

The Righteous and the Wicked

Readings: Psalm 1; Romans 5:12-21 *Text:* Psalm 1

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The Psalter is an extremely important part of the church with its prayers, songs, emotions, and doctrine. During the early church and the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation, the Psalms were almost exclusively sung in the churches. Psalm 1 is the prologue/introduction of the whole book, and has been rightly called the "father of all wisdom psalms."

Scriptures often speak of two ways. Israel's obedience to God's covenant leads to blessings, but disobedience leads to curses (Deut 28:1, 15). Abraham looked forward to a city whose designer and builder is God, while Lot chose to dwell in worldly cities (Heb 11:10; Gen 13:12). Elijah made the Israelites choose between serving God and serving Baal (1 Kgs 18:21). Jesus preached two contrasting ways: the wide gate and easy road that lead to destruction, and the narrow gate and hard road that lead to life (Matt 7:13-14). Jesus also taught that his disciples that they either serve God or money (Matt 6:24).

Psalm 1 typifies all the wisdom Psalms and Proverbs that talk about two ways: the way of the righteous, and the way of the wicked. Today, we will consider three things concerning the contrast between the righteous and the wicked:

- 1. Their Distinguishing Marks**
- 2. Their Identities**
- 3. Their Eternal Destinations**

Their Distinguishing Marks

The psalm begin in verse 1 with a description of what the righteous man is not: he is not like the wicked man. What marks distinguish the righteous from the wicked?

Their counselors

"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."

First, their counselors are different. The wicked takes pleasure in the company of ungodly counselors – the wicked, the sinners, and the scoffers. In contrast, the righteous man delights in the unfailing counsel of God's word.

Hebrew poetry often contains parallelisms to emphasize a point. This psalm has three triads of parallels: walk, stand, sit; counsel, way, seat; wicked, sinners, scoffers.

The wicked walk with their fellow wicked who hate God and reject God's laws. Their counsel is based on worldly wisdom and moral values, which Paul calls foolish (1 Cor 1:20). As well, the wicked stand with unrepentant sinners whose behavior or way of life is founded on this worldly wisdom. Paul says that *"the judgment of God rightly falls on [the ungodly and unrighteous] who practice such things"* (Rom 2:2). Finally, the wicked sit in the assembly of scoffers who ridicule God's word, proud fools who mock the righteous, saying, *"There is no God... Where is the promise of his coming?"* (Psa 14:1; 2 Pet 3:4)

Did you notice the progression to more and more sinfulness here? At first, the wicked only walks with his fellow wicked who gives him ungodly counsel. Later, he stands on the road, waiting and looking for sinners so he may join them in their wicked behavior. Then at last, he sits among the scoffers, mocking the righteous, and plotting evil against God's people.

But the righteous man is not so, because *"his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on His law he meditates day and night."*

Instead of listening to the "counsel of the wicked" in the world, he meditates on God's word day and night. This verse echoes God's reminder to Joshua about the importance of meditating on the law of Moses, *"This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it."* (Jos 1:8).

Instead of living a sinful life and following his own will, the righteous man obeys God's law. He delights in the word of God so much that he memorizes God's precious promises, as the Psalmist said, *"Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You"* (Ps 119:11). God's word is a "lamp" to his feet and a "light" to his path (Ps 119:105). All his decisions in life are guided by God's word, even if it might lead to problems or persecution.

Instead of belonging to the company of scoffers, the righteous saints delight in the assembly of God's people. While the wicked enjoy filthy and foolish talk and crude joking, the righteous take joy in sitting under the preaching of God's word. While the wicked make merry with their friends in gorging themselves with food and being drunk with wine, the righteous hunger and thirst for righteousness, nourished by the body and blood of Christ in the assembly of the saints.

Many in the church today have forsaken God's word, paying only lip service to its significance in the Christian's walk with God. Preaching of the gospel has been replaced by entertaining talk shows, moralisms and self-help lectures. Psalms in worship have been supplanted by repetitious, often unscriptural mantras called "contemporary Christian music."

In-depth Bible studies have been displaced by shallow roundtable survey of opinions. This is why many Christians today are biblically illiterate.

Do you meditate, memorize and reflect on God's word day and night? From the time you wake up and go to work until the time you go to bed, do you desire God's word more than gold and honey? (Psa 19:10). Do you say with the psalmist that the perfect, sure, right and pure law of the Lord revives the soul, makes wise the simple, rejoices the heart, and enlightens the eyes? (Psa 19:7-9).

Their fruits

Second, their fruits are clearly distinct. Psalm 1 continues in verses 3-4 with a description of the fruits of the righteous and of the wicked.

"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 he does, he prospers."

His life will be one of fruitfulness. He shall be like a tree, which is planted and is nourished by a stream of water. His life will be a blessing to those around him, and they will know that he has the Spirit of Christ in him. He will go to the office or school, or work at home, and do all his work to the glory of God, being careful not to disgrace the name of his Savior.

When sufferings come; when a loved one dies; when unpaid bills accumulate; when the cupboard is empty; when he is in the pit of despair; and when temptations seem irresistible – his *"leaves will not wither,"* and he still *"yields fruit in its season."* God rewards obedience under sufferings and trials. God promised blessings to Israel in the Promised Land after 40 years of testing in the wilderness, *"For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success"* (Jos 1:8). In the same way, after being sold as a slave and then falsely imprisoned, Joseph was favored by God, making him Pharaoh's right hand, so that *"whatever he did, the Lord made it succeed"* (Gen 39:23).

In total contrast to the way of the righteous is the way of the wicked. *"The wicked are.... like chaff that the wind drives away."* Here, the word for "wind" is the same word used to refer to God's Spirit. Therefore, the wicked is driven away by God into eternal punishment. Just as chaff has no root and is blown away, so too the ungodly will not stand on the Day of Judgment.

The wicked man delights not in eternal things but transitory things. Instead of spending time reading the Bible, he reads *New York Times* bestsellers and plays video games for hours. Instead of worshipping God, he worships his money, his car, and himself – he is only concerned about what's in it for me, and how to satisfy his desire for worldly pleasures. He shall be blown away like chaff because his life has no roots, no foundation, and no knowledge of the God's word.

But who are the righteous and who are the wicked? Psalm 1 begins with *"Blessed is the man..."* The word used for "man" here is also the word used for "Adam" in the Genesis creation story. Thus, the imagery in this Psalm is very much similar to the imagery in the Garden of Eden.

Their Identities

The first Adam listened to the counsel of the wicked serpent. Instead of listening to God's Truth, he listened to the devil's lie. Instead of meditating on God's word, he looked at the tree and *"saw that the tree was good for food, and that the tree was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise"* (Gen 3:6). Instead of being a fruitful righteous tree, Adam was like chaff driven out of the Garden of Eden by God's wrathful Spirit. Instead of inheriting eternal life, he inherited eternal death.

Because Adam was a covenant-breaker, his descendants also are sinful, covenant-breakers. For Paul said in Rom. 5:12 that *"sin came into the world through one man [Adam], and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned."* Therefore, not one person who ever lived, from Adam till the end of the world, can claim that he is not sinful.

This is why Paul warns us in Ephesians 4:17-19 that as believers, we must *"no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart."* And because their minds are darkened and separated from God, their hearts become hardened. And what kinds of fruits do unbelievers – whose hearts are futile, darkened, ignorant and hardened – produce? *"They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity."* These are the deeds of the wicked, sinners and scoffers.

In contrast to the wicked man is the righteous man. But who is this righteous man? It cannot be any of us! Who among us *do not* walk in the counsel of the wicked, *do not* stand in the way of sinners, and *do not* sit in the seat of scoffers? We are totally depraved creatures. We continually walk in the counsel of the wicked. We continually stand in the way of sinners. We continually sit in the seat of scoffers. Because in this world, we are immersed daily in the world's sinful advice from our family, friends, co-workers, television, radio, newspapers and movies.

Who among us *delight* in the law of the Lord? Who among us meditate on God's law *day and night*? In our struggle with sin and temptation, we often find ourselves questioning God's word. We try to find loopholes in it to satisfy our wants. And, obviously, it is impossible for us to meditate on God's word continually throughout the day.

Who is this perfectly righteous man? Jesus is that blessed man!

He meditated on God's word for forty days, enabling him to resist the devil's temptations in the wilderness. His Spirit drove Satan away like chaff in the wind with the word of God. He is the only person who fulfilled all of God's law, and who delighted and meditated on it day and night. He is that Tree of Life in Eden, as well as that Tree *"planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season."* He himself is the Living Water which gives eternal life to anyone who drinks of it. If the first Adam passed his test, he would have eaten of the fruit of the Tree of Life, and he would have had eternal life. As the Word of God, his leaves do not wither, because *"the grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever"* (Isa 40:8).

Our Lord Jesus Christ delighted in God's law even to the point of death on a tree at Calvary. Because his death paid the penalty for all of our sins, that tree of death became the Tree of Life. The Righteous One who delighted and obeyed God's law was made wicked on our account. But only by his death on the tree are we then made righteous before God. We cannot be righteous by our own works, because our righteousness is a righteousness outside of us given by Christ. Only Christ, the Last Adam, can give eternal life to those who have faith in him, as Romans 5:19 says, *"For as by the one man's disobedience [Adam's] the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience [Christ's] the many will be made righteous."*

We are righteous only because of the great exchange: Christ's perfect righteousness is transferred to our account, and our sins transferred to Christ's account.

Their Eternal Destinations

Not only does the Psalmist contrast the character of the righteous with that of the wicked. In verses 5 and 6, he also contrasts the destinations of these two kinds of people.

In verse 6, God says that he *"knows the way of the righteous."* The word "know" used here is not just knowledge of acquaintance, but that of intimate sexual knowledge between a man and his wife. Therefore, God knows the righteous man intimately. He knows the righteous man even before he is born. He knows his righteous deeds even before he does them.

The Lord Jesus tells us that in the last day, all the nations will stand before him. He will separate the righteous sheep from the wicked goats. On that day, Jesus will say to the righteous sheep, *"Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world"* (Matt 25:34).

What about the wicked? Verse 5 says that *"the wicked will not stand in the judgment."* To the wicked goats, Jesus will say, *"Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels."* They will be like chaff driven by the wind, gathered together, and burned with unquenchable fire" (Matt 3:12). Christ will tell the wicked that he does not know them in the

same manner that he knows the righteous, *"I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness"* (Matt 7:23).

Jesus tells us in the parable of the wheat and weeds that at the end of the age, the eternal destinations of the wicked and the righteous will be in stark contrast to each other. All causes of sin and all law-breakers will be gathered and thrown into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. But the righteous saints *"will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father"* (Matt 13:40-43).

In the book of Revelation is another picture of severe contrast between the end of the righteous and the wicked. Those who persevere in the faith to the end are told, *"Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb."* They will rejoice as they celebrate their victory in heaven, *"clothe with fine linen, bright and pure"* (Rev 19:9, 8). While this joyful assembly is happening, the wicked are described as cursed dogs outside the kingdom, tormented day and night forever in the lake of fire (Rev 22:15; 20:10).

Do you look forward to that day when Christ will invite you to come inherit the Kingdom of God? Or do you dread that day when you will hear his terrible voice saying, *"I never knew you. Depart from me, you evildoers!"* If you are in fear of that day, Christ offers forgiveness of sins to all who come to him in faith and repentance. Then, and only then, you will become a citizen of that heavenly kingdom.

Conclusion

In the heavenly kingdom, there is a tree which yields fruits in its season, in fact, *"twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month."* This tree is for *"the healing of the nations,"* because the righteous saints will come from all nations of the earth. These are those who are *"blessed.... those who wash their robes, so that they may.... enter the city by the gates"* (Rev 22:2, 14).

This tree is Christ, who is the blessed, perfectly righteous man. Believe in Christ and in the perfect righteousness he gives to you, and you will also be counted among God's blessed in his kingdom. And if you are a citizen of this heavenly kingdom, you will meditate on God's word day and night. You will eat of the fruit of the Tree of Life, which gives you eternal life.

Then, the Spirit of Christ who indwells you, will drive Satan's temptations and wicked ones away from you. He will enable you to not walk in the counsel of the wicked, to not stand in the way of sinners, to not sit in the seat of scoffers. He will give you delight in the law of the Lord, and enable you to meditate on it day and night. And he will seal you with the promise of a heavenly inheritance, because the Lord knows your way. *Amen.*