going to manifest my righteousness." We start talking to ourselves: "Come on Peter! be more compassionate! Come on Peter! Be more generous! Come on Peter, stop worrying so much! Come on Peter, be more righteous!" We go inside ourselves and we to create this righteousness out of our own power, our own determination, our own will.

And how does that go? Not so well. It's exhausting because it's all on us, and it's discouraging because we make so little progress and we keep falling flat on our face.

That's what could happen if you just had Psalm 112 on its own. But we don't have the portrait of Psalm 112 on its own. Before we get to the portrait of the righteous human, the psalmist wants us to go to Psalm 111 and the portrait of the righteousness of God. What do we see in that portrait and how might it change the way we search for righteousness? Well, to put it succinctly, Psalm 111 pushes us out of "I'm going to DO this" mode, and shows us a better place to start our search for righteousness.

If we look carefully at the portrait of God's righteousness in Psalm 111, what qualities stand out? There are a number of God's attributes mentioned in Psalm 111, but one of the most common attributes you hear about is his eternal faithfulness. The God of Psalm 111 is a forever God. His righteousness endures forever, he remembers his covenant forever, all his precepts are trustworthy, they are established forever and ever. He has provided redemption for his people; he ordained his covenant forever. Psalm 111 shows us a steady, forever God.

Now look at the portrait of the righteous person in Psalm 112. Does that attribute show up? Yes, it does. How is the righteous person described? Their righteousness endures forever. They will never be shaken. They will be remembered forever. Their hearts are steadfast trusting in the Lord. Look at the portrait of Psalm 112 by itself and you might see his steadiness is self-created: "Wow he is a rock. He must have some inner reserves of strength" But look at both portraits together and you see, "Yes he's strong and steady but that steadiness comes

from God. He's only steady because the forever God has a steadying hand on his shoulder. He's only steady because the forever God is the ground under his feet."

The same with the other qualities. The righteous man is compassionate and merciful. Why? That doesn't come from him, it's because God is compassionate and the man has received the compassion and mercy of God. The man is generous and gives to the poor. Why? That doesn't come from his own native generosity; it's because he knows that God has given him food and redemption and that everything he has comes from the hands of his Lord.

Let me be clear about what I'm saying: it's not just that God is showing the righteous man how to live. It's not just that God says, "Let me show you what righteousness looks like, now go and do likewise"; it's way better than that. God's righteousness isn't just a passive set of rules, it's active. It's a life giving force. God's righteousness is on the move and it's moving towards you. God isn't just gracious and compassionate in general; he's gracious and compassionate towards you. God isn't generous in general; he's been abundantly generous to you. God isn't just faithful and steady in general, he's reaching out to steady you. Psalm 111 doesn't just say that God is righteous; Psalm 111 says that his righteousness and goodness is aimed at you, is working for your good.

I'll take it for granted that everyone here is looking for the path of righteousness. We all want to be good people. We all want to be strong and lovely and good, right? When we put Psalm 111 and 112 together, we see that the path of righteousness does not start with a list of rules. It doesn't start with us gritting our teeth and tightening our belt and saying, "I'm gonna do this!" It starts with a relationship. It starts with us opening our hearts and lives to the righteousness of God, this compassionate, gracious, generous, holy force that has been pursuing us all our life. It doesn't start with effort; it starts with surrender. The rules and the commandments and our moral effort are all important, they're part of this journey. But it begins by us submitting to the God of Psalm 111 and letting his life fill us.

This is a pattern you see all through the Bible. The ten commandments. So important. Such a critical summary of the moral order of the universe. Where do the ten commandments start? Do they start with a rule? No. They start with "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Before God calls the people to justice and righteousness, he's poured out his justice and righteousness and mercy on them when he liberated them from Egypt. You might say that in the ten commandments, God puts Psalm 111 before Psalm 112.

How about the Heidelberg catechism? The catechism talks about the ten commandments and gives a longer interpretation of what God means by those commandments. Those interpretations are good, and helpful and authoritative. Where does the discussion of the commandments come in the catechism? Are they at the beginning? Is our obedience up front? No. The catechism starts with the faithfulness, the obedience, the sacrifice of Jesus. It's not until after we've been told that we are clothed with the righteousness of Jesus that the catechism gets to the commandments. You might say that the catechism starts with Psalm 111 before it gets to Psalm 112.

We are all trying really, hard aren't we? Trying to find this path. Trying to do life the right way. Trying to find this way of goodness and blessing. And we get frustrated because it's hard to figure out what the right path is, and we fight about that. And sometimes we get frustrated because even when we know very well what the right path is, we blow it. We do stupid, self-destructive things. Praise God that his righteousness is more than a passive standard. Praise God that his righteousness is a living, active thing in pursuit of us.

How far is God's righteousness willing to go? All the way to the cross of course. In Jesus the living and active righteousness of God takes on flesh, and Jesus stops at nothing to save us. He goes to the cross, he breaks the power of sin, and he puts his Spirit into our hearts so that we can be clean, so that we can be whole, so that we can be righteous. The path is long and hard, but don't be afraid, and don't be discouraged, because the righteousness of God is moving toward you with holy intent, Jesus is interceding for you, the Holy Spirit is working inside you, and you will be changed.

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