

Matthew 5:13-16
(Psalm 1; Ephesians 2:4-7; 4:1-3; 6:10-13)
“The Good Life”

Introduction

If we are honest, we must admit that the Church has never done very well from a position of power. It is, historically, at its best as a counter-cultural minority proclaiming the message and living the values of God’s Kingdom. When there are cultural benefits to being a Christian, the Church fills up with people who are there to fit in culturally, not to follow Christ. The Church loses its distinctive calling to represent the message and values of God’s Kingdom to the kingdoms of this world. So we should never wring our hands as though the advance of God’s Kingdom depended upon the Church’s cultural ascendance. Nor should we see ourselves as another special interest group seeking our place in the political scheme of things.

But what does it look like to be faithful to our unique calling, what does it look like to follow Jesus, in this present age? Jesus spoke these majestically simple words to those who would follow him: “You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:13f). What does that mean? Where does one begin?

It is important to note something here as a caution: The Bible portrays a stark contrast between those who seek to transform themselves from the outside in, and those who seek God’s grace to change them from the inside out. It is the difference between thinking that we can do certain things, and in doing them become the people we ought to be, as opposed to recognizing that we must seek the Lord, asking his Spirit to work within us the changes that only he can make, changes that will then affect everything that we think and say and do. Yet God works through means, usually called “means of grace.” So as we look at the call to a new way of living, remember that this is not a description of mere external changes in behavior, but rather a description of the means God’s Spirit uses to transform us from the inside out. And we must employ these means of grace if we would be transformed.

The Scriptures repeatedly present a stark contrast between two different kinds of life: the good life and the wasted life. The first Psalm is perhaps the best known and most frequently quoted example of such a text, and we will begin our meditation there, seeking to hear the Psalmist as he encourages us toward the good life, first by describing the wasted life and saying, don’t live like that. He describes life in the three postures that mark our waking hours: walking, standing and sitting. His aim is to describe our entire life in all its aspects.

Body

1. The Wasted Life (Psalm 1):

Walking in the counsel of the wicked. Who are your closest companions on your life's journey? Whom have you given permission to speak into your life? The emphasis here is on the people and things that shape our thoughts, desires and actions. Where do you seek answers to your deepest questions of life? Who has your ear? I am not implying that we have nothing to learn from the wisdom of those who do not know Christ, nor am I saying that we should not read novels or go to movies or listen to music that is not written by Christians. Seeking an alternative universe to the one in which we live is not what I mean by Christian counter-culture. We are to be "salt" and "light" right here, permeating our world with the flavor and fragrance of God's Kingdom.

My question concerns your standard or rule, that against which you measure all the rest. What establishes for you the norms that guide your reflection and action? If it is the world in its rebellion against God and his Word and his people, if you are shaped by the mindset of those who mock God's Word, rather than weighing what they say against a different standard than theirs, then you will soon begin to think and live and act according to the patterns of a broken world. How do you evaluate a novel or movie or song? Simply by its art, or also by its message? What is shaping your soul?

Standing in the way of sinners. Here, one has stopped to listen more closely to those opposed to the Lord. We are profoundly influenced by what we spend our time hearing. One begins to act out what one hears and thinks. It is not without cause that a woman worries if her husband spends his time with people who break their marriage vows or are careless about ethics or keeping the law. She knows that it is probably only a matter of time before he begins to stand where they stand, to do what they do, to see things as they see them, and to take their side on the great issues of life.

So, too, parents worry about the crowd their children hang around. Peer pressure is a form of counsel that begins to effect behavior for better or for worse. Once one's behavior begins to reflect the behavior of those who care nothing for God's Word, one is well on the way to the final stage.

Sitting in the seat of scoffers. The emphasis here is on one's identity, the place where one sees his life as settled. No longer is one merely hanging out with those who don't care for the things of God. One is now part of the group. He is not merely walking through life listening to their counsel as he passes by them. He has stopped and stood and listened and begun to do the things they do. He has in fact stood so long that he has forgotten that he was ever on a journey. He has forgotten where he was going and why he was going there.

And so, he sits down in the middle of the God-mockers, the clever jokesters who can never hear an ethical or moral or spiritual statement without poking fun. This is a final, tragic picture: Sitting together, going nowhere, making fun of what is good, true and lovely, and mocking of those who take it seriously.

In the end, this path leads to death: He is “like chaff that the wind drives away” and he will not “stand in the judgment” or “in the congregation of the righteous.” *Everything in our culture pushes us in this direction. Simply reading the Bible as we read any other book is not enough. What sets the blessed life apart?*

2. The Good Life (Psalm 1):

Delighting in the law of the Lord. While others listen to the worldly-wise, the one whose life is being transformed by God’s Spirit delights in the Law of the Lord. The Hebrew word translated here as “law” is the word *Torah*, which means “instruction” or “teaching.” God’s Word is where he gets his counsel. It serves as the standard against which he measures the advice and counsel of others. While some sit and mock, he doesn't just keep dutifully doing it because he thinks it is the thing to do. He *delights* in the *Torah*, the instruction, the counsel, the direction, of the Lord.

Meditating on God’s law day and night. It is unlikely that one would truly, deeply meditate on God’s Word and yet keep walking in the counsel of the wicked, that one would meditate daily on God’s Word and still stand in the way of sinners, that one would meditate on God’s Word and keep sitting in the seat of mockers. In meditation, we “eat” the fruit of our study of God’s Word, which cannot, if it remains mere knowledge, help us to change. It must go deep into our consciousness where it can shape and form us.

The meanings of the two Hebrew words used in the Old Testament for meditation include the ideas of talking quietly to oneself or murmuring to oneself, and of chewing. Those two ideas get, I think, at the heart of the biblical idea of meditation. In prayer, we speak our words to God. But in meditation, we speak God's Word to our hearts. We dwell upon his words, turn them over and over, examining them from different perspectives. We chew them slowly and swallow them, so that they go down into us and become part of the very fiber of our personalities.

In the end, this path leads to life. “He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in season,” “his leaf does not wither. In all he does, he prospers.” *This is to know eternal life, not merely as a future promise, but as a present, lived reality.*

But how do we relate this to our life in Christ? How does this Old Testament psalm describe our New Testament experience?

3. The Fruit of Meditation on God's Word (Ephesians 2,4,6):

What might we come to understand as a result of a life of meditation on God's Word? We have in Paul's writings an illustration of such fruit. Whether he consciously had Psalm 1 in mind, in Ephesians, Paul actually built his description of salvation and its effect on the believer's life around the same three postures of sitting, walking and standing, as did the Psalmist, in order to show the Christian life in its completeness.

Sitting with Christ (2:6). Paul begins with the final, settled posture of one who understands his identity. Where is your life? Where are you at rest? Not only are we promised that those who overcome will sit with Christ on his throne (Revelation 3:21), but Paul tells us here that, in raising us up from bondage to death and joining us to Christ, God has in effect already seated us with Christ in the heavenlies. Either that is sheer and utter nonsense, or it changes our perspective about everything. What could be a more fruitful topic of meditation than that?

Walking in a worthy manner (4:1). As a result of such great salvation, Paul calls believers to "walk worthy of the calling" we have received in Christ. Here we are invited to meditate on the various ways that we are gifted and called within Christ's body to help each other grow to maturity in Christ, and then to begin to put the fruit of meditation into action. Our salvation is not merely past forgiveness and future hope: it calls us to life and ministry now.

Standing against the devil's schemes (6:11). Because we have an enemy who still attacks us through the world around us and through our own flesh, Paul ends his letter with a description of spiritual warfare, and repeatedly calls on us to stand against the devil's schemes. Rather than standing with God's enemies, those the Psalmist describes succinctly as sinners, we are to stand as God's own children, wearing "the whole armor of God." In naming the various pieces of armor that we have been given, Paul again creatively recounts the riches of salvation that are ours in Christ Jesus.

Conclusion

As he wrote, Paul mined a rich deposit of biblical treasure laid up in his heart through years of delighting in God's law and meditating on it day and night. So, too, the Psalmist, who called us to live a good and blessed life shaped by God's Word, was himself shaped and molded by a lifetime of meditation on the *Torah*. Such lives shine God's light into a darkened world. Such lives flavor and preserve from rot people, communities, cities and cultures, even as salt preserves and flavors food. *Such a life is yours in Christ Jesus*, who said, "You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world... let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Mat 5:13f).

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