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Are You Ready to Rule?

a sermon on Psalm 8

by David C. Mauldin

Westminster Presbyterian Church, Mobile, Alabama

Psalm 8 was the first psalm on the moon. When the Apollo 11 astronauts landed on the moon 40 years ago, they left behind a silicon disc. That disc contains messages from 73 nations, including the Vatican. The Vatican's message has the text of Psalm 8. They could not have chosen a more appropriate or profound passage. "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" Psalm 8 set the whole moon mission in context: We can reach for the stars because God gave us the ability, and because he put them there in the first place. We can take small steps and make giant leaps because God has crowned us with glory. Yet our glory derives from his. He has given us dominion, yet our rule is subordinate to his sovereignty.

Psalm 8 puts into words the tension most of us feel but cannot express: On one hand, we are nothing but dust. We are small and insignificant. In the grand scheme, what do we matter? As the psalm says, "What are human beings that you are mindful of them?" If you've sailed the oceans or hiked in the Rockies, you've probably asked the same question. On the other hand, there is no other creation like a human being. We are the pinnacle. Every human being has inherent dignity and worth simply by virtue of being human. And we intuitively know this. You do not have to be Christian to care about things like human rights. We know humans are special. Where being a Christian comes in handy is also knowing we are not God.

If we forget the higher glory and majesty of God, then we will start to think we are the highest. And if we start to think that way, we will begin to act as if we are gods, and that is always a recipe for disaster. Some would make humanity the measure of all things. Others say we are nothing but animals. Ironically, either way you end up with human beings pretending to be God. Because either way there is no rule above ours. Christians have a higher view of humanity because we have a lower view of humanity: We know that we are lower than God, and that sets us free. We don't have to be God, which is great because we're not good at it. Instead we can assume our rightful place in creation as God's junior partners in the business of creating, protecting, and ruling the earth. Unfortunately, we are not good at that either.

Psalm 8 reminds me of Genesis 1 & 2 where God creates humankind in his own image and gives us dominion over the natural order. These passages tell us something unexpected about ourselves: We have a vocation. We human beings as a race have a job to do. And if the whole race has a job to do, then you have to do your part. What is

our vocation? You can think of it different ways: You can think of the human race as a priest among all living things. Being made in God's image, we represent God to the rest of creation, and we represent creation before God. We function as a kind of go-between. As a priest, our job is to bless creation.

Another way to think about it is like this: When the Bible was being written there were kings, real ones, not just figureheads. A king with a large territory might appoint governors to rule over the provinces of his kingdom. The governor had authority in his province, but always subject to the higher authority of the king. We are like that governor. "You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet." As governors we have real power to do things. We can not only adapt to our environment, we can adapt our environment to us. We can use natural resources creatively. And yet, we must always remember that the earth is not ours to do with whatever we please, it belongs to God.

Why are you here? Why do you exist? Do you have a purpose, and if so what is it? If Psalm 8 is right, you were created to rule. It's a vocation you share with everyone else, but it is your calling too. Created to rule ... I don't know about you, but I don't feel up to the task. Am I ready to rule? Are you? I've put together a little checklist to help us find out. It has just three essential things we need if we are to have any hope of doing the job God has given us without messing up.

Are you ready to rule? The first thing you will need is humility. You are not God. It's important to remember that. Psalm 8 begins and ends with praise for God: "O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" In between we learn about ourselves. It also asks, literally in Hebrew, "What is man that you remember him, the son of man that you visit him?" Notice the two things God does that make all the difference for us: He *remembers* us, which in Hebrew and in the Old Testament is a word loaded with meaning. Over and over God remembers his people. He is mindful of them. When it says he remembers us, it means we are important to him. He cares about us. Same thing for the word *visits*. God pays attention to his people. He visits them, in order to bless them, to make himself known to them, to punish them, to test them, or to seek them. Psalm 8 could not have found two words that better reflect what God does for his people in scripture. And why? It asks, why does he do all this? The answer has to do with who God is and who he has made us to be. What we have to keep in mind is: We are special because God loves us so much. God does not love us because we are special. His love comes first. We have only the beauty and glory he has given us.

Again, I hope you see how the Christian view of humanity really is higher because it is lower. We are lower than God, but we share his glory. We are important because he has made us that way and he cares for us. We are loved. We have a purpose. Without God, what are we, really, except dust? Nothing. We are random molecules. We are

particularly dangerous animals. But nothing more. Only as creatures of a sovereign God do we have lasting significance.

We must always remember and honor God, because when we do not, we begin to think and act as if we are sovereign. As I said, and as you know, that always ends in disaster. And this leads to the next item on the checklist.

Are you ready to rule? The second thing you need is grace. Question: Psalm 8 says God gave humanity dominion over the rest of his creation. Was this a mistake? Your piety may answer immediately that God doesn't make mistakes, but a moment's honest reflection will make you wonder. It sure looks like a mistake. Is there anything haven't messed up? The environment is only the beginning. Yes, we've done terrible things to the planet, but we've done worse to one another: war, injustice, oppression, hatred, all the evils human beings have visited upon one another down through the ages. *We* are the ones God put in charge? Talk about the asylum being run by the inmates.

How can this be? God gave us wonderful abilities, and we have misused them. The worst is always a corruption of the best. Remember that: The worst is always a corruption of the best. Another way to say that is, it takes a really bright person to make a colossal disaster. You take a petty thug who is into drugs and alcohol, lives for the moment, doesn't care who he hurts. He can create significant pain in a community through his crime. But the suffering he causes pales in comparison to what a gifted, focused, determined person can do when he puts his mind to it. Think of Hitler, with his gift for oratory. Hitler had an abundance of natural ability and talent. He turned it completely to evil, and tens of millions died. You can't begin to calculate the suffering he caused. A person's gifts determine his or her capacity for both good and evil. Now reflect on the glory and gifts God has given to humanity, and you can see the abundant potential for both. How have we used our gifts? No doubt we do much good. Yet often we have used our gifts for evil. Dominion has become domination.

Shusaku Endo wrote a book called *Silence*. It is about the extermination of Christians in Japan in the early 17th century. Most people don't know Christianity exploded in Japan in the 16th century. At the high point, there were around 400,000 Christians, a significant portion of the population in that day. And the movement showed every sign of continued growth. Then those in power grew suspicious of any foreign influence, and the faith was all but wiped out by some of the worst torture and repression the world has ever seen. Anyway, in this book Endo offers the best definition of sin I have come across: "Sin is for one man to walk brutally over the life of another and to be quite oblivious to the wounds he has left behind." We humans do that all the time. We can't help ourselves. And this propensity to abuse our gifts and our power make us unfit for the job God has given us. So why did he give it to us?

He gave it to us because his ability to redeem is greater than our ability to destroy. Rather than take away our vocation — which would mean demoting us within the order

of creation and taking away our glory and gifts – God resolves to put things right and restore us to our rightful place. So the Father sent Jesus.

Jesus has been called the true human being, because he was everything we are supposed to be but aren't. We failed in our vocation, but he fulfilled his and ours. The heart of Christianity is this: By dying on the cross for us and by rising again, he has opened the door for us to have new life. We can yet be all that God created us to be. When we turn to him in faith and with repentance, he forgives us and sets up shop within us. His Spirit actually comes to live in us. And he has promised that he will raise us to eternal life and give us back our glory. He will make us fit for the work God has given us. So, not only do we get eternal life, we get our old job back, and this time we will get it right. We will be a blessing to all creation. We will love God and others perfectly, just as he loves us.

I hope you are hearing me carefully, because I would never claim that any Christian attains this in the present life. No, this is our destiny. It is what awaits us on the other side of death, when we are resurrected just as Jesus was. The book of the Revelation, the last book of the Bible expresses this beautifully. In chapter 5 it praises Christ and says to him, "You were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, *and they will reign on earth*" [vv. 9-10]. That song of praise is looking back to Genesis and to Psalm 8, and it's saying, "Christ will restore humankind to the vocation from which it has fallen." He will give us back our purpose.

Anyone with eyes can see that we Christians are a long way from loving perfectly and blessing all creation. But here is the crazy thing: Even though we constantly fail, God never takes from us humans our vocation as priests and governors. That's why we need grace. We need a double dose of grace. We need grace to reconcile us to God and make us heirs of the promise, so that on the other side of death we will not be lost but become our truest self. Meanwhile, we need grace from day to day because God still expects to us to go around loving and blessing and acting as his priests and governors, even though we aren't very good at it. Is that amazing or what! How great his grace must be! It is far deeper and wider than you can begin to imagine. Anyone else would have fired us by now. Not God. He's not giving up on us. His grace is overwhelming ... but ... his grace is not an excuse for you to quit trying. Are you ready to rule? Not yet. If you are in Christ, then someday he will make you able. Even now his Spirit lives in you with the hope of real growth. You have to do the best you can, each day, with his help. And this is grace too. He doesn't ask you to do it alone. He is with you. The more you rely on him, the closer you will come to doing your job well.

Are you ready to rule? The third thing you need is: You have to know what ruling looks like. You might think you know what it means because you know what kings do or politicians or generals or corporate executives. They say, "Do this," and somebody

does it. They guard their dignity jealously. They exercise authority to get what they want. You might think ruling means something like that ... but you would be wrong.

Jesus said that is exactly the model of leadership *not* to follow. He told us to follow him, and he had some funny ideas about what real authority looks like in action. What does ruling look like? We see it in Jesus, who washed his disciples' feet ... who died on the cross. That is how he exercised his sovereignty. He gave himself for us. If Psalm 8 is right, and God has given us dominion, then you can be sure that our rule ought to be like his. It's not about my rights and privileges, and above all it's not about my power. It is about giving and serving in order to bless creation, including other human beings.

That's heavy stuff. If you are like me, all this business about ruling sounded good until now. But that's the broken part of us talking. The part of us that wants to rule is the part that wants the power and the glory for me, me, me. That's the part that has to die. In its place God gives us love. Once Christ seizes us with his love, we realize we are not the center of the universe, and we are set free. And then we are ready to rule, because we will want to be a blessing.

OK, Jesus is our model for how we rule. But what exactly do we do? It's not hard to figure out. Let's break the job down into the different areas where we rule and serve, and you will probably be able to think of dozens of practical things to do: As a church ... and as individuals ... we are called ... by God ... to be a blessing.

To be a blessing to the earth and its creatures. You can do this with an ecologically responsible lifestyle. Try to eliminate waste. Recycle. Be kind to animals. Care about the natural order. There are lot and lots of ways to bless the earth, remembering that it belongs to God and he has made us his junior partners in caring for it.

To be a blessing to the human family. What can you do to promote peace and harmony among people? What can you do to share the Good News of salvation through Jesus with people? I'm talking big picture humanity here, the whole world. Sometimes it feels as if we cannot do much, unless you are a scientist who cures a disease or a farmer who develops a super-hearty kind of wheat. Maybe most of us cannot do much, but we can do something. I think of the Heifer Project. I taught a Sunday school class once of kids who raised enough money to send a water buffalo to a developing nation. Somewhere in the world today that buffalo or its offspring are still helping people farm. A lot of people doing little things makes a big difference. And of course humanity's greatest need is God. He has given us the precious gift of the gospel. We know Jesus. How can we keep such a precious gift to ourselves? The need is so great.

To be a blessing to the community we live in. I'm not going to say much about this because I wrote my August newsletter article about it. When I preach, I try to teach what Christianity is and says. I want people to see Jesus, not hear my own dubious opinions. The following comes from the category of "Things that are true but not

essential to the faith." In other words, you can disagree with me about this and still be a good Christian. You would just be wrong. Here it is: Mobile, Alabama, is the best place in the world to live. If you need reasons, read next month's newsletter. Seriously, I don't know about you, but I feel that way. I love this city. I hope you do too. I believe God wants us to love our community: the land, the institutions, the people. He wants us to love and bless the community in which we live. There are so many ways to do that.

Your job. Volunteer work. The possibilities are endless, but every one of them starts with a love for the place you live.

To be a blessing to our neighbors. This means caring for people and treating them well. That's all. It includes sharing our faith.

When you realize, "God has made me a priest and a governor. He wants me to bless and rule," you'll feel overwhelmed. But when you break down all the areas he has given you to work in, the job seems a bit more manageable. The earth. The human family. Your community. Your neighbors. You are God's partner in caring for them all.

Let me close with Leslie Brandt's paraphrase of Psalm 8 from the book *Psalms/Now*. He says it in a way that speaks to me:

When I gaze into the star-studded skies
and attempt to comprehend the vast distances,
I contemplate in utter amazement
my Creator's concern for me.
I am dumbfounded that You
should care personally about me.

And yet You have made me in Your image.
You have called me Your son.
You have ordained me as Your priest
and chosen me to be Your servant.
You have assigned to me
the fantastic responsibility
of carrying on Your creative activity.

O God,
how full of wonder and splendor You are!

To this I can only add: Are *you* ready? Are you ready to rule?
Amen.