

The Psalms/Songs of Our Lives: "Livin' The Good Life"  
John 15:1-8 NIV, Psalm 1  
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"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. <sup>2</sup> He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes<sup>[a]</sup> so that it will be even more fruitful. <sup>3</sup> You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

<sup>5</sup> "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup> If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. <sup>7</sup> If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup> This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

Psalm 1 NIV

<sup>1</sup> Blessed is the one  
who does not walk in step with the wicked  
or stand in the way that sinners take  
or sit in the company of mockers,  
<sup>2</sup> but whose delight is in the law of the LORD,  
and who meditates on his law day and night.  
<sup>3</sup> That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,  
which yields its fruit in season  
and whose leaf does not wither—  
whatever they do prospers.  
<sup>4</sup> Not so the wicked!  
They are like chaff  
that the wind blows away.  
<sup>5</sup> Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.  
<sup>6</sup> For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

PRAY

## Introduction to Psalms

Today we're beginning a series of messages from Psalms. The Bible has within it various types of literature. In terms of literary genre, they are what is called "Wisdom literature". Recalling that these are the songs and prayers of the people of Israel, they are strongly influenced by the Torah or "the law of the Lord". Recall that at the time they were written, the only scriptures in the possession of Israel, were the first five books of the Bible. Given that this was many centuries prior to the printing press, the people learned the word of God by repetition, during worship as a community, by committing the psalms to memory.

Some are written as personal and some as corporate expressions of the people of Israel. They range from deeply personal, intimate expressions of joy and gratitude, to also include heartfelt expressions of anger, anguish and loss. Some are actual songs, the liturgy of Jewish worship: upbeat, filled with joy, praise, and thanksgiving (Such as the one we sang as our Introit this morning, derived from Psalm 100).

The entire range of human emotion, from elation to devastation, can be found within the Psalms. That in itself is good news: it honors our human experience and the fact that God can meet us in both the heights and depths. The faithfulness of God is experienced throughout!

We start at the very beginning with Psalm 1. As a "torah" psalm, it introduces a major theme that permeates the entire collection of psalms:

That a life well-lived is an ordered life based on obedience to God's will and purpose as expressed in the Law/Torah.

READ PSALM 1.

PRAY.

Living the good life...isn't that what everyone desires? An article in Psychology Today sought to discover how people defined happiness.

A survey resulted in these four predominant outcomes/definitions of happiness or the "good life": "experiencing pleasure, avoiding negative experience, seeking self-development, or making contributions to others."

Not bad. Mark Twain described the good life this way:

**“Always do what is right. This will gratify some people and astonish the rest.”**

Today there are countless people today who are purveyors of happiness and positive thinking.

The Psalmist offers not only a prescription for a blessed and happy life, but also a warning.

Where is the good life found? In whose presence is the good life experienced?

*How will I know the difference between the good life and the not-so-good life?*

That is important, because some paths and people may promise the good life but deliver something else entirely!

To what is one devoted in life? How does one move forward in hope? What gives the most basic direction in life?

Who influences me the most? Whom do I most influence?

The psalm contrasts two paths...two ways of life that look quite different.

The warning has to do with the people with whom we spend time: who has the greatest influence over me? So-called “peer pressure” is not limited to children and youth. Even as adults we are not exempt from such pressures either from peers, from media, from those with whom we spend the most time.

As a young adult I worked in a particular summer job where it was not uncommon for my coworkers to swear. A lot. This was not my norm, and certainly not acceptable within my family of origin, however it was easy in that work environment to talk as those around me did. I wanted to fit in and be like them. It became a habit that was harder to break than I thought it would be! Thus is the influence of others...!

Notice the progression in the psalm, the blessed person is one...

who does not **walk** in step with the wicked  
or **stand** in the way that sinners take  
or **sit** in the company of mockers.

This progression-- “walk” to “stand” to “sit”—indicates a deepening of relationship and influence of those who are described as “the wicked”, “sinners”, and “mockers”.

Those who are “blessed” or “happy”—are those who carefully choose their companions, and the amount of time one spends with those companions.

The wicked/sinners/mockers—are contrasted with those who are Happy/blessed. The former do NOT allow their lives to be directed or ordered by God’s law, whereas those who are happy and blessed, are those who take delight in God’s ways and meditate on God’s word day and night.

In other words, a blessed life is a consequence of an inner attitude and desire to please God by living authentically, informed by God’s word. That said, when we think of the “law”, rules and regulations come to mind. That is not what is intended here.

In the Old Testament, “torah” also means “instruction”. As a parent of newborns, I wished that each child had arrived with an instruction manual! Recently we had a problem with our dish washer and after trying to solve the problem ourselves, we gave up and called an appliance repair person.

“Oh that’s easy”, he said, as he showed us the easy solution! IF only we’d had an instruction manual. You know, if all else fails, read it! That is what the Bible is, an instruction manual for living the good life!

The law was given to the people of Israel as an expression of God’s desires for how we as God’s creatures can experience an ideal relationship with our Creator. “Torah” instructs God’s people with regard to God’s will, purpose, and intention for us.

Obedience, or living in accordance with God’s will results in “livin’ the good life”! The result is to experience love, joy, trust and peace/shalom!

By delighting in and meditating on God’s word, we can absorb its wisdom.

What does it mean to take delight in and meditate on God’s law/instruction, day and night?

It does not mean to sit in a lotus position, and repeat a word or phrase for 20 minutes at a time. That is a different kind of meditation. No, the Hebrew word used here, creates a visual image for us—one familiar to the dairy farmers among us, for the Psalmist uses a word that describes a cow chewing its cud! (No kidding, I’m not making this up!)

Now from the research I did this week, I learned that a cow’s stomach has four compartments, each of which help the animal digest the forage properly. The digestive process involves chewing the food, swallowing, regurgitating it, chewing it again and repeating the process several times until the food is adequately digested and the nutrients in it are able to be

absorbed for the health of the animal. One article indicated that for the average cow, this process of “chewing the cud” can take up to 8 hours, and involve between 30,000 to 40,000 jaw movements! (<http://www.cattle-empire.net/blog/115/what-cud-and-why-do-cattle-chew-it>)

The point?

If our spiritual health is determined by how much spiritual food we digest on a daily basis, we should be meditating on God’s truth throughout the day.

Suppose we select a short passage—perhaps just one verse—and “chew” on it through out each day...turning it over in our minds, ruminating on it, asking God to reveal its deepest truths to us, and helping us apply it to our lives—what difference would it make?

Kathleen Norris tells the story of visiting an elderly neighbor in North Dakota. Arlo told her about receiving a Bible as a wedding gift from his devout grandfather. Even though they wrote a thank you note, and verbally thanked him, the grandfather repeatedly asked them how they liked the Bible. Finally, Arlo went to the closet and got the Bible out of its box. On further inspection, he discovered that his grandfather had placed a 20 dollar bill at the beginning of each book—you do the math, 66 books times 20=over \$1300. Which at the time he married (in the early 1930’s ) was a considerable sum. He almost missed those “riches” because he never opened it! Trust me, friends—there are riches untold within the pages of your Bible, and not the monetary kind, but the kind that will lead to living the good life! But...you’ll miss them entirely if you never open and read your Bible!

The goal of meditating on God’s Word is so that it is no longer external to us, but internalized. It is no longer written on tablets of stone (as were the ten commandments), but now on the “tablets of our hearts”. As such it then influences our behavior if we live out of that center which is focused on God’s life-giving Word. In this way of thinking, God’s Torah/Law/“Instruction” becomes a means of grace! (p.43 James Mays)

If and when we take time to reflect on God’s express purposes for us, as revealed in the Torah, and if we live accordingly, we will discover it to be a delight—and a life-giving, authentic way to live. We’ll be living the good life!

The psalmist uses simile to contrast these two ways of life:

The “blessed” or righteous are like a deeply rooted tree planted by a river, that bears fruit in season. Such a tree in the middle east, given the arid climate, would be conspicuous—the exception to the rule. A rare find. As a

metaphor for a person of faith, the deeply rooted tree represents an image of one who is strong, not easily influenced by others. Some one who is conspicuous, who stands out in a crowd. An exception to the rule.

The central question is whether or not a life is in right relationship to God or not. "Not partly righteous, not-a-little-bit-wicked. Do life purpose and life performance confirm or deny [a relationship with]...God? What/Who directs your life and mine?" (J Mays, p. 42)

Given the world in which we live, indeed, in which the Israelites lived, it is not only impossible to avoid the "wicked", but neither is it desirable. We are instructed by Paul to be "in the world but not of it". We cannot escape proximity to and rubbing shoulders with those who are nonbelievers. However, we are to resist their influence and their potential effect on us. *In fact, if there is any impact it should be our positive influence upon them, not vice versa!*

Jesus ate with and spent time with so-called sinners all the time, but he did not follow their way.

These flourishing tree like people of faith then are contrasted with those who are described as "chaff", that which has no substance, no roots, no fruit, no lasting worth, literally, "no standing" (v.5) or lacks standing in God's presence.

The implication is that the "wicked" live lives that are self-directed and self-focused, versus the "righteous" or "happy" ones whose lives find direction and delight in God's word.

More often than not, we associate the word "righteous" with the idea of "self-righteous"—personal piety or purity that is not particularly attractive or desirable (because of the "better than" factor, as in I am better than you...!) However, in the Psalms, this is not the case. "Righteous" refers to being rightly related to oneself, to others, to creation and to God the Creator. These categories of "wicked" or "righteous" are not referring to personal virtues and vices, as such.

We will discover as we take this journey through Psalms, that

"...the lines drawn between wickedness and righteousness has far more to do with social categories than with purity categories. In fact, when the word "righteousness" (Hebrew *tsedakah*) appears in parallel with a synonym in the Psalms, that parallel synonym is three times more likely to be *mishpat*, "justice," than any other word. ***Being righteous, the Psalms say repeatedly, means being just.***"

(Patricia Tull [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2106](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2106))

For instance, Psalm 72, describes in some detail the monarch who rules in righteousness and the moral order he wants to enact:

*Give the king your justice, O God,  
and your righteousness to a king's son.  
May he judge your people with righteousness,  
and your poor with justice.  
May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,  
give deliverance to the needy,  
and crush the oppressor.*

According to the Psalms, righteousness—when lived out in our daily lives-- means right dealings with people who may be very different from ourselves.

If righteousness is tied to justice, and the Torah is filled with exhortations to do justice, then the path of the righteous is no easy road. The wicked, the sinners, and the scoffers are not just derelict teenagers tempting kids to smoke cigarettes behind the gym. Rather, the temptations are substantial and difficult -- how do we know when our judgment is being swayed by deference to wealth and power? How do we know when we are loving our neighbors rightly?

Loving God and loving our neighbor is easy until we get real. When it is our neighbor who decidedly different from us, who is difficult to understand, much less to care for, and whose beliefs and behaviors make it challenge to truly love them as God loves them. Ahh...perhaps the psalmist is in touch with our reality when he/she reckoned it is necessary to meditate on Torah/God's Word constantly, day and night, in order to live it out.

In the final analysis, Psalm 1 presents a choice -- *our* choice. There are two clearly contrasting ways. Will we choose God's way, which promises life? Or will we choose to go our own way, which promises destruction?

When confronted with two paths, poet Robert Frost muses about the possibilities. Ultimately he concludes:

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—*

*I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.*

May it be so for us as well.

Let us pray.