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*Psalm 1*

*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 judgement,  
   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.***

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There’s a poignant scene in one of the Harry Potter movies when Harry is worried that he’s becoming more and more like Voldemort, the evil villain of the series. Ever since Voldemort failed to murder Harry as a baby, the two have had a special connection that haunts Harry. In a particular moment of fear, Harry confesses the following to his godfather, Sirius:

*"This connection between me and Voldemort... what if the reason for it is that I am becoming more like him? I just feel so angry, all the time. What if after everything that I've been through, something's gone wrong inside me?* ***What if I'm becoming bad?****”*

What if I’m becoming bad? It’s quite the existential question I suppose many of us have pondered from time to time. And Christians have, of course, long wrestled with this. The Apostle Paul gave voice to this struggle in his letter to the Romans:

“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”[[1]](#footnote-2) I don’t know of a single person who wakes up in the morning, looks in the mirror, and says to themselves, “Today, I want to be wicked bad.” And yet, like Paul, we do not do that which we want to do, and we do the very thing we hate.

John Calvin called this “Total Depravity.” And there’s truth to it. But it’s not the whole story, thanks be to God.

The Heidelberg Catechism opens with the following beautiful question:

“What is your only comfort, in life and in death? That I belong - body and soul, in life and in death - not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ…”

The second question, then, has a three part answer:

“How many things must you know that you may live and die in the blessedness of this comfort? Three. First, the greatness of my sin and wretchedness. Second, how I am freed from all my sins and their wretched consequences. Third, what gratitude I owe to God for such redemption.”

This tells us two things that seem to be antithetical to one another but instead live in creative tension with one another.

The first is that A) we are incapable of escaping the reality of sin *and* B) the Christian life affirms that God’s grace is stronger than sin and, therefore, we are capable of making choices that heal instead of hurt.

Which brings us back to the exchange between Harry Potter and Sirius. After anxiously wondering if he is “becoming bad,” Sirius lovingly places his hands on Harry’s shoulders, looks him intently, and says the following:

*“I want you to listen to me very carefully, Harry. You're not a bad person. You're a very good person, who bad things have happened to. Besides, the world isn't split into good people and Death Eaters. We've all got both light and dark inside us.* ***What matters is the part we choose to act on. That's who we really are.****”*

There is perhaps no better segue into Psalm 1. At first glance, it would appear that Psalm 1 is pretty black and white. On the one hand you have the righteous. On the other, the wicked. One path is described as “good,” like a tree firmly planted by an ever-flowing stream. The other, a path that leads to good-for-nothing chaff that blows away in the wind. One delights in the law of God while the other scoffs at it. One prospers while the other perishes.

This either/or dichotomy is a common feature in the Bible’s wisdom literature. But if we take Psalm 1 and pat ourselves on the back for being the “righteous” while pointing the fingers at everyone else for being “wicked,” then I think we’ve woefully failed to receive the wisdom Psalm 1 is communicating. This is, of course, not to say that there aren’t times when we should have a concrete sense of the difference between right and wrong! We must never hide behind nuance as an excuse to remain silent when our neighbors are suffering by wickedness in its many forms!

Rather, Psalm 1 invites us into a lifelong practice of continual moral discernment. A fool thinks they have all the answers; the wise know that they don’t, and such is the source of their wisdom. The conversation that we have within ourselves of moral discernment should be as continuous as the flowing waters by that firmly-planted tree of life. Because even small moral lapses - slight deviations - given time, can take us to places where we never intended to go. The dichotomy of Psalm 1 is challenged by the fact that wicked behavior can too often be the result of good intentions.

Tricia and I recently finished watching the hit TV show “Billions.” Towards the end of its seven-season run, the main villain is a billionaire named Mike Prince who aspires to become President of the United States. He considers himself to be a good man, with an “I alone can fix it” mentality. Because (or despite) of his good intentions, he adopts a “the-ends-justify-the-means” strategy to get himself to the Oval Office. Branding himself as a progressive, eco-friendly, lead-with-strength politician, he arrogantly promises prosperity while ignoring the collateral damage left in his wake. It reminds me of a great line in Taylor Swift’s song “Anti-hero:”

*“Did you hear my covert narcissism I disguise as altruism,  
 Like some kind of congressman? (Tale as old as time)”*

Well, hopefully without giving away too many spoilers, there comes a moment in the show Billions when Mike Prince is finally confronted by the reality of his wickedness, ruthlessness, and being pretty much an all-around lousy human being. He looks to his second-hand man, Scooter, and essentially asks “How did we get here? We wanted to fix the world, not break it!” After a moment, Scooter tells him something like the following:

“We started in a good place. But somewhere along the line we made a slight deviation in course and it didn’t seem like a big deal at the time. But it went unchecked and ended up taking us *far* from where we intended to go.”

Such is the nature of sin, my friends. Sin rarely starts out in diabolical proportion. Instead, some of the greatest sins begin with the best of intentions:

* What begins as simple self-defense turns into genocide…
* What begins as national security turns into waterboarding and other forms of torture…
* What begins as a preacher genuinely wanting to preach the Gospel turns into narcissism…
* What begins as a movement to improve a country turns into a kind of populism that brings out the worst in humanity…

Please, please hear me: the point of this sermon is not to stoke paranoia! I don’t want you to leave this worship space stressing about whether or not your next misstep is going to lead you to become a sociopath or dictator!

**My point, instead, is this: the wisdom of scripture invites us into a *continual* conversation by which we measure our fidelity to God’s joyful intent for Creation.**

I stress the word “continual” because of a particular phrase in verse three of Psalm 1. In it, the wise are likened to “…trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit *in its season*.” A few weeks ago, in the Word This Week, one of our participants shared that these three words jumped out to them. In their interpretation of this passage, it seemed to suggest to them that the foolish are in it for short-term gratification. The wise - or righteous - on the other hand, know that sometimes we plant things knowing that we may have to wait for its season to come.

In other words, the work of the wise is to understand that we’re in this for the long haul! My friend and colleague David Gambrell who, as it turns out, wrote the hymn that we will sing here shortly, has likened Psalm 1 to an extension of the Beatitudes. Like the Beatitudes, Psalm 1 and the rest of the God’s Word is something we return to again, and again, and again, and again, and again, lest we forget our calling to be pursuers of wisdom, righteousness, and justice.

Friends, we do the work of wisdom now, so that the fruits of that labor bloom in its season.

In the moment when you’re confronted with a choice, as Albus Dumbledore put it in Harry Potter, between “what is right and what is easy.”

Again, it all comes down to choices. And Psalm 1 reminds us that we *do* have a choice. And those choices are what make us who we are. And the Church is where we remind ourselves that we are, first and foremost, children of God who are made to love and serve our neighbor. Let that be the choice that we make so that we may be trees firmly planted, deeply rooted, and fruitful in it season.

As Maya Angelou once quipped: “Let choice whisper in your ear and love murmur in your heart. Be ready. Here comes life.”

In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us, God’s children, say: **Amen.**

1. Romans 7:15 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)