

# WHERE DOES MY HELP COME FROM?

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*PSALM 121; MATTHEW 5:38-48*  
*LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH*  
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We've reached the end of our Epiphany sermon series called "Listening to the Psalms: Wisdom for Living Well."

We've had a look at some of the building blocks or important components of what a well-lived life looks like.

As I was preparing this sermon, my thoughts returned to where the idea of a series on the Psalms and wisdom for living well came from. The idea originated in a number of comments in a number of contexts about the struggle to live a "balanced" life. There were a number of conversations about the difficulties of juggling the many demands of life, the noisiness of technological culture, and the way in which many people frequently feel pushed and pulled in all kinds of different directions.

The display at the *front* is meant to symbolize this idea that life can often feel like a balancing act.

The display on the *wall* contains a few of the building blocks to a well-lived life that we have discovered through our short tour through the psalms from each week's lectionary readings.

This has all been well and good. I think that each of these words on the sidewall *do* represent important components of a well-lived life, and that if we consistently pursue these things, our lives *will* be more balanced and sane and permeated by joy and hope.

But as I thought about how we were going to end this series, I kept coming back to what I think is the rather large elephant in the room whenever we talk about things like what a well-lived life looks like from a Christian perspective, or how to seek balance in our lives, etc.

The elephant in the room is this: As Christians, ours is a faith that is based on Jesus of Nazareth, a man who

- was a wandering nomad with few material possessions
- was vilified by respectable religious people and those in positions of influence and power
- spoke about the “blessedness” of those who mourn, those who made peace, those who were persecuted for the sake of righteousness, those who were poor in spirit
- generally advocated what many felt (and still feel today) was a foolish and unrealistic way of living the world
- and was executed as a criminal in his early thirties.

**Jesus was not the prototype of a life of balance—at least not in the way that many of us think about and seek balance for our lives today.**

Wander through any bookstore today and you will see shelves and shelves of self-help books claiming to tell you how to achieve the life you’ve always wanted.

Jesus lived a life that few people would have wanted. He advocated a way of life that few people were (and *are*) interested in.

The self-help books assume that the self is the center around which everything else orbits.

Achieve the life that *you* have always wanted; not the life that you *should* want; not the life the world and your neighbour *needs* you to live; not the life that is right and true, regardless of how it makes you feel, or whether it “works.”

Jesus starts from a very different place. God, not the individual self, is the starting point.

Jesus says that he has come only to do what the father is doing (John 5:19).

Jesus submits his desires to those of the father in Gethsemane (Matthew 26:39-42).

Jesus surrenders his cause to the father on the cross, when he says, “into your hands I commits his spirit (Luke 23:46).

Jesus’ understanding of what a truly human life looks like and what it is *for* is very different than the ones we default to. This is perhaps nowhere more obvious than in the Sermon on the Mount, the central core of Jesus’ teaching.

Our text today contains some of the most difficult teaching in an already difficult larger sermon.

There are times when Jesus says nice things that make us feel nice about how nice we are (or are trying to be), times when he talks about love and peace and justice in comfortably vague and non-threatening ways (assuming we're not paying very careful attention). This is not one of those times.

This is a very different kind of time, a time when Jesus grabs us by the collar and shakes some foolish sense into us. *Do not resist an evildoer... if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also...give your cloak as well... go also the second mile... give to everyone who begs from you... love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you... For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?*

This is not wise advice in any normal sense of the word.

**And then this concluding statement that seems impossible: Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**

Well, thank you very much Jesus. Be perfect, just like God. How very helpful of you.

Why? Why should we live like this? What rationale does Jesus offer?

Matthew 5:45 — *That you may be children of your Father in heaven.*

Because, presumably, your heavenly Father is the sort of father who loves and gives in precisely this way, with precisely this little thought for his own self-interest, with precisely this little care for social norms of respectability and propriety.

Jesus seems to imagine that in giving ourselves away in these reckless ways, we are mirroring the character of God himself.

Matthew 5:38-48 is about disciples imitating God. We are to love indiscriminately because *this is how God loves*. God blesses the righteous and the unrighteous without distinction (indeed, we have been noting this, with some discomfort, throughout our short tour through the Psalms).

As God loves, so must we.

Jesus is not an add-on to produce the ultimate goal of a balanced life.

Jesus tears down and builds up. He alters the whole system of doing things for rewards and punishments. He dignifies human beings by assuming that we are capable of looking *past* our own self-interest and being part of the way the world changes.

Jesus doesn't reject the wisdom tradition of the Psalms; he builds upon and expands it. He pushes us beyond a carrot and stick mentality whereby we do the right things for the rewards they will secure for us.

Francis Spufford puts it beautifully in his book called *Unapologetic*:

[W]hen the crowds gather, he sits them down in the sheep pasture and he says: behave as if you never had to be afraid of the consequences. Behave as if nothing you gave away could ever make you poorer, because you can never run out of what you give. Behave as if this one day we're in now were the whole of time and you didn't have to hold anything back, or to plot and scheme about tomorrow. Don't try to grip your life with tight, anxious hands. Unclench those fingers. Let it go. If someone asks for your help, give them more than they've asked for. If someone hits out at you, let them. Don't retaliate. Be the place the violence ends.

Because you've got it wrong about virtue. It isn't something built up from a thousand careful, carefully measured acts. It comes, when it comes, in a rush; it comes from behaving, so far as you can, like God Himself, who makes and makes and loves and loves and is never the less for it. God doesn't want your careful virtue. He wants your reckless generosity. Try to keep what you have, and you'll lose even that. Give it away, and you'll get more back than you bargain for; more than bargaining could ever get you.<sup>1</sup>

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So, how does any of this relate to our Psalm for this morning? Psalm 121 is a song that the ancient Israelites would sing on the road, on the way to the temple to celebrate the Passover each year.

It is a song for the journey—a song that acknowledges that *all* of the journey takes place under the sovereign care of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Spufford, *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), 115-16.

**Jesus' entire way of being in the world—his life, his teaching, his death and resurrection—all of this depended upon his unshakeable conviction that he was in God's hands.**

*I lift my eyes up to the mountains. Where does my help come from?*

The Lord. The Lord is the one who watches over you. The same Lord who watched over Jesus as he made his way through a difficult life watches over you and I on our peaks and valleys.

The Lord is the one from whom your help comes, in good times and in bad times, when the road is smooth and scenic, and when it is rough and confusing.

The Lord.

Our last word is “trust.” And trust is what is necessary, whether we are talking about the wisdom of the Psalms or the more difficult wisdom of Jesus Christ.

It makes no sense to follow God on this journey, it makes no sense to strive after Jesus' commands in the Sermon on the Mount if we do not *trust* that God is trustworthy and that our future is safe with him.

It makes no sense to

- to turn the other cheek
- to not resist an evil person
- to hand over our coat when someone wants our shirt
- to walk two miles for the one who compels us to go one
- to give to anyone who asks
- to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us

These are not wise ways to live, nor are they recipes for a life of balance and tranquility. Living in this way is downright foolish based on the standards of this world.

But Jesus doesn't come to offer us a balanced life. Jesus doesn't bleed and die on a Roman cross to offer us a balanced life. He lives and dies and rises from the dead to offer us a life *to the full*.

Jesus comes to unbalance us and then reorient us.

Jesus comes to show us that violence and persecution and anger and infidelity and untruth and injustice are not overcome by force, but by a different way.

By refusing to respond in kind. By repaying earthly wisdom with holy foolishness, and in so doing imitating our Heavenly Father who loves all of us—the righteous and the unrighteous, the perpetrator and the victim, the powerful and the powerless, the influential and the easily neglected, the one who lays down their life for others and those crying for blood and vengeance.

*And doing all of this in the confident trust that the maker of heaven and earth watches over us, that he will not allow us to stumble in the end, that he is the one from whom our help comes, and that he adds his glad “amen” to our partial attempts at the foolishness that shames the wise.*

*Doing all of this in the confident trust that we are going along with the grain of how things really are and how things will really one day be because this is how God is.*

The world is not made new in any other way.

So, at the end of the day, perhaps it comes down to this. Jesus invites us to live “unwisely” by the world’s standards in order to understand what a well-lived life really looks like.

And the one who issues this invitation is the same one from whom our help comes.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.