

Walking in the way of the righteous

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning. My name is Brian Wallace. It's a delight to be here today. Bishop Alex, thanks for being here, Bishop Jeff.! In this story this morning, in Psalm 1, I'm going to be talking a little bit about some of the values that we have in C4.

So I hope you get to know us a little bit as we talk a little bit about our value of formation. Dallas Willard once says that we're always being formed. The question is, by what?

And as you heard in the scriptures from 1 Timothy in our gospel passage, there is an invitation to pursue the things of God, to run after them and to flee evil. And there's this reminder that we have the law and the prophets, the scriptures, to instruct us, to remind us, and how to avoid calamity. So this is where we're going this morning in Psalm 1.

But would you pray with me as we open up our heads and hearts to the Lord? Lord Jesus, we are glad to be in this space. We're glad to be with you. We need you desperately. We need your teaching. We need your love and your grace, your mercy. Would you speak to our minds that we would understand? Would you speak to our hearts that we could experience your nearness and presence to us? Would you speak to our hands and feet that we would have the courage to live differently based on what you're inviting us to this morning? Have mercy on me as I preach. Lead us, Lord Jesus. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. As we begin, I'd love to just give you a quick overview of the psalm, Psalm 1. I want you to pay attention to the fact that this is actually a work of art. It's a poem, a poem deliberately written. And if you took ninth grade

English class, you would study this poem and understand that there is some structure. It actually has the A-B-B-A pattern of poetry. It begins and ends with a similar statement. The righteous do not stand at the beginning and the wicked will not stand at the end. And this poem has a contrast between the righteous and the ungodly. The blessed and the perishing, those are the bookends of this psalm. The first word is blessed in the ESV, and the last word is perishing. They are the contrast.

[2 : 5 0] Blessed are the righteous, and perishing are the wicked. Now, there's two similes in the middle of this parable. Pay attention to the word like. The blessed are like a tree, planted, firm, established, sure. The wicked are like chaff. They're light. They blow away. They are ephemeral. They are tossed by the winds of our culture. Now, this is a deliberate pattern of poetry writing for the psalmist.

It's the very first psalm. It's an invitation and a warning to all of us who would follow after Jesus and let the psalter be our guide in worship. This is the invitation to worship in the way that God would have us worship. Now, blessed, favor, doesn't mean that we're better than others. It simply means we have the favor of God upon us. Remember, Jesus blew away his crowd when he preached that blessed were the poor, blessed were the sorrowful, blessed were the meek, those who suffer, blessed are those who are mourning and persecuted for righteousness. So it's not blessed that everyone's going to have everything go right in life, that we'll never get hurt or sick or experience pain, but we'll have the favor of God with us all the way through it. We will have relationship with God. His kindness and mercy and goodness will follow us everywhere we go. As a created person with the creator, we'll have relationship with him and have peace. That's what it means to be blessed. And it's interesting to note that this passage first talks about what the blessed or the righteous don't do. The blessed, they don't walk in the counsel of the wicked. They don't stand in the way of sinners. They don't sit in the seat of scoffers. Now pay attention to the movement that the poet is deliberately inviting us to.

They don't walk. They don't stand. They don't sit. They get progressively settled over time. And it reminds me the most of junior high. Do you guys remember junior high? Are you trying to forget junior high? I am trying to forget junior high. It's where we sat at the lunch table and had the biggest influences shape who we were and how we thought or how other people thought of us. They thought we were cool or geeks or whatever it was of the language, a jock or whatever label they would give you based on where you sat. Now the only time I got in trouble in junior high was when I was hanging out with a guy named Wendell Cornell. I went to Edgar Allan Poe Middle School in Annandale, Virginia.

And Wendell was an unruly person, always making fun of the weak and the wounded in our church. And I don't know why we became friends. But the only time I got into tension was when one day Wendell started a food fight with a table next to us. And I was sitting next to Wendell, so I was implicated and got into tension. This is one of the things that happened to us. We start walking in the hallway in school.

We get progressively hanging out with those people. They become part of who we are. They guide us in our direction and who we start thinking that we want to be like. We want to stand in the locker next to them. We find a sense of belonging or connection and capacity to be with them. Oh, look, I'm not alone.

[6 : 29] Oh, look, someone finally likes me. And even though it's not good choices, we end up doing things we normally may not do in order to belong, to fit in. Did you do that in junior high? Did you ever listen to music you didn't really like because your friends listened to that music? Did you wear clothes that you look back on in horror? But you think, that's what all the people were wearing? My kids look at their pictures from their junior high days and say, Dad, why did you let me wear my hair like that? And I'm like, there was no letting, son. That wasn't the fight we were going to have was how you wore your hair.

When we sit with folks that we hang out with, we become more and more like them. We become settled in the patterns of behaviors of the people who are around us. Now, the problem isn't that we befriend unrighteous people. Jesus did that. The problem is that we let the unrighteous form or mold us into the patterns of the way they think and live in the world. We get settled and we begin to not even pay attention to what's being told us to think and believe. So one of the questions I want to ask you this morning is, who do you sit with? And I'm not just asking you who your friends are, but who's forming you? Who's shaping the way you think about the world and reality? What's playing on your television at night? What patterns of life are being normalized by the culture so you would understand a way of being the way that they would understand it? Is it highly sexualized content that says, hey, this is how you can live with your body. There aren't any real consequences. You can do whatever you want whenever you want. Or more, are you sitting day after day, week after week with Fox News or CNN? I'm not against either one of them over the other. They're both equally bad in my opinion.

They are the seat of scoffers. They normalizing, making fun of people whose opinions we may not share. It's evil and it's not good for our hearts to be formed by that way of being. Because most of us, what we're doing is rooted in lies. We're hearing rude things rooted not in the truth of how God wants to think about people who are different than us. So how do we think about people who are different than us? Either from a skin color or a cultural political opinion, folks who are the other.

God would have us think of them as fellow image bearers of the living God, worth the dignity and love and mercy that we have received. As I have been forgiven, I will choose to forgive. As I have been loved, I will choose to love. As I have received goodness, I will choose to give goodness.

Do you hear any of that on CNN? Do you hear any of that on Fox News? I guarantee you don't. So why are we letting that shape the way we think about our neighbor? Why are we letting it shape how we think about our culture, our families, about what's right, what's true, or what's beautiful?

[9 : 51] And if it's not Fox News that's shaping you, what is it in your life? Is it the cultural value for achievement, esteem, exceptionalism, wealth, or comfort? If we're honest, we look ourselves in the mirror, we all have to face the way that our culture has shaped us and not formed us into the image of God, but deformed us away from who God would call us to be. But what should we do instead?

The righteous delight in the law of the Lord. Now, the law here is being used as an overview word for all of Scripture. The way that the Old Testament, the word law is meant for the words of God. The word for God is not just law. It's not just rules, but it's God's self-revelation to human beings.

The self-revelation of God who delights to be in relationship with his image bearers. Every woman, every man created in every place on earth. He longs to be with them, so he makes himself known to them in the words of Scripture. So this is what we do when we read the Scripture and we delight in them. We love them. We receive the God of the word. Just like Adam and Eve would enjoy God in the cool of the evenings in the garden, when we delight, when we read the word, we're delighting in his choice to be in relationship with us. It's an opportunity to delight in the word of God, not in the culture, to be defined by what Jesus would say we are, not by what the culture would say we are. So the righteous pursue Scripture and they meditate on it day and night. Now here the psalmist is using a word, a language from farm community, meditate. This word is the same one that would be used of cows who chew their cud, bringing it back up to suck some more juice out of it day by day by day.

Did anybody grow up around cows? My grandfather was a dairy farmer in upstate Vermont, so I didn't get to spend all my life with cows, but I got to spend lots of summers with cows. I was afraid of them most of the time, but I got used to them being around them. And the thing about cows is they are consistent.

They eat, and then when they're not being fed, they chew their cud. They meditate on it day and night. By the way, my grandfather was an interesting person. He was a card, a sixth grade educated person from a one-room schoolhouse who left to go take care of his family. And he was a funny human being, and he loved the Lord too. When I visited him as a junior high kid, he would always convince me the electric fence wasn't on. If you grab an electric fence, you just feel a pulse. It doesn't really hurt. So he would grab the fence. See, it's not on. Got me every time. But my grandfather loved the Lord, and he and his wife Joyce were the real Christian heritage in my life. When I visited my grandfather, after my grandmother had died, he took me into his little apartment in Lindenville, Vermont, where he had a retirement little village. And in that little apartment, there was an alcove with two chairs in it and a table. And at the table between the chairs was a Bible and a devotional guide. And he says, hey, Brian, I need to ask you a question. He knew I was a pastor by this point. And his question was this. All of our life, Joyce and I would sit in these chairs and read the Bible to each other in the morning. And he handed me his devotional guide. And on one page, there was the word Steve, his name, and the other Joyce. And he goes, my wife's been gone for six years, but when the devotional has her name on it, I hear the Bible in her voice. Is that okay? Of course, I kind of burst into tears and said, yes, grandfather, it's okay to hear the voice of God's word in the voice of the woman that you loved and lived with for 65 years. He meditated on the word. He lived in the word. He soaked in the word.

[14 : 20] It's interesting about my grandfather. He was an uneducated person. He didn't understand all the words that he read in scripture, but he soaked himself in it. He read it in the morning and at tea time, he took tea time every day at three o'clock. And he and all the people that worked on his farm would sit around and he would ask them, what do you think that passage means? How do we live that out today? He would live in it. He'd go back to it. And he would say, Brian, I'm not like you. I'm not educated. I'm just simple. I read the Bible and do whatever it tells me to do every single day.

He simply let the scripture form the way he thought about everyone around him. And he was a remarkable human being who gave dignity and grace to every person he encountered.

Later in life, my grandparents lived most of their time with mentally and physically handicapped people, giving dignity to everyone around them, running homes for people who couldn't take care of themselves. So for instance, it was an interesting place to be as a junior high kid. I walked in the barn when I was in junior high and my grandfather was painting a brand new chair. And I said, what are you doing? He goes, well, Charlie loves to scrape paint off stuff and we've run out of stuff for him to scrape. So he was doing this remarkably silly thing of painting a brand new chair so Charlie could scrape it off. His delight was in the word of God and it gave him capacity to hold the dignity of all people.

And he gave it away to them freely. Again, to me as a junior high kid, it didn't make very much sense. I had to learn what he was doing and out of what word he was living. He didn't walk in the counsel of the wicked. He didn't stand in the way of sinners. He didn't sit in the seat of scoffers. He didn't make fun of these people around him. He loved them because he meditated on the scriptures and let it form how we thought about himself and every person around him. Ultimately, he was a word picture of a tree planted by streams of water. It yielded fruit, the fruit of dignity and love and kindness and generativity.

He was a tree simply planted strong by a stream of those scriptures, a place where its nutrients could be soaked into his very fiber of his being. Now, one of the things that describes about this tree planted by the stream who's soaked in the word of God is that its leaves don't wither. But let me just say a quick word about that. Drought is going to come to every single one of us. Relational drought, emotional drought, employment drought. We'll experience loss, loss of job, loss of friends, loss of feeling uprooted. We'll feel falsely accused all the time in our life, especially the higher you go up in the organizations in which you're serving. You're going to experience drought and difficulty in life. Hard stuff is going to happen to you. It's not evidence that you're not close to God.

[17 : 37] What is evidence that you're close to God is that you not wither. Not wither, not that you don't experience all these things as not hard, but it doesn't destroy the things that are most important, your relationships and your relationship to Jesus. In my 20s, when we experienced hard things, my wife and I were missionaries within a varsity for a long time. And when a hard thing would happen to us, it did cause us to wither a little bit. I would get testy with Lisa or she would get testy with me and the stress and anxiety of how are we going to fix this car? We can't afford to fix our washing machine. But as we've grown older, we begin to realize that we're no longer in this place of being in danger of losing our footing in the world. As I've gotten older, it's been interesting to see now that I'm 62, that I've had this consistent pattern of life come my way. It's no longer a threat to my sense of identity when bad things happen or I get accused. But again, it's zero credit to me.

It's actually credit to the 20-year-old or 30-year-old or 40-year-old or 50-year-old Brian. The younger version of me who said, I don't understand everything, but I'm going to plant myself here in this word. And ultimately, it's no credit to my younger self. It's ultimately credit to the Spirit of God who gave me the desire for the word and made me have the capacity to see that there was no life being offered to me by the world. You see, one of the things you have to understand is that these patterns of life that we pursue to be formed into the image of God, primarily rooting ourselves in our understanding of who we are based on what the Scripture is saying, it's really not our work. It doesn't change us. It's just our daily participation with the Spirit who does. By the way, I have a doctorate in spiritual theology, and this is the best analogy I can give you about how you're formed. Getting formed in the image of Jesus is like getting in the shower.

It's very complicated, isn't it? Very profound. We don't wash ourselves. The water does all of that. We can add some soap to it, and ultimately, we have to choose to get in. And that's what our job is every single day. I'm going to choose to get into the environment where the Spirit of God can have access to my mind and my heart in the way I choose to live my life. He does all the work. I'm simply participating with the Spirit of God who put friends in my life to say, let's read the Bible together, who put a youth worker in my life when I was a kid who said, let me help you understand the gospel, who had older, mature leaders in my life who said, I know you don't get what God's doing to you in your 30s and 40s, but I'm going to help you understand. I'm going to accompany you along the way.

Your decision every day to put yourself in the right environment to be formed is the most you can do. Jesus desires to do the rest, and he will. You make small choices every day to plant yourself in scripture, to meditate on his word, to choose to be with Jesus daily in your lament, in your joy, in your question, in your sorrow, in all of the things that life comes at you. That is what will cause you over time to go from acorn to oak tree, planting yourself in the right environment.

Despite our the hog realities, we can become people who face all of life's realities, including our death with peace, without fear, because we're making small decisions every day to be rooted by the stream and to put ourselves in scripture. Friends, drought is coming, but if you are planted by the stream, you'll have rich source of life that causes you not to be afraid, to be able to face life with hope and love. The tree, the righteous, the blessed are like the tree planted by streams, but not so the wicked.

[22 : 12] The wicked are chaff. Do you know what chaff is? Chaff is that thing that gets stuck in your teeth after you eat popcorn. No one likes it. You just want to spit it out. It's the outer kernel of a grain of wheat or corn or barley or something. In agrarian communities, they would take that kernel and put it on a mat and beat it with sticks. They would usually do that on the top of a hill so that when the wind would come across the hill, they'd throw the grains up and the grains would fall down, not pushed by the wind and the chaff would blow away. See, the chaff is the useless stuff to a farmer. It's not even good enough to be fed to animals. It's only good to be thrown away. The righteous are rooted, stable, the wicked. The wicked, not so. They're tossed back and forth by the winds of culture.

Now, I want you to understand verse five. Therefore, the wicked will not stand in judgment nor sinners in the congregation or the righteous. Now, you can read this in one of two ways. Now, the wicked will not stand with the righteous. So, it's a choice. Remember, the blessed do not choose to stand with the wicked or the scoffer. And the same is true for the wicked. The wicked aren't making the choice to stand with the righteous. It's the reality that they see your good deeds and they choose to have nothing to do with it.

They won't stand with you. They won't see you and make a new choice. Just as the blessed won't walk or stand with the wrong people, the wicked won't be with the wrong people either. Maybe they'll rub off on me.

I feel too guilty, too ashamed, too dirty to be with us. And what I would want the wicked to know is that you're never too dirty for Jesus. Amen? You're never too far away to be welcomed in.

But it's not only that they won't stand with the righteous in life, but in judgment, they can't stand. They can't stand in the righteous. The sinner is making a choice not to come into this building, not to come into the company of the followers of Jesus. The sinner is making a choice not to hang around people who are making good choices. It's a choice. It's always a choice. And it's our choice that we cannot stand to judge of it. It's not because Jesus doesn't want us. It's because we don't want Jesus. Whenever we're in danger of not being with God, it's our decision. Because scripture tells us that God would have all men and women turn and repent and come to him. So it's our choice. It's our choice every single day. The wicked will not stand in judgment. They will not make that choice.

[25 : 07] They will not make a choice to stand in the congregation of the righteous. But the question is, who can be righteous? We have to understand and read this passage in light of all the other passages of scripture. Romans 3, Psalm 14, Psalm 53, all declare the same reality. There is no one righteous. No, not even one. So how can we be talking about the righteous? Standing with judgment, flourishing, never withering. They are the ones who are loved by the Lord. They are a tree that doesn't wither and produces fruit. They're not going to perish. They're not going to die. They're not going to experience judgment. But if we wake up every morning, we go and look ourselves in the mirror and go, am I righteous? No. I have to agree with scripture. No, not even me. Now, I want you to make a distinction between people who sin and people who become sin, ultimately pursue sin.

You are someone you have sinned. And my suspicion is last night, the day before, the other day, there's some things that you did that you're unashamed of, that you're ashamed of. You wouldn't want them projected on the screen of this church to watch you get testy with your kids or have an argument with your spouse or yell at someone in a car who just cut you off. These are things that we are wrestling with. And you might be here this morning going, I need help. I need renewal. I need someone to give me the ability to stop doing the things I don't want to do and give me the capacity to do things I do want to do, referencing Paul. We all need the renewal and new life of Jesus.

In a moment, we're going to come and celebrate the Eucharist. And so, a remembrance of the story of God, that we were the enemies of God, but by his love and mercy, he's making us the righteous.

Not just new, but sons and daughters of the living God. You become righteous not because of your works, but because of the works of Jesus on the cross to remove that sin from you and to throw it away as far as east is from the west. To remember it no more. Not because God is a tottering old fool who can't remember things. No, he remembers. He knows that your sin has consequence. It cost him his very life.

But he takes it and moves it from you. It's no longer your identity. Your new identity is blameless, pure, holy because of the life, the death, the resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

[28 : 04] And all God invites us to do is say yes. Yes to him. Lord, I'm going to choose you every day. Lord, I'm going to invite you to come and make me new every day. I'm going to invite you to convict my heart of sin, but also convict my heart of hope and joy. I'm going to remember the story and believe that it's true that God in his goodness can make me new again day by day by day. Lord Jesus, would you do that work in us? Would you renew us day by day that we could become formed by your word, not by our culture, formed not by our fears, but formed by the truth of your word.

Help us remember the story. Help us live the story in the name of the Father, the Son, Holy Spirit.