

“FIRST THINGS FIRST.”

Rev. Robert T. Woodyard

First Christian Reformed Church

August 6, 2023, 6:00PM

Scripture Texts: Psalm 1

Introduction.

As I was pondering where to turn next in Scripture after finishing the Ten Commandments last Sunday, I knew I had two open Sundays before a month of Sundays that are already planned. My mind turned to two Psalms that focus on the law of the Lord, Psalm 1 and Psalm 19. They seemed like a fitting follow up to the Law of the Lord in the Ten Commandments.

They are both well known and well loved psalms and good for fruitful application to what we have studied these past six months.

Psalm 1.

Why is Psalm 1 Psalm 1? What makes it first? Is there a reason? Why isn't Psalm 150 first or Psalm 100? Those are big worship Psalms full of praise to God. Why not start there?

Let's take a closer look. In some ways this Psalm is the preface to the whole book of Psalms, sometimes called the Psalm of Psalms.

Psalm 1 starts out with a matter of supreme importance. It is called the two ways concerning the two destinations of the two kinds of humanity. There are two and only two ways to life in this world.

Jesus said something similar in Matthew 7

Matthew 7:13-14 Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. 14 For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

So it seems like the greater part of wisdom that the Holy Spirit should put a Psalm about wise living first. Psalm 1 is the map, the plan for living the most blessed life.

Psalm 1 divides very easily and naturally into to parts, a description of a godly, righteous person, and a description of an ungodly, unrighteous person.

The description of the godly person further divides into considering the negative side and the positive side of such a person's life, what they don't do and then what they do.

The blessed person from the negative perspective, vs. 1.

It is interesting to see that the word blessed is in the plural. It might be awkwardly translated as blessednesses.

The blessednesses of a man's life depends on where he walks, stands, and sits. It depends on who or what he is letting impact his life.

The influences in a believer's life.

Psalms 1 begins with a stark contrast. There is no ambiguity here. The Psalm contrasts the influences or influencers in a person's life.

What or who are the influences in the life of the wicked and what or who are the influences in the lives of the righteous?

In our culture today there is much talk about influencers.

An influencer is someone who has: the power to affect the decisions of others because of his or her authority, knowledge, position, or relationship with his or her audience.

People who use social media a lot know who the top influencers are on Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube.

The top influencers have millions of followers, even 50 to 100 million or more. There are Mega-influencers like Taylor Swift, Kim Kardashian, Elon Musk, Chip and Joanna Gaines.

There are niche influencers for fashion, beauty, design, food, travel, fitness, self-help, lifestyle, parenting, pets, marketing, advertising, sales, leadership, even church related influencers.

This Psalm is saying loud and clear, nothing is more crucial than the influencers in your life. It matters what crowd you hang out with on TV and in the internet world and social media crowd. Who has your attention, who do you listen to the most, what voices fill your ears?

Notice, first of all, the righteous believer is defined by what he shuns, avoids, steers clear of, does not do. The psalmist is setting up an antithesis by saying what a blessed man is not. In order to enjoy God's blessings, we can't be neutral about some things. We have to separate ourselves from what is evil, wicked, unholy, ungodly, unbiblical.

Some people see a progression in the three terms, from walking to standing to sitting, as if one is slowing down, then stopping to look, and finally joining in.

First, he considers it, then he compromises and finally he makes an allegiance.

There is truth in that. Sin is always progressive. No one jumps immediately into the deepest end of sin, they walk by, step their toe in, wade in up to the knees and then their neck and then

start swimming. What started as a little click bait becomes a full-on search for more. A taste, leads to a drink, leads to a full on addiction.

Satan is crafty, deceitful, sneaky, enticing us with the smallest of baby steps, just a little one. Sin is always leading us somewhere, from bad to worse to terrible.

James 1:14-15 Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. 15 Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

A thought becomes a wish, a wish becomes a desire, a desire becomes a decision, a decision becomes an action, an action becomes a lifestyle, a lifestyle leads to misery and death.

Vice is a monster of so frightful mien, (appearance, look, countenance)

As, to be hated, needs but to be seen;

Yet seen too oft, familiar with her face,

We first endure, then pity, then embrace.

- Alexander Pope, 1688-1744, "An Essay on Man, Epistle II."

Sin is progressive, dynamic, not static. And God intends it to be so. God wants us to repent, and sometimes we are so strong willed and bull headed we have to progress well into it before we come to our senses and repent.

Counsel has to do what we believe, with ways of thinking, with forming plans, with a mind-set.

Walking in the way has to do with behavior, actions, practices.

Sitting implies a kind of belonging, joining in, becoming comfortable with.

To sum it up, we know the wicked by the advice they take and follow, the direction they go in, and the company they keep. "Don't be influenced by the wicked. Don't be influenced by the sinner. Don't be influenced by the scoffer."

We are called to be counter-cultural, we are called to not go with the flow, to do what everyone is doing or saying or wearing or thinking.

Christians are to be different, you should be able to tell them apart from the pagan crowd. He is to avoid and shun peer pressure, to go along to get along. It may come with a cost, but you pay the price.

An old lady was asked what the best thing was about being 104. She said, "No peer pressure."

What are your influences, what fire hydrant are you drinking from? How many of us keep company with sin, temptation, ungodly entertainment? How many of us are diligent in guarding ourselves from the enticements of sin and lust and greed and pride and sloth?

Romans 12:2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

The blessed person from the positive perspective, vs. 2.

Notice something here. The Psalmist doesn't just stop at avoiding the world, separating from all that is evil. To live a life just shunning what is bad ends you up in a kind of legalism, a Pharisaic moralism which leads to a joyless life.

If all our faith is, is saying no, we will become negative, critical, joyless. If all we do is refuse to eat the meat of worldly ways and wickedness, we will shrivel and starve.

Our faith is so much more than that, it is saying yes to truth, beauty and goodness, to feast of the good food of God's abundant goodness in His Word. This is life giving.

The godly man finds true delight, true joy, life giving pleasure in the law of God, God's Word.

Delight.

Does that sound like an odd word to use regarding the Scripture? Most people would associate delight with self-seeking, self-fulfillment, doing what you want. Do we use words like delight or pleasure or enjoyment when we are talking about the Bible? Some people do.

Delight is seeing the Bible the way you see dessert, something to be enjoyed, savored, loved. Taste and see it is good.

Some people find great pleasure in the Word of God. They actually get their kicks out of reading it and studying it. They get joy out of the truth, out of the real meat of God's wisdom.

Think of that thing in your life that you really like, that you really delight in. How do you act toward that thing? Seek to apply that to God's Word.

“The only hope against the pleasures of the world is the pleasures of the Word. And just like the pleasures of the world are awakened by looking at them long enough, so the pleasures of the Word are awakened in the regenerate soul by looking at them long enough — day and night” (John Piper).

Day and night.

Meditation.

When you think of that word what comes to mind? A Buddhist monk sitting cross legged, eyes closed, humming. Most modern notions of meditation have been taken over by eastern ideas of spirituality. Maybe yoga, maybe some silent retreat center. Maybe emptying yourself into some form of mindlessness.

The goal of Biblical, Christian meditation is not to empty our mind, but to fill our mind with God's Truth. This is what sets the wise person apart from the fool.

As the Puritan pastor Thomas Watson put it, "The reason we come away so cold from reading the word is, because we do not warm ourselves at the fire of meditation."

"Meditation is the active engagement of the mind to focus intently upon the Word of God to provoke joyous delight in God" (Justin Deeter).

It is active, not passive. It is engaged, calling for work, discipline, concentration. It calls for a focused attention on the word, which doesn't work well when we are rushed. It calls us to push away distractions and thoughts of the day or week, to focus on the Word. It starts with reading, and then reflects on what was read. Its goal is joy, delight in God and His Truth. It moves from the head to the heart. It is meant to stir up our affections for God.

The Christian life is like a cup of hot water, and the Scripture is the teabag. If I only do quick dips of the Word, I don't give it the time necessary to change me and transform. Meditation is the practice of letting the word steep into our soul, giving time and thought for the Word of God to change me. (Dallas Willard).

Meditating simply means regularly and consistently drawing the water of the Word into the roots leading to a fruitful harvest. If you are having a hard time grasping how to meditate on God's word let me suggest three simple practices.

Scripture memory, memorization requires repetition which fuels meditation.

Scripture writing, use a journal and write out Scriptures for reflection. Add your thoughts, or questions.

Scripture pondering, take a text, read it slowly a few times, begin to mull it over, pursue thoughts, questions.

Use Psalm 1. Read it slowly. Read it a few times. Use a sheet of paper and write out your meditation. Memorize it. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you see what He wants you to see.

The picture of the believer's life, vs. 3.

He is like.

This is a picture of what a blessed life really looks like. This is a picture of what delighting in God's Word looks like. Beautiful, fruitful, verdant, satisfied, refreshed.

Like Psalm 23. Green pastures, cool waters, paths of righteousness.

A tree by streams of water.

This is such a simple, easy metaphor, it is easy to miss the profound meaning and help of it.

Notice he is planted, not he planted himself. This is gift, the grace of God to the one who finds delight in God and His Word. We are planted by the sovereign grace of God.

1:3 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.

Jeremiah 17:7-8 Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord.
8 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.”

This is a tree firmly rooted, fixed, strong, permanent, resistant to the winds of time, fear, stress, temptation, worry.

And no this is not saying there are no troubles, setbacks, trials or afflictions. I have had all of those things, and can still affirm the truth of this Psalm, as can many of you.

How is it with your soul? What metaphors would you use to describe your soul, your spiritual life? Well-watered, fruitful, abundant, flourishing, thriving? Or parched, dry, barely surviving, thirsty, rootless, wandering in the desert? Like chaff?

What are the influences in your soul? Holy Scripture, Holy Spirit, godly wisdom, spiritual counsel? Or worldly wisdom, secular nonsense, godless counsel? Do you want your life song to be, “All We Are is Dust in the Wind”?

Implications and application.

This is the first Psalm about first things. Make sure you get this, understand this, believe this.

Notice the first and last word, blessed and perish.

Those are the two ways, the only two ways. Which are you apart of? The counsel of the wicked or the delighting in the Word of God? The chaff blown away by the wind or the tree planted by streams of water? The seat of scoffers or the congregation of the righteous?

Psalm 92:12-15 The righteous flourish like the palm tree and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.
13 They are planted in the house of the Lord; they flourish in the courts of our God.
14 They still bear fruit in old age; they are ever full of sap and green,
15 to declare that the Lord is upright; he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.