

Piety: The Importance of a Forgotten Word

One very important teaching of scripture is that there's a direct connection from what we truly believe to how we live our lives. A deep foundational belief in the God of Holy Scripture will, by grace, produce people who desire obedience to God and growth in godliness. A few years ago, Christian theologian, professor, pastor and author, Joel Beeke, wrote a short monograph that addressed the need that Christians have to renew in our vocabulary the word "piety." In that work entitled, "Piety, the Heartbeat of Reformed Theology," Dr. Beeke noted that the word "piety," which was once believed to be a good thing in a Christian's life, has become a word that now seems to be received as something negative. It's a word that some have associated with what is often called a "holier-than-thou" attitude. And yet, "piety" is a word that simply pertains to "fear (or reverence) of the Lord" resulting in a desire for and seeking after godliness as a pattern of life. In Psalm 111:10 we read, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom."

Dr. Beeke notes that "piety" was at the heart of the teaching and life of John Calvin. He writes, "For Calvin, piety is rooted in the knowledge of God and includes attitudes and actions that are directed to the adoration and service of God [including] heartfelt worship, saving faith, filial fear, prayerful submission and reverential love." Today we begin a series of articles from Psalm 138. The Psalm doesn't tell us the situation in David's life that caused him to write it. Still, I would suggest that David is giving us in this Psalm a beautiful example of piety, rightly understood. We'll see in this Psalm that a proper "fear" or "reverence" for God leads to all of life worship. Let's begin our look at verses 1-2 under the heading...

—Thankfulness to God from the Heart

Let's look at verses 1-2 under the sub-point heading, "Praise in the Sanctuary." "I will give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart..." The verb tense in the Hebrew speaks of "giving thanks" as an ongoing action. David is saying that the worship of God from the inside-out—"with my whole heart"—is the primary purpose of his life. David is giving us an example of a man whose actions of worship come from a heart fully devoted to God, by grace. No matter what we say we believe about anything, what we truly believe will show up in the myriad of daily—even moment by moment—choices through which our words and actions become the pattern which makes up our life.

Notice the next phrase: "...before the gods I sing your praise." There's not universal agreement about who these "gods" are. Scholars note that the Hebrew word translated "gods" is also used in Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning God (plural, "*Elohim*") created the heavens and the earth." And yet, if translated "I will give thanks to you, O LORD....before God I will sing your praise" it would be confusing at best. John Calvin is one scholar who believes that David is speaking of "angels." In addition to that, the word is also used in a number of Old Testament texts to speak of "judges" (Ex. 21:22; Ps. 82:6). Lastly, it may be speaking of other rulers or influential people—that is to say, false "gods"—who are revered, at times, even by God's

people. Connected to earthly rulers, this could also speak of the “world rulers of this present darkness” (Ephesians 6:12) who are behind those wicked, influential rulers (Isaiah 24:21). David’s meaning seems to be that he will “sing the praises of God” even in the presence of those who would speak against God, i.e., influential people who may be intimidating to us and yet, those whom we may want to impress. This is a real problem in our age of social media where there’s often a crippling desire for acceptance. Teenagers want approval so badly from others, especially among their peer groups. Peer pressure can be devastating. Do we have people in our circle of relationships who when we’re with them, we tend to mask or marginalize our Christianity?

Notice verse 2: “I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness.....” Notice that David is worshiping God for his, “steadfast love and faithfulness” without undue concern for the opinions of influential people. David is giving us an example of true piety. As Christians are we seeking, by grace, to live a life of “piety?” What we truly believe about God will show up in how we live our lives.

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