

# OPEN HANDS

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**PSALM 112:1-9; 1 CORINTHIANS 2:1-12**  
**LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH**  
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**FEBRUARY 9, 2014/5<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF EPIPHANY**

This week, the Winter Olympics began and the eyes of the world are now on Sochi, Russia.

Everywhere you turn now, the Olympics are on and we all get very excited about sports that we probably hadn't even heard of until three days ago (snowboard slope style – well, Kevin and Jonathan had probably already heard about this sport 😊) or cared about (how many of us will ever watch luge and bobsled between now and 2018?). You can hardly be out in public without having a monitor on somewhere in the background with a few people huddled around watching the Olympics.

Yesterday, our kids were at Castle Mountain and they said the whole lodge was watching as the two sisters from Canada won gold and silver in moguls.

During the Olympics, we are all sports fans, it seems. So I want to begin today with an observation from the world of sports.

Part of the drama of sports, part of the reason we *watch* sports, is because they are *unpredictable*.

Sometimes the underdog has the performance of a lifetime and wins the race, against all odds! Sometimes the favourite has an off day and they don't win. Sometimes, you play the game of your life but things just don't go your way.

Sometimes, remarkable performances are robbed of their proper reward by incompetent or corrupt judging. One of the snowboarders from Canada yesterday was convinced that he had delivered a medal-worthy performance only to finish 5<sup>th</sup>. There have been rumours about back room deals between Russian and American judges to ensure that their own skaters get on the podium.

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(This is why I don't like judged sports 😊)

**All this is to say that effort and training do not necessarily guarantee the desired results.**

Athletes train and train and train for years and years for these competitions. They take meticulous care of their bodies, they follow the instructions of nutritionists and trainers and coaches, they *do everything right*, but they don't get always get rewarded for this.

I know this to be true personally. Despite my rigorous personal training schedule and the hours of practice and exercise I put into it, sometimes my beer league hockey team doesn't win 😊.

Sometimes, there is a connection between what we put in and what we get out. But sometimes there isn't.

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What is true in sport is true in all of life. Our Psalm this morning highlights this in perhaps a negative way.

Many people have trouble with OT because of either its violence or the extent to which many of the customs and rituals it describes are so foreign to our experience as twenty-first century Westerners.

I have shared these struggles.

But for me, while the violence is troubling, and while the weirdness is troubling, one of the aspects of the OT that I often found very difficult to understand was **the straight line that it so often seems to draw between virtue and blessing.**

Psalm 112 gives us a very straightforward view of the life of faith. If you do well, things will go well for you.

Happy (or "blessed") are those who fear the LORD, who greatly delight in his commandments.

What makes them happy?

- their descendants will be mighty in the land; the generation of the upright will be blessed
- wealth and riches are in their houses (!! Prosperity gospel?!)
- their righteousness endures forever
- “it is well” with those who deal generously
- they will never be moved; they will be remembered forever
- not afraid of evil tidings
- their horn is exalted in honour

According to the psalmist, there is a very obvious connection between virtue and material blessing.

What you put in, you get out. If you do what is right, you will be rewarded with riches and honour and influence.

But this isn't how life works!! We know this!

We know that good things happen to bad people and bad things happen to good people.

I know of a marathon runner who took meticulous care of his body for years, ate a balanced and carefully calibrated diet and died in his mid-forties.

Naomi's grandfather spent 12 years working in a toxic German coal mine that destroyed his lungs, and the rest of his life smoking cigarettes to destroy what was left of them. He had a ridiculously poor diet and, to my knowledge, never so much as went for a five-minute jog. He lived well into his eighties.

I'm sure each of us could think of many examples from our own lives.

Doing the right things does not always lead to the right results.

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So, is the writer of Psalm 112 naïve? Deluded?

It's important to recognize what kind of writing the Psalms are. These are not doctrinal statements, but prayers and expressions of worship. They are found in what scholars call the “Wisdom Literature” section of Scripture.

The Hebrew Bible groups the books of what we call the Old Testament differently than we do.

For us, the Psalms come right in the middle, kind of in between the more “historical books” and before the prophets

For the Hebrews, there are three sections:

Torah – first five books of the bible

Nebi'im – former and later prophets

Ketuvim – “Writings”;

It is in the “Writings” section that we have books like the Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, Ruth, etc. This is the “wisdom” section of the Hebrew Bible.

So, right along side Psalms we have books like Ecclesiastes 7:15-16 which says:

<sup>15</sup> In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these:  
the righteous perishing in their righteousness,  
and the wicked living long in their wickedness.

<sup>16</sup> Do not be overrighteous,  
neither be otherwise—  
why destroy yourself?

Or how about the book of Job which is the story of the undeserved suffering of a righteous man:

When I think about this, I am terrified;  
trembling seizes my body.

<sup>7</sup> Why do the wicked live on,  
growing old and increasing in power?

<sup>8</sup> They see their children established around them,  
their offspring before their eyes.

<sup>9</sup> Their homes are safe and free from fear;  
the rod of God is not on them....

<sup>13</sup> They spend their years in prosperity  
and go down to the grave in peace (Job 21:6-9; 13),

And even *within* the Psalter, we hear Psalms of lament. We hear things like this from Psalm 73:

This is what the wicked are like—  
always free of care, they go on amassing wealth.

<sup>13</sup> Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure  
and have washed my hands in innocence.

<sup>14</sup> All day long I have been afflicted,  
and every morning brings new punishments.

Now, none of these writers *stops* with these observations. Almost always, these statements are followed by something like, “Nevertheless” or “But then I also saw...” or some recognition that this doesn’t tell the *whole* story.

But they clearly noticed that life doesn’t always seem fair. This observation runs throughout all of Scripture!

**So, we have Psalms like Psalm 112 that point to a direct connection between what we do and what we get. Do what is right, they say, and you will be rewarded with blessings!**

**And we have Psalms that lament the fact that even when we do what is right, we do not always experience blessing!**

Apparently the Hebrews were not too concerned to have these apparently contradictory expressions in the same song/prayer book

What wisdom Psalms like Psalm 112 are point to is that *in general* this is how things tend to work.

*In general*, people who are honest and generous, people who follow the rules, people who act justly toward their neighbours, who look after the poor... *In general*, these are the kinds of people who find things going their way in life.

Except when they don’t.

Our text from 1 Corinthians points to a few of the most obvious examples of this.

Jesus lived the way that Psalm recommends.

Was he rewarded?

1 Corinthians text is a text about the “foolishness” of God’s wisdom in a crucified Christ. Paul resolves to know nothing other than Christ and him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2).

Let’s think about this for a minute.

Jesus was generous.

Jesus was righteous.

Jesus gracious and merciful and just.

Jesus distributed freely and gave to the poor.

Jesus exhibited all of the positive traits of Psalm 112 and many more. What was his reward?

Was his house full of wealth and riches?

If ever there was a case of someone *not* deserving what they got it would be Jesus!

As a “reward” for a life of virtue, for living the most genuinely selfless, God-honouring human life that has ever been lived, Jesus lived in poverty, was abandoned by his friends in his darkest hour, was persecuted relentlessly by religious people, was executed after a farce of a trial, and was mocked and ridiculed up until his dying breath.

Or what about the Apostle Paul, the writer of 1 Corinthians? His life was no picnic either. Always on the move, hunted by authorities, beaten, thrown in jail, mocked, abused, misunderstood, and thought to be a pathetic and un-influential speaker...

In the text today, he speaks of coming the Corinthian church in weakness and fear and much trembling.

Paul would have been no one's idea of an obviously blessed man.

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So, what wisdom for living well can we glean from our Psalm this morning?

Is it just a negative object lesson? An example of how people thought the world worked before Jesus arrived on the scene?

Clearly, we know this is not the case. As we saw, the Hebrews knew very well that living the right way did not always lead to a life of material blessing. They knew that life wasn't a mechanical formula with predictable results.

"Open Hands" is the title of this sermon. I think that the wisdom of our texts today is that we are to be people of open hands in at least two ways.

First, and perhaps most obviously, we are to be generous people. As Psalm 112 says twice, the "happy" or "blessed" person is the one who "deals generously," who helps the poor, who "distributes freely."

A well-lived life is one in which resources are not greedily hoarded but are held with open hands.

But I think that this metaphor of living with open hands extends beyond this. For me, it is an image that points to the fact that we are to live the right way, *no matter the outcome*. To live with open hands is to say...

"I know that a lifestyle of generosity and justice and mercy and graciousness will not necessarily lead to attaining all the material blessings that I have ever hoped for.

"I know that, like Jesus, like Paul, like countless other saints throughout the ages (including many of our Mennonite ancestors), living the right way might lead to persecution or suffering...

"I know that putting in the effort will not always lead to winning the game or standing on the podium..."

**"But I choose it anyway, because it is the right way to live, and because in doing so, I will be becoming the *right kind of person*, the kind of person God created me to be.**

Blaise Pascal was a 17<sup>th</sup> century French mathematician and philosopher who is most well known famous “wager” he proposed. The wager essentially says, nobody can prove whether or not God exists, but all of us have to “bet” one way or another with our lives.

So, let’s look at this rationally. If you bet that there is no God and you’re right, congratulations. If you’re wrong, though you have a lot to lose. An eternity apart from God.

If you bet that there *is* a God and you’re right, again, congratulations!! But if you bet that there is a God and you’re wrong? Well, then what? Well

Essentially, the wager says you have more to lose betting against God and being wrong than betting *for* God and being wrong.

Even if there turns out to be no God—even if you don’t get rewarded for choosing a life of faith, you will have become the right sort of person. Listen to what he says near the end of the passage from *Pensees*:

Now, what harm will befall you in taking this side? You will be faithful, honest, humble, grateful, generous, a sincere friend, truthful.

Certainly you will not have those poisonous pleasures, glory and luxury; but will you not have others? I will tell you that you will thereby gain in this life, and that, at each step you take on this road, you will see so great certainty of gain, so much nothingness in what you risk, that you will at last recognise that you have wagered for something certain and infinite, for which you have given nothing.

So, we live with open hands, knowing we don’t control the future. We live with open hands as a way of saying, “no matter what happens, God, I am casting my lot with you. I trust you.”

And we live with open hands because we know that the story isn’t over yet.

We know that God is determined to bless us, even if this blessing comes to us in strange ways and at unexpected times.

1 Corinthians 2 speaks about the hidden wisdom of Christ.



When we are weak we are strong. What seems foolish is actually God's wisdom. What seems up is down. What seems like death is actually the gateway to life.

1 Corinthians 2:9 — "No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him."

We can live generously, confidently, with open hands—we can live lives that are “not afraid of evil tidings,” as Psalm 112 says—not because bad things will never happen to us or because we can insulate ourselves from them by doing the right things, but because no matter what happens, our lives are firm and secure, hidden with Christ.

Amen.