

Blissfully Blessed

Some time ago I preached on the sin of comparison, at least as comparison leads to sinful attitudes and behaviour with regards to our relationship with our Lord and others around us. The kind of comparison we looked at mostly involves the comparisons that occur among believers and the specific trying circumstances that the Lord has ‘tailor-made’ for their lives, whether financial, health, interpersonal, or whatever it may be. These are indeed times that we are tempted to be like Peter in John 21 who dared to ask the Lord about John, “what about this man Lord?”. But these are not the only times we can be tempted to do so.

The world around us is filled with people who, from the outside looking in, seem to be smooth sailors in whatever they do. We often see this when we scan the pages of social platforms, observing a world of success, achievement, satisfaction, and happiness. We see happy faces glaring at us. These appear to be people who, as far as the photo reveals, are doing well, and seem to have it ‘together’ in life. They will share every ‘next big thing’ for others to see and approve of by giving the much coveted “like” on their page. Hours upon hours are invested on these platforms as the internet gets pumped with more and more information. This is the world where unreality is often mistaken for reality. Mildly stated, it’s simply not the world that your great-grandmother had to deal with.

Sure, the tabloids were around for a long time, but now-a-days a world of useless information about people’s lives is only a click away. We see their successes and achievements and it tempts us to want to be like them, and even model them in some way or another. We give in to the allure of the photoshopped images that roll off the screen unhindered and never ending, and we start to think “they have the life.”

That’s what we think...

That is certainly the impression created on the social platforms of the world, be it Facebook, Instagram, the blogosphere, or whatever other sources there may be in a culture that is infatuated with ‘celebritism.’

Although I do agree that there are practical and godly reasons in which some social platforms can be maintained, leading to the effective communication of the Christian message or being able to keep up with relatives who have emigrated. However, Christians of all people should know better than to have their faces anchored on such platforms but rather to have their “faces” anchored in the “Book,” the “Good Book” that is. Apart from the obvious reasons for my exhortation, like time stewardship, money, sexual temptation (especially men), emotional temptation (especially women), comes the more subtle temptation — envy.

Envy can be a killer. And here’s the big problem with envying someone who is unsaved: Unless they repent of their sins and believe in the Lord Jesus, they are still seen as guilty for their sins before a holy

God, thus facing eternal damnation. That's what makes it so ridiculous to be infatuated by any unbeliever's life, no matter if this person is a celebrity, family member, acquaintance, colleague or whoever. The very antithesis between your life and the unbelieving person, "fill-in-the-blank," is that your sins are no longer held against you (Rom. 8:1) but theirs are. I don't mean this in the sense that we sneer at them as the right response, but I do mean that we cannot allow our attitudes, moods, and actions to be affected by what they do, or what they think about something. It doesn't really matter what Oprah Winfrey (TV is one more medium that can lead to this) has to say about forgiveness, for instance, because she doesn't understand the basics of being forgiven of her most nagging problem, her sin. Sure, unbelievers can teach us things about the world, and we can see how even they have been gifted by God in many ways, but when it leads us to the point of "hero worshipping" them things get problematic.

The book of Proverbs in broad strokes shows the antithesis between wisdom and folly, or between the wise and the fool. And might I add that the fool is considered as such because of his unwillingness to worship God and deny himself the sinful pleasures of this world (1 Jn. 2:15-16).

We are for instance told that "...the way of a fool is right in his own eyes" (Prov. 12:15). In other words, as it involves the clear revelation of Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2) the fool keeps on leaning on his own ways and his own convictions. In addition, a fool often gives full vent to his "spirit" (Prov. 29:11). In other words, a fool will broadcast his foolishness about life and reality, and for our purposes, will often use social platforms to do this.

The Psalms are no different. Repeatedly the righteous becomes juxtaposed to the "wicked," or the "fool" who "says in his heart, "There is no God" (Ps. 14:1). This must not be understood as an intellectual reference. Rather when this contrast is drawn in scripture between the saved and the unsaved, the reason for their foolishness or wickedness involves their moral unwillingness to worship God.

There really is no getting around it. In the end there is only so much that can be said about the unbeliever. I have personally been in a handful of situations where I have been asked to conduct the funeral of a deceased person did not die in Christ (as far as we I could tell by looking at their life) but in their sins. It's not a nice situation to be in for obvious reasons. The worst thing I could do is make stuff up for the sake of a eulogy. And by this I don't mean to be unfeeling. Of course, every funeral goes along with a sense of loss and sadness. However, the reality stands that the person probably died in their sins and is already facing the consequences for their unbelief. So, for the lack of being able to extol the virtues of any person whose life is a failure based on their unwillingness to acknowledge the Saviour, "we preach Christ..." (1 Cor. 1:23), and we preach him convincingly...Sure you comfort people's grieving hearts, that's a given, but you don't give them false assurance. You give them the only thing that ultimately helps — the gospel.

Perhaps this puts an inordinate level of admiration for unbelievers in the right perspective. Again, there are things that we can learn from them such as their contributions to science, biology, finance, or

whatever. Biblically we are also instructed to love them with the love of Christ and show them basic courtesy (Lk. 10:25-37). Like us, they have been created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). But our ultimate attitude toward them, and how we allow this to affect our attitude about ourselves, is limited by their response to the cross of Christ. Our regard of them should be limited by their seeing the cross, either as “a stumbling block” or as “folly” (1 Cor. 1:23b).

So, we can only expect Scripture to continually warn against, and denounce such folly. We can simultaneously expect the Lord to encourage and praise those who have already made the right decision by having chosen to serve Him. And this is exactly what meets us in Scripture. In fact, the very first Psalm in the record of the Psalms deals with the antithesis between the saved and the unsaved. The Psalm can be divided into two main parts, “the way of the righteous” (Ps. 1:1-3) and the “way of the wicked (Ps. 1:4-6).” I am convinced that this Psalm puts all these temptations — that tempt us to make more of unbelievers than what we really should — in its right perspective because of the sharp contrast it paints between the righteous and the unrighteous. So, here is the Psalm. A cursory reading should reveal this contrast. However, to assist I have italicised those words and phrases that make this obvious.

“¹ *Blessed* is the man

who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,

nor stands in the way of sinners,

nor sits in the seat of scoffers.

² but his delight is in the law of the Lord,

and on his law he meditates day and night.

³ He is *like a tree*

planted by streams of water that yields its *fruit* in its season,

and *its leaf does not wither*.

In all that he does, *he prospers*.

⁴ *The wicked are not so,*

but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

⁵ Therefore *the wicked will not stand in the judgment,*

nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;

⁶ for *the Lord knows the way of the righteous,*

but *the way of the wicked will perish.*”

The evidence is quite compelling. This Psalm draws a sharp distinction between those who are seen by God as righteous and those who are not.

1. The Righteous

Righteousness is a reality that God alone can establish as no one can boast about their salvation, since it is by grace that anybody can be saved to begin with (Eph. 2:8-9). However, once saved the redeemed person starts to live in a way that is pleasing to God. Their behaviour starts to be transformed (Rom. 12:1-2), their outlook on life gets altered and informed by a biblical outlook. Their desires start to change and so what the Lord desires is what they will inevitably begin to desire. In all, life cannot be the same ever again. People like these will not continue to walk “in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand “in the way of sinners,” nor sit “in the seat of scoffers...” (v. 1). It is simply impossible for them to be the same. In the same breath, what the psalmist means to convey is that it is in a very active sense that the righteous must choose to give expression to these behaviours.

It is not simply a question of lying back and waiting for it to happen automatically. Rather, it is a righteous behaviour that involves where the righteous treads, pauses, and remains (“walk,” “stands,” and “sits”).

I like the way C.H Spurgeon explained it in his exposition of Psalm 1. Commenting on the attitude or the behaviour of the righteous, he said:

“His company is of a choicer sort than it was. Although a sinner himself, he is now a blood-washed sinner, quickened by the Holy Spirit, and renewed in heart. Standing by the rich grace of God in the congregation of the righteous, he dares not herd with the multitude that do evil...He finds no rest in the atheist’s scoffing’s. Let others make a mock of sin, of eternity, of hell and heaven, and of the Eternal God; this man has learned better philosophy than that of the infidel, and has too much sense of God’s presence to endure to hear his name blasphemed. The seat of the scorner may be very lofty, but it is very near to the gate of hell; let us flee from it, for it shall soon be empty, and destruction shall swallow up the man who sits therein.”

Very actively the righteous will continue this way until his dying day, and this is inseparable from a fear of God (not man) and a reverence for his Word:

“...his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night” (v. 2).

The picture that we get here is of a man who stands upright while reading the Scriptures aloud (in this context, the Law of Moses), as if to audibly meditate on the words that he is reading. In the ancient Near East people hardly ever read anything silently. That is more common of the west. Really then what the psalmist wishes to convey is a man who verbally and audibly reads the words of the Law of God and meditates on it, as if to treat them as the rule of his life.

To summarise, the righteous can be characterised by their yearning to follow the law of God. They watch where they walk. This is so fitting for us today where temptation lurks around every corner (1 Pet. 5:8). Where we walk will greatly determine the level of temptation we allow ourselves to be

exposed to. The same is true when we choose to turn our attention to something other than what we had just been busy with (this can often occur with social media) and before you know it you have given up something righteous for something unrighteous. Before you know it you could be sitting in the seat of scoffers where God is not honoured. The picture we get here is that this can be a gradual process of temptation and the child of God must be ever vigilant to see temptation in the distance.

I remember a Prof I had in seminary who would tell us that whenever they approach a sketchy billboard, he would tell his boys “Okay boys let’s all look to the left,” or “let’s all look to the right,”. This was my Prof’s way to guard his sons from the filth that is launched at us daily. But the point is we have to start somewhere, because if you can look, then you can be tempted to stand still, and if you can stand still, then you can be tempted to lodge there. Moms and dads can do the same for daughters in other ways, but we can all do that for each other in different ways. If we do this, we are taking this psalm seriously.

2. The Unrighteous

The unrighteous is not like this at all. They do not have a basic yearning to please the Lord and to live in light of His Lordship over their lives. Rather their end is the end of dead plants — they end up like chaff being blown by the wind wherever it wants.

“⁴...but are like chaff that the wind drives away. ⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous...” (v. 4-5).

To be succinct, the end of the wicked is death, eternal death. The picture that the psalmist employs is quite vivid. Chaff is nothing other than dead plants. It used to be something, or at least used to have the resemblance of something useful, but then it soon became obvious that there was no life in it to begin with because it soon withered and was carried with the wind. Chaff is unusable. It is dead and it’s remains gets scattered everywhere the wind wishes to blow.

Scripture elsewhere puts it even more vividly. The Lord Jesus himself on numerous occasions warned the unbeliever about his end unless he chooses to repent. One parable in particular makes this plain, the one of Lazarus and the rich man found in Luke 16:19-31. What was obvious from our Lord’s detailing of the fate that awaited the rich man who did not repent of his sin during his lifetime, is that he finally ended up in hell. This became clear through his communication with Abraham. Abraham finally informs him that “none may cross from there to us” (Lk. 16:26). In other words, once in hell, there is no way to get out.

This is the sad fate that awaits the unbeliever or the unrighteous. This is why the wicked will not stand in the day of judgment and cannot be in the company of the righteous. Rather, the “way of the wicked will perish” (v. 6). They will be forever cast away and in torment. This is indeed a sobering thought, one that should lead us to more and more thankfulness for God’s grace in our lives.

3. The Verdict

Here's the final verdict then. The righteous is the one that God calls "Blessed" (v.1). He is the one that is seen as eternally secure and whose life has true meaning. Why? Because he has placed his trust in the one true God. Nothing else matters unless this one thing is right. For this one reason, God calls such a person "blessed."

The psalmist even employs a beautiful picture to illustrate his prosperity (spiritually speaking):

"He is like a tree, planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers."

The believer is someone who can be compared to a massive fruit bearing tree that has the benefit of being planted right next to a river. I have personally seen in the dead of summer what a difference it can make to something that can easily be uprooted if it grows near a river. While everything else seems to be dying, everything on the riverbanks flourishes because of the nearness, availability, and abundance of life-giving water.

This is what it means to be blessed. David has said it differently elsewhere, but it comes down to the same:

¹ Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. ² Blessed is the man against whom the Lord counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit" (Ps 32:1-2).

This describes us, the *redeemed*. The Lord, in his grace, has forgiven us of all our trespasses against him. Even in our weakest hours, this applies to us. Dare I say, even during our worst hours. We are the blessed ones.

The wicked on the other hand does not enjoy this recognition. They do not enjoy this kind of life-giving relationship. Unless they turn to the Lord and from their sins, their lives can be seen as one massive failure, notwithstanding their temporary successes in this life.

This is exactly how we should see it. The way the world is wired now it's easy to get caught up in all the hype of what people do, and where they go, and what they achieve. Instead of envying them in some way or another, let us rather be concerned for their souls.

Ultimately, there are only two categories of people in the world: Those who are in the right with God, and those who are not — those who honour God through their lives, and those who do not.

Everything else may vary.