

Drawing Near to God: People Flourish in His Presence

7/16/17- Pastor Randy

Psalm 1 (ESV)

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; 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 that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.

The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore, the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

I was raised by two loving parents, in a good, healthy Christian home. Not a perfect home of course, since none exists, but a pretty consistent home. I accepted Christ at a young age and grew up in Sunday School, memorizing bible verses and learning to pray. I would say as a child I had a sincere faith in Jesus and a genuine experience of the Holy Spirit's presence in my life. My family and church provided a very strong Christian support system, but as I entered my pre-teen years my non-Christian friends from the neighborhood began to exert a greater and greater influence in my life. This influence led to some of the typical mischief one might expect from young boys to more problematic behavior as I entered my teen years; behaviors such as drinking, smoking pot and vandalism. When my friends began using drugs I refused to join them, standing firm in my principles. However, it was only a matter of time before my resistance wore down and I began participating along with them. Fortunately, God got a hold of my life when I was only seventeen, before things got too bad. About a year after I recommitted my life to Christ, I discovered that one of my now former friends, the friend who was the major influence in my start with drugs had become the biggest cocaine dealer in his high school. I am certain that if I had not severed that relationship with him when I gave my life to Christ, I would have followed in his steps.

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When I recommitted my life to Christ I was painfully aware that my mind and heart were messed up. I was a miserable person. I remember praying, "God I know I need you, but my heart is dark and I can't change it. I need you to change it!" I started reading the bible and praying every night, believing that God's word and his presence could change me. I believed because I witnessed a group of young adults transformed by the power of God when I was a kid.

As I began to fill my mind and heart with God's word and call out to him in prayer I began to experience a new sense of joy and peace and purpose. I never came to deny the existence of God, but now I was experiencing His existence. He was no longer "out there" somewhere, but He had drawn near to me and I responded by learning to draw near to Him. I began to experience a flourishing in my spirit where there had been a languishing due to low self-esteem and selfish rebellion against God.

There are two persons contrasted in this Psalm; the righteous man whose life is *influenced and impacted by God's word* and the wicked man, whose life is *influenced and impacted by ungodly words*; what the Psalmist calls the counsel of the ungodly. I can relate to both of these characters. *I have been both.*

When we read the Bible we need to interpret it in light of the storyline of inspired scripture. The Psalms were written by David and others prior to the life transforming effects mediated to us through the cross, resurrection, and impartation of the Holy Spirit. When the OT describes some people as righteous and others as wicked, this is not to be interpreted in absolute terms. These words should not be interpreted as indicating that we can make ourselves righteous by following God's laws without need of the sin-pardoning, redemptive power of the cross being applied to our lives. Paul, in Romans chapter 3, making the point that all of us are unrighteous and in need of Jesus' sin bearing, guilt justifying work applied to our lives, wrote this: "*None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for*

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God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."

Do you know where he got those words from? He borrowed from David's words in Psalm 14. Here is the point: Psalm 1 does not teach that one can become righteous simply through God's word. However, God's word supplied grace to sinful people, enabling them to live lives that generally adhered to the moral and ethical principles in God's laws. So, on the one hand, no one is naturally righteous in their heart, and no one is perfectly righteous in their behavior, but on the other hand, it is possible for a person to live a righteous life, generally speaking, as a result of God's common grace.

Psalm 1, although written from the perspective of someone living under the old covenant, is nevertheless very relevant to, and profitable for, the Christian. As members of the new covenant we are positionally righteous in Christ, and empowered to be practically and personally righteous by the Holy Spirit. However, spiritual disciplines such as prayer and meditation on God's word are vital means by which the Holy Spirit transforms our lives so that they reflect the righteousness of Christ. Let me unpack that for you to make it more clear. God's people possess:

1. Positional Righteousness – A right standing, or right relationship with God. It results from our union with Christ through faith in His atoning work on the cross. While we are not perfectly righteous in our attitudes, affections and actions, we are counted righteous because of our relationship with Christ.

2. Personal, Practical Righteousness – Righteous attitudes, affections, and actions. Through the power and influence of the indwelling Holy Spirit, Christians experience a transformation of their attitudes, affections, and actions in a direction consistent with the attitudes, affections, and actions of Christ. Prayer and meditation on God's word are two of the most important means through which the Holy Spirit accomplishes His work in our lives.

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Jesus saved us to place us in a right relationship with God SO THAT we will begin to relate rightly to God. The focus in Psalm 1 is not on positional righteousness but on practical, personal righteousness.

The Psalmist tells us the following about the righteous person:

1. **He is blessed** - David begins by describing the righteous person as “blessed”. The word means “happy’ or ‘joyful”, but this happiness is founded upon the reality that they are blessed by God. The “blessed” are those who have a good reason to be happy because the favor of God is upon their lives.

2. **He flourishes** – I choose to refer to the Psalmist’s description of the righteous as one who “flourishes” rather than “prosper” simply because our culture has such a tendency to define prosperity in terms of wealth and possessions. Anthony Bradley, professor at “The King’s College in NYC provides a great description of flourishing when he writes,

“... human flourishing... is characterized by a holistic concern for the spiritual, moral, physical, economic, material, political, psychological, and social context necessary for human beings to live according to their design.” (“Here Come the Radicals” @ Christianitytoday.com 3/15/2013)

The key phrase in that quote is “to live according to their design”.

You might be asking yourself at this point, “Then why do the wicked sometimes prosper?” and “Why do the righteous often endure persecution and oppression?” When you witness wicked, ungodly attitudes, affections, and actions, apparently accompanied by blessing, keep in mind two things:

A. James reminds us that ungodly attitudes and affections will produce sinful actions and sinful actions ultimately lead to death. In the short term the wicked may prosper, but it is a superficial, pseudo-prosperity. It is temporary and will ultimately lead to destruction.

B. Even in the short term, ungodly attitudes, affections and actions have an immediate soul corrupting effect that is invisible to the naked eye. In other

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words, the outward, external destructive consequences may not appear for a while but sin corrupts the heart, mind, and spirit immediately.

Also, keep in mind that the Psalmist is communicating general truth about the benefits of righteousness and the destructiveness of sin. His concern is not to emphasize the rule and not to address the exceptions to the rule that result from a fallen, broken world. Many people whose homes were destroyed by hurricane Sandy were hard-working, godly Christians. They probably didn't feel like they were flourishing in that moment.

3. His **"way is known" by God**. This phrase does not simply mean that God is aware of his "way". God's "knowing" means God is intimately involved in His way. The NLT translates this phrase, "For the Lord watches over the path of the godly", picturing a parent "watching over" his children in a caring sense. Eugene Peterson in *The Message* does a good job of capturing the even fuller sense of the phrase when he writes, "God charts the road you take." The righteous man is accompanied by God, helped by God, and his destiny is determined by God. His way is ultimately not *his way*, but **God's way!**

I trust that everyone here wants to experience the blessing of righteous attitudes, affections, and actions. I trust that every one of you wants your life to flourish. I am confident that all of us would love to hear God say, "I know the way of _____"

Psalm 1 tells us that in order for that to happen we have to draw near to God! The righteous man is blessed, flourishing as he walks in God's ways, because... *"... his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night."* We draw near to God by giving our concentrated attention to God's inspired scriptures, listening to God as He reveals his person to us as well as His purpose and plans for us. Meditation on God's word should never be divorced from prayer to God. The two go hand in hand.

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I am going to close this message with two important points from Psalm 1
Those who draw near to listen to God's voice:

1. Must draw away from ungodly voices. The righteous person does not:
WALK...COUNSEL...(WICKED)UNGODLY
STAND...WAY...SINNERS
SIT...SEAT...SCOFFERS

There is a downward progression described here. This person starts off in a casual relationship with people whose counsel is unrighteous, ungodly, and immoral. He is influenced to a degree by the people he "rubs shoulders with" as he moves about his day. Then he graduates to more intimate relationships as he stops and stands with them. The relationship becomes even more intimate, resulting in this individual being influenced to a greater degree as he takes a seat, settling down among those who possess contempt for God.

The picture created by the Psalmist here reminds us of the relationship between time and influence. Our beliefs and values are caught more than they are taught. Whenever there is interaction between individuals there is influence being exchanged. Whatever, or whoever, you give your attention to most will exert the greatest influence in your life. Drawing near to God requires that we draw away from every voice that is contrary to God's.

2. Must draw near constantly, not sporadically. The Holy Spirit can, and often does, deliver people instantly. But after He instantly delivers us, we also need Him to constantly develop us. Unless the person who has been instantly delivered by the Spirit begins to be constantly developed by the Spirit, he will find himself enslaved by sin and in need of being delivered all over again. According to Psalm 1, drawing near to God must be a habit, not a visit. The righteous "meditates on God's word "day and night". He is like a tree "planted". Habits form our loves and habits direct our decisions. In this Psalm "delight" or "love" for God's word leads the person to make a habit of focused study and reading. This is true but it is only part of the story.

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It is also true that the practice, or habit, of mediating on God's word will foster a delight in it. In fact, simple logic would indicate that some degree of experience with God's word is necessary before a love for it occurs in the heart. My affection and love for my wife arose out of interaction with my wife. The interaction preceded the love.

In his book, *You Are What You Love*, James K.A. Smith writes, "Worship is the arena in which God recalibrates our hearts, reforms our desires, and rehabilitates our loves. Worship isn't just something we do; it is where God does something to us."

Through the habit of prayer and bible meditation "God does something TO us". The premise of Jamie's book is that discipleship - being conformed into the image of Jesus - is not accomplished simply through education. It is not just about renewing our minds. The practice, or habit of spiritual disciplines take us deeper to the renewing of our affections or loves.

We can't afford to wait for the "desire" to pray to begin praying. You can't wait for the desire to read, study and meditate on God's word before opening it. You will develop, or acquire, a greater and greater love for prayer and Bible study as you practice it. We are all familiar with the phrase, "It is an acquired taste". Think of the spiritual disciplines of prayer and bible study as analogous to drinking coffee. Few people love coffee the first time they drink it, but when you acquire a taste for it, you can't make it through the day without it. God's word is an acquired taste. The Spirit will give you a desire to know who he is, and the practice of drinking in the word of God will cause that desire to grow to where you can't live without it.