

“Did You Ever Go to a Church That Had a Bell Tower?”

Psalm 24

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My second pastorate was the North Fork Baptist Church in Frankfort, Kentucky. I used to say that if Norman Rockwell had ever seen the church and its setting, it would have been on the cover of the New York Post. This church sits on a hill overlooking a covered bridge on the Elkhorn Creek. It was beneath that bridge that we would have our baptisms.

Another striking feature of North Fork was its bell tower. Each Sunday morning, Tommy Cardwell would go to the church and ring the bell calling people to Sunday School and worship. When I was at the church last summer helping them celebrate their two-hundredth anniversary, I grinned when I heard the bell ringing. That brought back so many pleasant memories.

I don't know if they rang a bell in ancient Israel to call people to worship, but I know they formed a processional and sang as they approached the temple. No doubt this joyful parade reminded people of worship and enticed them to come along. Psalm 24 was one of the songs they sang as they processed. As we examine it, I think you will understand why they sang this song.

The Psalm was divided into three parts and the Psalmist began by telling the Jews why they needed to worship God. He was their creator and they owed their existence and well being to Him.

Since the place of worship sat on a hill overlooking the city of Jerusalem, the Psalmist asked who could ascend the hill of the Lord and stand in His holy place. This was a privilege never to be taken lightly or casually.

Finally, as the worshippers approached the worship center, the Psalmist encouraged the gates and doors to swing open so that their God of majesty and strength could enter and be praised.

It is the middle of this Psalm that I want to focus upon this morning. In this part, the Psalmist asked some penetrating questions that need to be answered even today.

“Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false. He will receive blessing from the Lord and vindication from God his savior. Such is the generation of those who seek Him, who seek your face, O God of Jacob” Psalm 24:3-6.

What does this paragraph say to us? Let me share my thoughts with you.

First of all, it tells me that our God is approachable and accessible. Implied in the question and answer is the idea that people can stand in the very presence of God with no barrier between them. This is unbelievably good news.

Have you ever been around a President of the United States? What is one thing you notice very quickly? The place is covered with secret service agents. No one can casually walk up to the president and begin a conversation. A person must jump a lot of hurdles to get to the president and then he usually gets only a few seconds of the president's time.

This is not the case with God. Even though He is described in Psalm 24 as the master of creation and the king of all men, He is accessible to all that wish to approach Him.

What good news this is for us because we certainly need Him. We have needs that only He can meet, such as meaning, purpose, guidance, direction, peace, security, strength, courage, confidence, patience, wisdom, understanding, forgiveness, and eternal life. How glad I am that He is accessible!

Who can approach Him? According to this Psalm, anyone can approach God who takes the privilege seriously and is trying to live the right way. Specifically, the Psalmist says that a person needs to be honest, sincere, loyal, and truthful.

To begin, anyone who wants an audience with God needs to have **clean hands**. I believe this is a reference to **honesty**. A person with clean hands is one who possesses only what belongs to him. Furthermore, everything he is holding in his hands has been obtained in an honorable way. A person with clean hands lives by the Golden Rule.

Do you remember the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-10? He was a corrupt tax collector who wanted to see Jesus. What happened to Zacchaeus as a result of that meeting? He made a radical change with his confession, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount" Luke 19:8.

Honesty is important to God. If your hands are filled with possessions that you have sinned to obtain, then you forfeit your privilege to stand in the presence of God. In light of recent corporate scandals and bankruptcies, there are some chief executive officers that need to hear this warning and make radical changes. There is far more at stake than the loss of possessions, pride and freedom.

Anyone who wants an audience with God also needs to have a **pure heart**. Even Jesus included this in his Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" Matthew 5:8. I believe this is a reference to **sincerity**. A person with a pure heart sincerely wants to think like God. He or she does not want the poison of greed, selfishness, jealousy, hatred, bitterness, or lust to cloud their thinking and lead them to do the wrong things.

I Samuel 16 describes the process that Samuel went through in order to find Saul's successor. God sent Samuel to Jesse's house to find Israel's next king. Do you recall what God told Samuel as he examined Jesse's son, Eliab? "Do not consider his appearance or height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" I Samuel 16:7.

God knows our actions begin in our heart, the seat of our thoughts and desires. This is why He wants followers who have clean hearts.

Anyone who wants to approach God needs to be **loyal**. He or she does not need to **lift up their soul to an idol**, or as Jesus said, try to serve two masters. A person who wants to be in the presence of God needs to put all their confidence and faith in Him. They do not need to spend time or energy chasing after what is temporary or counterfeit.

The Ten Commandments reveal that our God is a jealous God, but it is for our own good. There is no other living God and there is no idol that can meet our deepest needs. To misplace our priorities is to throw away our lives. This is why we must seek His face with all our hearts.

Finally, anyone who wants to approach God needs to be **truthful, never swearing by what is false**. His word must be his bond and he must be counted on to speak the truth about others. Never must she deceive others or lie about another. The person who wants to stand in God's presence must be reliable in word and deed.

Abraham Lincoln once advised potential lawyers to "resolve to be honest in all events, and if in your own judgement you cannot be an honest lawyer, resolve to be honest without being a lawyer." That's good advice for any professional.

What if I am not honest, sincere, loyal, and truthful? Can I stand in the presence of God? Is there any hope for me? Yes, there is hope. You can confess your sins and ask for forgiveness. You can pray the prayer David did in Psalm 51:10-12, "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. **Do not cast me from your presence** or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me."

Join me in that prayer today. I believe it will put a song in your heart that you can sing on your way out into the world.