

How Is It Right to Justify the Ungodly?

by John Piper

God leads us in paths of righteousness for his namesake, to display his glory and honor, and to bring us into a life of sanctification and power.

Duration: 35:31

Scripture: Psalm 23:1-4, Psalm 23:6, Psalm 119:18, Ephesians 1:18

Topics: "Gods Mercy", "Divine Providence"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the concept of God as a shepherd and a host. He uses the analogy of driving down a highway and being pursued by blinking red lights to illustrate how God's goodness and mercy follow us every day of our lives. The speaker emphasizes that God not only provides for us like a shepherd, but also prepares a banquet table for us as a host. He mentions the anointing with oil as a symbol of honor and celebration in biblical times.

Transcript

If you have your Bibles, let's go together to these green pastures and this banquet hall here in Psalm 23, Part 2. We've heard it now twice, so I won't read it again. Let me bring you up to date what we did last week. Last week, we looked at the form of this psalm, and we noticed that it starts off talking about God as He, and then starts in verse 4 to talk to God as You.

And we reflected on the significance of that, about how we ought not to talk too long about God without praying to God. Our theology ought to be mixed up with a heavy dose of praying. Another indication or implication of the form was that it's very interesting that He switches over to You from He right at verse 4, where He's going through the dark valley.

And I suggested that the reason is that when sheep walk through a dark valley with their shepherd, they nuzzle up very close to that knee, and that accords with addressing the shepherd as You. Whereas when we're in the green pastures, we're prone to roam all over the place, and the shepherd might be the He way over there on the other side, which means that there's a danger in the green pasture, just as there's a danger in the valley of the shadow of death, because the danger in the green pasture is that we might fall in love with the grass instead of the shepherd. Then the second thing we noticed was the phrase, I shall not want, which was beautifully paraphrased in the psalm.

He gives me everything I need. It's not that we have no more wants. It's that he gives us what's good for us.

And then the last phrase we looked at was he restores my soul. And we talked about refreshment of spirit that comes through the works of nature as we behold them. That's God's word, as well as the scripture and his word of promise.

And in all of this, I stress that the psalm is a very personal testimony. It's I and you, not we, David alone with his God. And therefore, I try to make my message in tune with that by stating things that I had learned personally.

And I want to do that again tonight. I was 22 years old before I first saw one of the lines in this psalm. Now, I'd seen it, but there is seeing and then there is seeing right.

Verse three, he leads me in paths of righteousness for his namesake. I'd never seen for his namesake till I went to seminary. Well, yes, I'd seen it.

I'd read the words, but you can read over phrases in the Bible a hundred times and they never hit you for what they mean. I went to visit Mrs. Blomgren just before her surgery on Wednesday. She was she was getting her eye operated on.

It was all bandaged over. And I read to her this verse from Psalm 119, verse 18. Deal bountifully with thy servant that I may live and observe thy word, open my eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law.

And I said, isn't it isn't it true that one of the best things about having two good eyes is the Bible, being able to read the Bible. But isn't it true, too, that there is another pair of eyes that God has given us? Paul calls them the eyes of the heart, and he prays in Ephesians one that the eyes of the heart might be enlightened. And I think that's what the psalmist is talking about.

May the eyes be opened that we may behold wondrous things out of thy law. Well, I hadn't seen that phrase there in Psalm 23 as wondrous. I'd been as deaf to that theme as you could imagine.

But there it was. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his namesake. The thought that God might have been causing me to do right ever since I was a little boy for his sake just never dawned on me.

I just right over that phrase just never even struck me, though I'd read it hundreds of times. So I want to zero in on that phrase for a few minutes. But before we get there, we better look at the phrase before it, namely, he leads me in paths of righteousness and asked how God does that or what it is that he is doing for his own namesake.

Now, the first thing we should notice about this phrase, he leads me in paths of righteousness, is that we shouldn't get the impression that it's something to be taken for granted. It sounds like it might be here. God just does this sort of thing.

So you don't need to ask for it. Right. Well, wrong, because you just look in Psalm 27, verses four and five and listen to what David is saying here.

Here he's praying and he says, make me know thy ways, O Lord, and teach me thy paths. Lead me in the truth and teach me for thou art the God of my salvation. For thee, I wait all day long.

In other words, there he's praying for what apparently in Psalm 23 is already an answer. He has led David in paths of righteousness, but we should not forsake the implication clearly from Psalm 27 that we must pray for that leadership and not just assume that it's there. But now the question I have, and I think it's a very important one, we need to ask how God does this.

The picture, of course, here is a shepherd leading sheep along with his crook or maybe with his call. The sheep know my name and they follow me. But when we get out of the metaphor of sheep and shepherd into our own experience in our day and ask, how does God lead in paths of righteousness? We need to ponder a little bit and poke around in the scriptures to see how he does it.

Now, in my experience, I have never seen a manifestation of God going before me at a fork in the road. I've never seen a cloud of fire, a pillar of cloud like they had in the wilderness. That's not part of my experience, nor have I ever heard an audible word that I know was God speaking.

A lot of people talk in that language and maybe I'm just callous, but that's never been part of my experience to see God in some clear manifestation showing me it's this way and not that way, or to hear a voice like my teacher at Wheaton said he heard one day while he was shaving in front of the mirror. Go to Wheaton. From Boston, he was in Boston.

Go to Wheaton. God can do that if he wants. He's just never done it for me, and he doesn't do it for most people most of the time.

The way he leads us is apparently differently, and I think we can get a clue from what David would say in Psalm 119, 105. There he says, Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. And in verse nine of that same Psalm 119, how can a young man keep his way pure by guarding it according to thy word? So one answer to the question, how does God lead his people in paths of righteousness is he has revealed a lot about those paths of righteousness.

He's described what sort of paths are righteous paths and told us to walk in them so that we can read and obey. Surely David did that often because he talked about meditating on the word day and night. But now that answer is only half the answer, isn't it? By itself, the Bible will not keep us on track, no matter how wonderful the Bible is and how we would be utterly lost without it, it is not enough by itself.

And for two reasons, one, we make lots of decisions in life which are not prescribed for us in the Bible, hundreds of little decisions every day and some big ones in which we look in the Bible and there are no sentences about that, how many children to have, where to send your child to school, where to go to work, this, that just hundreds of little things that we have to decide every day. And we don't want to bracket those and say, well, that's not part of Christianity. I'll just make those decisions anyway, please.

And then Christianity is something else God has to do with all those decisions. But the Bible doesn't give explicit guidance for every one of those little decisions. And therefore, something more has to be said if we're to walk in right paths in those decisions, as well as the ones where the Bible is perfectly explicit.

The second reason that the Bible by itself is not enough to guide us in those paths of righteousness is this. A path of righteousness is doing the right thing with the right attitude or a right motivation. It's not just a bodily action like don't beat your wife.

It's having a right attitude towards your wife as well. But reading words on a page don't always change attitudes. You can read over what you ought to feel like in the Bible a hundred times and maybe your

attitude, you come away from the Bible.

It's just the same. Something else has to come into play. And I think that's why David said God leads us in paths of righteousness and why Paul said.

All who are led by the spirit are the sons of God, we need not only revelation coming to us from outside, namely the Bible, we need transformation coming to us inside from the Holy Spirit, the word and the spirit together are the leadership that we need. Paul says in Romans 12 to this very familiar word, don't be conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind. Why? So that you can prove or better approve of the will of God, what is good, acceptable and perfect.

In other words, you've got to have something happen up here on the inside, some changed attitudes and changed feelings, or when little decisions present alternatives, you won't know how to prove which one of those is the will of God. So the Bible is the input into that new mind. And the spirit takes the word and begins to shape our thinking, mold our emotions so that even when there's no explicit command in Scripture for this decision you're facing, you weigh all the alternatives and you're weighing those alternatives with the mind of Christ.

Paul says we have the mind of Christ. And then when you make the decision, you look back and you don't say, my, what a smart fellow was I, but rather you say, thank you for your word that informed the principles of my life. And thank you for the spirit that shaped my emotions and my priorities so that I made this decision your way.

And God then gets the credit for the leadership, which means personally for me that I have been driven basically for all of life to meditate day and night on the word and to pray continually that the Holy Spirit would work on me. You can't over intellectualize the Bible, you can't over spiritualize your private experience with God, it's both and not either or. It has been in my experience and I haven't found the two in conflict, but tremendous compliments for guidance in life.

Now we can go back to verse three, the last phrase and ask, why does God, the Holy Spirit, and why did God inspire the word to lead us in paths of righteousness? And the answer he gives is for his namesake. Now, a few weeks ago, back in my study here, a former student of mine came to talk to me. Probably one of the best students I ever had, maybe third or fourth best in six years.

And I told him, I said, Bill, I'm I'm preaching a series on this first message is going to be God does everything for his glory and the next one is going to be. And we ought to bring our lives into alignment with that glory. And the third one is going to be.

And that's not selfish of God to seek his own glory. That's loving. And he said, are you still on that kick? You are saying that same thing six years ago when you came to Bethel.

And I scratched my head, I said, well, Bill, everywhere I look in the Bible, I see it, I just see it everywhere, that same thing. And for twenty two years, I was so deaf to that theme that I couldn't see for his namesake right there in front of my eyes in this song. But when I was twenty two, here's what happened, in case you're curious about that age, I discovered Jonathan Edwards.

Now, some of you have heard of Jonathan Edwards, that great 18th century hellfire and brimstone evangelist who's got terrible bad press in English literature classes, but really is the greatest theologian philosopher this country's ever produced. He wrote a book typically titled for Edwards, A Dissertation

Concerning the End for Which God Created the World. And I read that my first year in seminary and it revolutionized the way I've thought about God ever since.

And that book, together with several other books, have opened my eyes to what I think is the unifying theme of all scripture, namely that God is absolutely sovereign and that he's at work all the time in every detail of my life to display his glory for the enjoyment of his people. That's that to me is what pulls all the pieces of scripture and they're so different together. And you'll hear it, of course, as you have for six or eight weeks now popping up in my messages again and again, because I simply see it everywhere I read in the scriptures and therefore hope anyway that I haven't created an artificial theme to harp on.

Now, it's no longer surprising to me like it was 22 years ago to discover that right here in the middle of a psalm that is world famous for the blessing it has brought to man, that we find the the inimitable signature of the sovereign God right in the middle where he says it's all for his sake, for my name's sake, I am doing this. Now, what difference has that made? Practically speaking in my life, what difference should it make? Let me try to go at it this way. That's a little indirect, but I think I'll end up answering that question.

As I pondered what the paths of righteousness were, it occurred to me that paths of righteousness are surely the same as paths of love, right paths or paths of love. Paul said in first Corinthians 16, let everything you do be done in love. So that you can't exclude paths of righteousness from that.

So these are paths of love. But now paths of love are paths in which you're acting for the sake of other people. You're doing things for their benefit.

Now, that starts to sound like the way everybody talks in the world. Everybody who has a moral fiber talks about doing good for people, whether they're Christians or not, whether they're religious or not. Most people would say you ought to do things that are good for people and not bad for people, which means that it is possible to talk about doing good for people in such a way that God kind of drops out of the picture and we gradually cease to be able to distinguish between a Christian ethic and a humanist ethic.

The humanist didn't become God centered all of a sudden to make us the same, but the Christian often tends to become man centered. Now, what Psalm 23, 3 did for me was to put a huge roadblock in the road to my tendency to become man centered. To think only on an earthly level where indeed much earthly good can be done for man, but where sometimes God seems strangely irrelevant.

The roadblock was this. It was the reminder that God is the one who leads me into paths of righteousness and God is the one whose glory or whose name is to be honored. It's for his namesake that he leads me in.

In other words, I see from these last two lines of Psalm 23 that God is the initiator of my entrance into a path of righteousness and he's the destination at the end of this path of righteousness. He leads me and it's for his sake. He gets me started and he's my destination.

Like Paul says, from him and through him and to him are all things. Romans 11, 36. And that is a great roadblock to a merely horizontal or humanistic ethic that talks only in terms of doing good to men and leaves God out of account.

So for me, the road to a sentimental morality that has man as the measure of all things was once for all blocked by this verse. He leads me in social justice. He leads me in personal righteousness.

He leads me in a good family life. He leads me in an ethical practice as a pastor, all for his sake. You can't just leave it there on that horizontal level.

Everything will go wrong if you do that. And now the result of this roadblock has been fourfold in my experience, and I'll just mention these. First of all, the result is that I live with an almost constant God consciousness.

I just don't see anything out of connection with God. Walking back and forth between the church and home, dealing with my children, writing messages. And now that's, I suppose, a little bit more easy for a pastor because most of his job revolves around spiritual things.

But I think that should be the experience of most people. When you go to work, there should be a God consciousness about the way everything is going. Secondly, the power of God in everyday life, for me, grew or the evidence of that power grew in direct proportion to my conviction that he is at work in everything for his namesake.

When God tells me that he's leading me all the time for his namesake, that gives me a sense that power is there in all the little details of my life. God is there that ties in with God consciousness. And since he's powerful, a sense of power in the everyday affairs of life.

Then third, there's a sense of confidence that comes from believing that God's honor or his name is at stake in the paths that I'm walking in. And I think that comes clear when I give you the fourth thing, my prayers for my own sanctification and the sanctification of my sons and my wife are much more fervent and I think more effectual now that I have this argument to come to God with. I come and I say, God, help me not to do that anymore.

Help me to get over that stupid tendency, that bad habit for your namesake. Your honor is at stake. Lord, people will think worse of you if I keep on in those bad habits or that bad tendency, help my sons to grow up into righteousness for your namesake.

And when I can add that for your namesake, I know that God perks up his ears because he's very much interested in his namesake. And therefore, my prayers are more fervent and I seldom pray a prayer in which I don't affix that for your namesake. And I like to close the Lord's prayer with yours is the kingdom and the glory forever and ever.

Now, let's leave behind verse three, and I want to deal just more briefly with verses five and six. We talked about verse four last week, so let's look at verses five and six and see if we can pull all this together in a few minutes. I think we have a picture here no longer of God, the shepherd, but rather God, the host.

God, look at the three things he does, he spreads a banquet table before his guest, that's the first thing he anoints us with oil. Now, you might think of several things there. You might, for example, think of the anointing to be king.

I doubt that that's what's in view here because of the context. If you remember from Luke seven, when Jesus went in to eat with the Pharisee and the harlot came in and anointed his feet with oil and wept over him and Jesus was a little bit disturbed with his host, told him a little parable. But one of the things he said to his host was this.

When I came in here, you didn't anoint my head with oil. But she has anointed my feet with oil. Evidently, then anointing the head with oil is what you do to a guest who comes at a festive occasion.

And there are other places with a reference to oil in the Psalms where it is in the context of joy and festivity. So I think he anoints my head with oil means he's just a great host. He leaves nothing undone at the party that would make it better.

And then the third thing, he keeps my cup full. And you coffee drinkers always appreciate that at certain restaurants that they just keep coming by and pouring it in there and you can drink yourself crazy with all that coffee. I'm not sure what was in the cup for David, but whatever it was, it must have been good.

Now, perhaps a comment about before my enemies, he he spreads this banquet in the presence of my enemies. Now, as I read a couple of commentaries on this and I thought about it myself and I came up with two possible meanings for that, one seems to be this. Maybe David is trying to get across that the enemies are being kept away from messing up this banquet.

He's not under attack. In other words, he's safe from them. So it's a picture of safety as the enemies are there, but they're being held at bay.

That's one possibility. The other possibility is a picture of victory. David has had a victory over some attacking Philistines or something.

And all these prisoners of war have been taken and they're forced to sit out there and regret their activity while the victors enjoy the spoils. And I'm not sure which of those is meant here, but either one connotes victory and safety and security for God's people. David, in that case.

Now here, let me give another word of caution, this word of caution I gave concerning the green pasture, the same here, it would be so easy to take verse five and extract it out of the psalm and make that the norm of life, wouldn't it? Life is just a great big party. But the main problem with that would be that we'd be forgetting verse four, wouldn't it? Namely, he's already said that he has walked through the valley of the shadow of death. I think, in fact, that what we have here is David kind of moving from a green pasture into a dark valley and out again into a banquet hall with God.

And life is like that. Life is not a party all the time, but there are those times in life aren't there. And I think what David wants to say is when they come, let's make sure that God gets the credit and we acknowledge him as the host in those affairs.

And I think also take our cue from God that this is his ultimate intention for his people, not the valley. That's only a highway leading to the banquet hall. The supper that he's going to spread for us in heaven, for example, and then verse six is the conclusion that David draws from all this experience, having been with God in the green pasture and by the still waters, having gone with God through the valley of the shadow of death, having been served by God, this great banquet.

He can draw the conclusion that goodness and mercy are going to follow him every day of his life. And I put I was going over this this afternoon, I put two big exclamation points, because when I read that, it really lifted my spirit. David concludes from his experience thus far with God that every day God is going to follow him with goodness and mercy.

But now there's a picture here I want to try to create for you. That's a little bit obscured by the English word follow. I follow might connote to you might lag behind and I'm trying to catch up with this poor little dog called Goodness and Mercy, and we're ripping out down the way and he just can't catch up with us.

So, no, we just don't experience any goodness and mercy. That's obviously not what David means. And the reason we know is not just because of the context, but because the Hebrew word Rodoff doesn't mean follow in the sense of lag behind.

It's a very active word that means pursue and almost everywhere else that it's used in the Old Testament. It means pursue to persecute. It's the negative.

The Greek word for pursue also means persecute. Now, here's the picture that comes to my mind. I got this partly from a teacher I had once, and I thought it through myself again this week.

Picture this. David has created a picture, something like this. Imagine yourself driving down the highway nonchalantly and you're a little jalopy.

And all of a sudden you see in the rearview mirror these blinking red lights. And for some stupid, irrational reason, you decide to run. You push on the gas and tearing off down thirty five W. And he's after you and all the times that you went over the speed limit come before your eyes.

And as your conscience gets more and more guilty, all the other sins you've committed start passing before your eyes, coming up out of your subconscious to make you miserable. Well, finally, your car won't outdo that highway patrol souped up car and he pulls you off to the side, gets out of his car and you're sitting there trembling. And he walks up, says, I got a guilty conscience there, huh, fella? And and you don't say anything.

And he reaches into his pocket. And he pulls out a wallet and he said that motel you stayed at last night asked me to try to catch you to give you this wallet that you left on the counter. And you you just feel so stupid and you blush and you get all embarrassed and and then before you can say anything else.

And he said he's kind of laughing and ticked all at the same time, he said. And by the way, that drawing you entered last night, that sweepstakes, they do that this morning and you want a free trip for two to Miami, Florida for you and your wife. And then you really feel dumb and he said, you have to call in soon or you won't get that prize.

Now, you and you start to feel good and you crank up your car. He says, wait a minute, buddy, you're under arrest and in your heart sinks again. He says, and you come with me.

I'm not going to let you follow in the car. So you get in the car with him. And you pass, as it were, from verse five to verse six, verse five says, surely goodness and mercy shall pursue me all the days of my life.

God is not only a shepherd, he's not only a host, he is a highway patrol. But verse six says. The latter part of verse six, I want to dwell with God in his house.

You go in this car now down the road and all of a sudden you realize he's not taking you downtown to that courthouse. He's heading for the country. And farther and farther, and then he turns into this huge gate and you drive under these 200 year old oak trees for five miles and you come up before this beautiful estate.

And you turn and say, what in the world are we doing here? And he says, well, this is my place and I want you to come live with me. And you can see down there in the valley, that's your bungalow under the willows by the river. You can have that.

Now, I'm going to go get your wife and children and hopefully they won't run from me. Like you did. And so he goes off to get them.

There's one problem with that analogy, at least one. The problem is this. That analogy focuses way too much on the building and grounds.

For David, it was God that he wanted to be with. Didn't matter so much that it was a bungalow under the willow trees in the country by a river with lots of big oak trees and a palatial main house. What mattered was God.

And we can see in Psalm 27, verse four, that that's exactly the way David thought. He says, one thing have I asked of the Lord that will I seek after that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life and do what? Behold, the beauty of the Lord and inquire in his temple, not the beauty of anything, but simply God. So the whole song leads us to God himself.

That's where we wind up, not a green pasture and not a valley of the shadow of death and not a banquet hall, but simply God himself. Let's pray, Lord. We have to be careful.

In prosperity and in pain. The prosperity might lead us to trust in pastures and streams and full cups and enemies at bay and rods and staffs guard us from that and help every blessing you give us to turn us to you and cultivate in our hearts a strong delight in you for your own self. And then when the pain comes, grant us not to let that threaten our faith either or turn us against you.

Thank you for this song. I'm sure we've just scraped the surface of what you have for our soul sakes here. May it be a well of water springing up unto eternal life along with your Holy Spirit in the lives of every person here.

I pray dismiss us now with your blessing for this new week in Jesus name. Amen.

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