

The right way (Psalm 1)

“Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked.”

That’s how the book of Psalms begins; the songbook of ancient Israel starts with this amazingly sound piece of advice: Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked.

Some translations have that as “Happy are those who reject the advice of evil people,” (Good News) or “Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked,” (NRSV)

Or, if you like things more poetically, I can give you the King James translation: “Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly”.

The book of Psalms contains 150 psalms – songs – which cover all aspects of life. There are psalms of praise, psalms of lament, psalms of joy, psalms of sorrow and they contain some of the best known parts of our scripture.

But it all starts here with Psalm 1, Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked.

And the psalmist expands his advice: 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.

So this first verse of Psalm 1 really gives us three profound points: Don’t follow bad advice. Don’t follow bad people, and don’t scoff at the people who are doing the right thing.

So I wonder, how are we going as individuals, as a church and as a society going in those three things?

Do we not follow bad advice?

Do we not follow bad people?

Do we refrain from scoffing at people doing the right thing?

It'd be nice to think that we were doing really well with those three things, but, but once we start trying to put those things into practice it gets a bit tricky. Because sometimes it's easier to cut the odd corner, and after all it doesn't really matter if we do something a bit dodgy because after all, everyone else is doing it too, and sometimes it's amusing to make fun of those that are trying to do the right thing. And sooner or later we might find ourselves saying "No no. There's nothing wrong with my life. I'm generally a good person. There's nothing I need to be forgiven for".

Isn't there?

So what should we do?

Well, the psalmist continues "but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night."

Rather than do what other people tell us to do, and rather than do what other people are doing, the psalmist is telling us we need to do what God wants us to do, and we should be following – delighting in – the law of the Lord.

The law of the Lord isn't like human laws. It's not like the tax act, or Australian consumer law, or the road traffic act. It's not a weighty document filled with clauses and requirements and penalties and all the rest of it. I've known some lawyers who have been really enthusiastic about the law – or at least parts of it, but I don't think anyone really, truly delights in human laws.

But God's law is different from human laws. Look at Psalm 19, it says that "The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul, the decrees of

the Lord are sure...the commandment of the Lord is clear...the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, sweeter are they than honey.”

So the psalmist says that the blessed person, the fortunate person, delights in God’s law and meditates on it day and night. I think here that meditation isn’t sitting crosslegged on the floor and repeating the scriptures over and over again, rather I think what the psalmist is talking about here is about keeping God’s law – what God wants – at the forefront of our minds. In fact, many Jewish people wear tefillin which place the law on their foreheads (“Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads”. – Deuteronomy 11:18).

If we are holding on God’s law at the forefront of our minds, then God’s law, God’s love, God’s desire will influence every important decision we make (whether we know the decision is important, or not!)

The minister and writer Tim Keller puts it like this: “If God is not at the centre of your life, something else is”.

That’s such a simple statement, and in a way, it should be obvious to us. But it is so insightful “If God is not at the centre of your life, something else is”.

We can all come up with things that we might think as being at the centre of other people’s lives – wealth, prestige, security or whatever – but the more difficult thing is to recognise what might be the centre of our own lives.

We all need God at the centre of all our lives, and we need to focus on God.

And the result of that, the result of focusing on what God wants from us, is that we flourish. “That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,” says the Psalmist, “which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither— whatever they do prospers.”

I think that’s a really, really nice image of what it means for a follower of God to prosper. It’s not prospering in the world’s terms, with lots of money and a mansion to live in and a flashy car.

Rather, we’re prospering like the healthy, fruitful tree, growing beside the source of life.

That is the right way to live. And that’s the way that we, as followers of Jesus are hopefully living, with God at the centre of our lives, and always remembering what God wants us to be doing.

But as well as telling us about the right way, Psalm 1 confirms that there’s also a wrong way.

In contrast to the happy, blessed person, who’s following God, thinking on what God desires, and is flourishing in a healthy, fruitful way, the psalmist tells us about the others:

The wicked aren’t like that, he says. Compared to the healthy, fruitful tree of the faithful person, the wicked are like dried up, broken grass. They’re not healthy, they’re not fruitful, and they don’t last – they are like the chaff that the wind blows away.

The wicked – those that don’t follow the ways of God – have no place in God’s kingdom. There will be no sinners in the assembly of the righteous, as the psalmist tells us.

Which is hard. Because God’s kingdom is welcoming and inclusive isn’t it?

Do you remember that old ad on TV where a group of people were having a barbeque, and someone said something like “So, David, what do you do for a living”, and poor David replied “I’m a banker”, and the gathering went quiet.

A banker? That’s not the sort of thing you admit at a friendly gathering.

Fortunately for David, the bank he worked for was perhaps not quite as bad as the others - although I haven’t checked what the banking royal commission had to say about him. But when he told them which bank he worked for, they started talking to him again.

David wasn’t too bad his bank wasn’t too bad. I think we’re all like that – we do the wrong thing from time to time, but in our hearts, we hope we’re not too bad. We hope we’re acceptable to others. Perhaps we even hope we’re acceptable to God?

David was better than those other bankers. David’s bank was better than those other banks. And just like that, hopefully we’re better than those others, whoever those others might be.

We often find ourselves hoping that we’re good enough for God.

But we never are. Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” and John’s first letter tells us “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” (1 John 1:8).

In his goodness and mercy though, God has provided us with the way to make us fit to take our place in his kingdom, even though we’re not ‘good enough’.

We are brought into the kingdom of God, not by anything that we do, not because we’re ‘good enough’ but by what Jesus has done.

Jesus who is good enough for us all. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son...so that whoever believes in him shall not perish (like the wicked) but have eternal life.

We often think of this idea of God's forgiveness is something that is only present in the New Testament, but the idea that God offers forgiveness to those who turn to him in faith is present throughout the scriptures. We see it especially in the book of Psalms.

Look upon my adversity and misery and forgive me all my sin. (Psalm 25:17)

Happy the one whose transgression is forgiven, and whose sin is covered. Happy the one to whom the Lord imputes no guilt, and in whose spirit there is no guile. (Psalm 32:1-2)

Purge me from sin, and I shall be pure; wash me, and I shall be clean indeed. (Psalm 51:7)

As far as the east is from the west, far has God removed our sins from us. (Psalm 103:13)

We see that God's forgiveness is given freely, through Jesus, but it requires us to consciously turn away from the ways of the world and turn to God – to turn away from following the advice of the wicked and following the path that the ungodly tread, to turn away from saying “No no. There's nothing wrong with my life. I'm generally a good person. There's nothing I need to be forgiven for”. To turn away from hoping that we're “good enough” for God...We need to turn away from all that and turn to God, to receive the grace and forgiveness that Jesus brings, to embrace God's commands – to walk in the way of the righteous, to delight in the law of the Lord.

And when we do that, the psalmist tells in the last verse of Psalm 1 that the Lord will watch over us, and ultimately, that the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

So we know that we shouldn't be following the advice of bad people, or following what bad people do, and instead we should be delighting in what God wants us to do, and if we do that we can be assured that we will prosper – maybe not as the world views prosperity – but certainly prosper in the kingdom of God.

We have been reminded in our reading from Matthew's gospel today of the greatest commandments...

[Jesus said], "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matthew 22:37-40)

And that is what the effect of delighting in and meditating on God's law is: Loving God, and loving one another.

Jesus said "All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." – and if you think about all that God calls us to do, if all fits into those two commandments.

In our Old Testament reading we heard from the book of Leviticus (19:15-18a) "'Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favouritism to the great, but judge your neighbour fairly. Do not go about spreading slander among your people. Do not do anything that endangers your neighbour's life... Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbour as yourself.

It's all about acting fairly, respecting our neighbours, looking after our neighbours. Loving our neighbours.

If you look at the ten commandments, they're all about loving God, or about loving each other.

If you're not loving God and not loving each other, who are you loving? Well, there's really only one person left, and that's yourself. You're putting yourself first.

It's pretty easy to do. Just do things for yourself – and maybe those close to you, because, well, they'll be able to do things for you in return.

If God is not at the centre of your life, something else is.

And if something else is in the centre of our lives, we're on the wrong way.

We need to get on to the right way.

We need to examine our hearts and our lives. Are we delighting in and meditating on God's law? Is what God wants at the forefront of our minds? Are we laying down our lives for each other and loving others as ourselves? Is God at the centre of our lives, or is something else?

Are we fruitful members of God's kingdom?

A few years ago, lots of people said "No no. There's nothing wrong with the banking system. It's working well. There's no need for a royal commission".

But look what happened.

And many people continue to say “No no. There’s nothing wrong with my life. I’m generally a good person. There’s nothing I need to be forgiven for”.

As John tells us in his first letter, “Whoever says, “I have come to know him,” but does not obey his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist.” (1 John 2:4)

Following the advice of the wicked is easy, taking the path that generations of people have trodden before us is quick.

Our challenge is to not walk in the path of the ungodly, but to choose the right way.

And ultimately, as the psalmist concludes, we can take heart because “For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.”

Amen.