

Sermon 13, A Profile of the Wicked, Pt. 1, Psalm 10:1-11

Proposition: Psalm 10 profiles the wicked and teaches us to pray like our king for deliverance from their evil.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the psalm before us this evening profiles the wicked, describing their wicked actions in detail. The psalm describes the wicked with special reference to their victims, the poor and needy. Such a description is utterly relevant to us. The poor we have always with us — but the wicked we have always with us too! When the wicked rise, as they are rising now in American society, it is imperative that our response to that rise be a godly one rather than an ungodly one. Our king describes and models for us in this psalm a godly approach to the wicked. Psalm 4 showed us how to evangelize the wicked, Psalm 5 how to pray against them. This psalm shows us more of the devastation they wreak on the poor and needy, while also encouraging us that God hears and sees and will respond by putting an end to evil. We are in a mini-series of psalms on evil men, one that begins with Ps 9 and runs through Ps 14. As we saw, Ps 8 introduces this series by describing man's greatness in reference to his Creator. But though God's name is excellent, man's name is mud; on every side the wicked prowl. The answer to the problem of human wickedness is the righteous work of God, as these psalms make clear — especially in the one that finishes this sequence, Ps 15, with its declaration about the man who is fit to ascend the hill of the LORD. The message of these in-between psalms on the wicked is clear: God loves and saves the human race despite our wickedness. Man is vile, no question. But God remembers and visits us, rescuing the poor and needy from the depredations of the wicked. This happens through our prayers and especially the prayers of our king, through whom the wicked are put down and we are delivered from evil.

I. Question: LORD, Why Don't You Stop the Wicked?, v. 1

Like so many of the psalms, indeed like many other poems, this one begins with a question: Why? This little question “Why” is at the heart of being human. We have a passionate desire to understand, to make sense of it all. Without the answer to this question, we die. The animals seem to be unable to formulate such a question. They endure what is and are content. But we must have meaning. We must make sense. Without meaning, we cannot live. The philosopher Immanuel Kant went so far as to posit that the human mind actually contains categories that impose sense and order on the world regardless of what the senses find there. There is good reason to question Kant's larger point — in fact, I can assure you that it is not true — but the notion of man's quest for meaning is accurate. You have this need to understand your world, and so do I, and so did the king of Israel in his role as psalmist writing music for corporate worship. As the king, though, he not only asked questions; he provided answers. That's what this psalm does. It begins with the question, not because it's going to rehearse a bunch of questions but because it's going to provide the answer that makes sense out of the world and specifically out of the problem of evil.

Why do the wicked prosper? Why doesn't God stop them? He is omnipresent, and yet He stands far away. He can intervene anywhere, anytime, with no trouble at all, and yet He doesn't.

That is the question. And it's getting at something that doesn't make sense, something that has troubled you and that has troubled me. Maybe the more you watch the news the more it's troubled you. God could have all the nations of the world experiencing a real, Spirit-driven revival right now. Yet He doesn't. Instead, all kinds of wicked people are very powerful and influential. Or look at the media. The Catholic streaming service, Formed, could be selling more subscriptions than Netflix. It isn't. And so on. If God wants all men everywhere to repent, why doesn't He make them do it? Or at least make more of them do it?

In times of trouble, the question presses with double force. The wicked are not just being wicked, they are actively hurting the people of God. And yet the Almighty seems to do little or nothing about it.

II. Background: The Success of the Wicked, vv. 2-11

Well, “actively persecuting” undersells the nature of what's going on — maybe even radically undersells it.

A. The Wicked Target the Poor & Afflicted, v. 2, 8-10

You see, then as now, the wicked target the poor and afflicted. I was thinking about this biblical narrative today as I listened to Doc Erb's psalm settings. “In pride the wicked hotly pursue the afflicted” (Psa 10:2 NAS). The powerful wicked trample on the deserving poor. That narrative holds such resonance with us. It has a grip on our imagination. Both political parties preach a version of it. Even someone like Ayn Rand, openly glorifying wealth and featuring a large golden dollar sign stuck in the ground in the hidden utopia she depicts in *Atlas Shrugged*, uses this same narrative. John Galt is hotly pursued by the arrogant wicked, and though by a strange

inversion poverty has become wealth, we can still say “poor John Galt” because the wicked pursue him in their pride and try to catch him in the schemes which they have devised.

Well, this narrative grabs our imaginations, I would suggest, because it is actually happening all around us. We have all seen it. From the moment when the serpent pursued Eve to the moment happening right now, when some scammer is convincing an elderly man somewhere to wire him \$25,000, the wicked hotly pursue the poor. The psalmist, warming to his theme, describes the wicked as robbers lying in wait just as robbers have lain in wait beside the caravan tracks of the Middle East since time immemorial and, for all I know, are still lying in wait beside some dusty track in Syria or Iraq at this very moment. They hide by the road, and when the unwary traveler comes along, they jump out and catch him, take his money, and oftentimes leave him for dead. You could read this scene to one of the Houthis, there at the southern end of the Arabian peninsula, and they would say “Oh, yes, that is exactly how the robber does it.”

The wicked don’t target the powerful and well-armed. As a youth I read and reread the book *Tough Target* by hard-bitten Chicago PD officer J.J. Bittenbinder, and his whole thesis is that if you look tough and hard to attack, the bad guys will leave you alone. Always walk with purpose and vigor; never meander. Bittenbinder also recommended against carrying a gun, unless you were completely certain you wouldn’t hesitate to pull the trigger. If you would have the slightest hesitation, he said, don’t bother. The gun will only be a liability unless you’re willing to use it.

Well, the wicked don’t target those who are going to put up a good fight. The wicked attack the poor, the afflicted — a key group that appears throughout this psalm and the previous one. Who are these people? They are what Zechariah calls “the poor of the flock.” They are the God-fearing but weak members of God’s people who do not have what it takes to protect themselves from the wicked. In a certain sense, due to the might of the world, the flesh, and the devil, these poor and afflicted could be any Christian. But I would especially refer the term to those who are strong in faith but weak in their ability to fight back. “Fear no evil,” says N.D. Wilson, and then adds: “And may Evil fear you.”

Well, the poor and afflicted are those Christian whom evil just isn’t going to fear. They are good Christians, but they are not warriors. For all of us, at points in our lives when we are weak, maybe too young or too old, too worn down or too sick, we are going to be part of this group of the poor and afflicted.

Verse 2 is open to differing translations. The consensus of English versions is that the second half of the verse is a prayer for the wicked to be brought down by their own wickedness, smitten by the poetic justice of God just as Ps 9 describes. But heavyweights like the NIV and NRSV, as well as the NET Bible, take it the other way — as the description of the wicked’s successful capture of the poor. I would tend to agree with the NIV on this one. All too often, the poor of the flock are caught and slaughtered by the wicked. They don’t have the spiritual discernment and physical means of protecting themselves, and they are caught. Just as in the physical world those who can afford to do so move to better neighborhoods and purchase more secure homes, while the poor remain stuck in high-crime areas, so in the spiritual world the

better-off attend better churches, study and learn more, and are generally better-resourced in the combat with the wickedness of the world, the devil, and their own flesh. The poor, though, are often caught in the schemes that the wicked devise. Regardless of how you take v. 2, v. 10 certainly says that the wicked often triumph. They often crush the poor with their might.

How do they do this? The king tells us that they do it by drawing the afflicted into their net.

What does it mean to be drawn into the net of the wicked? I would say that at the very least, it means to enter into temptation, to entertain the notion that the world, flesh, and devil are telling the truth, to start to work from false premises, to start to embrace notions that are hostile to the Lord's Anointed and to the Ten Commandments. The wicked catches the afflicted by drawing him into his net, as v. 10 says. When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, pleasant to the eyes, desirable to make one wise, the wicked one was drawing her into his net.

How do you escape? Verse 17 says that Yahweh will strengthen the heart of the afflicted to stand against the wicked. The king has given us these very psalms as one of the greatest means of strengthening our hearts.

I'm telling you, brothers and sisters: read and study and pray these psalms. They will put steel in your spine like nothing else, strengthening you to resist the world, the flesh, and the devil. The naive Christian, the unprepared Christian, walks into the trap that the wicked has devised. Think about the worldly Christians you know, all the people who believe in Jesus and make some sincere efforts to obey Him, but who shoot themselves in the foot with their worldly habits, practices, and beliefs. The better you know the psalms, and the more you let the king shape your thinking, the less susceptible you are to such things. I'm not saying that the world will never hurt the godly; obviously, the Son of God was struck down by the world. But though they killed His body, they could not corrupt His soul or get Him to believe a single lie. The strongest temptations of Satan are powerless against the power of the word of God.

The word will also spare you from the powerful element of surprise. As we will see as we continue to examine this profile of the wicked, there are solid predictions here of what the wicked are like. If you are ignorant and naive, you will not be on guard against the temptations of the wicked. When they show up, you will not recognize them. Eve didn't know temptation when it offered her a forbidden apple. Snow White didn't know temptation when it offered her a poisoned apple. And millions of Christians don't recognize worldliness on their televisions and social media feeds, don't recognize the devil's hand in their college textbooks and their favorite films, don't recognize the stirrings of the flesh in their habit of looking at or wearing immodest clothing. They don't know temptation. They don't know the wicked because they have not sung Ps 10 and the other psalms and learned about their enemies. They were surprised not by joy, but by misery — surprised that their untrained children left the faith, surprised that their ungodly church folded like a house of cards during Covid, surprised that Disney and *National Geographic* were not teaching their families to love and honor Jesus.

This is bad enough! But there is a lot more yet to be said about the wicked and their pervasive evil.

B. The Wicked Are Practical Atheists, vv. 3-6, 11, 13b

The wicked act this way because they are practical atheists. Indeed, it appears that they are theoretical atheists as well, based on the end of v. 4. God is not in all their thoughts — or if He is, it is only so they can deny Him and say “There is no God.” It is the fool who talks like that. No doubt. Ps 14 says as much. But though they are fools, the damage they do is real enough. They reject the existence of God, and they are dangerous in their mulish folly.

The wicked are portrayed as consumed by their own desires. They actually brag about their cravings; they not only do this, but give approval to those who practice such things. It would not take long to go through recent issues of *Vogue* and *The New Yorker* and find profiles of celebrities doing exactly what Ps 10 describes here. But it would hardly be edifying. All of us get quite enough of the wicked, indeed, too much of them. They are all over our televisions, our phones, our newspapers, our social media feeds, even our conversations with our friends. I will not name names, then, but rather point out to you the contradiction here: the wicked revile Yahweh but also reject His existence. Even if you substitute alternate translations — “rejects” or “despises” — the result is the same. The atheist’s creed is “there is no God, and I hate Him.” The atheist indulges in self-contradictory thinking, which the psalm captures well here. He refuses to believe that the rules apply to him; he renounces the Lord even while insisting that the Lord has no real existence or influence over his life. The atheists of our day speak of God as being the same sort of being as the Flying Spaghetti Monster — that is, a ludicrous joke. But they also spend vast emotional and intellectual energy trying to besmirch His name and make Him hated.

The wicked are greedy, and they are atheists, and they approve of their own greed and others’ greed too. All of this is driven by pride, as v. 2 already posited. The bad behavior of the wicked is the result of them thinking all too well of themselves.

And that thinking is reinforced by their worldly success. Do I need to tell you that the richest moguls in Hollywood, the most powerful media magnates, the executive directors of the nonprofit organizations that develop the curriculum and set the standards for American public schools, the men who manage vast capital flows on Wall Street — that these people are wicked? No, I don’t. You already know that they are not likely to be elders or even members at a conservative evangelical church of any stripe. If they are any type of Christian, they are most likely liberal Catholics (think of Joe Biden and Nancy Pelosi), or liberal Protestants whose thin veneer of Christianity wore off decades ago (think Donald Trump).

Pick out the richest and most powerful people in our country. Go to the Forbes list of the world’s 500 richest billionaires. And then tell me how many of the top fifty are notable for their dedication to godliness.

Ha ha. The very notion is a bit absurd. That is the wicked, though. His ways prosper at all times. The idea that God will judge him is completely off his radar screen, to use a more modern version of the same metaphor the psalmist deploys here. The wicked see no reason to be afraid of any of their adversaries. Oh, there are plenty of people who hate billionaires, with Bernie

Sanders allegedly serving as a perfect example. But none of the people who hate billionaires have the slightest chance of doing anything to them. You may think Walmart is terrible, and know for a fact that Alice Walton is not a good person. But I assure you that doesn't bother her. Billionaires can't buy Bernie, but only because they already have.

The wicked, especially the rich and successful wicked, are progressively detaching themselves from reality. They actually dare to utter the ludicrous assertion that suffering will never befall them. Anyone who has lived in this world for a day knows that cancer and colds and bank failures and parents dying happen to all of us. Suffering is a part of life. The Christian is ready for it; the Lord's Anointed is ready for it. He knows that he will see adversity in his own generation and that his children will see it in theirs. The place where his unmoved foot stands is not within the horizon of this world, but outside it — in heaven, where God cannot be moved. The righteous stands on level ground, but the foot of the wicked shall slide in due time. That's a promise from God. It's also the text for Jonathan Edwards' "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." You can find it in Deuteronomy 32:35.

The wicked are practical atheists; they don't believe in God, and so they do believe in the ludicrous and impossible. We ascribe only to youth the notion that one is bulletproof. But I can tell you right now that's not true.

I said earlier in the sermon that I wouldn't bother collecting examples of the wicked boasting of their hearts' desire. But I do want to give an example of the wicked boasting against death. From *The Economist* last March about media mogul Sumner Redstone:

"Why are you so mean to people?" asked one of Sumner Redstone's many girlfriends, after he had summoned a chef to their table just to throw an overcooked steak at him. "I don't care," replied the mogul. "I'm going to hell anyway."

Though he boasted he would live for ever—"I eat and drink every antioxidant known to man"—Redstone died in 2020, aged 97.¹

Isn't that insane? And yet to the reader of Ps 10, and to the king who penned it, there is nothing new under the sun. As followers of King Jesus, we knew that this kind of insanity is out there. We were prepared for it. We knew how detached from reality the rich, successful wicked are. Notice how he speaks of hell as a light thing, approaching damnation as one who is predestined to it. Redstone seems to think of himself as reprobated from the start. He's also a great example of a foul mouth.

C. The Wicked Are Foul-Mouthed, v. 7

The question arises: if the wicked are so powerful and devious, how can the Christian spot them? The answer is "Listen to them." The shadow of this persists in the Motion Picture Academy of America's rating of some films R for language. The wicked are foul-mouthed. Listen to their speech, and you will know whether they are good or evil. Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The king names five things that come out of the mouth of the wicked.

¹ <https://www.economist.com/culture/2023/03/09/sumner-redstone-and-the-battle-for-paramount>

First up is cursing. The tongue of the wicked does not bless. It curses. It utters maledictions and imprecations all day long. In the nineteenth century, politer novelists like Robert Louis Stevenson would have their villains say “curse him” all the time. These days, you simply need to walk around any public place to hear harsh and foul language, from the mouths of little children, geriatrics, and everyone in between. The wicked don’t bother trying to restrain their tongues. Christian, if you are known for cursing, stop it now. Don’t take God’s name in vain. Don’t utter imprecations and harsh words about others, about institutions, about the government, when you hit your finger with the hammer, or at any other time. If a blue streak comes out of your mouth, then you are not fit to bless the people of God. That’s what James says when he says that one fountain can’t give both sweet and bitter water. One mouth cannot both curse and bless. The tongue of the righteous blesses.

The second thing that comes out of the wicked’s mouth is deceit. How do you know whether someone is wicked? Does he lie? If so, that’s a pretty good clue. This characteristic comes up again in other psalms: “The wicked are estranged from the womb; These who speak lies go astray from birth” (Psa 58:3).

You can also identify the wicked by whether they talk about oppression. Are they trying to get something for nothing? Are they consistently bragging about how they are wise and the rest are fools, how they put one over on the other guy, how they outsmarted so and so, how they figured out what no one else understands, and all the rest of it? The wicked talk about getting more than their due, shifting costs, making others pay. They actually brag about this. The worse society gets, the more openly they brag about their violence and villainy, from locker room talk about one’s sexual conquests to going on TV to show off one’s martial prowess in invading a smaller, weaker neighbor.

The fourth element in the wicked’s speech is mischief, also translated trouble, spite, and injury. This when the wicked has gone beyond bragging about screwing others over and has started taking pleasure in actual malice, in harming others. The wicked man who brags that he tortured so and so, that he burned down someone’s house, that he made a man suffer or hurt a woman — well, he is obviously not just wicked but extremely wicked. That is the final summary of the wicked: wickedness is under his tongue. He doesn’t talk about doing good and loving good. He talks about doing evil and loving evil.

This is the wicked. And this is who you need to beware of, who you need to be praying against.

D. The Wicked Lie About God’s Justice, vv. 6, 11

The wicked, finally, lie about God’s justice. They talk about how the Almighty will not punish them, or if He will, then He won’t punish them any worse for additional acts of violence and villainy. As we heard from Redstone, the purpose of his belief in Hell was simply to encourage him to further wickedness — the exact opposite of what Hell is really about. The wicked may give lip service to punishment, but the reality is that they suppress that truth in unrighteousness. They prefer to think that God is not watching, that He will never see it. The king comes close to saying in v. 1 that God has hidden His face, that He is like the Buddhist monkey covering His

eyes so He will “see no evil.” But the wicked says it outright. There is no need to walk in the fear of God, they say; even if they acknowledge some aspect of His existence, they live by suppressing the truth in unrighteousness. They know that God is real and that His judgment will come on them, but they squelch that knowledge and build their lives on failing to fear the LORD.

III. Prayer: Please Stop the Wicked, vv. 12-13, 15

Next Sunday evening we will return to this theme, and we will talk more about the wickedness of the wicked and also about how God counters it. But I want to leave you with just one lesson from our king: Pray against wickedness! Don’t be content with the world as it is. The world is in Satan’s lap. The Devil was only half lying when he told Jesus that all the kingdoms of the world had been given to him. But the king teaches us to pray to the one who is the true King of this world. He shows us that we can and should pray to God to stand up, to lift up His hand, to break the arm of the wicked and to seek and destroy every last particle of their wickedness.

The wicked are mighty, but they are vincible. They are going to lose, and they are going to lose through the power of prayer and the leadership of our king who teaches us to pray. The wicked are successful, foul-mouthed, practical atheists who lie about the judgments of God. But God is the King, and He will judge them nonetheless, despite their beliefs about His inactivity.

So don’t be afraid. We will talk more next week about how God deprives the wicked of one of their favorite weapons: fear. For now, fear not, and don’t be spiritually weak and undernourished. Be a tough target whom the wicked cannot easily draw aside into their nets. Don’t be taken by surprise. Be ready for the wicked, and even more ready for God’s swift salvation through His Son, the king. Amen.