

Summer of Psalms: Delight

Psalm 1
July 26, 2015
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~Blessed people don't just do the right thing, they love the right thing~

While there is a good likelihood that summer is virtually over in Prince George we are just beginning our summer series which I have titled "Summer of Psalms."

If you brought a Bible or see one in the pew in front of you or have the app please open it up to Psalm 1. You will find this almost exactly in the middle of your Bible.

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Over the rest of the Sundays of summer that I am preaching we will be digging into and taking apart a different Psalm each time. Now I'm excited about this because the Psalms are incredibly emotional literature, and as such they are meant to be experienced more than just studied. Emotional literature is intended to excite.

So the Psalms deal with deep feeling in a raw way that connects very honestly with where we find ourselves in different seasons of life. And because there are so many Psalms – it's the biggest book in the Bible – pretty much every emotion gets covered from gratitude to joy to rage to depression to fear to exhaustion to rejection to surprise to you name it.

And so people often turn to the Psalms seeking to hear God speak into where they find themselves. So do you want to hear God's word for you today?

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Now as we begin this series it is important to note that all of the Psalms are expressions of Hebrew poetry – they are songs. So in general they are concerned with feelings more than facts.

And English poetry does the same. Now I was looking for an example of this and found a bunch of poetry I wrote in grade 7... but you aren't lucky enough to get to hear it. It was so cheesy that I couldn't bring myself to share any of it so I grabbed this example off the net. A grade 6 student wrote this, and it certainly has feeling.

Scared

Scared is a bad feeling to have,

Scared is when it lightnings and thunders

Scared is when you see a ghost

Scared is when you get in trouble and everybody finds you out.

Scared is when your parents get a divorce, and it might be your fault. - 6th Grade

There is feeling there, but just because a poem conveys feeling doesn't mean that it has no logical value or doesn't want to also argue a specific theological point. And we are going to see that the authors of the Psalms tie these two goals together masterfully; not only do they connect with our hearts, but they connect with our heads and teach us things about God and ourselves.

So let's turn our attention to Psalm 1.

In a nutshell this Psalm gets in at our desire to live lives that count – do you want your life to count?... Of course you do, this is something we all want. And the Psalmist is going to argue that this is a good desire. And we can achieve this desire by intentionally delighting ourselves in God and His law.

So would you pray with me that our desire for meaning that is so intimately connected to what it means to be human would be inspired as we read this and that God would draw our hearts towards what will help us achieve what He designed us to want? Let's pray:

[Pray]

Let's start by reading the Psalm through.

[Read Psalm 1]

Now Psalm 1 was written by David and is particularly special because it is the gatekeeper of all the Psalms. It sets the broad theme that all the rest of the Psalms follow. And there is a lot packed into these six verses and we aren't going to cover all of it by any stretch of imagination. But my goal in this is to unpack the general picture of what David is getting at.

First he describes two kinds of people. And this polarization is repeated regularly throughout the Psalms. There are the righteous and there are the wicked, there are godly people and there are sinners. And these two categories aren't just two among many; in the psalmists mind there are only two kinds of people. So this is black and white language.

And as we look into this we see that the divisions between these two categories of people is stark. So verse 6 notes that "the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction." God keeps one group in His care while allowing the other to ultimately destroy themselves.

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But it isn't just the final outcomes that David is concerned with – and this is really important – it is also the daily lives of these two groups that are distinct.

So in verse 3 the righteous live today like trees planted by streams of water. They yield fruit in appropriate moments, they bloom beautifully and everything they turn themselves to prospers. This is language that all of us deeply desire to be true about ourselves. Everyone wants to be “blessed.”

And no one wants the alternative. Verse 4 says the wicked are blown away like chaff – they are so inconsequential that even a slight breeze uproots them and tosses them to and fro. They are totally foundationless lacking the ability to stand before judgment or even relate to the righteous.

No one sets out desiring for themselves. No kid says “when I grow up I want my life to be meaningless and fickle, completely devoid of integrity such that even the slightest accusation leaves me reeling – no one says that.

And yet in spite of the fact that no one would ever want to be like chaff, and everyone would like to be like a tree planted by streams of water, the psalmist says these two groups exist.

But that isn’t the end of it. The Psalmist doesn’t present this as fate such that some people just end up in one camp and some end up in the other. Instead his desire is to teach us how to live in order to end up in the blessed camp. And this is where the argument and feeling of the poem collide.

And verse 2 is where this happens with the words “whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on His law day and night.” This is both the command of the psalm and the emotional connecting point, and this is what divides the righteous from the wicked. David says: **Blessed people don’t just do the right thing, they love the right thing.**

The key word is “delight.” What David doesn’t say is “Blessed are people who beat themselves into submission finally managing to conform their behaviour to what God wants in spite of the fact they never really want to do it.

Instead he describes blessed people as those who do whatever it is they want to do because what they want to do is seek God. This is their delight. Can you see how those two positions are completely different?

Now we are going to come back to that in the end, but let’s turn our attention at this point to the two groups David paints – David says some people are righteous and some people are wicked.

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But if you know your Bible this might raise some red flags in your mind. You might be thinking something like “hold on a minute” how can people be divided into righteous and wicked? After all in Romans Paul says:

As it is written:

“There is **no one righteous**, not even one;
 there is no one who understands;
 there is no one who seeks God.
 All have turned away,
 they have together become worthless;
 there is **no one who does good**,
 not even one.” (Romans 3:10-12)

So it seems pretty clear that righteousness evades us all? God alone fills the righteous camp which leaves the rest of us to live in the wicked camp. So how can David say “the Lord watches over the way of the righteous” if there aren’t any righteous people? Isn’t this a contradiction?

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Actually it’s not, instead it is a misunderstanding of what the word righteous means.

When Paul talks about there being no one righteous he is actually quoting from another Psalm – Psalm 14, which says:

The fool says in his heart,
 “There is no God.”
 They are corrupt, their deeds are vile;
 there is **no one who does good**.
 The LORD looks down from heaven
 on all mankind
 to see if there are any who understand,
 any who seek God.
 All have turned away, all have become corrupt;
 there is **no one who does good**,
 not even one. (Psalm 14:1-3)

This is where Paul gets this idea but there is more. As the Psalm goes on things get clearer. David continues:

Do all these evildoers know nothing?
 They devour my people as though eating bread;
 they never call on the LORD.
 But there they are, overwhelmed with dread,
 for God is present **in the company of the righteous**. (Psalm 14:4-5)

So David says there is no one in the whole world who does any good... apart from the company of the righteous. And the righteous do good, not because they are intrinsically good, but because they have built on a good foundation. They have been redeemed by God's grace. And this is what Paul is referring to in Romans 3 as well.

So there are righteous people, a whole company of them – and Jesus followers are in this company because we are those who have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus. It is outside this company that no one can be good.

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Now that's helpful, but it's not enough since when we think "righteousness" we connect it with "perfection." And with that understanding it is no wonder we are reluctant to attribute it to ourselves. But perfection isn't what the Bible means when it talks of righteousness.

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One of my professors said righteousness means being in a state of "right-relatedness" with God. Or having a right relationship with God.

And the key example of someone with this kind of relationship in Scripture is Abraham. The Bible tells us:

Abram believed the LORD, and He credited it to him as righteousness. (Genesis 15:6)

So Abraham had a kind of faith that God respected so much that he deemed Abraham to be righteous.

Now that's great for Abraham, but Paul goes on to build on this something that has profound implications for us all. He said:

So the promise [of our justification before God] is received by faith. It is given as a free gift. And we are all certain to receive it... if we have faith like Abraham's. For Abraham is the father of all who believe. (Romans 4:16 NLT)

So if we have the same kind of faith Abraham had then we also will be deemed righteous by God.

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So the question that should be burning in your mind is "what kind of faith did Abraham have?" And what we find when we look at scripture is that Abraham's faith was one that changed the way he lived.

So Abraham's story begins with him choosing in faith to leave his homeland and follow God to a country he didn't even know existed. Then he believed God would make him into a great nation even though he had no kids. He believed this for 25 years until Isaac was born. Then when God asked him to sacrifice Isaac on an altar he believed God could raise him from the dead and so traveled with his son to the mountain, built an altar, put his son on top and drew his knife – that's when God stopped him.

Abraham had a kind of faith that made him live differently than he would have lived if he didn't believe. And God saw this and deemed it righteousness.

But here is what we miss. Abraham wasn't perfect. The Bible is very careful to record several of his major screw ups. At one point Abraham faithlessly took God's promise of a coming child into his own hands and slept with his servant girl – that's sin. After that, instead of protecting his wife like a husband is supposed to, he fearfully denies Sarah is his wife at all and causes her to be taken into another man's harem... and this happened twice! That's faithless sin.

So Abraham wasn't perfect by any stretch of the imagination, and yet he was righteous – he always came back to trusting God's promises and living in light of that trust. And if we are Christians it is because we have the same kind of faith that Abraham had. He is the father of our faith.

So here is the point, perhaps you are out there today and you are feeling weak and condemned and broken, you've fallen back into the trap of sin again. Perhaps imperfection feels like a bit of an understatement and you feel a bit more like depraved. Here's the good news: God doesn't require perfection from us, but He does want us to be righteous, He wants us to be in a right relationship with Him. When we sin He wants us to come back, repent, and trust Him again in a way that makes a difference in our lives.

So what does that look like?

Here is where Psalm 1 gives us some help. People who are in a right relationship with God continually run from the influence of wickedness and passionately embrace godliness. And that's because **blessed people don't just do the right thing, they love the right thing.**

So David starts this psalm with the word "blessed", and this is the same word Jesus uses in His Sermon on the Mount. And this word describes someone who is enjoying a right-relationship with God right now.

And this is key. Righteousness or right-relatedness does not refer to having our sins forgiven so that we get into heaven when we die. Being righteous is not the minimum requirement for salvation.

In fact there are no minimum requirements for salvation – at least not any in Scripture. Jesus never once says "if you believe these things and pray this prayer then you will be good in the end."

Instead every time Jesus describes people in right relationships with God He uses the word "disciple" which in first century language was someone who conformed their entire life to look like their master. A disciple is someone who conforms their entire life to look like the Master.

So when people asked what it meant to be a disciple Jesus said:

"Whoever wants to be My disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me. (Matthew 16:24)

Being Jesus' disciple then is about having a faith in Jesus that makes you follow Him even though He is on the way to the cross. Discipleship is an all in thing.

So how do blessed people, how do righteous people, how do disciples of Jesus live?

David first describes what they don't do. He says people in a right-relationship with God don't give themselves over to the influence of the wicked. And he presents three snap shots of this influence as it increases in intensity.

So first he says righteous people "do not walk in step with the wicked." And walking speaks of the direction we are going. So David says the righteous don't go to the same places the wicked go. But at this stage he isn't talking about brothels or drug dealing parties, he is talking about seemingly harmless activities where we might "innocently" be influenced by the wicked.

Now the Hebrew word for wicked here simply refers to someone ungodly – someone without God.¹

So some people start their day by reading their horoscope – that's counsel that does not take God into consideration so it's wicked or godless counsel. Or some people turn on Oprah or Dr. Phill. Or some people spend hours meditating on so called "secular" music, or sitcoms. Now most of these things are not sinful in and of themselves – it isn't sinful to listen to most secular music. But righteous people don't meditate here because it's message is godless counsel. It does not seek the glory of God.

And David says righteous people avoid this kind of counsel, they don't walk in it. And that's because righteous people don't spend their time thinking "that's not sin so I can do it." Instead they spend their time saying "What can I do to get closer to God?" And these are very different perspectives.

So the righteous don't walk in step with the wicked.

Second David says righteous people don't "stand in the way that sinners take." This pictures the next step down the slippery slope towards allowing godless counsel to infiltrate our defenses.

To stand with someone is to identify with them, to embrace what they say and not oppose their viewpoint. So while in the first stage we might be tempted to turn to godless counsel as entertainment, this second stage describes what

¹ Strong's Concordance *Rasha'* = morally wrong...ungodly

happens after this counsel begins to become common – it's ideas begin to become our ideas. We begin to agree with them, and hold their ideas as our own.

Now here I have spoken with many people who say “what I watch and what I listen to doesn't influence me”, and perhaps it doesn't. But at least consider that advertisers spend billions because they believe what you watch and listen to does influence you. So don't be naïve about what influences you. Heed the warning.

David says the righteous cut the influence of the godless off at the stem, and so they don't identify with the wicked.

And third David says righteous people don't “sit in the company of mockers.” This is the final step of being influenced by godless counsel. To sit with someone speaks of resting in a comfortable place. So at this point the godless counsel would have lost it's shock value and been fully embraced as our own thought. And the result would be joining those who mock God.

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So look at your life right now. Certainly if you attend church with any regularity it is likely you have not slipped to the third stage of influence, but ask yourself are there godless things that might be influencing my thoughts more than I know? Ask yourself “Am I just trying to avoid sin, or am I pursuing intimacy with Christ with every opportunity?”

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Next David turns his attention to the positive, to the delight that the righteous have for God and His law. And this is important because righteousness, right-relatedness with God, is not so much about avoiding sin as it is about loving God. Look again with me at verse 2.

[Read Psalm 1:2]

David says **Blessed people don't just do the right thing, they love the right thing.**

And over and over again in the Psalms David speaks of how the righteous love God's word. So Psalm 119 says:

Oh, how I love your law!

I meditate on it all day long.

How sweet are your words to my taste,

sweeter than honey to my mouth! (Psalm 119:97,103)

Friends, it is so important that we not reduce our right-relatedness with Jesus to a list of dos and don'ts because then our relationship becomes a matter of obligation. But Jesus doesn't want people who begrudgingly obey Him, He wants disciples who love and delight in Him.

Jesus says “loving God and loving our neighbours is what God’s law is about.”² Now Jesus also says “If you love Me you will do what I say.”³ But the word “love” does not just mean “obey.” It connotes passion and desire. And a disciple of Jesus is someone who seeks to love God and people the way Jesus did, while someone who is not Jesus’ disciple loves something else.

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Jesus said:

Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. (John 3:19)

So people are divided into righteous and wicked, by what they love... What do you love? Those who love God are hungry for more of His law just like their Master is. So these people make a practice of getting into the Bible. They are hungry for what God is saying, and they delight in it.

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Alright, but what if that isn’t you? What if following God’s law is something that at the best of times you have to wrestle yourself into doing? You honestly wish you loved God and His law more, but you just don’t?

Here is where grace enters the picture, and we will end with this good news. The same Psalmist who describes God’s law as honey in his mouth also writes this:

Open my eyes that I may see
wonderful things in your law. (Psalm 119:18)

David prayed this because he needed God’s help to love His law. To have a holy desire for God is a gift of grace; nobody naturally hungers or delights in God.

But here is the catch, the gift God gives those who want to want Him more is His law – His word. God reveals Himself to those who hunger as we seek Him.

So friends, if you lack delight but want more of it, then cut yourself off from the influence of the wicked, godless world. Don’t walk there, don’t stand there, don’t sit there. Instead get into your Bible because God promises that the more we know Him the more His love will consume our minds and we will find ourselves loving Him and loving others. We will find ourselves looking like our Master.

And when this happens, then instead of being blown away by the wind we begin to live as we were designed to live – like trees planted by streams of water bearing fruit in season and enjoying ultimate prosperity wherever we turn. The Lord watches over us, and we find ourselves blessed.

And the Psalmist says if blessing is what you want then intentionally delight yourself in God and His law.

² Matthew 22:37-40

³ John 14:15