

This sermon was originally preached by Pastor Lucas Bitter at Intown Lutheran Church, Atlanta GA.

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost; July 30, 2023

Psalm 1

“Walk the Way of God’s Rest”

How blessed is the man

**who does not walk in the advice of the wicked,
who does not stand on the path with sinners,
and who does not sit in a meeting with mockers.**

**But his delight is in the teaching of the LORD,
and on his teaching he meditates day and night.**

**He is like a tree planted beside streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season,
and its leaves do not wither.**

Everything he does prospers.

Not so the wicked!

No, they are like the chaff which the wind blows away.

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

**Yes, the LORD approves of the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.**

Are you feeling rested and refreshed now that “summer vacation” is half over?

I know that some of you here today are teachers and students, and some of you are not. But whether you’re on the academic calendar or not, I think you can still feel the momentum shifting as we move into August. Many people are done traveling. Lots of kids are done going to camp. The time for relaxation has nearly ended and it’s almost time to get back to the grind.

Now ideally, after coming off of a “summer vacation,” you should feel rested and refreshed and re-energized to take on the year that lies ahead of you. I mean that’s the point of summer vacation, right? However, in reality things tend to look a little bit different. In the words of one author, “No man needs a vacation so much as the man who just had one.”

And maybe that’s you as we head into this August. Maybe you’re feeling like summer flies by so fast you don’t even have time to enjoy it. Maybe you’re feeling like summer isn’t much of a vacation, because you so massively overscheduled yourself. Maybe as the school year approaches you’re already thinking, “When is fall break again?”

If that’s the case, then I’ve got good news for you. Even though it may be a little while until your next physical vacation, your spiritual vacation starts now. Today we hear one of the most comforting Psalms, with the result that, hopefully, no matter what else is going on in our lives, we will all be *spiritually* refreshed. We can say, “God’s got me. And it’s going to be OK.”

Psalm 1 happens to be a good header for this entire book of Old Testament hymns. If you wanted to summarize them all in one, Psalm 1 would be a good choice. Because so much of the Psalms is about choices for God’s people, and most of the choices are black and white, right and wrong, wise and foolish,

Godly and ungodly, choices that result in peace and rest and choices that leave you exhausted and destroyed in the end. We read it earlier but to introduce it to you again let me ask you the question another way. Because this Psalm, like so many others, is here to give us rest – when the right choice is reached.

Are you tired? (Spiritually, I mean.)

Are you tired of facing the same temptations of the devil day in and day out?

Are you tired of fighting against your sinful nature which keeps pushing you to do things you know full well are wrong?

Are you tired of being constantly pressured and influenced and pushed around by a society that disagrees with your whole worldview – even on things that seem like they should be just basic human morality?

Are you tired of peer pressure?

Are you tired of being the only person in the room who's a Christian? The only one in the office who goes to church, or the one in your neighborhood who believes in Jesus and his Word?

Parents, are you tired of trying to teach your kids about God in a world where *you* are constantly challenged for *your* faith, and you know that the older they get the more *they* will be constantly challenged for *their* faith?

Are you tired? Spiritually? Well then, this Psalm was written for you.

Psalm 1 basically walks through two ways of “doing life” (a phrase I can't stand, but will use anyway). God's way, and the world's way. And it demonstrates how God's is the way that leads to meaning and fulfillment, to a fruitful and productive life, and ultimately ends up with eternal rest in heaven.

How blessed is the man who does not walk in the advice of the wicked, who does not stand on the path with sinners, and who does not sit in a meeting with mockers. Do you see the progression in those words? This verse is a warning about the way sin wants to take hold of our life. Think about it:

First a person **walk[s] in the advice of the wicked**. That means she hangs out with wicked people (people who don't really care what God says, and simply live to serve their sinful nature.) As she hangs out with them, she starts to *think* like them. Their mindsets and their lifestyles start to make sense to her. They don't seem so “wicked” anymore.

So next, she **stands on the path with sinners**. She's no longer just hanging out with them, being influenced by them, *thinking* like them. . . now she's *acting* like them. She's *joining in* with them. She's no longer just approving of their sinful actions, but she's actually doing those things herself.

Then comes the last step. She **sits in a meeting with mockers**. She's not just walking along with wickedness, she's not just stopping and joining in sin, but she's sitting down and camping out in it. She's totally committed to her sinful lifestyle. In fact, now she's a “mocker.” As people walk by on the road of life attempting to do God's will, she mocks them and makes fun of them and makes them feel so foolish

that they're tempted to give up on God too. So not only has she fallen completely away from God, she's now trying to pull other people away too.

We look at this list and we say, "Obviously that doesn't sound like a good progression. Obviously this isn't something God wants me to do." But here's something that's not so obvious. *The path that is listed here (first walking, then standing, then fully camped out in sin) is the path that every single sin wants to take.*

In the New Testament, the Apostle James describes sin in a very similar way. Check this out. He writes: **Each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.** It's kind of a graphic picture. It's as though each temptation is trying to seduce our soul. If it succeeds, a sinful desire is conceived. If that sinful desire is not dealt with, it gives birth to sinful actions. If those sinful actions are not dealt with, they grow into even more sinful actions which get bigger and bigger and uglier and uglier. . . until they finally become a full-grown monster which destroys our relationships and our life in this world. . . and which destroys our relationship with God and our faith in Jesus for eternal life in heaven.

Every sin wants to do this. Every sin will do this. There's really no such thing as a "big sin" or a "small sin." Left unchecked, every sin wants to eventually make that progression from a seemingly harmless desire in our hearts to a raging monster that destroys us forever.

Is that scary? Yes it is! But quite frankly if our sin doesn't scare us, then we are underestimating the seriousness of our sin and what exactly it can do. And yet, we don't have to be afraid. Because God loves us. God has promised to protect us. And the picture of Psalm 1 is that during times of temptation, *God protects us with the power of his Word.*

How blessed is the man...[whose] delight is in the teaching of the LORD, and on his teaching he meditates day and night.

This is super important. To meditate on God's teaching day and night does not mean that you just have to try harder. It does not mean that you just have to visualize success. It does not mean that if you just set your mind to being a good person, you can actually become one.

This is the part of God's teaching we need to meditate on most, if we are to succeed against sin and walk in God's way of rest: the message that because we have a serious sin problem, God sent us an even more serious Savior; the message that Jesus faced all the same temptations that we do, and he never fell into sin – not even once; the message that Jesus lived this kind of life, not just to be our *example* but to be our *replacement*; the message that Jesus died on the cross to suffer the destruction that our sins deserved. . . and to give us, as a gift, the perfect life he lived in our place that has won for us eternal life in heaven.

That's the message God's people delight in, and meditate on day and night. Because as we fill ourselves up with the gospel, our faith grows stronger and stronger. And God's Holy Spirit gains more and more of a hold on our hearts. He leads us to pluck out sinful thoughts before they have a chance to take root. He leads us to repent of sinful actions before they have a chance to grow and take over our lives. He leads us to the cross of Jesus over and over again to find forgiveness for our sins, and motivation for living our life the way God wants us to.

And thus God prevents us from slowing, and stopping, and sitting down and camping out in sin, and he keeps us moving along the road of faith and life all the way to heaven. It all happens through the power of God's Word, especially the saving good news of Jesus.

So that's the mechanics of it. But what does this look like in practice?

He is like a tree planted beside streams of water, which yields its fruit in season, and its leaves do not wither. Everything he does prospers.

Imagine that you are a tree living in a hot and dusty desert. The baking heat and the scorching wind make it a deadly and unhealthy environment for trees. But you have a secret weapon. It's water. You've been planted next to a stream. And even though the you are surrounded by a hot deadly desert, you're not just surviving. You're thriving.

This doesn't mean that as a child of God your life on this earth is going to be perfect and easy. This doesn't mean that there won't be times when you feel tired and stressed.

What it means is, when you are drinking deeply of God's Word, God spiritually rests and refreshes you. God equips you not just to handle all the trials and temptations that life throws at *you*, but even to help and encourage other people as they go through their trials and temptations too. That's a "fruitful life" in every sense of the word – rest for you and those around you.

I've read Psalm 1 dozens of times. I've analyzed it word by word. In fact, I had to memorize Psalm 1 for Hebrew class at the Seminary (Don't ask me to recite now). And yet as I prepared this sermon for this week, I learned something about Psalm 1 that I've never noticed before. *You can see Jesus in the whole psalm.* Not just in the end part but even at the beginning.

The psalm starts out with a warning, right? "Don't walk with the wicked. Don't stand with sinners. Don't sit with mockers." And yet if you look at Jesus' life, what did he do? Who did he hang out with? Who did he spend the most time with? Who did Jesus not only sit with, but even eat with? The corrupt, the immoral, the unclean. Those were the kinds of people that Jesus "did life" with. And this is one of the reasons the religious leaders hated Jesus so much: because he spent his time with the lowlifes of society instead of with them.

So why did Jesus spend all this time with the prostitutes and tax collectors and sinners and dregs of society? It wasn't because he wanted to condone their sin. It was because he wanted to show them the meaning of grace. One time some of Jesus' enemies challenged him. "Why do you spend so much time with sinners?" Jesus answered, **"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick."** In other words: the very people who are walking in wicked mindsets, the very people who are standing up in sinful lifestyles, the very people who are sitting on the sidelines of life and mocking the children of God, those are people who need to find grace and forgiveness more desperately than anyone in the world.

And Jesus gave it to them. He walked with them, he stood with them, he sat with them, *without condoning their actions or making them feel like dirt.* Instead, by showing love and forgiveness and by sharing the good news of God's grace, he was able to turn many of them from their sin and put them onto the path of being children of God. One of Jesus' closest disciples, Matthew, had been a corrupt tax collector. Another dear follower, Mary Magdalene, had been living a thoroughly sinful life, too.

And so this, I think, is where the rubber really meets the road for us as Jesus' followers. Like Jesus, we too are surrounded by people who are caught up in wicked and sinful lifestyles. Like Jesus, we too are surrounded by people who in many cases are straight-up mocking God. So how can we reach out to them in the proper way?

Jesus did it by being the Son of God. We do it by using the Word of God.

If we're serious about reaching out to our neighbors in the culture we now live in, the very first thing we need to do is be deeply rooted in God's Word for ourselves and drink from it every day. We need to drink deeply of God's Word, not so that we can learn some perfect strategy for evangelism and outreach, but simply so that we can become so full of the message of grace that it naturally pours out of us. We don't want the free forgiveness of Jesus to be a thing we only think about on Sundays. We want the free forgiveness of Jesus to be the lens through which we view every detail of our lives. "This is who I am. I am a freely-forgiven child of God. I am going to heaven." And with that in the front of our hearts, we are equipped to walk alongside the wicked without walking in their attitudes; to stand with sinners but not to join in their sin; to sit with mockers but not to join them in their mocking. Rather, to show them that they too are loved and forgiven and promised eternal life in heaven through faith in Jesus.

That's a "fruitful life" where "everything we do prospers." It is the life of spiritual rest for ourselves, for other believers, and, as it was for Jesus' life, a life of rest for those who didn't believe...until they met him. God give us that life, through the power of his Word!

And now our psalm ends with one more sober warning.

Not so the wicked! No, they are like chaff which the wind blows away. (That's a very different picture than that healthy palm tree at the oasis.) **Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. Yes, the LORD approves of the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.**

Fruit and chaff. Life and death. Heaven and hell. But God has given us his Word as the key to it all, to guide us in the right direction, to spiritual rest now in our Savior's gospel, and eternal rest after the judgment where will stand righteous in Christ.

God grant us deep roots and healthy fruits, lives of rest in his Word for ourselves and those we touch with it.

Amen.