

In Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland, we read this exchange, "Alice came to a fork in the road. 'Which do I take?' she asked. 'Where do you want to go?' responded the Cheshire Cat. 'I don't know.' Alice answered. 'Then,' said the Cat, 'it doesn't matter.'"

The choices we make every day determine the direction and shape of our life. Every decision we make leads to other possibilities and closes the door on other ones. The *Book of Psalms* begins with a Beatitude about two ways, two paths, and how the choices we make all the time influence our life and our future. *Psalm 1* is a statement about human existence. **The Psalms begin by teaching that the way life is lived is decisive for how it turns out.** Listen to *Psalm 1* (NRSV):

"Happy are those **who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers**; but **their delight** is in the **law** of the LORD, and on his **law** they meditate day and night. 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. 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 watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish."

Psalm 1 invites us to read and use the entire *Book of Psalms* as a guide to a blessed life. *Psalm 1* contrasts two ways of living—the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked. You want to know how to live a blessed life? Read and pray your way through the *Psalms*. **Verse 1 says what the blessed do not do.** They do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers. Do you see the progression that is described here? It's a statement about **Who Influences Us**. The progression in verse 1 is from listening to the wicked, to taking the path of sinners, to sitting in a place where we scoff at God. If we listen to the wrong people, if we listen to the wicked, we'll be led astray and away from God's way for our lives and for this world. We can say these three images speak of **thinking, behaving and belonging**. The righteous and the ungodly are different in how they think, how they behave, and to whom they belong.

I'm going to invite you to ask yourself four questions this morning. The first is **Who influences me?** If you had to write a list of at least a few names, whose names would be on it? Are they trustworthy, truthful, wise, mature, godly, kind, and loving people? If so, their godliness, maturity, trustworthiness, truthfulness, wisdom, kindness, and love will hopefully shape us in those directions. If they're not, look out! *Psalm 1* says we can start down the wrong way by listening to the advice of the wicked and starting to follow it because we're influenced by who we listen to. We become like who we spend our time with, we start to think, speak and act like them. The next thing you know we've gone from merely listening to

them to taking the way of sinners. Before you know it, you're sitting with the scoffers who mock God, God's ways and God's people. Yoda was right when he warned Luke Skywalker 40 years ago in *The Empire Strikes Back*, "once you start down the dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny. **Consume you it will**, as it did Obi-Wan's apprentice." Yoda knew that if you listen to the wicked and start down the path of sinners, before you know it, you'll be sitting with them, and your lifestyle and way of thinking will be indistinguishable from theirs. Through the media, through our workplaces, in society, someone is always trying to influence us. Are you being shaped by the "wicked" or the "righteous" (the two groups in *Psalm 1*)? How do you know? Who is influencing you? Who are you influencing? Is the influence for good or evil?

The second question to ask yourself is, What delights me? What brings you joy? What energizes you? What do you find to be life-giving? When God gets a hold of us, God changes the things we want. Yes, we still struggle with being tempted to do wrong, but **our greatest desire should be for God and the blessed life God has for us.** If a list of what delights us only contains things that give us pleasure and satisfy our own desires, we have more growing in godliness to do. Verse one of *Psalm 1* tells us what the righteous don't do. **Verse 2 says what they do: "their delight is in the law of the LORD**, and on his law they **meditate** day and night." According to the *Psalm* that begins the whole *Book of Psalms*, the wise person is the one who reads and meditates on the Torah day and night. **The blessed person is the one who delights in God's ways and meditates on them** (v. 2). In Christian meditation, the goal is to fill your mind with the word of God. This can be done by carefully thinking about each word and phrase and applying it to one's self and praying it back to the Lord. Martin Luther said that he could not live in paradise without the word of God, but he could live well enough in hell with it. In the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye sings a song, "If I Were a Rich Man," that many of you know. What does he say would be the most delightful part of being rich? "I'd discuss the learned books with the holy men seven hours every day that would be the sweetest thing of all." Is that how we would spend our time if we were rich? Would studying God's word for seven hours every day be the sweetest thing of all for us? The writer of *Psalm 1* would agree with Tevye. Whatever delights you, is it a positive influence on you like meditating on God's Word is? Is it making you a better person and a better follower of Christ? Is it helping you love God and others?

Psalm 1 encourages us to ask ourselves, **Who influences me? What delights me?** The third question is: **Where do I get my strength and nourishment?** *Psalm 1*, like **Jeremiah 17:5-8**, compares the righteous, godly person to a tree planted by streams of water. This is how Jeremiah describes the two ways in life. *Jeremiah 17:5-8 NIV*, "This is what the LORD says: 'Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who draws strength from mere flesh and whose heart turns away from the LORD. That person will be like a bush in the wastelands; they will not see prosperity when it comes. They will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives. **But blessed is the one who trusts in the**

LORD, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.”

The reason the tree in *Jeremiah* and *Psalm 1* flourishes at all times and yields its fruit in season is because its roots go down to a steady source of water, providing what is life giving even in dry times. **What resources do you draw from when you face dry times of life? Where do you get your strength and nourishment?** That which grows fast withers just as rapidly, what grows slowly, like a tree, endures. Wouldn’t it be great to have a relationship with God that was so rich that you had a continual source of spiritual strength and resilience? Do you have that kind of relationship with God and others? If not, what would it take for you to develop those? Meditating on and delighting in God’s word every day and associating with positive, godly people are good places to start. That’s why I’m encouraging you to read 5 *Psalms*, 1 chapter in *Proverbs*, and 3 chapters in the *Gospels* every day this month. It can change your life.

Who influences me? What delights me? Where do I get my strength and nourishment? The fourth and final question *Psalm 1* invites us to ponder is **Which way am I on?** We live in a society where increasingly right and wrong are simply in the eyes of the beholder and words like “righteous” and “wicked” are rarely used anymore.

This *Psalm*, however, remains uncompromising. There is no middle way. We’re all on a journey, and on one of two paths. Is your life flourishing and solid like a well-watered tree, or is it flimsy like weightless chaff blowing in the wind? Is your life rooted in God, or are you attempting to root it elsewhere? What choices will you make this week to put yourself on the right path?

The idea of there being two ways that we may make countless choices about every day is picked up by Jesus who says in *Matthew 7:13-14* (NKJV), “Enter by the narrow gate; **for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction**, and there are many who go in by it. **Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life**, and there are few who find it.”

“The Way” is mentioned several times in the *Book of Acts* (*Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22*) in connection with early followers of Christ. Peter refers to Christianity as “the way of truth” in *2 Peter 2:2*. And the writer of *Hebrews* says that Jesus’ broken body is the “new and living way” for us to enter the Most Holy Place (*Hebrews 10:19–20*). As Christians we’re pilgrims on a journey that requires many choices and decisions every day about which way we’re going to take.

Hall of Fame Yankee catcher Yogi Berra was quoted as saying, "When you come to a fork in the road, take it." Poet Robert Frost in his poem "**The Road Not Taken**" put it a little more eloquently.

"Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

"Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

"And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!

**Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.**

"I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference."

Who influences me? What delights me? Where do I get my strength and nourishment? Which way am I on? The righteous are not afraid to take a less-traveled road, because we know it leads to blessing, joy and eternal life. Jesus said (*John 14:6*, NKJV), "I am **the way**, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." Following Christ day by day on the narrow, less traveled way that leads to life does make all the difference. I hope you find it, strive to enter it, and follow Christ who is the Way, the truth, and the life, as long as you live.

Blessing: *Jeremiah 6:16* (NIV), "This is what the LORD says: 'Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.'"

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. How does *Psalm 1* work as an introduction to the entire book of *Psalms*? What is the primary truth *Psalm 1* is trying to communicate? How would you summarize *Psalm 1*?
2. What does it mean to be “blessed”? What are some other words that could be used to describe the blessed person in *Psalm 1*?
3. What does it mean to “walk in the counsel of the wicked,” to “stand in the way of sinners,” or to “sit in the seat of scoffers”? Have you experienced this in your life or seen it in the life of another? How is each of these conditions worse than the previous one?
4. What does the blessed person do?
5. What benefits have you found from spending time in God’s Word or hearing God’s Word being taught? What happens to the blessed person who makes God’s Law a priority?
6. What contrast does the Psalmist point out between the righteous and the wicked? What does it mean that God “knows” the way of the righteous? What needs to change in your life in order to be like the tree planted by streams of water?