

Sermon: Psalm 1 - The Character and Condition of the Righteous
South Yarra Community Baptist Church - SYCBaps Cyber Chapel, Melbourne, Australia
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Introduction

It is fascinating that in the harsh reality of a global pandemic, we can discover and identify new ways of doing and new possibilities of being. As Church, we have learned and continue to learn new ways of being the embodied community while practicing physical distancing. We gather virtually for worship within the new norms, and we are joined together across a 14 hours' time difference. As we gather in the presence and power of the crucified, resurrected, and ascended Lord, we remind ourselves that we serve a God who is beyond time and geography. We see God's hand in every moment and can trace God's hand in every space and all spheres of human life. Our God transcends time zones, ethnicities, and cultures.

It is equally fascinating that God's actions and words remain constant and relevant to human lives throughout history, within the new ways of doing and new possibilities of being. While modern societies evolve and change, and the Church responds to these changes by adjusting traditions and practices, God's word is still applicable. It is against this backdrop that I invite us to revisit ancient wisdom literature. It is an invitation to reimagine Psalm 1 relevance and its application to a post-Easter people.

This Psalm, often referenced or quoted within the Christian tradition, offers instructions concerning good and evil to help us make the right choices or take the right path, leading to blessedness. The first Psalm sets a general theme for the other Psalms by presenting a stark contrast between the righteous and the wicked ways and their respective life outcomes. It also emphasizes the joy and benefits of studying God's word. We can glean from this Psalm many

lessons, but as we reimagine its relevance, today we reflect on the character and condition of the righteous as painted on the canvas of this Psalm.

The Psalm begins as a **character reference** of the righteous. "Those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of the scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law, they meditate day and night" (1:1-2). The righteous are those who trust in God and are in a right relationship with God; they do not turn to the ungodly for advice or counsel. Nor do they participate in the actions or follow the same moral path of the ungodly. There is a noticeable difference in how the righteous conduct themselves. They do not share fellowship with those who cast scorn on others. The thought processes, behaviors, and attitudes of the righteous stand in stark contrast to that of the ungodly.

It does not escape the readers or hearers that in verse 1, negative clauses fill the character reference of the righteous - They do not walk in the counsel or advice of the ungodly. They do not stand in the way of sinners. They do not sit in the seat of the scornful. The use of the negative presupposes that seeking the counsel of the ungodly, adopting the actions of the wicked, and embracing contemptuous attitudes were normalized in society. If it were so, then it is highly likely that the first readers and hearers of the Psalm were familiar with the status quo and could understand the need to live against the tide or the flow of the times. It might not be popular, but the righteous lifestyle is often counterculture to the norms of society. Those in the right relationship with God will constantly upend the immorality normalized in and by some within society. The righteous dare to be different in a world marred by moral and spiritual decay, a

world where there is the obvious progression from walking, to standing, to sitting in the ways, actions, and attitudes of those who live outside of God's will and purpose. The Psalm is relevant today because we often engage in rationalizing, and sometimes even justifying, rather than countering the evil in our homes, communities, and societies. The Psalmist's use of the negative clauses alerts us to our vulnerabilities. Everyone in places and spaces where sin is normalized is at risk of being incorporated. Therefore, the Psalmist's instructions are not just a call to live counter to the ungodly ways but also a call to be constantly alert and perceptive lest we become consumed by the normalizing of evil in our world.

I hear you ask how we have normalized evil in the world.

- We normalize evil when we justify the disparities and inequities visible in human societies and relationships worldwide.
- We normalize evil when we behave as if we have a monopoly on God and treat those who are different or differently-abled with disdain; they too are created in God's image.
- We normalize evil when we engage in unfair trade practices where small developing island states find it hard to compete because they are at a disadvantage owing to their unique social, economic, and environmental vulnerabilities.
- We justify and normalize evil in the world when we participate in wanton greed, and waste. In contrast, others face the risks of food insecurity and natural disasters brought on by climate change due to our poor stewardship of the environment.
- We normalize evil in the world through the entrenched systemic oppression that favors some ethnic, social, and gender groups and marginalizes others.

- We normalize evil when we justify rich nations hoarding vaccines while developing countries do not have access to the vaccines.

When making policy decisions, the righteous have a moral obligation to be different in the boardroom. The righteous ought not to take counsel from or follow the practice of those who are often more concerned about profit than people, nor affirm the principles that dehumanize people and rob their self-worth and dignity. Such practices, policies, and principles undermine the command to love your neighbor as you love yourself. To achieve this love of neighbor, we must first love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength (Mark 12: 30-31). The righteous do not walk, stand, or sit under the influence or collaborate with those who live in contradiction to God's will; they resist normalizing evil in the world and are mindful of their vulnerabilities.

As we continue to reflect on the character of the righteous, we note in verse 2 the Psalmist uses the conjunction "but" to juxtapose against the previous negative clauses. "But their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law, they meditate day and night" (1:2). There is a positive identification because of their association with the word of the Lord. The righteous take wise counsel from and walk in obedience to God's commands and precepts. Those who live in obedience to God find joy in studying God's word and know the positive benefits of consistently doing so. They seek to order their footsteps in God's word, which is a lamp to our feet and light to our path. As we reimagine the relevance of ancient wisdom to our lives today, we affirm and celebrate the inner joy and peace we experience when God's word breaks forth afresh in our hearts and minds. It is life-giving and dynamic; it is the oasis that rejuvenates us when we find ourselves in the harsh existential realities of life. To avoid even the slightest measure of conformity to evil and resist immoral counsel and unethical companions, we need to hide God's

word in our hearts. When we do so, we will be less likely to sin against God. But even as we celebrate the delight in the law of the Lord, we equally confess of the peace we often forfeit because of how often we neglect to meditate on God's word.

It is worth noting that the Psalm also speaks of **the condition of the righteous**. "They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper" (1:3). The image of the righteous being like flourishing trees planted by streams of water suggests stability and sustainability. In this sense, we consider God's word as both soil and stream at the same time. People who are in the right relationship with God and depend on the direction of God's word are deeply anchored in God's will and stand upright. They are more likely to withstand or resist any life storms that may arise. God's refreshing waters through the Holy Spirit sustain the people who are rooted and anchored in God's word. It is not that their relationship with God exempts them from the vicissitudes of life; they are not easily blown away by the storms of life. Ultimately, all they do will prosper because they discern God's will and discover their purpose as they seek to follow God's word diligently.

As they realize their intrinsic worth, they experience a state of blessedness. This blessedness or happiness is not tied to external circumstances but is an inward grace gift as the righteous meditates on God's law. Modern societies have cultured us to believe that blessedness or happiness is found in material wealth, health, and success or achievements. As important as these are to human life, they can be fleeting and create a false sense of happiness. We can always be chasing happiness as the world defines it - working long hours, overworking ourselves, and

experiencing burnout, as we channel our energies in what the world perceives as the drivers of happiness.

On the other hand, as we reimagine the Psalm's relevance in modern society, we recognize the author's desire to teach us the way of blessedness that comes through obedience and submission to God's will. But the choice lies in our hands. Suppose by our folly, we are led by the counsel of the wicked, in the way of sinners, to the seat of the scornful, and do not find joy in God's word. In that case, the wind will blow us like trash; we will not stand in the judgment nor the congregation of the righteous. We will perish.

It is not the easy way, but by God's enabling, I choose the course of the righteous. My prayer today is that we will decide to yield to the Holy Spirit's empowerment and emulate the character of the righteous that we may experience the condition of true blessedness. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.