

## Rap Sheet

Sunday, February 16, 2020

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Psalms 119:1-8

When you think of famous criminals throughout history, some notorious names leap to mind: Al Capone, John Dillinger, Baby Face Nelson, Bonnie and Clyde, Whitey Bulger, Charles Manson, Ted Kaczynski, Peter Gotti, “El Chapo” Guzmán, Ted Bundy, Timothy McVeigh, and Jeffrey Dahmer. History reveals a rogue’s gallery of people known for their audacious, heinous, headline-grabbing crimes against humanity.

What if we measured a criminal history not by the *nature* of the crimes but by the *volume* of crimes committed? If the length of the “rap sheet” (“Rap sheet” comes from the name of an old FBI form called the “Record of Arrest and Prosecution.”) is the measure, then the most famous criminal in American history is a Lexington, KY, resident named Henry Earl. His rap sheet is literally longer than his arm, in fact, it’s long enough to wrap around the block several times. As of 2013, Earl’s record includes more than 1,500 arrests and more than 5,000 days in jail (about 13 ½ years). His average consecutive days of freedom during that time is just 2 days; police often arrested and released Earl twice in one day.

Earl is not a violent criminal: most of his arrests are for public intoxication and trespassing. He started drinking in his teens after the death of his adoptive mother, garnering his first arrest in 1970. Earl’s epic record of arrests brings him a fair amount of celebrity status in Lexington, where University of Kentucky students often take selfies with him. Earl’s reputation around town is more that of a lovable loser than a hardened criminal. Earl tried rehab numerous times, only to fall off the wagon again, proving that addiction is hard to shake. Once you get into a cycle, especially one as embedded as Earl’s, it takes a powerful movement to change it.

Of course, the best way to avoid having an extensive rap sheet is to develop a habit that takes you in a different direction. Replacing a negative habit with a positive one — or what 19th century Scottish clergyman Thomas Chalmers called “the expulsive power of a new affection” — is what permanently breaks a destructive cycle. This seems to be precisely what the psalmist is offering us in Psalm 119, which reads like a repetitive list of positivity designed to embed a deep affection for and obedience to God’s Word.

Psalm 119 is the longest psalm in the collection, and it is written as a Hebrew acrostic poem. There are 22 sections, representing the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Each

section is composed of eight lines, and each line has the same first letter of the corresponding Hebrew letter for that section. For example, verses 1-8 are the *aleph* section (the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet), and each line begins with that same first letter. The next section, *beth*, follows the same pattern and so on. It’s as though the psalmist is giving his readers the basic ABCs of human life and how to best live from beginning to end.

Reading this long psalm, one gets the impression that it is repetitive. It has 167 lines and says essentially the same thing 167 ways. There are eight key words referring to the *Torah* or the law of God which appear throughout the psalm: law, decrees, statutes, commandments, ordinances, word, precepts and promise. According to Old Testament scholar James L. Mays, the use of the Hebrew alphabet as the form of the psalm signals completeness, while the vocabulary represents comprehensiveness.

In other words, *the repetition in the psalm is really the whole point*. The more one engages the repetition of words and concepts, the more they have a chance to influence the imagination. The psalmist wants us to imagine a life that is not characterized by a rap sheet of sin, but by a “Record of Abiding Principles,” of constant obedience to God’s Word. We are to store God’s Word and “treasure” it in our heart so that we might not sin against God (v. 11).

The psalm opens with lines that look very much like the Beatitudes with which Jesus opens the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1-12). True “happiness” or blessedness is associated with those whose way is “blameless,” who “walk in the law of the Lord,” who “keep his decrees” and “seek him with their whole heart” (v. 1-2). Then, as if to drive the point home, verse 3 states that those who keep God’s laws “do no wrong” and, “walk in his ways.” Those who study, meditate on and obey the law of God are those whose rap sheets are clean!

Verse 4 shifts this opening section from beatitude to prayer, addressing God directly. “You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently,” prays the psalmist. “O that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes” (vv. 4-5). The psalmist recognizes right away that keeping God’s law and walking in his ways isn’t something one can simply do under one’s own willpower. If that were the case, people like Henry Earl could simply stop what they were doing and change. All of us know the power of a troubling sin; those bad habits and transgressions that recur in a seemingly never-ending cycle.

The apostle Paul hints at this predicament in Romans 7:14-25; he says we seem doomed to repeat the things we don’t want to do. How do we break such a cycle? Paul recognized,

as did the psalmist, that we need divine intervention to expel the old and stoke a new affection in us. We may not be “steadfast” on our own, but the power of God is unwavering (v. 5). It is this knowledge of and trust in God’s unwavering love for us that permits us to accept the Savior God provides for us, Jesus Christ who will “rescue” us from this “body of death” and enable us to focus on a new way of life (Romans 7:24-25). In Christ, we can have our “eyes fixed” on God’s love and God’s commandments (v, 6).

What the psalmist is advocating here is “freedom through obedience.” The prolific 20<sup>th</sup> century Methodist missionary E. Stanley Jones equated it with flying: a pilot is free to fly the plane wherever he wants so long as he obeys the rules of flight. God provides us with the freedom to live our lives in blessedness and happiness so long as we respect the boundaries God provides within God’s Word. Step outside those boundaries and we are bound to crash. Indeed, like Henry Earl, without God’s Word we are destined to crash repeatedly.

One of the ways we reinforce this freedom and develop new affections is through worship. When we “praise [God] with an upright heart” daily in our personal spiritual disciplines and weekly in worship with other Christians, we allow the Word of God and the Spirit of God to shape us, to change our self-perception and to redirect our vocabulary in ways that translate into a life transformed (v. 7).

Henry Earl’s long rap sheet is legendary; but keeping track of where he is now is difficult. Rumors abound that he died or that he is living somewhere in assisted living. The internet tends to forget people once their newsworthiness outlives its usefulness. We hope that Earl has some measure of peace and that his wild days are over. But, no matter how long and legendary that rap sheet is, God still loves Henry Earl and still loves all of us who aspire to live lives of obedience and fruitfulness despite the past. God does not “utterly forsake” us, even when we’re stuck in a cycle of sin. Rather, God wants to replace our rap sheet with a clean sheet of righteousness and guide us toward a future filled with hope.

Here’s a story to illustrate what I mean. The boys knew they shouldn’t be doing it. They were supposed to be studying the Talmud. Still, when one of them pulled out a checkerboard and a box of checkers, they all gathered around to see who would win. None of them noticed the tall, silent figure standing in the doorway until it was too late. It wasn’t one of their parents. It wasn’t even one of the Hebrew teachers. It was none other than the rabbi himself. Swift as could be, the checkers disappeared into their box, the board folded and squirreled away in a backpack. In a snap, the boys were back at their desks,

heads buried in their books. None of the miserable offenders dared look up to catch the rabbi’s eye. It seemed an eternity before he spoke.

“You should not be ashamed,” he said. “You need to learn that you can study the law wherever you can find it. Can any of you tell me the three laws of the game of checkers?” No one was so bold as to reply. “I think you all know the answer to my question. The laws of checkers are three. First, you must never make two moves at once. Second, you may move only forward, not backward. And third, when you have reached the last row, you may move wherever you like. Such,” he said, “is what the Torah teaches.” Then, without saying another word, he turned and left.

It was only later, as they spoke with each other about what the rabbi had said, that the students began to grasp his message. First, you should not clutter your life with more than one move at a time. Choose your course well and devote your whole self to it. Second, never lose sight of your goal, which is to move forward. Third, when you finish the journey of obedience, when you reach the last row, there is truly nowhere you cannot go.

We’re all called to walk in the way of the Lord! Career criminals are known by their “rap sheet”—the long list of their arrests and convictions. Career Christians, on the other hand, should be known by their long obedience to the commandments of God. God’s commandments, laws, statutes, and ordinances are designed to keep us moving forward, in a positive direction.

Prayer: Gracious and ever-living God, you have given your promise for us to treasure in our hearts, and your justice for us to declare with our lips. You have given your commandments as a sure path for us, and your decrees for our richest delight. You have given your Covenant so that we may have life in its fullness, and the urgings of your Spirit for our attentive listening to your word. May we be obedient to your Word, faithfully following in the steps of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

#### Sources:

- “Henry Earl, arrested more than 1500 times, in jail again.” *HuffPost*, November 27, 2013, huffpost.com. Retrieved October 13, 2019. An internet search for “Henry Earl” will bring up many articles about Earl.
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