

The Way of the Righteous (Exegesis of Psalm 1)

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Psalm 1 RSV

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law he meditates day and night.
He is like a tree planted by streams of water,
that yields its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither.
In all that he does, he prospers.
The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff which the wind drives away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
for the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.

Everyone please look and see if there's a hymnal in front of you. We're not going to sing — but this morning the pastor suggested that if anyone were to fall asleep a well-aimed hymnal might wake them up. That reminded me of the Congregational churches of old New England, which used to have an officer called the beadle. The beadle would stand in the back of the church with a long pole. If a couple of kids were whispering to one another, or if somebody fell asleep, the beadle would take the pole and “knock them upside the head.” That would keep the congregation awake! So I hereby appoint each one of you an honorary beadle. I'm not worried that *you* might fall asleep, but *I* might. So please keep your eyes open and make sure that I stay awake. You know, it's been calculated that if all of the people who sleep in church on Sunday morning were laid end to end they would be more comfortable.

It's not usual to begin a sermon with a disclaimer, but I want you to understand one thing. I'm not used to preaching to *Christian* congregations. You laugh too soon — you will laugh later. I'm not used to preaching to congregations in which people know the Lord. In the last church I pastored there was one person who was a Christian, and she was a kind of namby-pamby sort who went along with everybody else. One day somebody woke up and heard what I was preaching, and that's why I'm not preaching there any more. I say this to say that if what I have to share with you today is too basic and elementary you'll understand why.

I want to speak to you about the first psalm, Psalm 1. Today we're concerned with our personal spiritual growth, and with a deeper walk with the Lord. We're concerned with discovering what the Lord has in mind for this church body — its further movement, its extended witness, its growth, its gathering of strength, and its effectiveness in reaching out. And it's always appropriate to be concerned with these things. The apostle Paul was certainly concerned with how Christians should exhibit their personal walk with the Lord. In the third chapter of the Epistle to the Philippians he wrote:

Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things (Philippians 3:17-19 NASB).

There's always the danger that the walk that we think is going to be a walk with the Lord will turn into another kind of walk. It's possible to think that our God is the God of heaven, and yet — as the apostle Paul says — we might in fact be among those “whose god is their appetite.” By this he didn't mean the physical appetite, although when I fast I wonder about the power of “the belly,” as some translations put it. Physical appetites can tyrannize us, but here Paul means here the emotions and overbearing personal desires. The Bible presents a human psychology of body, soul and spirit. The life we're conscious of is that of our *psyche*, our “soul life” or personality. That's the life that we know ourselves to be, the part of us that says,

“I want to be myself and I want to do my own thing.” That’s the appetite, or “belly,” to which the Apostle Paul is referring here metaphorically. One’s God might turn out to be the appetite instead of the God of heaven, the God of the Scriptures.

Upon honest examination, then, we could discover ourselves to have “set our minds on earthly things” instead of heavenly things. We might find that our value systems, rather than being shaped by the Word of God, are actually values that we had picked up from our culture that surrounds us, from the media, from our upbringing and background, or from some other influence coming into our life. I want to point out that when the Apostle Paul spoke of those “whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things” he wasn’t speaking of people outside the body of Christ. He wasn’t referring to unbelievers. Paul said that he was under obligation to barbarians and Jews and whoever didn’t know the gospel of Christ (Romans 1:14), but he didn’t particularly weep about their condition because he understood they had no better light. But when he discovered Christians who had “set their minds on earthly things,” that was another matter. “Many walk, of whom I often told you,” he said, “and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ.”

So there’s this danger, in your life and mine, that we may be found to be “enemies of the cross” despite our Christian profession. Now you can understand why I’m used to preaching in denominational churches where the members aren’t really Christians, but think they are. Yet even among evangelicals there’s always this possibility that, though we consider ourselves Christians and believe that our God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, if we really took a deep look into ourselves we might find some traits of those whom the Apostle Paul calls “enemies of the cross of Christ”. For this reason it’s always appropriate to be concerned with our walk with the Lord.

The first psalm goes very much to that point, because it talks about a person’s walk with the Lord. It contrasts the walk of the righteous with the walk, or the way, of the unrighteous or ungodly. It contrasts them as to their present state, and it contrasts them as to their destiny— their ultimate state. Let’s study the first psalm together, verse by verse. This is an exegetical sermon, a textual sermon, and I want to look rather intently with you at this psalm.

The first psalm is the introduction to the Book of Psalms. In fact, in some of the ancient manuscripts of the New Testament there’s a quotation from Psalm 2, and it’s referred to as “the first psalm.” That indicates that Psalm 2 was thought of as the first psalm, while Psalm 1 is an introduction to the Psalms. Whoever collected the Psalms, under the guidance of the Spirit, added this introduction to show us *what kind of person* feeds on the Psalms, and worships through the Psalms, and is open to the Lord and allows Him to shape his life through use of the Psalms.

So what we have in Psalm 1 is a portrait of the righteous man who worships the Lord. It’s a psalm of praise of that man, because the opening words in Hebrew could be translated “Hail to the man who doesn’t walk in the counsel of the wicked” — *ashrei ha-ish asher lo’ halach be’atzat resha’im*. One could even translate “congratulations to the man” — *ashrei*, “the happiness of, the blessedness of” that man. It’s the very same expression the Lord Jesus Christ used — in Aramaic, of course — when he pronounced the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the pure in heart.” A good word in English might be “happy”; “how happy, how blessed” is the man who does not follow in the ways of the godless. The first psalm, in laying out the contrast between the righteous and the wicked, makes the point that the righteous man is actually happier, more prosperous and more blessed than the person who turns his back on the Lord.

Before we go any further we need to define some terms. What do we mean by “righteous” and “wicked”? In the Bible a righteous person is a person who is righteous in virtue of his relationship to the Lord God. God has defined that relationship in terms of what we know as the *covenant*, and has laid down the terms of that covenant. Jeremiah 31:33 summarizes those terms: “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

Those are the terms of God’s covenant, and if we’re determined to be the *people* and not to be the *god* in that relationship then we’re *righteous* in relation to the Lord. Righteousness is not something we possess. It’s not something we can shop for at the supermarket and pluck it off the shelf, pop it into our basket, check it out at the register and take it home and own it. Righteousness is that which we have in virtue of our being the people of God in a right and proper relation to Him. In biblical terms, it’s a

relationship word. Yet we can go a step further, from our Christian perspective, to see that righteousness means that all of the sin and every shortcoming that are found in my life have been covered by the Son of God. The Lord God accepts Christ's life in the place of mine, so that in virtue of Christ's obedience I'm righteous before the Lord.

And we can go yet a further step yet and understand that not only am I in covenant with the Lord and His people, and not only did the Savior die for me and take my place and allow me to be righteous through His blood. Most importantly, *because Jesus lives*, through the work of His Holy Spirit I can live a life filled with the power of God. I can live in the kingdom of God, according to the principles the Lord Jesus Christ enunciated in His preaching of the kingdom of God. If you're familiar with Pat Robertson's book *The Secret Kingdom*, you know what I'm talking about when I refer to the principles of the kingdom of God. These principles include the "law of use" — if you use something you'll have more of it but if you don't use it you lose it, as in Jesus' parable of the talents. Another principle is the "law of reciprocity" which says, "The measure you give will be the measure you get" (Mark 4:24) — if you want to have the abundance of the Lord, you give. These, and others like them, are principles of the kingdom of God, and we can live by those principles because Jesus Christ lives. That is being righteous in Biblical terms.

But now, what is wickedness? Of course, it's the very opposite of righteousness — a total disregard for any covenant relationship we might have with the Lord. Older translations read "the ungodly" instead of "the wicked." That's a good place to begin our analysis, because wickedness begins with ungodliness, a lack of regard for the Lord and His principles. The Bible makes this clear in Psalms 14 and 53: "The fool has said in his heart, *eyn elohim* — 'there is no God.'" The "fool" doesn't deny that God exists — philosophical atheism is probably foreign even to the enemies of the people of God in the Bible — but he expresses a practical atheism that says, "There is no concern of mine into which the Lord fits, or in which He plays a part, and there is no concern of the Lord that touches my life." So in his "heart," in the seat of his decision-making, in the practical day-to-day direction of life, the "fool" is saying, in effect, "There is no God."

Sadly, that's the philosophical position adopted by many in our culture, whether by design or by default. It's the philosophical position of our court system, which no longer determines the efficacy and the interpretation of law on the basis of God and the absolute principles He has structured into His universe, but on the basis of the majority point of view — not the people's majority, but the court's "majority." It's the philosophical position of our educational system, which sees nothing wrong with presenting alternate life styles or with promoting the theory of evolution, which is more of a religion than a science. It's the philosophical position of our media. A recent study attributed to Columbia University discovered that, of the people influential in determining what comes through the media, eight percent attend worship, fifty percent claim no religion, fifty-five percent believe that extra-marital relationships are not immoral, and ninety-five percent believe there is nothing wrong with homosexuality. This is the result of the philosophical position that says, "God does not matter."

Wickedness, then, begins with the adoption of a "no-God" philosophy. And where will a person go with that position? Eventually such a person's life style sinks deeper and deeper into a morass of ungodly behavior, because behavior follows belief. Eventually this person will find himself not only behaving that way but encouraging others in that lifestyle. He will eventually come to the point of scorning and rejecting those whose *godly* behavior calls his reprobate life into question. The secular media begin to heap contempt upon any group of religiously committed people, especially evangelical Christians, labeling them as a harmful "cult." Expressions of Christian faith and understanding are barred from the public square, because they challenge the dominant "no-God" philosophy.

But we must move on in our study of Psalm 1. In verses 1-2 the psalm contrasts the *delight* of the righteous and the delight of the wicked. Verses 3-4 proceed to contrast the *dependability* of the righteous with the unfruitfulness of the wicked, and verses 5-6 contrast the *destiny* of the righteous with the destiny of the wicked. So let us take a closer look at these passages.

First of all, verses 1-2:

*Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law he meditates day and night.*

The delight of the righteous man is portrayed here, first negatively in terms of what he does not do and then positively in terms of what he does. Negatively, he does not “*walk* in the counsel of the wicked,” nor “*stand* in the path (or way) of sinners” nor “*sit* in the seat of the scoffers (or the scornful).” We have an image here of a man, as it were, walking along the street. He’s walking into the territory inhabited by the wicked — an area of a town inhabited by, or ruled by, ideas, principles and practices that are not of the Lord, not “godly.” And this person is deliberately exposing himself to those influences. He walks down that street into that area. Having arrived there, he comes to a standstill and begins to look about him, gazing at the enticements, the allurements, the influences of wickedness on every hand. And then what does he do? Finally, he sits down right where he is. In Hebrew, *uvemoshav letzim . . . yashav*, “in the dwelling place of the scornful he makes his dwelling,” he establishes residence among the wicked.

Of course, the psalmist is putting it negatively; the righteous man *does not* do that. But you see a progression of behavior. First, we’re exposed to this influence of ungodliness. Then we began to deliberately look at it, notice it, survey it and gaze upon it. Then we set ourselves down and dwell in the midst of it, and become one with it. Alexander Pope wrote some words apropos of this point:

*Vice is a monster of so frightful mien,
as to be hated means but to be seen,
yet seen too oft, familiar with her face,
we first endure, then pity, then embrace.*

What kind of influences do you expose yourself to? Is your television set always on, and when it’s on, what’s being broadcast? Are you surfing through channels children aren’t supposed to be watching, but probably are anyway, where garbage and filth are dispensed? What’s coming into your home through the Internet? What kind of magazines are in your house, and what’s in the advertisements in those magazines? What kind of entertainment are you watching, and what sort of “no-God” philosophy does it reflect? While the football game is on, is your household being exposed to ads for alcoholic beverages or for every conceivable sort of pharmaceutical preparation, including those that supposedly augment a man’s sexual function? What about your friends and associations? Are you a close associate of somebody who doesn’t know the Lord, and not only do they not know the Lord but they’re indifferent to Him, and may even be dispensing all kinds of filth and garbage into your life through their speech or practices? I don’t know the answers to these questions, but they’re questions we ought to be asking ourselves.

What are the influences to which we’re exposing ourselves, as Christian people? What about sports and hobbies? Uh oh, I stepped on a toe or two. Is that football game you have to watch really so harmless, apart from all the sleazy ads? Sports and hobbies may not be wrong in themselves, but they can divert you from spending time with your family, or becoming more familiar with the Word of the Lord, or concentrating on some aspect essential to your Christian growth. Think about the other activities and interests of our life — even our work, perhaps — that can function in a way that exposes us to ungodly influences.

So, first of all, Psalm 1 portrays what the righteous man does *not* do — he doesn’t expose himself to such influences. But then the psalm goes on to portray what the righteous man does: “His delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night.” When we speak about the law of the Lord we mean, in a particular sense of course, the Books of Moses. The Hebrew word here is *torah*, and that’s what the *Torah* is. In a wider sense, however, all of Scripture — all of the Word of God — is the law of the Lord. This Scripture that God has given us, within the covers of this Book, reflects universal principles by which God governs His universe; and those principles make up the law of the Lord.

There’s a natural law of the Lord as well as a revealed law. The revealed law, Holy Scripture, points to the natural law, as we see in the first chapter of Romans. The Lord has principles which are firm and fixed, in which His creation is grounded, and to which the creation itself testifies. Psalm 19:1 states, “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.” From this fact the psalm draws this conclusion: “The law of the LORD is perfect” (Psalm 19:7). The righteous man finds his delight in this law of the Lord, *uvetorato yehggeh yomam valayelah* — “and on his law he meditates day and night.”

Studying for this message, I discovered an interesting fact: this word “meditate” doesn’t refer to meditation like transcendental meditation, in which you seek to empty yourself out. Jesus suggests that if you do that, seven demons worse than the one you cleared out will come to take its place. Meditation, in the Christian sense, is not emptying yourself but allowing yourself to be filled with the Word. Moreover,

meditating on the law of the Lord is more than just memorizing Bible verses. That's a good thing to do; it helped me, in preparing for this message, to memorize the first psalm; and since I'd already memorized it in English I learned it in Hebrew this time. As a result, I don't have to look at a sheaf of notes to preach this message. (The first psalm, after all, will preach itself; all I have to do is stand here and talk.) But it's not enough to memorize the Scripture, if we then fail to apply it; that's like being a hearer and not a doer, which the Lord's brother James warns us against (James 1:22). We have to allow the Word of God to shape our responses to life situations. The Sunday school teacher discovered that someone was pilfering the collections during the class. Upon investigation it was discovered that the person stealing the money was the class champion in Scripture memorization! That child had not *meditated*; he had not allowed the principles of Christian living as set forth in the Word to change his responses and his behavior.

I discovered, furthermore, that the very same word for "meditate" occurs also in the first verse of Psalm 2: "Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples *plot* in vain?" To meditate, in the biblical sense, is to *plot*, to *conspire*, or as older translations put it, to *imagine*. The enemies of the Lord's people are meditating — they're turning something over in their minds, exploring its possibilities. In their case it's rebellion against the Lord, which is pointless and in vain. But in Psalm 1 the righteous person is imagining how he could apply the words of God's law to his life; he's scheming and plotting the various ways in which he could put into action the principles of the Word of God. And the psalm says that he does this "day and night." One commentator suggested that by day the law is our study, and by night it's our pillow — we find in it our refuge and our rest. That is the delight of the righteous.

The psalm goes on then to speak, in the second place, of the dependability of the righteous. It does this with two figures or pictures, in verses 3-4. The first picture is that of a tree a tree, a firm and shapely tree — one with a straight trunk and well-formed branches, planted by a stream so that it's well watered, with its roots sunk deep into fertile soil. Its leaves are shiny and smooth — not withering, not drooping, as the Hebrew says. And this tree is bearing fruit when it's time to bear fruit — bearing fruit "in its season." That's the picture of the righteous man.

The seventeenth chapter of Jeremiah either borrows this image, or was known to the composer of the first psalm. In verse 6 Jeremiah, speaking of the wicked, says he will be like a shrub in the desert; he will never prosper, but will live in stony wastes in the wilderness — a land of salt without inhabitants, where nothing can grow. But, says the prophet, "Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit" (Jeremiah 17:7-8).

Psalm 1 presents the same image if the righteous person, who is like a tree planted by streams of water. But when you look at the Hebrew text here, it reads *ve hayah ke'etz shatul 'al-palgey mayim*; literally this means he will be like a tree transplanted by an *irrigation canal*. In other words, this prosperous state is not a state in which we find ourselves naturally. We're not going to grow into this "righteous tree" without some cultivation and irrigation. That's the difference between the natural man and the man of the spirit, the person who is "born of the spirit." That which is "natural" isn't always what God intends. The Bible doesn't refer to the wilderness as a great place to be. We, in our time, have exalted the wilderness because of the ecological uproar — the wilderness is supposedly the greatest thing. But in the biblical view the wilderness is the last place you want to go to! It's where you send the scapegoat to get rid of your sins (Leviticus 16:22); the threat of "wild beasts" from the wilderness is part of curse upon those who turn away from the Lord's covenant (Leviticus 26:22). But the place of paradise, the place of godliness, is the cultivated area where God can till the ground of your life. The righteous man is like the tree planted — transplanted, actually — by the irrigation canal of the Word of God, drawing moisture and nourishment and life from that Word.

Go, then, to the second picture. High upon a windswept hill there is a threshing floor. The farmers are bringing their grain in from the field in baskets, and as they reach the threshing floor they lift their baskets and toss the grain high into the air. The brisk wind, as it sweeps over the floor, blows the chaff to one side and allows the wheat to fall to the threshing floor. There it can be gathered up and put to good use for the nourishment of man and beast — to be sold in the marketplace, sold to the housewives of the city who will bake their loaves and feed their families. But the chaff is being blown over to one side, because it's good for nothing. It's to be disposed of, just thrown on the refuse pile and burned.

The Bible says that's what the wicked, or ungodly, person is like. His life counts for nothing; no value comes out of it. Nothing endures from the efforts of the ungodly person, the person who is doing it his own way, living by the principles enunciated in Frank Sinatra's "I did it my way." The person who lives by that principle has nothing to show for his life; it's "like the chaff that the wind drives away" into the scrap heap of eternity. The wicked can't be depended upon to produce anything of lasting value. But the righteous person, the one who conspires to apply the principles of God's law, bears fruit in season. We can depend on him, or her, to build something worth while, something that endures.

So the Psalm 1 contrasts, first of all the delight of the righteous versus the delight of the wicked. It contrasts, in the second place, the dependability of the righteous who bears fruit contrasted with the unfruitfulness of the wicked who has nothing to show for doing it his way. And, in the third place, the first psalm contrasts the destiny of the righteous and the destiny of the wicked. It has more to say, here, about the destiny of the wicked; but it does say something extremely significant about the destiny of the righteous.

First of all, what's the destiny of the wicked? "Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous." There are two series of judgments into which both the wicked and the righteous will enter — into which we all enter. There is the ultimate judgment of God; the wicked will not stand in that day, because he will not be found to have produced anything of enduring value since he has not invested his life in the Word of God nor in the service of the Lord. But also there's a judgment that takes place within the congregation, or assembly, of the righteous. The ungodly person has no place in the company of those who belong to the covenant, the people of the Lord. There will be a judgment on the human scene as well as on the eternal scene. Sinners will not stand in the congregation of the righteous. When the Lord looks for those whom He can call His own, they will not be there. The way of the wicked is the way of lostness, the way of perishing.

But what about the righteous? I'll come to that in a moment, but first I want to ask this question: What's going to happen to your life and mine? For that matter, what's going to happen to this world? What's will happen to the solar system, the galaxy, the universe? Astronomers and astrophysicists offer a variety of theories; one that I have heard claims that in a matter of four or five billion years the sun will become a supernova or exploding star. It will expand to such a point that it will burn up the solar system; the earth will be destroyed. Then, through other cosmological forces, eventually the universe itself will collapse.

An astronomer was giving a lecture about this very scenario. "In four or five billion years," he stated, "this is what will happen." After the lecture a lady came up to him, very agitated, and asked, "In how many years did you say the earth would be destroyed by the sun?" "He replied, "In four or five billion years." "Oh," she sighed, "what a relief! I thought you said four or five *million*." Well, the point is that this earth isn't going to last forever; I don't care if it's a million years or a billion. The Bible says the same thing in 2 Peter 3:10: "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up."

What's going to last when the earth is burned up and the elements are dissolved? According to Scripture, two things are going to last. Jesus Christ said, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (Matthew 24:35). And the prophet Isaiah said the word of our God abides, endures, stands forever (Isaiah 40:8). But there's something else that's not going to be lost, that will endure; the Lord Jesus Christ referred to it in John 5:29. He said that in the resurrection "all shall come forth, those who do good to a resurrection of life and those who do evil to a resurrection of judgment." The second thing that's going to last is your soul and mine. There will be a judgment, and it's worthwhile to invest your concern and your efforts and your concentration in the cultivation of your soul — your life in relationship to the Lord God in whom you are bound together in covenant. It's worthwhile to invest your efforts in meditating on the Word of God, which also will endure forever, and which can shape and mold both your present life and your eternal life.

And, when you get right down to it, Psalm 1 says something very important about the destiny of the righteous man. "The way of the wicked will perish," it concludes; judgment will overtake him. But "the Lord *knows* the way of the righteous." Knowledge, in the Bible, is another relationship word; it refers to an intimate and personal connection between the knower and what is known. That relationship in which

you and I find ourselves is the covenant relationship: “I will be your God, and you shall be my people” (Jeremiah 7:23). We are the people, and He is the God. That knowledge, that relationship in which the Lord *knows us*, is not going to be lost. If we have invested our life in that relationship, when the judgment comes He will see us where we need to be, and we will stand.

Psalm 1, then, teaches us some very important things. It reminds us that there is a judgment, an accounting for our lives. It warns us of the consequence of sin. It points out to us that there is a value to investing our lives in that which endures. So, finally, the first psalm is an encouragement to allow the Lord to shape our lives through His Word and to commit ourselves afresh to Him — meditating, imagining, plotting what we’re going to do with that Word of God and how we’ll to allow it to mold and transform lives, our relationships and our thought patterns. God’s Word, His law, is worth investing your life in. It’s worth investing my life in. Congratulations — hail to the man or woman, hail to the young person or child who invests a life in that value! Such a person is indeed blessed and happy, praise the Lord!

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