



THE CHURCH OF THE  
RESURRECTION

WASHINGTON, DC

## **BLESSED SPEECH (Psalms 1 - 150)**

2018 Parish Retreat - Plenary Sessions 2 & 3

May 5, 2018

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*Blessed is the one*

*who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,  
nor stands in the way of sinners,  
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;  
but his delight is in the law of the Lord,  
and on his law he meditates day and night.*

*He is like a tree*

*planted by streams of water  
that yields its fruit in its season,  
and its leaf does not wither,  
and in everything it does it prospers.*

*The wicked are not so,*

*but are like chaff that the wind drives away.  
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous  
for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked will perish.*

*Psalm 1*

In what follows, we will explore how to “talk the walk” on the way of the righteous in Psalm 1. This will be a further examination of the Blessed Life introduced during the previous (first) session. Talking the walk involves blessed speech with God, ourselves, and one another. After laying some groundwork, we’ll consider each aspect of blessed speech in turn.

### **THE BLESSED LIFE (REVIEW)<sup>1</sup>**

In Psalm 1, the blessed life is pictured by a great tree (1:3) whose roots, fruits and hardiness teach us about the nature of blessedness. The tree’s **roots** go down to streams of living water, enabling a life of constant communion with God. The **fruits** come seasonally, as God’s grace overflows in us for the benefit of others around us. **Hardiness** is what separates the blessed life from manmade prosperity. Because we live in a fallen world, everyone experiences periods of

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Claire, “The Blessed Life (Psalm 1),” May 4, 2018.

difficulty and opposition. The fires of adversity expose the good life apart from God as superficial. Those who are rooted in the Lord don't wither but continue to prosper.

Psalms 1 also describes how to lay hold of the blessed life, by both *walking* and *talking* the way of the blessed. We must choose our own paths, whether the way of the wicked or the way of the righteous. However, we will not walk alone. Even the names of the paths show that these ways are walked in community. One path offers the companionship of the wicked, of sinners, and of scoffers. The other path offers the companionship of the righteous and of the Lord. To experience the blessed life and become like the great tree, we must follow Jesus. Only through repentance and faith can anyone enter the way of the blessed.

Furthermore, to walk the walk one must also *talk the walk*. Each path has its own lingo. One begins with the *counsel* of the wicked, devolves into scoffing, and becomes chaff in the wind. The other path involves delighting in God's word, and whispering it to yourself night and day.

Psalms 1 stands at the beginning of all the psalms as an overture, establishing the melodic line for the entire psalter. The themes of fruitfulness, the two ways, companionship along the way, blessed speech, etc. all recur again and again throughout the Psalms. Once activated to these themes, readers will see them everywhere. In what follows we will learn more about blessed speech from the rest of the psalms, which are, after all, the first and best prayer book for the people of God. The psalms teach us how to pray, and more fundamentally, how to talk.<sup>2</sup> But first we must think about how words work.

## 1. THE POWER OF OUR WORDS

### 1.1. Word Power Introductory Exercise

How do words have power? Let's begin by reflecting on remarks that have been said to you and that have stuck with you. Take some time to write down what you remember. Be honest and write what was really said, even if it was unpleasant. Also note who said it, the context, and any thoughts you have about how or why it stuck with you.

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Now let's sort these remarks in two ways. First, consider the impact of each comment that you remember. Did it have a low or a high impact? Circle ones that were high impact. Second, consider whether it blessing or a curse. If it was constructive, then put a "+" beside it. If it was destructive, then put a "-" beside it. Keep these evaluations in mind as we talk about the power of our words.

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<sup>2</sup> Anglicans around the world pray through all the Psalms every seven weeks by way of the "Daily Office," i.e. morning and evening prayer. To get started praying the Psalms daily, visit <http://dailyofficeexpress.org/>

## 1.2. Word Power—the Current Problem

We're relational creatures, made in the image of the triune God who eternally exists in relationship. Because we're relational creatures, we communicate. Like God, we use language to both speak and listen. Like God, our words really matter; they have power to create and destroy. That's what we're continually doing with our words, whether spoken or written, whether in person or online. We wield power as we use our words to create and destroy.

*We live at a time when word power is especially toxic.* In one sense, there's nothing new under the sun. Fake news has been around since Adam and Eve walked in the counsel of the wicked serpent in the garden (Genesis 3). Cynicism regarding the truth didn't begin in the modern era; Pilate's carefree attitude toward the truth was a factor in Jesus' wrongful death sentence and brutal crucifixion.<sup>3</sup> We continue to tell lies, as we always have done, because of our bondage to the father of lies (John 8:44).

On the other hand, times have changed. With advanced communications technology, we are bombarded by words. One study has shown that the average American may now encounter about 100,000 words per day.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, urbanization and modernization have left us more independent and more isolated from our neighbors than ever. We're surrounded by the chatter of strangers. Consequently, it's easy to become indifferent to the consequences of our words. We can say whatever we please, or so we think, because the people around us are unknown to us, and we're not likely to see them again. Given our communications technology, whatever we do say has the potential to reverberate infinitely around the world.

In March, MIT researchers published a study of news stories retweeted via Twitter. They found that "falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information, and the effects were more pronounced for false political news than for false news about terrorism, natural disasters, science, urban legends, or financial information."<sup>5</sup> "It took the truth about six times as long as falsehood" to reach people.

Not only do we live at a time when word power is especially toxic, but *we also live in a city where deception is notoriously commonplace.* Perhaps you've heard the old joke: Q. How do you tell when politicians are lying? A. Whenever their mouths are open. In truth, Washingtonians are blessed to have so many dedicated women and men serving in elected office. Arguably no government in the world is better. Yet it's extraordinarily difficult for leaders to remain in office without practicing some measure of spin. Who could blame them? They're put in an impossible

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<sup>3</sup> Jesus said, "For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice." Pilate said to him, "What is truth?" John 18:37-38.

<sup>4</sup> Doug Ramsey, "How Much Information?" University of California, San Diego, December, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral. "The spread of true and false news online." *Science*. March 9, 2018. Vol. 359, Issue 6380, pp. 1146-1151.

bind trying to do their jobs and also appease a culture that's driven primarily by emotional appeals rather than substantive details. Nevertheless, the fact that our lawmakers survive by instinctively and continually reshaping the truth suggests that there's a trickle-down effect. It begs the question: can anyone survive in Washington without developing a spin habit? I'd wager that few of us are innocent in this regard.

In short, because of both our time and our place, we write and speak with extraordinary power, yet there are few cultural restraints on what we say. Simply by going with the flow, our words have the capacity to be catastrophically destructive.<sup>6</sup>

According to Psalm 1, destructive speech isn't the path to the blessed life. Instead, it's identified with the way of the wicked. That's why we must change course. By following Jesus on the way of the righteous, we can discipline our tongues and learn to speak the truth in love (James 3, Ephesians 4:15).

### 1.3. How Do Words Work?

Sometimes things said to us have a greater impact than others. Why is that? How do words work? And why do some have more power than others?

There are many biblical examples of powerful words:

- The centurion's servant in Matthew 8:5-13. Jesus offered to go to the centurion's home in order to heal him. The centurion responded by saying, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, *but only say the word*, and my servant will be healed." Indeed, Jesus did so, and the servant was healed.
- The creation story in Genesis 1. The repeated refrains of "And God said..." and "it was so" describe how God spoke the cosmos into being out of nothing.
- Formal instances of blessing, e.g. Isaac's blessing of Jacob in Gen 27:30-40. After Jacob tricked Isaac to receive his father's blessing, Esau came and begged Isaac to bless him as well. Esau said, "Bless me, even me also, O my father!" "Have you not reserved a blessing for me?"

How do these words work? A century ago, at the pinnacle of modern skepticism toward the Bible, the scholarly consensus was that the ancient Israelites believed that words had magical powers. Just as Harry Potter disarmed opponents by exclaiming, "*expelliarmus*," it was

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<sup>6</sup> E.g. the "Pizzagate" conspiracy theory during the 2016 presidential election cycle, in which rumors spread through cyberspace of a child pornography ring in a NW DC pizza parlor. That December, a Christian man from Salisbury, NC, armed with an AR-15-style rifle, raided the restaurant in order to release the captive children he had read about on the internet. Three shots were fired, but thankfully no one was injured. The man is now serving a 4 year prison sentence for his misguided heroism.

thought that ancient Israelites believed they could wield power over nature and others simply by saying the right words in the right way. This idea developed from a unique feature of the Hebrew language. In Hebrew, דָּבָר, *Dabar*, can be translated both “word” and “thing.” From this accident of philology, critical scholars theorized that the ancient Hebrews had a primitive, concrete view of language. Unlike sophisticated moderns who understand that words symbolize things—so their theory went—the ancient Hebrews must have thought that words and things were interchangeable. Therefore, they believed (wrongly) that words possessed magical powers.

Although this theory has been largely discredited, its consequences continue to be felt today in two ways. First, this kind of thinking gave rise, at least in part, to the “Word of Faith” movement in fundamentalist and pentecostal churches. “Word of Faith” proponents teach that those who say the right words in the right way with enough passionate faith will be able to receive healing, prosperity, etc. This is a profound misunderstanding of prayer, as a tool to wield power over nature rather than as a means of communion with God. Second, because the magic words hypothesis was used to explain biblical narratives, it has been easy in more skeptical contexts to dismiss huge portions of the Bible because they represent so-called “primitive, magical thinking” about the way language works.

Thankfully, there’s a better way to think about how words work. Sociological insights into language have demonstrated that words do not have power in and of themselves. Rather, words have power by virtue of the ways a particular culture uses them. For example:

- ***Vocabulary, grammar, and articulation can give words power.*** Within our recognized and honored institutions, rarely does anyone rise to the top without having a strong command of “proper English.” Conversely, marginal groups typically have their own vocabulary, grammar and cadence as well. Rarely does anyone become a gang leader, for example, without learning to talk like they belong.
- ***Context makes a difference.*** A promise made over a cheeseburger at fast food restaurant is very different from an oath sworn in a courthouse, even if the words that are spoken are identical. Likewise, words spoken during a crisis will be felt and remembered differently than those spoken in everyday life.
- ***The stature of the speaker always matters.*** Consider the one who says, “I pronounce you husband and wife.” Such a pronouncement is binding only if the one who says it has been given authority by society (in our context, a licensed minister or justice of the peace). Further, while the same legally-binding declaration can be made by anyone credentialed to do so, some speakers carry more gravitas than others. The rent-a-chaplain in a Las Vegas wedding drive-thru doesn’t have much. Ministers who have known and cared for a couple have much more.

Thus, it's the "who, what, where and when" of things said that determine their power. "I'm leaving and won't be back" could be enormously powerful, but not necessarily so, particularly if it's spoken by an American tourist to the desk clerk at a Bangkok hotel. If, however, it's said by one spouse to another, or a child to a parent, it will be felt and remembered for a lifetime.

How, then, are we to understand what appear to be magical pronouncements in the Bible? In the case of Isaac's blessing of Jacob and not Esau, the power of the father's blessing wasn't magic. It was socially conferred. In the Ancient Near East, leadership of the family was passed down to the next generation through the father's blessing. This blessing always was given only once, to one son, who was then understood to be the leader of the family when the father died.<sup>7</sup> Leadership by committee wasn't an option; only one son could do the job. Physically speaking, Isaac could have blessed both Jacob and Esau, but it would have been a colossal faux pas, the social equivalent of polygamy today. Just as a husband in our culture can say the words "I do" to a second wife, but is socially prohibited from so doing, so also Isaac could not "also bless" Esau after having blessed Jacob. Social convention forbade it.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to our sociological understanding of how words work, neuroscience has also provided insights into the way that words affect us physically. Each of our brains has a language center (usually on the left side), an emotional processing center (usually on the right side), and a basic life support center (in the brain stem, i.e. "the lizard brain"). Though all are distinct, they nevertheless communicate with one another. Whenever one area is activated, it impacts how the other areas operate. Thus, every time you try to remember a painful remark that was said to you, your heart may start racing, and you may experience shortness of breath and cognitive disorientation, disrupting your train of thought. Or, on the other hand, you may remember something traumatic with vivid clarity, even smelling the same smells as if you were right back in the moment. Why do these physical reactions occur? Because God made us with minds that are integrated with our bodies. Try as we might, we cannot escape the interconnectedness of body, thought, emotions and memory.

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<sup>7</sup> Though Esau was the firstborn son, it was Jacob who ended up with both the birthright and the blessing. The birthright conferred an extra measure of the inheritance. E.g. if there were seven sons, the father would divide his wealth into 8 portions, and the son receiving the birthright would receive his portion as well as the extra portion. The blessing conferred leadership over the family after the father died.

<sup>8</sup> What about the words of God in the Bible? When God creates, or curses, or when Jesus "says the word" and the Centurion's servant is healed, are these "magical words"? We simply don't know. God doesn't explain to us the mechanics behind the words that he says. Perhaps his words do have "magical power" within the universe he created. That would make sense, inasmuch as God is the owner and creator and sustainer of the cosmos. On the other hand, it may work differently. For example, the angels may do his bidding every time he speaks. We don't know.

#### 1.4. Word Power Exercise Evaluation

Now that we better understand how words work, take some time to process the remarks you remembered and wrote down during the introductory exercise. As you sorted them, were they mostly low or high impact? Why? Were they mostly constructive or destructive? Do you remember the context of when and where the remarks were made? Was the speaker a person of stature or insignificance in your life? Did you feel any physical sensations in remembering what was said? In thinking through these things we gain more insight into the power of words.

#### 1.5. Word Power Illustrated

Many of us still remember and feel very strongly certain remarks our parents said to us years before. This experience can go both ways, as theologian Stanley Hauerwas demonstrates in the following story about his father.<sup>9</sup>

*This story relates an incident between me and my father that occurred in an instant but has stayed with me for many years. In order to make it intelligible, I need to supply a little background.*

*My father is a good but simple man. He was born on the frontier and grew up herding cows. Living with a gun was and is as natural to him as living with an automobile is for me. He made his living, as his father and five brothers did, by laying brick. He spent his whole life working hard at honest labor. It would have simply been unthinkable for him to have done a job halfway. He is, after all, a craftsman.*

*I have no doubt that my father loves me deeply, but such love, as is often the case among Westerners, was seldom verbally or physically expressed. It was simply assumed in the day-to-day care involved in surviving. Love meant working hard enough to give me the opportunity to go to college so that I might have more opportunity than my parents had.*

*And go on I did in abstruse subjects like philosophy and theology. And the further I went the more unlike my parents I became. I gradually learned to recognize that blacks had been unfairly treated and that the word “nigger” could no longer pass my lips. I also learned that Christianity involved more than a general admonition to live a decent life, which made belief in God at once more difficult and easy. And I learned to appreciate art and music that simply did not exist for my parents.*

*Married to a woman my parents would always have difficulty understanding, I then made my way to Yale Divinity School, not to study for the ministry, but to study theology. During my second year in divinity school, every time we called home the primary news was about the gun on which my father was working. During the off months of the winter my father had undertaken to build a deer rifle. That meant everything from boring the barrel and setting the sight to hand-carving the stock. I thought that was fine, since it certainly had nothing to do with me.*

*However, that summer my wife and I made our usual trip home and we had hardly entered the door when my father thrust the now completed gun into my hands. It was indeed a beautiful piece of craftsmanship. And I immediately allowed as such, but I was not content to stop there. Flush with theories about the importance of truthfulness and the irrationality of our society’s gun policy, I said, “Of course, you realize that it will not be long before we as a society are going to have to take all these things away from you people.”*

*Morally, what I said still seems to me to be exactly right as a social policy. But that I made such a statement in that context surely is one of the lowest points of my “moral development.” To be sure, there are ready explanations supplied by the Freudians to account for my behavior, but they fail to do justice to the moral*

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<sup>9</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *The Hauerwas Reader*, John Berkman and Michael Cartwright, eds. Duke University Press, 2001, pp 246-47. Excerpted from *Character, Narrative and Growth in the Christian Life*, 1980.

*failure my response involved. For I was simply not morally mature enough or skillful enough to know how to respond properly when a precious gift was being made.*

*For what my father was saying, of course, was “Someday this will be yours and it will be a sign of how much I cared about you.” But all I could see was a gun, and in the name of moral righteousness, I callously rejected it. One hopes that now I would be able to say, “I recognize what this gun means and I admire the workmanship that has gone into it. I want you to know that I will always value it for that and I will see that it is cared for in such a manner that others can appreciate its value.”*

## 2. TALKING THE WALK WITH ONE ANOTHER

Having considered how words work, now let’s explore how we may use words to bless rather than curse. Our focus will be the use of words in the Psalms. No book in the Bible has more to say about our speech than the Psalms. Once you’re alerted to the theme of “blessed speech” in the Psalms, you’ll take note of it on every page.

We will explore the practice of blessed speech in three overlapping areas: with each other, ourselves, and with God. Let’s begin where Psalm 1 begins, by considering how we talk with one another.

### 2.1. The Curse of Wicked Speech in the Psalms

The first concern raised by Psalm 1 is destructive speech: “Blessed is the person who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, or stand in the way of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers.” This particular psalm, as well as the entire book of Psalms, begin with a warning: ***the words we say to one another can lead away from the blessed life***, towards becoming chaff in the wind.

The Psalms are not a random collection; there’s organization and order.<sup>10</sup> Both Psalms 1 and 2, taken together, constitute an introductory overture to the book of Psalms.<sup>11</sup> They introduce the psalter’s major themes of the blessed life and the blessed king, respectively. Then, as the action

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<sup>10</sup> James Hely Hutchinson, “The Psalter as a Book,” in Andrew G. Shead, ed., *Stirred by a Noble Theme: The Book of Psalms in the Life of the Church*, Apollos: UK, 2013, pp 23-45. Hutchinson argues that the five “books” of the Psalms are organized conceptually as follows:

Introduction (Pss 1-2)

Book I (Pss 3-41): David as a (reverse) type

Book II (Pss 42-72) Hope for the son of David

Book III (Pss 73-89) The crisis of the exile

Book IV (Pss 90-106) A call to meditate on God’s Word

Book V (Pss 107-150) Gratitude for God’s covenant loyalty

<sup>11</sup> Psalms 1 and 2 go together as an overture. The first word of Psalm 1, “blessed,” is the last word of Psalm 2. Together they read like the prologue to John’s Gospel prior to the start of the action.

begins with Psalm 3, King David's concern focuses on the destructive consequences of wicked speech.<sup>12</sup> Note how this theme arises repeatedly in the first three psalms of Book I:

**Psalm 3.** The superscription indicates a tragic setting: King David's son, Absalom, had rebelled against his father and made a play for the throne. David had to flee for his life, and this particular psalm captures his prayer in a time of fear and sorrow. Of all the concerns on David's heart, the first one he identifies is what his many enemies are saying about him:

*O Lord, how many are my foes!  
Many are rising against me;  
many are saying of me,  
"There is no salvation for him in God."*

*Psalm 3:1-2*

**Psalm 4.** The problem of wicked speech remains at the forefront of David's concern. The two paths of Psalm 1, with their two communities, are identified by their speech. The wicked use empty and dishonest words, while the righteous speak to God:

*O men, how long shall my honor be turned into shame?  
How long will you love vain words and seek after lies?  
But know that the Lord has set apart the godly for himself;  
the Lord hears when I call to him.*

*Psalm 4:2-3*

**Psalm 5.** In this Psalm, David identifies the wicked as boastful, deceitful liars, flatterers who fall by their own counsels. The righteous, however, are those who rejoice and sing praises to God:

*For you are not a God who delights in wickedness;  
evil may not dwell with you.  
The boastful shall not stand before your eyes;  
you hate all evildoers.  
You destroy those who speak lies;  
the Lord abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man.  
For there is no truth in their mouth;  
their inmost self is destruction;  
their throat is an open grave;  
they flatter with their tongue.  
Make them bear their guilt, O God;  
let them fall by their own counsels;*

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<sup>12</sup> About ½ of the psalms identify David as their author. About ⅓ have no attributed author, while another ⅙ are attributed to others like Asaph and the Sons of Korah. King David is identified in the Bible as the author of all the psalms in Book 1 (1-41) except Psalm 1.

*because of the abundance of their transgressions cast them out,  
for they have rebelled against you.  
But let all who take refuge in you rejoice;  
let them ever sing for joy,  
and spread your protection over them,  
that those who love your name may exult in you.*  
*Psalm 5:4-6, 9-11*

In surveying Pss 3-5, do you see how the two communities of Psalm 1, with their respective speech patterns, recur through subsequent psalms? These constitute the antagonists and protagonists in the larger story of the psalter. Once you've begun to recognize them, you'll see them everywhere as you read through the psalms on your own.

Wicked speech wasn't King David's only challenge. He was twice a hunted man, first during King Saul's insecure madness, and then again during Absalom's rebellion. Of course, David also stumbled and fell into sin on different occasions, including some spectacularly grievous ways. Yet in my reading of the Psalms, I find that what stuck with David the most were the unkind things people said about him, e.g. the slander and the scoffing. Often when he set out to write and sing a new psalm, the burden on his heart that put him in a song-writing frame of mind was wicked speech, spoken of him by someone else.

King Jesus, the long-awaited Son of David, faced the same difficulty. When Jesus began to lead his disciples in the way of the righteous, he quickly encountered opposition from the Pharisees and the Scribes. While these opponents did want to hurt Jesus and eventually were complicit in Jesus' death, the Gospels nevertheless focus primarily on the destructive power of their words. The Pharisees and Scribes were very persistent in their efforts to somehow trip up Jesus or otherwise discredit him through slander, scoffing, and deceptive language.

## **2.2. Loneliness in the Psalms and Today**

Wicked speech takes a huge emotional toll on its hearers. As we read through the psalms, it often feels as if King David is surrounded by enemies, totally outnumbered, and feeling utterly alone. Over and over and over again he cries out for God's intervention and help. On the rare occasion that David does mention a friend, he's usually describing either abandonment or betrayal. e.g. "My friends and companions stand aloof from my plague, and my nearest kin stand far off" (Ps 38:11).

David's loneliness comes as a result of wicked speech. As one who seeks to walk with the Lord in the way of the righteous, David is ostracized by those who walk in the counsel of the wicked and sit in the seat of scoffers.

Today, because we live in a time when speech is especially toxic, it's no surprise that loneliness has become a health epidemic. Recent studies suggest that many people in the U.S. and Great

Britain often feel lonely.<sup>13</sup> As a result, British Prime Minister Theresa May has established a “Minister of Loneliness” to help combat the problem.<sup>14</sup>

Long-term loneliness can be hazardous to your health. Loneliness has the same deleterious effect as smoking 15 cigarettes a day in terms of health care outcomes and costs.<sup>15</sup> It’s associated with greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, depression and anxiety.

If you’re not feeling lonely, chances are you work with someone who does. As recent studies have shown, America’s loneliest workers are single and childless, and often well educated.<sup>16</sup> Doctors and lawyers are the loneliest of all among American workers. The lonely are particularly likely to work for the government. And finally, those who are non-heterosexual and non-religious are at the greatest risk of loneliness.

### **2.3 Talking the Walk with One Another**

Loneliness is symptomatic of our fallen world. We were created for community. Sin drives us toward isolation, but Jesus beckons us to follow him in the way of the righteous, the way of fellowship with him and with one another.

How do the Psalms recommend that we deal with the loneliness of not walking with in the counsel of the wicked, or standing in the way of sinners, nor sitting in the seat of scoffers? We gather with our brothers and sisters and join them in fellowship with our risen King.

Consider Psalm 22, penned by King David, yet also a brilliant picture of the Lord Jesus in his passion and in his resurrection.<sup>17</sup> Psalm 22 is familiar because we always read it during Holy Week (usually on Maundy Thursday or Good Friday). Many elements of the psalm anticipate Jesus’ passion, especially the opening line: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

However, let’s not focus on the agony of the first twenty-one verses. Instead, consider the triumph of the resurrection in the last ten verses:

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<sup>13</sup> Rhitu Chatterjee, “Americans Are a Lonely Lot, and Young People Bear the Heaviest Burden,” [NPR.org](http://NPR.org), May 1, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Katie Hafner, “Researchers Confront an Epidemic of Loneliness,” *The New York Times*, September 5, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/threat-to-health/>

<sup>16</sup> Shawn Achor, Gabriella Rosen Kellerman, Andrew Reece, and Alexi Robichaux, “America’s Loneliest Workers, According to Research,” *Harvard Business Review*, March 19, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> As Christians we read the Psalms with double vision. In the foreground, King David is a lovely tree bearing some fruit. Standing in the background is a Giant Sequoia, miles higher than the first tree. That’s King Jesus, son of David, and also David’s Lord (Ps 110). Despite his imperfections, King David is a sign and shadow of the perfect Lord Jesus who is to come.

22. *I will tell of your name to my brothers;  
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:*
23. *You who fear the Lord, praise him!  
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him,  
and stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!*
24. *For he has not despised or abhorred  
the affliction of the afflicted,  
and he has not hidden his face from him,  
but has heard, when he cried to him.*
25. *From you comes my praise in the great congregation;  
my vows I will perform before those who fear him.*
26. *The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied;  
those who seek him shall praise the Lord!  
May your hearts live forever!*
27. *All the ends of the earth shall remember  
and turn to the Lord,  
and all the families of the nations  
shall worship before you.*
28. *For kingship belongs to the Lord,  
and he rules over the nations.*
29. *All the prosperous of the earth eat and worship;  
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,  
even the one who could not keep himself alive.*
30. *Posterity shall serve him;  
it shall be told of the Lord to the coming generation;*
31. *they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn,  
that he has done it.*

*Psalm 22:22-31*

In light of Ps 22, how ought we to respond to wicked speech and the loneliness epidemic? These final ten verses send us to go to church! We go because the triumphant, resurrected messiah king has taken his rightful place as worship leader (vv. 22-23).<sup>18</sup> All of us little trees gather around the giant Sequoia, who leads us in lifting our voices in praise to God. Jesus leads in praise because his Father rescued him (v 24). He teaches us the words to sing, and we sing along with him. Thus he both leads and feeds those who gather. (vv 25-26). We extend our roots out to his living water and drink deeply. Yet we don't go to church to hide from the world. We bring them with us (vv 27-28). It's a huge party for both those who trusted him prior to death (v. 29) and those yet to be born (vv. 30-31).

These verses paint a beautiful picture of corporate worship, as believers gather around the risen Lord Jesus to be fed by him, and to grow in his likeness. It's hard to feel lonely when

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<sup>18</sup> Edmund Clowney, "The Singing Savior," *Moody Monthly* (1979) 40-42. Cf. Michael Glodo, "Singing with the Savior," *Reformed Quarterly* (1998).

you're singing praises with the risen Lord and his people.

Psalms 22 also helps us make sense of what King David was doing when he felt all alone in his struggle against the wicked speech of his enemies. He opened his heart to his brothers and sisters in the church. He wrote songs such as this one, not only as prayers to the Lord, but also to share his heart with those fellow believers who were his companions in the way.

David was no wimp. He fought lions and Goliath the giant, and he won! In many respects, David represents the masculine ideal. Yet he was also vulnerable. With honesty and transparency, David shared his fears and pain with God and with us.

Being vulnerable isn't a sign of weakness, it's merely a sign of being human. As Curt Thompson says, "To be human *is* to be vulnerable."<sup>19</sup> And "vulnerability is the state that we must pass through in order to deepen our connection with God and others, given our condition. There is no other way."<sup>20</sup> In fact, "the process of being known in the context of our vulnerability *within* the church (is) one of the most powerful means of evangelism and healing."<sup>21</sup>

In writing the psalms, King David *practiced* blessed speech. First he meditated on God's word, and then spoke it out, back to God, to himself, and to his brothers and sisters. There was a lot of fruit in David's life, but in my opinion this was his best fruit by far—this blessed speech that we now call the Psalms. David's words teach us how to feel and what to say as we endeavor to follow Jesus on the way of the righteous.

## 2.4 Practicing Blessed Speech

There's something particularly beneficial in not only thinking the truth, but also speaking it aloud. St. Paul makes this point in Romans 10:10 when he says, "For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved." Why does it matter that we say things aloud?

Speech is an incarnational activity. It converts our inner world into something others can receive and feel. Resurrection member Acacia Danielson is a professional actor who has given a lot of thought to incarnation speech. Acacia says:

*If we are to reclaim our vocation as truth-tellers, we must reclaim our understanding of language as physical, and therefore as social and world-building. Of the five senses, sound is the only one that is interior: sound waves penetrate and resonate within our bodies. The voice comes from our inmost being—physically in how sound is produced, and spiritually as an expression of our deepest needs and desires—and then it travels to someone else's inmost being. Words matter because they become flesh. They're born in the spirit and are*

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<sup>19</sup> Curt Thompson, *The Soul of Shame*, IVP: 2016, p. 120.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

*incarnated by our speaking them.*<sup>22</sup>

Because of the incarnational nature of language, we can “talk the walk,” and in so doing build up others as well. By practicing blessed speech aloud, we can break down the strongholds of loneliness and enter into one another’s worlds in ways that bring life and healing. That’s the blessed way. It’s what the righteous do.

### 3. TALKING THE WALK WITH OURSELVES

#### 3.1. The Universal Heart Murmur

In the Psalms, it is the heart and not the brain that is the center of the person. Consider how King David begins Psalm 9: “I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart; I will recount all of your wonderful deeds.” And consider this familiar line from the end of Ps 19: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.” (Ps 19:14)

In medicine, heart murmurs are a bad sign. In faith, however, there’s a different kind of heart murmur that’s normal and universal. In this case, it’s the murmuring affections of our hearts.<sup>23</sup> In Psalm 1:2, the righteous and blessed person meditates, or murmurs, God’s word day and night. But as we’ll see in a moment, the heart can also murmur wicked speech as well. It’s not a question of whether your heart murmurs, but rather what it's saying.

Jesus was continually bombarded by the Pharisees’ wicked speech. One day Jesus pinpointed the source. Jesus’ opponents had challenged him because his disciples disregarded their Pharasaic purification rituals at mealtimes. Jesus said:

*Hear and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth ... Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person.*

*Matthew 15:10-11, 17-20*

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<sup>22</sup> During the 2018 Parish Retreat, Acacia provided some exercises for us to experience one another’s sound. People sat back to back, spines touching as much as possible from the base of the neck to the sacrum. They took turns saying sounds, phrases and Scripture, while their partners felt for resonance within their own bodies.

<sup>23</sup> From the previous message on The Blessed Life (Psalm 1): “The Hebrew word translated meditate (הגה, *hagah*) describes the steady self-talk that people and animals engage in. The word is used in the Old Testament to capture what pigeons do when they coo, and what lions do when they growl. For people, it seems that the idea is one of reading aloud quietly, or muttering to themselves their own advice. Thus, like an engine idling, blessed persons are constantly whispering God’s word to themselves, all the time, day and night.”

Jesus indicated that there's a deep connection between our inner selves and our mouths. What comes out as speech originates as murmurings in our hearts. Therefore, we pray with David that the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts might be acceptable in the sight of the Lord.

### 3.2 The Internal Chaos of Wicked Speech

Psalms 9 and 10 offer an especially sobering picture of the fruit of a heart that murmurs wicked speech. Originally one Psalm, Psalm 9-10 is also the first alphabetical acrostic in the Psalms.<sup>24</sup> Each couplet of verses begins with a successive Hebrew letter. Thus, 9:1 begins with א (Aleph), 9:3 begins with ב (Beth), etc. all the way to 10:17 which begins with the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, ט (Tav). However, for some reason, verses 10:2-11 are messed up. They should begin with the Hebrew letters between the English equivalents of L and Q, but they don't. For years scholars have puzzled over this problem. Is it a mistake? Did a scribe goof up? What happened?

Interestingly, the verses that aren't alphabetical are all about the self-talk of the wicked:

*In arrogance the wicked hotly pursue the poor;  
let them be caught in the schemes that they have devised.  
For the wicked boasts of the desires of his soul,  
and the one greedy for gain curses and renounces the Lord.  
In the pride of his face the wicked does not seek him;  
all his thoughts are, "There is no God."  
His ways prosper at all times;  
your judgments are on high, out of his sight;  
as for all his foes, he puffs at them.  
He says in his heart, "I shall not be moved;  
throughout all generations I shall not meet adversity."  
His mouth is filled with cursing and deceit and oppression;  
under his tongue are mischief and iniquity.  
He sits in ambush in the villages;  
in hiding places he murders the innocent.  
His eyes stealthily watch for the helpless;  
he lurks in ambush like a lion in his thicket;  
he lurks that he may seize the poor;  
he seizes the poor when he draws him into his net.  
The helpless are crushed, sink down,  
and fall by his might.  
He says in his heart, "God has forgotten,  
he has hidden his face, he will never see it."*

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<sup>24</sup> The most famous acrostic psalm is Psalm 119, in which each successive 8 verses begin with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The other acrostic psalms are 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, and 145. Proverbs 31:10-31 and Lamentations 1-4 are also acrostics.

*Arise, O Lord; O God, lift up your hand;  
forget not the afflicted.*

*Why does the wicked renounce God  
and say in his heart, "You will not call to account"?*

*Psalm 10:2-13*

Why do these particular verses vary from the alphabetical acrostic pattern in the rest of Psalm 9-10? In 2006, rabbi Ronald Benun proposed an elegant solution. Benun noted that several of David's psalms reveal intentional structural disorder whenever the wicked are in the spotlight.<sup>25</sup> In the case of Psalm 9-10, the disordered part of the psalm is the section that focuses on the actions and heart murmurs of the wicked.<sup>26</sup> Of course King David knew his alphabet! But when he sang about the wicked murmurings of the heart, he intentionally varied the pattern of the song to demonstrate the connection between heart and mouth.

The "disorder" of Psalm 9-10 also reflects what happens to our neurobiology as our hearts murmur lies like, "There is no God," or "God has forgotten and will not call me to account." Repeating such things to ourselves leads to cognitive disintegration. In other words, the wicked speech that we murmur to ourselves has a way of stalling our healthy neural pathways and making us stupid—both in thought and in deed. Thus, sin ends up wreaking havoc and causing chaos. Instead of creating, it destroys.

### **3.3 Wicked Self-Talk Drives Us Crazy**

In C. S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Edmund betrays his siblings by siding with the White Witch. Even though there are numerous indications that the Witch means to do Edmund harm, he nevertheless talks himself into remaining loyal to her. Throughout the book, Lewis does a masterful job of revealing the destructive power of Edmund's self-talk. Here are a couple of examples from the book.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ronald Benun, "Evil and the Disruption of Order: A Structural Analysis of the Acrostics in the First Book of Psalms," *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 2006 Vol 6, article 5, pp 2-30.

<sup>26</sup> The "disorder" of Psalm 9-10 is a variation from a poetic pattern. We do the same thing in English from time to time. For example, consider the old show tune "Sweet Violets." The song's initial couplets read as follows:

There once was a farmer who took a young miss  
In back of the barn where he gave her a...  
Lecture on horses and chickens and eggs,  
And told her that she has such beautiful...  
Manners that suited a girl of her charms,

The format exemplifies the "censored rhyme," in which the expected rhyme of each couplet is instead replaced with an unexpected word. The surprise of variation from the standard form is what grabs the reader's attention. The unexpected variation from the acrostic in Psalm 9-10 functions in the same way.

<sup>27</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. MacMillan: 1950

### **Excerpted from Ch. 9, “In the Witch’s House”**

*You mustn’t think that even now Edmund was quite so bad that he actually wanted his brother and sisters to be turned into stone. He did want Turkish Delight and to be a Prince (and later a King) and to pay Peter out for calling him a beast. As for what the Witch would do with the others, he didn’t want her to be particularly nice to them—certainly not to put them on the same level as himself—but he managed to believe, or to pretend he believed, that she wouldn’t do anything very bad to them, “Because,” he said to himself, “all these people who say nasty things about her are her enemies and probably half of it isn’t true. She was jolly nice to me, anyway, much nicer than they are. I expect she is the rightful Queen really. Anyway, she’ll be better than that awful Aslan!” At least, that was the excuse he made in his own mind for what he was doing. It wasn’t a very good excuse, however, for deep down inside him he really knew that the White Witch was bad and cruel.*

*... The silence and the loneliness were dreadful. In fact I really think he might have given up the whole plan and gone back and owned up and made friends with the others, if he hadn’t happened to say to himself, “When I’m King of Narnia the first thing I shall do will be to make some decent roads.” And of course that set him off thinking about being a King and all the other things he would do and this cheered him up a good deal. He had just settled in his mind what sort of palace he would have and how many cars and all about his private cinema and where the principal railways would run and what laws he would make against beavers and dams and was putting the finishing touches to some schemes for keeping Peter in his place, when the weather changed.*

### **Excerpted from Ch. 11, “Aslan is Nearer”**

*Meanwhile the dwarf whipped up the reindeer, and the Witch and Edmund drove out under the archway and on and away into the darkness and the cold. This was a terrible journey for Edmund, who had no coat. Before they had been going quarter of an hour all the front of him was covered with snow—he soon stopped trying to shake it off because, as quickly as he did that, a new lot gathered, and he was so tired. Soon he was wet to the skin. And oh, how miserable he was! It didn’t look now as if the Witch intended to make him a King. All the things he had said to make himself believe that she was good and kind and that her side was really the right side sounded to him silly now. He would have given anything to meet the others at this moment—even Peter! The only way to comfort himself now was to try to believe that the whole thing was a dream and that he might wake up at any moment. And as they went on, hour after hour, it did come to seem like a dream.*

*... “Who gave them to you?” said the Witch.*

*“F-F-F-Father Christmas,” stammered the Fox.*

*“What?” roared the Witch, springing from the sledge and taking a few strides nearer to the terrified animals. “He has not been here! He cannot have been here! How dare you — but no. Say you have been lying and you shall even now be forgiven.”*

*At that moment one of the young squirrels lost its head completely.*

*“He has—he has—he has!” it squeaked, beating its little spoon on the table. Edmund saw the Witch bite her lips so that a drop of blood appeared on her white cheek. Then she raised her wand. “Oh, don’t, don’t, please don’t,” shouted Edmund, but even while he was shouting she had waved her wand and instantly where the merry party had been there were only statues of creatures (one with its stone fork fixed forever half-way to its stone mouth) seated round a stone table on which there were stone plates and a stone plum pudding.*

*“As for you,” said the Witch, giving Edmund a stunning blow on the face as she re-mounted the sledge, “let that teach you to ask favour for spies and traitors. Drive on!” And Edmund for the first time in this story felt sorry for someone besides himself. It seemed so pitiful to think of those little stone figures sitting there all the silent days and all the dark nights, year after year, till the moss grew on them and at last even their faces crumbled away.*

Isn't self talk a sign of mental illness? Not necessarily. Murmuring God's Word leads to mental health. What makes us crazy, however, is murmuring the counsel of the wicked. We all do it, which means that we're all somewhere on the spectrum between sanity and madness.

In *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre argued that man is "a story-telling animal."<sup>28</sup> We are made in the image of God, who is the great story-teller. As humans, we're constantly integrating the murmurings of our hearts into a coherent story which then shapes how we live. In other words, in light of Psalm 1, the story our hearts tell determines the way that we walk, whether the blessed life or the way of the wicked.

All of us are like Edmund at times. We talk ourselves into a way of understanding our circumstances that leaves us feeling slighted, misunderstood, unappreciated, betrayed, or otherwise victimized. We talk ourselves out of doing hard things like admitting our own mistakes, apologizing and seeking forgiveness. We harden our hearts against setting things right, justifying our own sin by dwelling on our own mistreatment. Bitterness takes root in our hearts and we cultivate it, nurturing and feeding it into an exaggerated narrative of our own misfortune. It becomes our story, and it drives us crazy.

What's the antidote to this madness? Drinking deeply from the river of life. Consider Psalm 19. After praising God for the beauty of his creation in vv 1-6, David then offers the same praise for the beauty of God's Word. "The law of the Lord is perfect" (v 7). "The testimony of the Lord is sure" (v 7). "The precepts of the Lord are right" (v 8). "The commandments of the Lord are radiant" (v 8). "The fear of the Lord is pure" (v 9). "The rules of the Lord are true" (v 9). David delights in God's word, as he should according to Psalm 1:2. God's word is worth more than gold and sweeter than honey (v 10). Why? Because it keeps him from error, harm and sin (v 11-13). Therefore, "let the words of my mouth and the murmurings of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer."

One of England's great preachers of the 20th Century, the Rev. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, challenged his congregation to preach God's word to themselves. Reflecting on Psalms 42-43 ("Why are you downcast, O my soul?"), 'the Doctor' put it this way:

*"Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself? Take those thoughts that come to you the moment you wake up in the morning. You have not originated them, but they start talking to you, they bring back the problems of yesterday, etc.*

*Somebody is talking. Who is talking? Your self is talking to you. Now this man's treatment was this; instead of allowing this self to talk to him, he starts talking to himself. 'Why art thou cast down, O my soul?' he asks. His soul had been depressing him, crushing him. So he stands up and says: 'Self, listen for a moment, I will speak to you.' ...*

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<sup>28</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Notre Dame, 1981. See chapter 15, "The Virtues, the Unity of a Human Life, and the Concept of a Tradition."

*The main art in the matter of spiritual living is to know how to handle yourself. You have to take yourself in hand, you have to address yourself, preach to yourself, question yourself. You must say to your soul: ‘Why art thou cast down’— what business have you to be disquieted?*

*You must turn on yourself, upbraid yourself, condemn yourself, exhort yourself, and say to yourself: ‘Hope thou in God’— instead of muttering in this depressed, unhappy way. And then you must go on to remind yourself of God, Who God is, and what God is and what God has done, and what God has pledged Himself to do.*

*Then having done that, end on this great note: defy yourself, and defy other people, and defy the devil and the whole world, and say with this man: ‘I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance, who is also the health of my countenance and my God.’”<sup>29</sup>*

#### 4. TALKING THE WALK WITH GOD

Finally, we come to focus on the practice of blessed speech with God. This is, of course, something we have been thinking and talking about all along, since it’s intertwined with the other topics. Nevertheless, it is appropriate that we conclude where the Psalms conclude, with a chorus of praise.<sup>30</sup>

Why is it that so many middle-aged men and women fall into addiction of one kind or another? As a middle-aged man, I have given some thought to this question. Middle-age is a strange time of realization that life didn’t turn out as planned. “I’m surprised to be living where I’m living, doing what I’m doing, sharing life with certain people, etc. I’m also surprised to have certain scars, unhealed wounds, fears, etc. I really thought my life would have turned out differently than this.”

For many, these discoveries lead to depression and despair. This in turn drives the desire for escape and the accompanying addictive behaviors, whether substance abuse, or sexual misbehavior, or simply cultivating the root of bitterness in your heart and giving in.

There’s another and better way, however. It involves “talking the walk” with God. For the great majority of us, our lives aren’t catastrophes. We are indeed greatly blessed. We must learn to be people who praise God, giving thanks to him for all the good surprises of our lives. As we practice blessed speech with God, we also become those who trust him regarding the difficult things we cannot change, and those who—instead of giving in to addiction—take responsibility for the difficult things that we can change.

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<sup>29</sup> Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure*, Eerdmans, 1965. pp 20-21.

<sup>30</sup> The book of Psalms ends with a chorus of praise. Psalm 145 concludes with an important doxology: “My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord, and let all flesh bless his holy name forever and ever.” From that point onward, Pss 146-150 represent an ancient hallelujah chorus.

Facing up to the broken parts of our lives and doing holy war against them is scary and hard. We are doomed to fail if we don't talk the walk with God. But as we learn increasingly to turn to him, we become men and women who exemplify the blessed life of Psalm 1.

As we have seen repeatedly, King David showed us how to pour our hearts out to the Lord with the hardest things. Psalm 55 is especially dear to me, because in it David describes one of the deepest and most painful of all hurts: the betrayal of a loved one.

*For it is not an enemy who taunts me—  
then I could bear it;  
it is not an adversary who deals insolently with me—  
then I could hide from him.  
But it is you, a man, my equal,  
my companion, my familiar friend.  
We used to take sweet counsel together;  
within God's house we walked in the throng*  
*Psalm 55:12-14*

What does David do? Does he drink himself to death? No. Does he allow the wicked murmurs of his heart to drive him crazy with the fury of unforgiveness? No. Instead he cries out to God:

*But I call to God,  
and the Lord will save me.  
Evening and morning and at noon  
I utter my complaint and moan, and he hears my voice.*  
*Psalm 55:16-17*

God is a loving Father. Pour out your heart to him. He won't be overwhelmed. Loving parents want to hear and be of help.

How did David cultivate his Godward orientation? How did he become someone who cried out to God, instead of souring in bitter self-talk? Somewhere along the way, David became seriously committed to "singing a new song," and pouring out his gratefulness to God.<sup>31</sup> This is, after all, the kind of sacrifice God wants. Not the sacrifice of bulls, but the sacrifice of thanksgiving:

*"If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world and its fullness are mine.  
Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?  
Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving,  
and perform your vows to the Most High.*  
*Psalm 50:12-14*

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<sup>31</sup> Many psalms of praise include a commitment to "sing a new song" to the Lord. These include Pss 33:3, 40:3, 96:1, 98:1, 144:9, 149:1.

Gratitude is both a gift that we offer to God, and also the fitting (and expected) response to God's initiative in giving to us. We who have been so greatly blessed by God have so much to be thankful for. The "sacrifice of thanksgiving" ought to flow from our hearts and our mouths all the time. "Reflect on your present blessings, on which every man has many, not on your past misfortunes, of which all men have some"—Charles Dickens.<sup>32</sup>

In recent decades, the regular practice of gratitude has been shown to have amazing health benefits.<sup>33</sup> Physically, these include stronger immune systems, lower blood pressure, sleeping longer and better, and more self-care. Emotionally, these include more joy, pleasure, optimism, forgiveness, generosity, compassion, social engagement, and healthier relationships. But for Christians, regardless of health benefits, we do it because it's what our good and loving Father calls us to do.<sup>34</sup>

## 5. CONCLUSION

Jesus came to make us like strong trees, planted by streams of water, yielding fruit in season, with leaves that do not wither, prospering in everything. This is the tree that Isaiah describes when he foretells the coming of the Messiah, saying:

*The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring the Gospel to the poor, he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to*

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<sup>32</sup> Mamie Dickens, *My father as I recall him*, Roxburghe Press, Westminster, England, 1897, p. 45.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Emmons, "Why Gratitude is Good," *Greater Good Magazine*, November 16, 2010.

<sup>34</sup> During the Parish Retreat, we took time individually to practice expressing our gratitude to God. We used gratitude journaling prompts adapted from Robert Emmons' book, *Gratitude Works!* The following recommendations come from Mark McMinn, *The Science of Virtue*, Brazos Press, 2017.

**1. Don't overdo it.** Gratitude journaling once or twice per week is more beneficial than doing so daily, because of what Emmons describes as "gratitude fatigue."

**2. It's okay to remember problems and struggles.** We may tend to think gratitude requires pushing problems out of consciousness, but this is not the case. Recalling a past failure or struggle often primes us to consider breakthrough moments, or to anticipate them, and in the process to encounter gratitude and hope.

**3. Try subtraction, not just addition.** One effective way of stimulating gratitude is to reflect on what your life would be like without certain blessings, rather than just tallying up all those good things. Instead of "counting your blessings," try imagining life without your child, partner, faith, job, church, city, etc. This helps us to recognize the gifts in life we might easily take for granted.

**4. Savor surprises.** Try to record events that were unexpected or surprising, as these tend to elicit stronger levels of gratitude.

**5. People over things.** Focusing on people to whom you are grateful has more of an impact than focusing on things for which you are grateful.

**6. Go for depth over breadth.** Elaborating in detail about a particular thing for which you're grateful carries more benefits than a superficial list of many things.

*those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to grant to those who mourn in Zion—to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit, that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified. Isa 61:1-4.*

This is the blessed life. Not a shimmering, transitory, Hallmark blessing, but with one that's built to last. It begins by choosing to follow Jesus on the way of the righteous. It continues especially in the ways that we talk—by practicing blessed speech with God, ourselves and one another.

We need this blessed life. Not only for us, but also for our city and our world, for “when the righteous prosper, the city rejoices.” Let's put roots down deep into the living water of God's Word, and become a community of gracious speech, blessing—not cursing—all who take refuge in our shade.