

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,  
by Pastor David Fischler, on Sunday, July 27, 2014**

**THE TWO WAYS**

**Psalm 1:1-6**

It is one of the unchallengeable truisms of the modern world that there are many ways to God. We're all walking the same path, except it's not the same path. And we're all looking to get to the same place, except it's not the same place. Some of us, as the hymn says, are marching to Zion. Some of us are marching to Mecca. Some are marching to the Ganges or to Lhasa in Tibet. Some of us are simply at home with our legs folded and our hands on our knees chanting, "Ommmm, Ommmm, Ommmm... I think I'll have a BLT for lunch." Some of us are making it up as we go along and some of us are picking and choosing and taking a little from this and a little from that and making our own path through an otherwise impenetrable woods. That is the modern truism. And that is as wrong as it can be!

It may be sad for the world and it may be rejected by the world, unfortunately it's even rejected by many people within the church of God, but it is the case that Scripture teaches unequivocally, consistently and truthfully that there are in fact only two ways. As Jesus put it, there is the narrow way that leads to salvation and there is the broad way that leads to destruction. Those two ways are described, albeit in less detail perhaps than the rest of Scripture, but nevertheless in a way that makes perfectly clear that God considers there to be just those two ways in the first Psalm. I would ask you to turn to it and hear in it not just a single psalm but actually hear in it an introduction to one of the themes of the Book of Psalms. I kind of wonder. There's no narrative, there's no story told in Psalms the way there might be in a novel or a history book. But there are themes in Psalms, themes that flow like a river throughout the 150 chapters of this book and are seen over and over and over again in the same way that those same themes are seen over and over and over again in our hymnal.

You'll remember that the Book of Psalms was Israel's hymnal and originally these poems were not read, but sung. It's still the case that we sing some of them today. We sang a setting of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm on Saturday at Jamile's funeral. This morning I believe the first hymn was based at least in part on a verse from Psalm 149. These psalms were hymns but they were also, like our hymnal is, meant to teach us God's truth, and to do so, unlike our hymnal, in a way that is infallible and completely trustworthy. So what we have here is not one man's religious opinion that can be set against the modern age's belief that in fact there are many different ways to God or to perdition as you choose. Rather what we get here is God's truth and it begins this way: "Blessed is the man..." The first way is the way of righteousness and it is the way of favor with God. Verses 1-3 expound that. But first, even before explaining the way of the righteous, verse 1 makes clear that there is another way, an opposite way that is contrary to the way of blessing. Blessed is the man, we're told, favored by God, who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers.

Now another thing that you may already know about Psalms is that it has a tendency to repeat itself. These were originally not written. They were handed down orally and so in order for people to remember what they contained, there was a lot of duplication. And in the second, third and fourth phrases of verse 1 what we have is a repetition. But it's not a complete repetition. There is a difference. Note that "Blessed is the man who does not walk, or stand, or sit in the way of wickedness." Walk, stand or sit. The blessed man doesn't conform to the world views or the counsel of those who reject God. He doesn't stand or act in the ways of those who reject God. He doesn't make judgments, and that's what the "sitting" refers to, he does not sit in the seat of judgment that is occupied by those who reject God. He doesn't stand, he doesn't sit, he doesn't walk. Instead what we see here is a progression that suggests a process of becoming more and more comfortable with ungodliness. It's comfortable to walk. It's perhaps more comfortable to stand, at least if you don't do it for too long. And it's even more comfortable to sit. I can testify to that. I did nothing but that for six days last weekend. Actually it seemed more like 60 days. All I did was sit. I barely moved and boy, did it feel good, because every time I moved it was agony. I sat. And at that point I was most comfortable. Well, the way of wickedness is like that as well. You get more and more comfortable and more and more settled with ungodliness according to the psalmist. But the way of the righteous is not at all like that.

Verse 2: "His delight is in the law of the Lord." And so he starts with an attitude. What does he delight in? Well, he delights in something that we've been told for much of our lives, depending upon how long we've been Christians, he delights in something we've been told we don't have to pay any attention to anymore. Right? We're Christians, we're no longer under the law, we can ignore it if we want. So if you don't want to study, for instance, the Book of Leviticus, no big deal. It's a bunch of stuff that doesn't apply to us anyway, right? No. The reference to the law of the Lord here is not simply an Old Testament leftover. Because the law, in fact, does still have pertinence for us. We are not judged, our salvation does not hang on whether we obey the law or not. But that doesn't mean that it doesn't have marvelous guidance for the way we live our lives. That doesn't mean that we have to start keeping kosher and after a childhood of being acquainted at least at times with relatives who ate kosher food, you'll be glad of that. It doesn't mean that we have to keep the Sabbath in a legalistic way. It certainly doesn't mean that we have to start sacrificing animals here in the Temple of God. The ceremonial law and the law of cleanliness have indeed been laid aside. But the moral law still very much applies to us. So we can't go about saying, "Well, you know, we're no longer under the moral law, so if I want to commit adultery it's no big deal because after all the Ten Commandments no longer apply to us, right?" Now the modern world might like to think that, but we know better, because the New Testament makes clear to us that the moral law does in fact apply. So the delight that the blessed man has in the law of the Lord is every bit as important for us as it would have been for someone living before the time of Christ.

He starts with an attitude – delight. And then in the second phrase in verse 2 he moves to an action. He meditates day and night. He meditates day and night on His law. The word "meditate" there comes from the Hebrew word "*hagah*" and it involves speaking

for the purpose of remembering. Think about that for a second. Speaking for the purpose of remembering. How do you go about remembering someone's telephone number? I don't know about you, but the way I do it is I say, "703-580-9198, 703-580-9198, 703-580-9198..." The way that many people remember things is by speaking them aloud. Because while it's true that you can memorize something just by reading it, by speaking it you add an extra sense and by doing that you increase, you multiply the effect on your memory.

Back when I was in college, I did public speaking, competitively. College public speaking involves the delivery of speeches in a variety of forms. There were speeches that were meant to be persuasive; there were speeches that were meant to be informative and not take a position on something, just present information; there were speeches that were supposed to be like eulogies, in honor of someone; there were speeches that were meant to be funny (I was really bad at those but I tried anyway); there was even a speech that was about other speeches. It was called *rhetorical criticism* and in it you presented an analysis of somebody else's speech. This is what's called "nerd speech" and I was good at that. Anyway, these speeches were supposed to be eight minutes long and in those days you didn't have a word processor, you had a typewriter, so I typed them out. They were about four pages long, double-spaced, and those four double-spaced pages were then something that I committed to memory. How did I do that? I did that by repeatedly reading them out loud, over and over and over again. I went paragraph by paragraph. I typically wrote them in the summer before the school year started. It was along about mid-July. And over the next month I did this over and over and over again and the result was that by the time the school year started I had memorized forty minutes of speech. No teleprompters allowed. If I forgot something in the middle my goose was cooked. I'd have to just start making stuff up and certainly it wouldn't make any sense. But as long as I stuck to what I had committed to memory by speaking it, I'd do okay. Well that's what *hagah* is about. Meditation is reading this aloud to yourself. Or, alternatively, if you didn't have access to the printed word, which most people wouldn't, you would commit it to memory by listening to someone else and repeating after them. And as you repeated after them you would, over time, gradually commit it to memory. And then, having committed it to memory, you would continue to repeat it out loud so that eventually it would become completely a part of who you were. I didn't do that with those speeches in college. Once the school year ended I tried desperately to forget them. There are at least a couple of them that I'm embarrassed about, that I ever even wrote them they were so bad. I managed to fool lots of judges in the course of my college speaking career. But I look back now and I think goodness, how could I have possibly written that? But I can only say that because I remember the general subject. I don't remember the details of those speeches at all, because I didn't continue to meditate on them day and night the way the psalmist does with God's law.

So he starts with attitude – he delights in the law of the Lord. He moves to action – meditation, speaking out loud. Joshua chapter 1, verse 8, makes clear that what I'm saying is true. He says that, "This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night." That's what I'm talking about. And Jesus speaks about that, too. In John, chapter 8, verse 31-32, He says that His followers will be

abiding in His word that we might know it and that it might make us free. And the only way, for the most part, in those days that you could know it was simply by repeating it to yourself over and over.

How many of you have ever deliberately memorized any Scripture? Okay. A lot of you have done that. And I hope the result of that is that under the proper circumstances you can call that to mind just like that. Things will just come to you and you'll think, oh, of course. An example of that happened just this week. I was contemplating what Scripture to use at the memorial service yesterday. As I spoke to Jamile's family I got a better and better picture of who she was and I didn't have to go looking in the Concordance. I didn't have to go paging through saying, what do I use, what do I use? It just jumped out at me. Proverbs 31. That's exactly what she sounds like. Everybody here know what Proverbs 31 is? Yes. The virtuous woman. I bet you haven't always known that. And guess what, I didn't know that when I was five, either. I didn't know that when I was eighteen. I only learned that one later. But because I learned it, it came to mind when I needed it. And that's what the *blessed* man, the man who walks in the way of the Lord, does.

Now the blessed man is further likened, in verse 3, to a tree. This is better than a sheep, I think. We're likened to all kinds of stuff in Scripture and a lot of them, if you didn't know what it was getting at, would not sound flattering. You know sheep are really dumb and the idea that we're called sheep, well, some people might be offended by that. Here we're called a tree and we are likened to a tree that is planted by streams of water which yields its fruit in season. So we're not just likened to any tree. We're likened to a tree that bears fruit, a tree that does not wither, a tree that bears its fruit in season, a tree that will be fruitful in what he or she does for the Kingdom that will not falter when things get tough, whose leaf does not wither, but who instead will prosper. Please don't be confused by the word "prosper." He does not mean that the one who is planted by streams of water is going to be rich, your bank account overflows. Isn't that in Psalm 23? No. The prosperity that is being referred to here is not necessarily the material kind. Rather it's the kind that bears fruit for the Kingdom of God. So that's the picture we get of the way of the blessed man. A man who starts with an attitude, who moves to action and who, as his faith becomes real and visible in the world, as it becomes more and more rooted in the Word of God, it bears more and more fruit for the Kingdom. That's the first way.

The second way is almost as important if only because of the contrast it provides. In verses 4 and 5 we're told the way of the wicked: "Not so the wicked," verse 4 says. No so with them. They are not rooted in God's Word. They are like chaff that the wind blows away. In contrast to the blessed man who yields fruit and doesn't wither, the wicked blow away with the wind. They're worthless. They're like chaff that's blown away. It's like the house that's built on sand that Jesus talks about in the Sermon on the Mount. He says that it's ruined because it has no solid foundation and so the first storm that comes along just blows it away. You'd think it was built on the North Carolina Outer Banks. The house just collapses. That of course is, interestingly enough, a characteristic of modern humanity and its belief that there are many ways. At the first

sign of trouble, the one who says there are many ways to God has a tendency to collapse and say in fact there are no ways, no ways to God if God is even real. Whatever faith might have been there blows away when trouble comes.

The problem with this lack of roots, this lack of rootedness, is because of it the wicked have no future and they have a terrible present. “Therefore the wicked,” verse 5 says “will not stand in the judgment nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.” In the judgment they will be found wanting. In the judgment God will say – and we’ll use for the sake of simplicity the old Evangelism Explosion question – when we appear before God’s seat of judgment, “Why should I let you into My heaven?” Our answer is, “Well, because I helped little old ladies across the street and I didn’t kick dogs and yeah, there was that problem with the IRS, but you know I gave to charity and I was...” And God says, “What is this? This is a pile of nothing here. This is chaff. It’s worthless. You may think that you did some good things in the course of your life. Good for you. In no way did you meet the standard that I set up for my people. And so for you there is no standing in the judgment.”

Unfortunately it’s not just the future that’s a problem. It’s also the present. “Nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.” Now please take note, he is not saying here that people who are walking the way of the wicked will therefore be unhappy and miserable and poor and sick and just generally have a terrible time in life. He is not saying that. It may well be that those who walk the way of the wicked are numbered among the powerful in this world, among the rich of this world. They may be people of great social standing to whom others look as oracles and prophets. They may be thought wise. They may be educated. And they may be deliriously happy. But they will not stand in the assembly of the righteous. In the house of God all of their riches and all of their power and all of their social standing and all of their degrees are as nothing. It’s not to say that they’re bad, per se, but it is to say that here they don’t count for anything.

We have folks here who have struggled, who knows, maybe for their whole lives, with depression. Is that a sign that God doesn’t love them? We have folks here who were born with genetic disabilities. Does that mean that God’s judgment is upon them and He hates them? We have people here who have endured long stretches of unemployment. Does that mean that God was punishing them for some sin in their lives? No, no and no. Because that’s not what standing in the assembly of the righteous is about. Standing in the assembly of the righteous is about walking faithfully with our God. And if the world can’t deal with that, or if our genes are not good with that, or if our health is not perfect, well, that’s simply the result of living in a fallen world, isn’t it? But it’s not a sign that we do not stand in the assembly of the righteous. It is instead the way of the world. Standing in the assembly of the righteous is something else altogether and something completely different from the way of the wicked.

One writer put it this way, summing up what this is about. He says, “The wicked experience bitter hopelessness before future judgment and alienation from believers in the present.” Alienation from believers in the present. Your typical atheist probably wouldn’t be comfortable here, unless they were of an incredibly open mind and willing to

just simply get to know folks here. That would be wonderful. We would be open to any atheist coming in and being part of this community, but things would not stay that way if they were to remain. The deepest joys of security and community are missing as they live in the depth of their own egos separated from God and from God's people.

Once again, that's not saying that they're going to live miserably. It is to say that ultimately there are going to be problems that they're not going to be able to overcome. There are things that are going to happen. Let's simply be ultimate here. There's a judgment that they will one day stand before and at that point all their riches, all their power, all their education will not save them. And the reason why is in verse 6: "For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish." All of our hope, all of our hope is in the Lord. It's not in us. It's in the stuff that we do. It's not in the stuff that we have. It's not who we know. It's not the resources we can call on, except in Him. The way of faith and of obedience that we walk is known to the Lord because He watches over us. There's nothing that we do that He doesn't see. The word for "know" here, in some translations it's "the Lord *knows* the way of the righteous," the word there is "yada." It means to have an intimate relationship with. Nothing that we can do. No place that we can run, no place that we can hide. He knows. He knows which way we're walking and He puts us on that path and He keeps us on that path. The form of that word that's used is one that indicates not only does He know, but that He *keeps on* knowing. That His eye is always on us. And that even at times when we don't have a clue, He does. Martin Luther once said, "The way I do not know, well do I know my Guide." Even when we can't see what the path is supposed to look like, if we're following the right Guide, namely Jesus Christ, then we'll continue on that path. The wicked, those who scorn God and His Word, they will perish. It's interesting because the root for the Hebrew word that's used for "perish" means "to wander." It doesn't mean annihilation. It means to go off on your own path, to walk your own way, to sit and meditate and chant, "Ommmm, Ommm," and think that you're walking the right way.

So this psalm points us, in fact, to a life of total dependence on God and His Word. The world tells us there are multiple ways. If this is the one that floats your boat, wonderful. If something else, any one of a thousand ways does, that's great, too. But we, my friends, we know better. Not because we're smart, not because we figured it out on our own, but because God Himself has told us this is the way and the truth and the life in Christ our Lord.