

Sermon Series:

The Psalms

1. THE BLESSED LIFE – Psalm 1; James 1:22-25

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I don't know about you, but as we move from one year into the next, I often receive cards or notes from people wishing me "God's blessings" in the new year. I even write this myself. It reflects our desire for good things to happen in people's lives rather than bad things. Sometimes I think it is used as just a Christian way to wish people "Good luck!", but it can also be a way to express a desire for God to be at work in their lives. Taken this way, it acknowledges that we need God to be involved in our lives for them to be successful and this is a very Biblical way of thinking.

Psalm 1 takes an interesting twist on this theme, however, because it suggests that God's blessings are not solely dependent on His willingness and power to bless us. We have a role as well. The Psalm begins by saying, "*Blessed is the one who ...*" (v.1) and goes on to talk about what we should do to put ourselves in the path of God's blessing. In doing this, it describes two different ways to live – the righteous and the wicked. It is similar to books of spiritual wisdom such as Proverbs or James which compare and contrast these two ways to live.

Influence

The Psalmist says that the key choice we have is what we allow to influence us and the way we live our lives. He starts out with the negative – what we must avoid. It seems to describe a downward progression. The person God blesses does not "*walk in step with the wicked*". This can be thought of as a casual association with those who do wrong occasionally. The word "wicked" indicates someone who has been declared guilty of an offense. But it doesn't mean that this is a way of life for them. The danger here is that if you are walking along with such a person, and they choose to do the wrong thing, you can be pulled into sin with them. The next level down is to "*stand in the way that sinners take*". This implies that you are lingering with those who sin, not just occasionally, but habitually. This person has become used to sin, and they no longer feel uncomfortable hanging out with those who consistently choose to do what is wrong. Finally, there are those who "*sit in the company of mockers*". These people have become completely at home with those who not only choose to sin but defiantly ridicule God's righteousness.

It is easy to look at this and wonder how anyone could head down this path. It seems so obviously wrong. But I would suggest that it is a bigger trap than we might think. Take for

instance TV shows and movies. There have been several things in recent years that I have quite enjoyed initially. But then, over time, they have begun to stray farther and farther from the truth found in God's word. For instance, the way they deal with issues of sexual practice. We've gradually gotten used to things being done which are blatantly against what God says is right and good. Thirty years ago, we would have been upset if a couple had sex before marriage, but now that is a normal practice and when it is shown on the screen we hardly react at all. We might not agree with it, but we accept it. The same is true with swearing and violence. It is only when these things get particularly graphic that we consider if we should still watch the show or movie. We gradually get used to wrong-doing and it bothers us less and less. Without even realising what is happening, we have begun to "*stand in the way of sinners*" and sometimes we even tolerate those who mock God and His righteousness. Constant exposure begins to shape our thinking, pulling us away from God.

So, does this mean that we should shut ourselves off from the world completely? For a while, I attended a Bible College which, out of a desire to protect us from negative influences, prohibited students from watching movies or TV. Did this mean we were all godly as a result? Hardly! For instance, even though I wasn't exposed to TV advertising and the push towards consumerism, I still had to go shopping and was there faced with all kinds of temptations to buy things I didn't need! I don't think we can ever completely remove the influence of the fallen world around us.

So, what do we do? I think Jesus offers us a good example to follow. He was looked down upon by some because He associated with sinners. However, He went into the encounters with His eyes wide open – He knew they were sinners and while He was accepting of them as people, He didn't accept their sin. He didn't "*walk in step*" with them or conform to their way of living. He came alongside them in order to redeem them and show them a better way. He pulled them up rather than allowing them to pull Him down. He engaged with them on His terms, not on theirs. As we live in this world, we need to have our eyes wide open to what is being promoted in what we watch and be aware of the influence it is having on the ways we think and feel about things. We can't just accept everything that is going on. However, if we are to reach out to people and share God's love and salvation, we need to be a part of the world. It is not always an easy balance to get right!

But it is not just about what we avoid, it is also about what we bring into our lives as positive influences. We need to allow the law of the Lord to shape our thinking. When we hear the word "law" we tend to think of regulations and punishments. However, most of what the Bible calls "law" is what one author calls "divine guidelines for daily life". These are primarily descriptions of how God's people are to value and respect others. It is what, in the New Testament, comes under the commandment to "love your neighbour as you love yourself". This is life as God intended it to be with us living in harmony with Him, His world and each other.

Psalm 1 calls us to delight in, to value and treasure God's Word and the guidelines for living it contains because they are good for us. Allow me to put on my "children's worker" hat for a moment! One of the most important things you can give the children in your family (children, grandchildren, nieces, and nephews) is a familiarity with and love for the stories in the Bible. God has given those stories to us to help us to see examples of how to live – and not live – as His people. We can see what His guidelines look like when they are lived out. He did this because He knows that we will remember and understand something much better in the context of a story. This is especially true of children. Reading about Moses and Esther and

David and others gives them heroes shaped by God, not Marvel comics! If you have children in your life, I encourage you to have some Bible Story books you can read to them or videos to watch together. You don't have to come up with a great moral at the end of the story – just let them enjoy it. But be available for them to ask questions if they have them. If you love the stories, they will come to love them as well. And becoming familiar with Bible stories helps to make the whole Bible more accessible to them It gets their foot in the door as it were, so that it is easier for them to read other parts of the Bible later. It is amazing what God can do with even small influences like this to eventually bring them to faith in Him. You can be a channel of God's blessing in their lives.

But we are to do more than just delight in the law, we are to meditate on it or think carefully about it so that it begins to shape our minds and our values and eventually, our behaviour. As we read in James last year:

But whoever looks intently into the perfect law

(that's what meditation involves)

that gives freedom,

(following these God's perfect guidelines frees us from the damage of sin)

and continues in it – not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it –

(if we trust God to know what is best for us, we will choose to follow His guidelines)

they will be blessed in what they do.

(God can bless us because we are walking with Him)

(James 1:25)

As our minds and hearts are shaped by God's Word, we will become more sensitive to the negative influences around us. We will learn to listen to our Bible-informed conscience rather than to the other influences around us. We will know the right thing to do and will want to do it and by God's grace, we will be enabled to do it and know God's blessing. We cannot earn God's blessing, but if we choose to linger in the way of sinners, we can cut ourselves off from His blessing because He cannot bless sin.

Quality

The Psalmist now turns to two outcomes in the lives of the wicked and the righteous. First, he talks about the quality of life they will experience, contrasting a deeply rooted, fruitful tree with wind-blown chaff. Many of us will have had a fruit tree or two in our yard at some point in our lives, and so can easily imagine this illustration. However, I imagine few, if any, of us have manually winnowed grain! All grains like wheat or rice have some kind of husk around their seed – the part which is used in food. The husk is a lightweight covering which protects the seed as it grows. Once the grain is harvested, however, the seed needs to be separated from the husk and other debris. Before current mechanical means, the harvesters would beat the grain to loosen the husk and then they would either throw the grain into the air or pour it from a height. The heavy seed quickly falls to the ground but the husk and other debris – what is called the chaff – is lighter and is blown away by the wind. The chaff is the waste product of the process of growing grain. Sometimes it can be mixed with other vegetation to be fed to cattle, but for the most part it is useless to the farmer.

In comparing the righteous to a tree and the wicked to chaff, the psalmist is setting up a stark contrast. He says the tree is planted by the water and thus provided with a constant source of nourishment so that it is able to endure varying conditions and produce much fruit. It is extremely valuable to the farmer. In contrast, the chaff is cut off from its source of

life when it is harvested and is blown away as waste. It is useless. The righteous are a picture of a LIVING, growing plant whereas the wicked are DEAD with no future.

It needs to be said that sometimes it looks like this is not true. Sometimes, the wicked seem to be thriving and the righteous struggling. Several Psalms, in fact, address this. However, appearances can be deceiving. Although the wicked may seem to be thriving from our perspective, we can trust God when He says that they are headed for destruction.

End Result

This is where the Psalmist ends his comparison. There are two ways of living on this earth – the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked. At the end of the road for the wicked is judgement before which they *“will not stand”*. And their condemnation will lead to destruction. Before the holiness of God, this is the end for all of us, isn't it? However, by the grace of God, those who turn to Him and accept His salvation, are placed on the way of the righteous and we will one day be vindicated by being welcomed into the *“assembly of the righteous”*. And in the meantime, *“the Lord watches over the way of the righteous”*, bringing blessing beyond what we deserve.

Blessed is the one who ...

The Psalm starts with these words. What have we learned about the one who is blessed by God?

- **They are purposefully immersed in Scripture** – there are many ways we can do this, what matters most is that we do something! Some of the time I read large portions of Scripture and other times focus on just a few verses. Sometimes I like to read devotional books and other times I need to sit down with just my Bible without other people's thoughts coming between me and God's words. Try different things and trust God to show you how to immerse yourself in His Word.
- **They allow Scripture to shape the mind, heart, and behaviour** – it is not enough to know a lot of Scripture, we need to allow it to change us. When it challenges us, we need to listen and obey. If we are thoughtfully reading it, we place ourselves under the instruction of the Holy Spirit and He can use it to make the changes that we need.
- **They are thoughtfully engaged with the world** – God doesn't call us out of the world, but we must not go along with everything in it. As we fill our minds with Scripture, we are more likely to see when the world around us goes against God's will. There are many good things in the world which can bring us joy and beauty, we just need to be wise in what we allow to influence us.
- **They trust God's care and blessing** – God is watching over us. This doesn't mean that life will be easy, but it will be possible. When the Psalmist says, *“whatever they do prospers”*, it is important to think about this from God's perspective. From God's eternal perspective, which is more important – that you are free from physical pain or that you are free from selfishness so that you can learn to walk with Him in any circumstance? That doesn't mean that God doesn't care about your pain, but that He knows that removing your physical pain won't always solve your problems. Can you trust Him to bless you in the ways He knows you really need?

I pray that you will know God's blessing this coming year – that you will be a living, fruitful tree instead of a dead waste product. God wants to bless you. Will you choose to allow Him to guide you through His Word into the way of the righteous so that He can bless you?