

“Wicked or Righteous?”

Psalm 1

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Do you remember as a child, lying out on the grass at night, looking up into the stars and thinking deep thoughts? Were there ever times in your adolescence when you and a best friend got into a very serious discussion about your lives and where you were headed in life? Have there been times even recently while driving somewhere alone or in your office when you found yourself thinking about life - your life. Have you ever found yourself asking what you want in life or on what basis you will consider life a success? Now I can hear some of you groaning when you hear such questions. You are thinking, "Come on, preacher, I have done that before and I am not certain that it does any good. I just live life now and let those philosophical questions take care of themselves." I do not want to make you angry if you are thinking that way but I do want to challenge your thinking.

I know that you have cared, in the past, about where you are headed and you will care again even if now you have dismissed thinking about such things. Furthermore, I expect you will agree with me that each of us lives life, makes day to day decisions based on some idea of what is worthwhile and what is not. And if someone were to observe your life carefully for a few months they would see that you make decisions based on some pattern so that your actions have coherence; they make sense and you are headed someplace. Whether you're 5, 15, 35 or 65 you make the day to day decisions of life (even the ones you aren't conscious of) based on what is most important to you.

If I were to ask five people who know you well to tell me what you want out of life, what would they say? If I asked, "What's he or she living for?" what would they say? How would they say you would finish the statement, "Life will be successful for me when...."? Would their response be: "When the children are grown, married, and have children of their

own?"; "When they have enough money put away or invested so they can retire and travel?"; "When they become president of the company, or full professor, or the manager?"; "When they have a job they like and money enough to buy the things they need?" I'm not disparaging those goals but I will ask if they are big enough? Are they worthy of a life - your life?

Every so often something comes along that puts a picture in front of us of what life was meant to be. That is what Psalm 1 does! And when we see that picture we see ourselves in comparison. And we get to ask, "Is that the way I'm headed?" or "Is that why I'm living my life?"

Read Psalm 1:

"Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers.

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, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.

Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away.

Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.

For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish."

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to see the point of this poem. Neither does it take brilliance to see the parts of it. The first part says blessed is the person who doesn't do certain things but who does do other things. The second part is that person is like a certain kind of tree but the other person is like chaff. And the third part is therefore the destiny of the one is such and such but the destiny of the other is something else.

Using the language of the song (for that is what "Psalm" means - a song, a poem to be sung) we can say this song is about two kinds of people: the "righteous" and the "wicked".

At this point someone might be thinking, "Now wait a minute! A few moments ago you were talking about where we are headed in life and now

you have reduced the conversation to two words: "righteous" and "wicked".

Are you going to suggest we are headed in one of these directions or the other?" My answer is, "I know those two words are loaded. In fact in our culture they are both loaded negatively. Most people don't want to be known as either righteous or wicked. We don't want to be known as wicked for obvious reasons and we don't want to be known as a "holier than thou", "do-goody two-shoes", "self-righteous saint". Even if we do think rather highly of ourselves we don't want the label – "he is righteous!" But in order to understand how this Psalm speaks to the issue of where we are headed in life we need to give these two words (righteous and wicked) their proper definitions rather than the negative, culturally-loaded ones."

"Righteous" doesn't mean self-righteous or perfect. It **means a person who is seeking to know God and obey Him**. Also **"wicked"** doesn't mean as bad as a person can be. It **means a person who (if the truth be known) doesn't care about knowing God or serving Him**. Now as you think about the definitions of these two words you can see that truly one or the other fits every person.

Is your life headed in the direction of the "righteous" seeking to know and serve God or is your life headed in the direction of the "wicked" not seeking to know and serve God? To answer that, let's look at the pictures the Psalmist paints - actually these are more like "videos" - moving pictures of the contrast between the one kind of person and the other.

The first video is titled: "Who are you listening to?" Looking at verses 1 and 2; what's the action you see? You see a man or woman, boy or girl, who refuses the ungodly counsel of others who have no interest in knowing and serving God, and instead this person spends his/her time seriously thinking about what God says.

Now by implication there is another person in this first video. What is this person doing? They are doing just the opposite of the first. He or she is taking his or her counsel not from the Word of God but from those who don't truly care about knowing God or obeying Him.

Who are you listening to? The decisions you make in life are made on the basis of some standard of what is important, some standard of what success is. Who we are listening to shapes that standard in us.

Several years ago I read of a survey of gold medal Olympians. They were asked if they would do it over again if they knew it would cost them their lives within ten years. Some very high percentage said, "Yes, even if I knew that winning the gold would cost me my life I would do it again." Success in life was, for them, winning the "gold".

Contrast that with Eric Lyttle of England in the 1924 Olympics. He is known to many of us through the movie, "Chariots of Fire". Eric demonstrated that he had a higher calling than winning the "gold". He was living by a different standard of "success" - a different idea of what made life worth living. Why the difference between Eric Lyttle and most Olympians? The answer is in "who they were listening to"!

Who is shaping your definitions of success in life? Is it the wicked? Look at verse 1 - "Don't walk in the counsel of the wicked." Another way of saying that is "Don't set your life's direction based on the advice, the purposes, or the plans of those who are opposed to God's laws." Is it the sinner? Look at the next phrase - "Don't stand in the way of sinners." Another way of saying that is "Don't give your allegiance to the actions or behaviors of the habitual sinner - the one who regularly turns to disobeying God." Is it the Mocker? Look at the next phrase - "Don't sit in the seat of mockers." Another way of saying that is, "Don't linger, don't settle down in the companionship of those who scorn, who mock God's laws." A Bible study would give us the time to look more carefully at each of those phrases but I think you get the sense of it. Your life will be lived according to who you are listening to!

Look now at verse 2. The righteous person "delights is in the law of the Lord and on his law he meditates day and night." Remember the video we titled "Who are you listening to?" What's the action in this verse? The word "meditate" here is the word for a low growling sound, indicating a person who is reading God's word aloud to himself and repeating the words so that he bathes his brain in the ideas and absorbs the meaning with a growing affection for the God who gave them. The word "delight" is the word for desiring something. You can tell by the way he meditates on the Scriptures that he prizes them - they are important to him. Why? Because he knows that in them he can meet with God. And he's

convinced that God's counsel leads to true success, true life.

Now if we were scripting and staging this video of verses 1 and 2 we might show a young man walking past a dark alley. In the shadows we see another person who whispers to our young man. The shadowy figure entices the young man to disregard his study of God's word and instead follow his advice to receive pleasure in life. No one would be tempted by such an obvious and unimaginative display of counsel contrary to God's counsel. So if we were more clever and wanted to show how people actually are tempted to disregard God's counsel we would probably script it like some television episode, or we would make sex outside of marriage seem like a pleasure too good to be ignorantly denied or we would make purchasing our product look like that without which you cannot live, or we would portray "freedom of choice" as the most fundamental right given to human beings.

Who is shaping your values? Who is shaping your children's values? Is it television, movies, magazines, irreligious friends or the Word of God as read in the Bible and modeled in your life? And who are you listening to?

I want us now to look at verses 3 & 4 and make our second video vignette. This one is titled: "What are you accomplishing?" Like the first video, so this one has two short sections. The first is of a tree and the second is of chaff. In the first section of the video we see a large, very green, tree planted by the side of a flowing stream of water gently moving in the breeze. On the tree is a large crop of its fruit and if we watched it over time we would see that its leaves never wilt - it has a steady supply of water and it keeps on producing. I grant you it isn't a very exciting video but it does make the point. Who is this picture of the tree supposed to be illustrating? Of course, it illustrates the person who meditates on the law of God - who seeks to know God and obey Him.

Now in the second section of this video we see something quite different. Instead of a lush green tree producing fruit we see a farmer of ancient times throwing his grain up in the air. He does this in a brisk wind but the video camera, instead of focusing on the kernels that fall to the ground, focuses on the hulls, the chaff (like the remains in the bottom of a

puffed wheat bag) as it floats away to nothing in the wind. And who does this picture illustrate? Yes, the man who takes the counsel of those who are not seeking God. And what is the point of these pictures? They show the contrast between the two kinds of people. What contrast? The contrast asked in this video's title: "What are you accomplishing?"

There are two key words in these verses that show the difference between a "fruitful tree" person and a "chaff" person. The first is in verse 3 where we see the word " prospers ". The second is in verse 4 where we see the word " chaff ". Let's take the word " chaff " first. Of what good is chaff? No good. It is the metaphor here of a wasted life. On the other hand look at the last word of verse 3 - " prospers ". Instead of living his life by the values and standards of the world around him, this man, who sought God in God's word was like a fruitful tree and then leaving the metaphor the psalmist says that " whatever he does prospers. " This word " prospers " does not mean that he becomes wealthy but means that he fulfills his intended purpose. A well-trained runner who never gets to run is a waste. A teacher who never has a student is a waste. Men and women created to glorify God and to enjoy him forever who never know him are a tragic waste. But the man or woman who lives out his or her life to know and enjoy God and to serve him will find that in accomplishing God's purposes for his life he finds the greatest happiness - such a person truly prospers.

I don't mean to be morbid but if you could determine what appears on your tombstone what would you want written? What epitaph would you like? What epitaph would most accurately define your life to this point? Would it include this biblical word " prospers " meaning you have fulfilled the purposes for which God created you? Or would it include the word " chaff " ?

Listen to these words from Acts 13:36: " And after he had served the purpose of God in his generation he died. " This was said of David, King of Israel. That is what I want said of me - " after he had served the purposes of God in his generation, he died. " Who are you listening to and what are you accomplishing?

The third video we will see is from verses 5 & 6. This one is titled: " Where are you going? " This time we see a large crowd, millions upon

millions gathered before the throne of the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords - Jesus Christ. What is striking as the camera pans that great multitude is who's missing. Those who did not know God, those who did not seek Him, are absent. The text says that they "will not stand". That word "stand" means "rise up". They won't rise up on that day to be counted with the righteous. They won't make the cut.

The most extensive scripting of this scene is given to us in Matthew 24. If we were to imagine the video picture at this point in verses 5 & 6 and then were to rewind the video to the scene just before this one (as seen in Matthew 24) we would see how it happens that some will not stand in the judgment. There the Lord himself separates those who are his from those who are not.

Now this is all descriptive language of what? Look at verse 6. The destinies of the two groups that we have been watching are as different as heaven and hell. Though most people are concerned about what happens to them at death, especially when death is imminent, they have in our day managed to deny a literal heaven and actual hell. In their search for alternatives they have imagined all sorts of ideas. But the question becomes the question of our first video: "Who are you listening to?"

God has spoken through four thousand years of history and has spoken through His Word and through His Son and He says there are only two destinies: living eternally under the watchful care of the Savior or perishing. Who will you believe?

So there truly are only two ways: the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked. Now as you look at your own life, which way are you going? If five people who know you best answered that question honestly what would they have to say? Are your values, goals, and aspirations shaped by the Word of God or by television, unwise friends and self-centeredness? What are you accomplishing in life: What God intended for you in your generation or "chaff"? And where are you headed eternally: Into the presence of God and his people or to perish?

Only a fool would choose a life of "chaff" and a destiny that "perishes" forever. But such a choice is made much earlier than at death. The choice is made now in who you listen to. Will you go the way of the

righteous and seek to know God and his will through His Word or will you live life not truly caring to know and obey God?

If your choice is to know God and serve Him, then what do you do? For everyone of us it begins the same way. We admit to God that we have been headed in the wrong direction and confess our sin of disregard for God. Secondly, we acknowledge that we can't turn ourselves around. We've tried harder, time and time again, to "turn over a new leaf" but it doesn't seem to work or last. Thirdly, we ask God to do for us what we can't do for ourselves - we ask Him to forgive us and give us a heart that desires to follow Jesus.

Through Jesus Christ, God gives full forgiveness and a desire for Him. And when He grants that desire we respond, we seek to know Him and His Word. If you admit today that you don't know God then come to Him through Christ now. If you say I have known God for years, I'm a Christian, but my life has looked more like I'm on the way of the wicked rather than the righteous then confess that and receive God's grace to change your way today.