

Sermon 7, How to Talk to the Sons of Man, Psalm 4

Proposition: The king presents a perfectly balanced account of energetically confronting the sons of man with their sin and evangelizing them, yet doing so from a place of prayer, peace, and rest.

- I. The Frame: Prayer, vv. 1, 6-8
 - A. Driven by Need, v. 2
 1. The Sons of Man are Shaming His Glory
 2. The Sons of Man Are Bent on Lies
 - B. Driven by Gospel Opportunity, vv. 6-7
 1. Many Are Saying “Who Will Show Us Good?”, v. 6
 2. Earthly Goods Are Not as Joyful as Heavenly Ones, v. 7
- II. The Picture: Speaking to the Sons of Man from a Place of Prayer, vv. 2-5
 - A. Questioning the Sons of Man, v. 2
 - B. Teaching the Sons of Man, v. 3
 - C. Exhorting the Sons of Man, vv. 4-5
 1. Tremble (in fear or anger), v. 4a
 2. Do not sin, v. 4b
 3. Meditate in your heart, v. 4c
 4. Be still, v. 4d
 5. Offer righteous worship, v. 5a
 6. Trust in the LORD, v. 5b
- III. The Prayer, vv. 1, 6-8
 - A. The King’s God
 1. He Answers, v. 1a
 2. He Is God of the King’s Righteousness, v. 1b
 3. He Delivered in the Past, v. 1c
 4. He Is Gracious, v. 1d
 5. He Shows Good to Us, v. 6
 6. He Puts Gladness in the King’s Heart, v. 7
 7. He Makes the King Dwell in Safety
 - B. The King’s Petitions
 1. Answer and Hear, v. 1
 2. Lift up the Light of Your Face on Us!, v. 6b
 - C. The King’s Repose, v. 8
 1. Lying Down in Peace Rather than in Fear/Anger, v. 8a with 4a
 2. Sleeping in Safety, v. 8b

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the poem in front of us strikes us at first glance as a prayer. But on second glance, we see that while the composition begins and ends in prayer, most of it is not actually a prayer but instead an address to the sons of man. This composition, then, tells us how to talk prayerfully to the sons of man.

This, I trust, is something that has long occupied your attention. How, exactly, are we supposed to reach the nonbeliever with the good news about Jesus? While this psalm does not present a universal formula for making converts, it certainly does present a deeply prayerful approach to that difficult process. It also specifically states some half-dozen truths that we need to communicate to the sons of man when they seek to attack and denigrate the glory of Jesus Christ. Yet in all of this, it does not urge you to get up and evangelize because you feel guilty — and even though it asks the question “how long?” it doesn’t project an aura of exhaustion. Instead, in this psalm the king presents a perfectly balanced account of energetically confronting the sons of man with their sin and evangelizing them, yet doing so from a place of prayer, peace, and rest. Does that sound good to you? It sure sounds good to me. Let’s dive in.

I. The Frame: Prayer, vv. 1, 6-8

The poem is framed by prayer. It begins with prayer and ends with prayer. From this, let’s just begin by saying that prayer needs to be where you begin and end your efforts in this life. If you are trying to raise children, pray before and after your daily parenting efforts. If you are trying to love your spouse, pray before and after. If you are trying to write sermons, fix engines, round up drug dealers, herd cattle, drill for oil, or any of the myriad of other callings that we in this church have been given by our Lord, go to Him for help! But the calling that is featured in this poem is the calling of dealing with the wicked, whom the king addresses as the “sons of man.”

If you have to deal with the wicked, say as a cop or an attorney or a construction worker, how do you do that? Let me say again: prayerfully. That’s how the king approached this task. He bathed it in prayer, surrounded it in prayer. If he was going to be talking to the wicked he was going to be talking to God first.

There are two specific reasons that drive the king’s prayerfulness in this psalm.

A. Driven by Need, v. 2

The first is his need. He can’t do it alone. He very much needs God’s help, because the sons of man are completely savaging him.

1. The Sons of Man are Shaming His Glory

The first thing he mentions is that they are shaming his glory. We talked about glory last time. Glory is your boast, the best thing in your life, the fullness and honor that makes everything else worthwhile. Glory is weight or weightiness.

The opposite of glory, of course, is shame. You want to boast of your glory, but you want to hide your shame. Glory is the thing you delight in everyone knowing and admiring. Shame is the thing you hate anyone knowing because you know they will despise it.

It is glorious to drive a flashy car, to wear clothing that you know looks really good on you, to show off things that make everyone go “Whoa. That’s impressive!” It is shameful to be evil, to be stupid, to be ugly, to be self-destructive or homeless or mentally ill.

You all know the feeling of shame. Many of you know it far better than you know the feeling of glory. The privation of glory is something we fallen creatures are used to; even those who know the feeling of glory know that it is typically rather fleeting.

Well, what is the king’s glory? He’s obviously not talking about his six-pack abs or his cool chariot. He’s talking about his relationship with God, and in particular his status as Yahweh’s Anointed. That is his glory — to be the Messiah, the one chosen by God to do God’s saving work in the world. The wicked are turning that glory into shame. They are making his status as the LORD’s Anointed something despised, something shameful, something he would want to hide.

Ouch.

How long has this been going on? The answer, of course, is “ever since the fall.” The world does not regard it as glorious to be God’s Messiah. The world regards it as pathetic. To be a Christian does not enhance your coolness in Hollywood or Times Square or Washington, D.C.

That’s the first need that’s driving the prayers of the king. He knows that it is glorious to be God’s Anointed — and he also knows that it is something despised and rejected of men. So he betakes himself to prayer, as you should whenever you feel the heat of the world’s rejection.

2. The Sons of Man Are Bent on Lies

The other factor driving his need for prayer is the bent character of the men around him. Their loves are disordered; they love vanity, and they seek lies.

Now, does that sound familiar? Part and parcel of the world’s opposition to God’s Anointed is its mania for the temporary and the false. Vanity means anything passing, anything vaporous, anything that will soon vanish. And of course, we all know about lies. They are the currency of our civilization, except that we call them “fake news” or “computer-generated imagery” or “deepfakes.” As I have observed many times, some of our politicians seem to have lost the truth at the level of facts and others have lost it at the level of understanding the framework into which individual facts fit.

When the civilization around you is drowning itself in lies, lies that some love to tell and the rest love to believe, go to prayer. When the civilization around you is obsessed with worthless things, when it is spending more on creating television shows than it does on drilling for oil, go to prayer!

The prayers of the king are driven by need as the sons of man around him tell lies and shame the Lord’s Christ. But the prayers of the king are not only driven by need.

B. Driven by Gospel Opportunity, vv. 6-7

They’re also driven by opportunity, and specifically gospel opportunity. You may not like the phrase “people are saying” because it’s vague and shifty. Instead of taking responsibility for your own opinion, you can take refuge under the phrase “people are saying.” Well, you may not like

this phrase, but the psalmist likes it. Well used, it can capture something very important about a time or a movement. The phrase is used here in Psalm 4 to highlight gospel opportunity.

1. Many Are Saying “Who Will Show Us Good?”, v. 6

The thing that people are saying is not an accusation or a denial of God’s salvation for His king, as in the previous psalm. In this psalm, people are giving voice to a longing for something better. While some are attacking the glory of Christ, others are wishing for they know not what — something good. That good thing, the psalmist tells them, is the goodness of God’s Anointed.

“Who will show us good?” I can guarantee you that the sons of man, the ones trafficking in shame, vanity, and lies, are not prepared to give anything good to the people who are crying out for it. Last I checked, faith, hope, and love are not for sale in the world’s bazaars. They never have been, because you can’t buy them. Even the Beatles said so. Everything is for sale on the dark web or in the red light districts of Amsterdam and Phuket — everything except love, joy, and peace.

There are people out there who are looking for good. They are not into the vanity, lies, and shame that the world trades in.

And guess what? We need to be praying for those people. Their openness should be driving our prayers. The king prays because a lot of people want to see something good.

2. Earthly Goods Are Not as Joyful as Heavenly Ones, v. 7

The king also prays because he is aware of the gospel opportunity that flows from the transcendent joy he has in God. Grain and wine, the blessings of a fat harvest, are joyful things — but the king’s delight in God far surpasses them. Again, this leads him to prayer. The people who are looking for good need to know about the best good, the divine goodness.

So both the need and the opportunity drive the king to prayer. They should be driving you to prayer as well. Are you aware of how many problems and disasters and judgments beset our civilization? Of course you are. We talk about them all the time. So pray! Are you aware of how many people are dissatisfied with the status quo, how many people are looking for lasting goodness? You should be. So pray!

II. The Picture: Speaking to the Sons of Man from a Place of Prayer, vv. 2-5

Well, as I said, most of this psalm is actually not a prayer. It is instead a discourse addressed to the sons of man. Let’s first talk about this phrase “sons of man.” Hebrew has two words for man, *adam* and *ish*. *Adam* is the more general one, while *ish* is the more specific one that refers strictly to an adult human male. The words correspond very closely to *homo* and *vir* in Latin. We do not have a similar pair of words in English, and so the psalm simply says “sons of man” in translation. This same phrase is rendered “men of high degree” in Ps. 62:10, and it appears to carry some overtones of “elite men” or “high-status men.” Our translations don’t have a way to quickly incorporate that nuance so they just stick to the literal translation of the denotation, “sons of man.” And yes, the “sons” is plural while the “man” is singular.

Who are these sons of man? Well, they appear to be broadly coterminous with “the wicked” of Psalm 3. Their goal is to shame the king out of his glory, and their love is misplaced

on the temporary rather than the eternal. In our day, we would call them “secular” — creatures of this world, men who have no transcendent horizon or point of reference.

How do you talk to these guys? The psalm describes a communication strategy.

A. Questioning the Sons of Man, v. 2

That strategy begins by questioning the sons of man. I want to make several observations about this.

First, it’s okay to stop praying and to start talking to the wicked. I think that a certain type of overly-pious Christian might miss this point, and so I want to take a moment to talk about it. The psalms are often thought of as prayers, and so they are. But they are not just prayers. Sometimes, you need to open your eyes, stop talking to God, and start engaging with the sons of men who are bitterly opposed to everything Christian.

Second, it’s okay to push hard against the sons of man when you engage with them. The king does not say, “Sorry to bother you, sons of man, but I was just wondering if you might possibly give me just a little more room to practice what I believe? Not that I have a problem with what you believe, I just need a little relief, a little space, because we all need to get along. Ha ha” (nervous laughter from the king). Notice that the king doesn’t do this. His strategy is to begin with some questions, but they’re questions that contain some not-so-subtle accusations directed against the sons of men.

Third, this engagement with the sons of man privileges the king’s own moral norms. This is another way of making the same point I just made, but this is precisely where most of us struggle. Most Christians understand that it’s okay to engage with the wicked so long as we’re not walking in their counsel. But the king does not give them any ground. He insists that he is the arbiter of what’s vain vs. what’s lasting, that he determines truth vs. falsehood, that he is glorious and that he will not allow them to shame him.

Now, we aren’t the king. So to what extent should we imitate him? My answer is “To a much larger extent than we have been.” The king assumes that his norms are the correct norms, and he squarely takes that position in his engagement with the wicked. We need to do this as well. Sure, it’s fine to understand that not everyone agrees. That’s what the conversation is about. But we do not come prepared to acknowledge that we ought to be ashamed of the cross of Christ. That is our glory, and we confront those who would want to shame us with it. We also stand openly and brazenly against the wicked when they love vanity and seek lies. We hate vanity and reject lies.

Do this by the questions you ask. The king’s questions here assume that his glory is glorious, that he knows vanity vs. permanency, that he knows the truth and that he has identified the lies coming from the sons of man.

B. Teaching the Sons of Man, v. 3

The second part of the king’s rhetorical strategy is to teach. He uses his first imperative: “Know!” He commands the sons of man to learn something. What they need to learn is that the *hasid*, the faithful godly man, is God’s special property. The technical term for that is “holiness.” The godly man is set apart from common use and belongs to his God.

Again, the king takes his stand squarely not on “universal truth” or “common ground” that both he and his adversaries acknowledge, but rather on the indisputably Christian ground that he is a holy man set apart to a holy God.

So the first truth he teaches is the truth of holiness. The second truth he teaches is the truth of answered prayer. The reason that I don’t worry too hard about what you sons of men are doing, even though you are trying to shame me, is that I have a God who hears.

Notice, then, that the king’s confidence is such that he is not afraid to appeal to God to back him up as he teaches the sons of man about prayer and about holiness. In other words, to adopt this rhetorical strategy, you need to be a man of prayer.

Do you think there might be a connection between many Christians’ public wimpiness and unwillingness to speak truth to the sons of man, and their prayerlessness that robs them of the conviction that “the LORD hears when I call to Him”? I daresay there is. If you were certain of the backing of the Almighty, you would conduct yourself more boldly both in questioning and in teaching the sons of man.

C. Exhorting the Sons of Man, vv. 4-5

Indeed, the king does not hesitate to go beyond teaching the sons of man about his own tradition; he actually utters half-a-dozen imperatives commanding them effectively to become followers of God.

1. Tremble (in fear or anger), v. 4a

The first of these seems to be a call to the fear of God: “tremble and do not sin.” The root word here is to tremble. The LXX renders it “be angry,” which is a legitimate translation of the word. Contextually, though, it does not fit for the king to be telling the sons of man to be angry in the midst of six other commands that drive them toward godliness. Thus, it is best to understand the verb here in its root meaning. The king calls on the wicked to tremble before the presence of God.

2. Do not sin, v. 4b

That fear of God needs to issue in them ceasing to sin. They should be afraid of what God will do to them such that they do not sin. To state the obvious, it is a sin to shame God’s Anointed. He calls on them to stop it.

3. Meditate in your heart, v. 4c

Instead, he says, they need to go lie down and think about their actions. This is not just good advice for the sons of men; it is good advice for every Christian. When you lie down, take stock of the day. Did you behave and speak like a Christian?

4. Be still, v. 4d

Indeed, then, the psalmist calls on the wicked to be still. Be quiet, if all you have to say is shame, vanity, and lies! Again, his rhetorical strategy is to take charge of the situation and to call upon the wicked to become righteous.

5. Offer righteous worship, v. 5a

He doesn’t just negatively forbid them from being bad, though. He actually tells them to offer righteous worship to the true God. He wants these guys to go from shaming the king’s glory to

worshiping his God! The “sacrifices of righteousness” are the sacrifices that are rightly done, in accordance with what God wants, and thus that make the worshiper righteous by applying the coming sacrifice of Jesus Christ to him. The king is eager to command these folks to offer sacrifices of righteousness because that is what they need in order to stop being wicked. He invites them to convert, indeed, commands them to convert.

6. Trust in the LORD, v. 5b

This reaches its climax in his closing call, not just to worship, but also to faith. These sons of man should place their trust in the LORD! In just four verses, the psalmist reckons that they can go from shaming his glory to trusting his God.

Is this rhetorical strategy dead? Does it no longer work in the modern world to invite the enemies of Christ to come and submit to Him?

Sometimes we think that yes, there is no more point in evangelism. Evangelism doesn't work. We don't invite the sons of man to come and worship with us because we are sure they won't. We don't tell them to believe in Jesus because we are sure they won't.

But why? Is the LORD's arm shortened, that it cannot save? We know that it is not. Somehow all of us were saved in the modern world, transformed from enemies of God into friends of God, transformed from doubters to believers, from fighters to lovers.

In other words, the rhetorical strategy does not neglect the invitation. In addition to questioning and teaching the wicked sons of man, be ready to call them to the fear of God and to faith in God.

III. The Prayer, vv. 1, 6-8

Well, with that, we return to the prayer that the king offers, the prayer that frames his conversation with the wicked sons of men. There are three things I want you to notice in this prayer: the king's God, the king's petitions, and the king's repose.

A. The King's God

The psalm makes seven direct statements about the God to whom the king prays.

1. He Answers, v. 1a

The most obvious one, the one that the psalm begins with, is that God answers! He is not a deaf god like the idols of the nations.

2. He Is God of the King's Righteousness, v. 1b

To call him “God of my righteousness” means that He is righteous and that He makes His people righteous. He is our God, and He makes us righteous like He is.

3. He Delivered in the Past, v. 1c

He is the God who saves. As we saw last week in Psalm 3, this God is Savior.

4. He Is Gracious, v. 1d

Why? Because He is gracious. He shows favor to the king, and to you, not because you deserve it but because He is a gracious God of unmerited favor.

5. He Shows Good to Us, v. 6

Many are looking for good; we talked about this earlier in the sermon. But God is the source of all good.

6. He Puts Gladness in the King's Heart, v. 7

He is also the source of all joy. He puts gladness in the king's heart, and in the hearts of all who have His Spirit.

7. He Makes the King Dwell in Safety

Finally, we see that He makes the king dwell in safety. You and I might be afraid of getting so bold and forthright with the wicked. What if they hurt us? But the king is not afraid of that. He says that he is safe precisely because God keeps him safe.

B. The King's Petitions

If you read the psalm closely, you will see that this wonderful, gracious, giving God is only asked for two things by the king.

1. Answer and Hear, v. 1

The first thing he wants is for God to answer and hear him. We all have a need to be listened to; the king has a direct line to God that the humblest believer shares. He is our God, not just the king's God. He is our God thanks to the king's suffering and death in our place.

2. Lift up the Light of Your Face on Us!, v. 6b

The other thing for which the king asks is for God to lift up the light of His face on us. He is asking for a blessing. For God to look at you, to show you the light of His face, is all you could ever need. "They shall see His face." That is the great promise. To see the face of God is to be blessed, to be satisfied forever.

C. The King's Repose, v. 8

The psalm ends by describing, not the king's burden for the wicked, or his worry about how they're turning his glory into shame, but rather His repose.

1. Lying Down in Peace Rather than in Fear/Anger, v. 8a with 4a

The wicked he exhorts to lie down trembling with fear. But he himself lies down in peace. That's how confident he is in God, and how peaceful he is after a hard day's work evangelizing.

2. Sleeping in Safety, v. 8b

The king sleeps in safety — and so do His people. We can lie down peacefully because though the wicked love vanity and lies, our Father is on the job and His king is too.

So how do you talk to the wicked? From a place of rest, blessing, and confidence. The better you know your Father and the more comfortable you are in His presence, the more you will be able to speak to the wicked and invite them to join us.

So rest in the Lord. Pursue prayer in such a way that you are able to confidently sleep in peace, and talk to the wicked without flinching. No one else can make you dwell safely — but when God sets out to protect your dwelling place, no one can threaten or harm you. Amen.