

Do you agree with Psalm 14? We just sang most of it a little earlier. It's printed in your bulletin. I'm going to read it and while I read it I want you to think about this one question: do you agree?

I know for a good many of you that may seem like a strange question. "Pastor, it's in the Bible, so of course I agree." But I want you to humor me. While I'm reading it I want you to listen carefully and ask yourself if what Psalm 14 says is what you believe about yourself and about the world.

Do you agree with Psalm 14?

Psalm 14

Do you agree?

I imagine that probably all of you here agree with the first half of the first verse. Unless you are only here because someone dragged you here against your will, the very fact that you showed up to a Christian church tells me you agree it is foolish to think there is no God. You agree that actual atheism (where you publicly proclaim that there is no God) and practical atheism (where you may not go around telling people you are an atheist, but you live as if there is no God); you agree that atheism is a foolish belief system.

I imagine that most of you can get on board with the end of Psalm 14 (v. 4-7). You look around at the world, at all of the violence that happens out there; maybe you yourself have been a victim of violence; you look at a world where there are some bad people who are devouring each other as if they were eating bread, where evildoers are oppressing poor and needy people. And seeing that makes you yearn for salvation; for a God who sees and cares and acts. You agree with that, again, that is probably what brought you here this morning.

I imagine that most of you can get on board with the very beginning and the very end of Psalm 14. But what about the middle?

Starting with the last line of v.1: **There is no one who does good. The LORD looks down from heaven on all mankind to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.**

Some of you may have no problem with that. But I imagine there are some of you here today who may cringe a little at that. Or maybe just a part of you is a little uncomfortable with such a sweeping condemnation.

God pops his head out of the clouds, scans the world and he finds no one – not one single person that he labels good. Is any part of you uncomfortable with that?

If there is a part of you that wrestles with that, you are not alone. This is a very common thing that people wrestle with. So, even if you are 100% on board with Psalm 14 already, don't tune out because chances are someone you know isn't quite as sure and it is important to understand why that might be.

This is a pretty blatantly counter-cultural worldview. I'm supposed to look out at the world, look at you and assume that not one of you is good? In a culture where we are trying really hard to build up and prop up self-esteem in our kids and in ourselves, this does not seem to help. This is not the message a lot of people want to hear.

It's counter-cultural, and it sure feels counter-experience too if you stop and think about it. I've met a lot of people who've been pretty good to me. I see a lot of people doing really good stuff.

There's no one who does good? Not even one?

What about someone like J.K. Rowling? Harry Potter made her a billionaire. But the other thing she is known for, other than creating the wizarding world, is her philanthropy. She has and continues to give generously of the money she makes. Sure, it's not like she's hurting for cash, but that seems pretty good to me. She is someone who came from nothing, became extraordinarily rich, and now is passionate about helping people with her wealth. No one who does good? Not even one?

We just celebrated Thanksgiving. A great American holiday filled with food, family, football – also a day widely celebrated by acts of charity. In just about every city in America there are people who remember on Thanksgiving to give time and dollars to help the less fortunate have a good Thanksgiving too. Just over a week ago, all across our country people took time to take care of someone else in need. No one who does good? Not even one?

What about right here, right now, you fine folks, doing what you are doing today. You showed up because you prioritize God and worship. You probably brought an offering, hard-earned money that you are going to give away so we can keep the lights on, and continue preaching and teaching about Jesus. You are probably going to stick around and give the gift of friendship over cheap coffee and cheap donuts in the back of church. No one who does good? Not even one?

God sticks his head out of the clouds, looks around and finds no one who does good? Not even one? It sure is counter-cultural, it sure seems counter-experience.

Lots of people disagree with this particular teaching of the Bible – maybe you've met someone who does. Maybe it makes you a bit uncomfortable yourself. But (spoiler alert) I do agree with all of Psalm 14, and it's actually kind of important that you do too.

I'm not suggesting that if you are struggling with Psalm 14 that all you have to do is listen to this sermon, and boom, you'll be good to go. Nor am I suggesting that if a part of you still cringes at this after we leave today that you are not a Christian. I am suggesting that this worldview is an important thing to wrestle with because it gets to the heart of what Christianity is all about.

So, let's wrestle a bit. Even if you already agree with me with Psalm 14, it's good to wrestle with this topic so you can love those around you who may not agree.

When it comes to reconciling this worldview difference (are we good or not), there are a couple of important questions that we need to grapple with. First, what does it mean to be *good*? Second, if Psalm 14 is true, does that necessarily lead to low self-esteem and a hopeless life?

First, what does it mean to be good?

We tend to make "good" a synonym of "nice" or "kind".

So, J.K. Rowling does nice things with her money, people do kind things on Thanksgiving, I'm assuming you will all be nice to each other after church today. So we wrestle with a God who looks at stuff like that and says, "I don't see anyone good."

God doesn't disagree that nice and kind things are important. God has very clearly articulated standards for how he wants people to treat each other (standards that include being generous, taking care of the poor, being kind and friendly). And the Bible says that God has written his law in all of our hearts. We have consciences, that voice in our hearts that prompts us to do nice things for other people.

A very important question though is: does doing nice things make a person good?

Let's use me as an example (I know myself best of all in this room).

I don't think I'm tooting my own horn if I say I'm a pretty kind and nice person. On the whole, I try really hard to be a kind husband. I think my kids kind of like having me as their dad. I hope you guys see that I try hard to be a decent pastor.

I'm a pretty kind and nice person, but does that make me *good*?

Well, you could ask my wife. But you might want to check with me first, just in case that particular day might not be the best day to ask my wife that question. You know, if I said something careless or was a bit selfish, as I tend to be...

You could ask my kids. But, again, you might want to check with me first just in case that happens to be one of the those days when I lost it with them – when their very existence was making my life harder and I let them know how little I appreciated that...

You could ask the other members here at St. Paul's. But, again, maybe check with me first because you never know what I might have said, or done, or not done on that particular day.

And I'll tell you what... even if you only ever see me cool, calm, collected, nice and kind, I'm sure glad you don't know the thoughts that go through my head...

I think I'm a pretty kind and nice person, but does that make me *good*?

Is this a scale thing? If I do 51% kind things and 49% not-so-kind things am I *good*? 80/20? 90/10?

Is it a comparison thing? "Well, I'm not perfect, but at least I'm not _____." "

Is it a progress/effort thing? "I'm not perfect, but at least I'm trying, and I'm getting better day by day, little by little, as I go along."

Does any of that make me *good*? If I do enough good, better than somebody else, progressively better, does any of that make me *good*?

And if that's the case, how can I ever know when I'm *good* enough? That's the big push today, right? "Wherever you are right now is good enough. Tomorrow you can try to keep being a little better, but you are good right now, as you are."

Says who? What, some psychologist in a lab has figured out that we are all good enough just the way we are? If I can get better tomorrow, doesn't that imply that something is lacking today, that I wasn't good enough today?

At the end of the day, if we are going to answer the question "what does it mean to be *good*" with any kind of confidence, what we need is clarity. If we don't want to spend our whole lives wondering, we need someone to clarify what is good enough, where is the bar?

As Christians, we believe God brings that clarity. He is the one who sets the standard of what it means to be *good*. Psalm 14 gets us started in answering the question of what it means to be good.

God's definition of good: The LORD looks down from heaven and what is he looking for? He looks to see if there are **any who understand, any who seek God. Understanding, seeking** God – this is how God defines good.

Understanding: A good person is one who understands who God is and what he expects.

And **seeking** God – a good person is one whose over-riding life objective is to get to know God better. He doesn't just know who God is and what he wants but he pursues it.

I don't know your heart as well as I know my own, but I'm pretty sure I'm not the only one who isn't very confident that describes me – someone who understand who God is and what he wants, and lives like it by seeking God with everything I am and everything I have.

So, first big question: what does it mean to be *good*? Well, God has set a clear standard in his Bible... a standard that does not describe me.

Second big question, if that's what it means to be good, and if, as God says, that describes none of us, are we just doomed to low-self-esteem lives of hopelessness?

Hopeless? I think the vast majority of you are here today because though you may know that the Bible is pretty cut and dry about what it means to be good, the Bible is far from hopeless. That's why we love Christmas so much. You are getting ready to celebrate Christmas because v.7 happened. David looks at a world where no one is good, not even one, and he prays, "**Oh that salvation would come out of Zion.**" Zion is the name of one of the hills in the city of Jerusalem. Do you know anything about salvation coming from the city of Jerusalem? Something that restores God's people and prompts rejoicing and gladness? Any major event that happened there that you can recall? Any reason for hope out of Zion?

Psalm 14 – this is why Jesus matters. Jesus' life and death only matter for me if what God says about me in Psalm 14 is true. If I am not good and need to be saved because I am not good, then Jesus makes a whole lot of sense. If Psalm 14 is true, that brings the *good* to the Good News of Jesus.

The God who looks down from heaven and sees no one good didn't just pass this judgement and strike us all dead. He sent salvation. That means I don't have to get all bent out of shape if God looks at me and calls a spade a spade. I don't have to worry about self-esteem if God tells me I'm a no-good, dirty, rotten sinner, because salvation has come out of Zion.

Bottom line: I don't care what God calls me, as long as he still loves me. I can have low self-esteem about myself and still rejoice and be glad because God loves me.

In fact, isn't that in the end a much more solid basis for feeling good – not spending my whole life trying to pretend I'm good enough, but knowing that the God of heaven and earth loves me – unasked, unearned, not based on my performance or how I feel about myself on any given day, he loves me. He has saved me. Period.

Hopeless? Low self-esteem? Not when God loves me.

I started out by asking if you agree with Psalm 14. I said it was an important thing to do. Did you know that we agree with Psalm 14 in just about every single service here at St. Paul's?

Bear with me for a minute more here...

There are two times in almost every single service here at St. Paul's where we collectively voice agreement with Psalm 14. Do you know what I'm talking about?

Here's a hint: the Latin word for "agree" is *confession*. To confess is to acknowledge or agree.

There are two times in almost every service where we confess that Psalm 14 is true.

One comes at the beginning of almost every single service. We confess our sins. To confess your sins is to agree with God. "God you look down from heaven and say that you find no one who does good. I, for one, can say you are right about me. God I agree. I am a sinner."

The second confession comes either right before or after the sermon. We confess our faith (with the Nicene or Apostle's Creed). To confess your faith is to agree with God. "God you promised salvation would come from Zion, though none of us are good you would give me a reason to rejoice and be glad, and you are right. God I agree. I believe that salvation has come from Zion."

The whole message of Advent, the whole life of a Christian is centered on agreeing with Psalm 14.

God you are right. I am not good.

God you are right. Salvation has come.

God grant that we would continue to learn the joy and freedom that come from agreeing with God.

Amen.