# Two ways

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## Psalm 1

1Happy 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;

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

and on his law they meditate day and night.

3 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.

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 watches over the way of the righteous,

but the way of the wicked will perish. [[1]](#footnote-1)

Bess and Jane and Jane’s friend Claire went kayaking Friday. I hear they had a great time—though Bess and Claire got sunburns and Jane’s arms ache. As they kayaked, they saw a lot of water fowl and other wildlife, including a swimming yellow snake. They also saw many “trees planted by streams of water,” trees that grew strong and well in the riparian ecology, getting their liquids easily, living and dying within their particular pockets of the world; they were made for the water, and they thrived, and they were beautiful. Bess has been particularly bothered by allergies this summer—usually, she has some allergic reactions in late winter to budding trees, but this year, her allergies have kept on going. Friday’s trip was no different—the pollen or spores or whatever were floating in the air, and her body was doing whatever it could to repel and attack these. They were not beautiful things in Bess’s eyes (and nose). They don’t belong there; they are out of sorts.

The Psalmist tells basically the same story. Some people are like trees by the water. You can see their beauty, you can see how they fit well into the life they lead. Some people are like chaff, the stuff left over when you’re done harvesting your grains. You can see their uselessness, and how they get into the way. Some people are good, some people are bad. The point of this psalm, to quote Bess from another context, “It’s good to be good and bad to be bad; don’t be a fool.”

It’s important to say right away that this psalm isn’t calling us to divide the world up into the good people and the bad people, although this is something we will naturally want to do. Our natural inclination is to mark these divisions out. Almost inevitably, the good people will turn out to be people a lot like us, people with whom we are comfortable. Almost inevitably, the bad people will turn out to be people unlike us. Maybe we’re Republicans, and they’re Democrats. Maybe we’re young and smart and cool, and they’re old and slow and uncool. Maybe we’re not gay, and they are; maybe we’re gay, and they’re not as affirming as we’d like. Maybe we like Sacred Harp music, and they like *anything* else. We could go on all day with this; like attracts like, and since “wisdom is justified by her children,” we’ll come up with really good rationales why we’re the good guys and they’re not.

The point of this psalm is not to help us divide the world into the good people and the bad people. But what is the point? The point is to show us how to be happy, to be blessed by giving us both negative and positive examples.

And we all want to be happy, right? So we should pay attention to its teaching.

Let’s start, as the Psalmist does, by listing some of the things that don’t make us happy, or that make us unhappy.

First, we shouldn’t listen to the advice of unhappy, wicked, or stupid people. There is a lot of advice being offered in the world. In fact, the Psalmist is giving us advice right now, and I’m passing it on! And, since I’m often unhappy, wicked, and stupid, you need to wake up and pay attention and filter out my bad advice.

Second, we shouldn’t go down paths that we know are wrong. How many stories do we need to read or watch about women continuing to love men who abuse them before we just stop doing that? (I know it’s more complicated than that). But let me ask you, are there ways of behavior that you feel powerless to avoid? This psalm reminds us that until we find some way out of these behaviors, we will not find a sense of happiness. Yesterday, I read the testimony[[2]](#footnote-2) of Scott Lybrand, who grew up in a strict Church of Christ household and church, but who later, partly because of the rejection and disgrace he experienced there, became an alcoholic who drove drunk, loss awareness for days, and, who finally understood that unless he did something, he was going to die. He received a great moment of grace when a fellow alcoholic at his first Alcoholic Anonymous meeting looked him in the eye and said to him, “You never have to feel this way again.” His way out was hard, and in it he rediscovered the God whom he thought he had rejected (and who had rejected him). But, of course, we don’t need to be alcoholics to recognized our need for a higher power before whom we need to humble ourselves.

Third, the Psalmist makes a point of telling us that we shouldn’t sit around with scoffers, with mockers, and join in on their scoffing and mocking. This might seem like a small thing, but I think it’s a very astute point. When we scoff or mock, we are placing ourselves in the good camp, and putting others in the bad camp—just the thing we have just said this psalm is *not* about. But, basically, I’ve come to believe that nothing ever gets better because of scoffing and mocking. It may make us feel better for a while, but it doesn’t do much for us, or for others; in fact, it often drives a wedge between us and others. If I make fun of Justin Bieber, it makes it hard to talk with fans of Justin Bieber. If someone makes fun of Baby Boomers (and we are so worth making fun of), it’s hard for me to connect. Jesus says, “Let your ‘yes’ mean ‘yes,’ and your ‘no’ mean ‘no,’” and I think part of this is a call to sincere and honest views and speech; and mocking and scoffing are often exercised at the expense of sincerity.

So, these are some things that *won’t* make us happy—listening to wicked people, acting wickedly, or speaking wickedly. And if we are not doing things that make us unhappy, it stands to reason that we will be happier, more “blessed,” than if we do, right?

But what positive steps can we take?

Interestingly, the psalm only has one positive things to say. Here’s what will make us happy:

Happy are those [whose] delight is in the law of the Lord;

On his law they meditate day and night.

Is the psalmist recommending that we spend all of our waking time in Bible study? Honestly, maybe he is. But I think something else all together. The psalm isn’t saying that Bible study will make us blessed, but doing what the Bible, the Law, the Torah tells us to do. In computer science, we often talk about “pointers,” which are links to some important data structure. The psalmist is telling us to follow the pointer, and at the end of that pointer, you will find the good life. The scriptures contain in it the keys to living the good life; another way to say this is that whatever is good, you’ll probably find it in the scriptures. And it’s worth spending time mulling them over at any time, “day and night.” When I have trouble sleeping, it’s often better for me to think about the scriptures I know than to concentrate on the worries I have.

I’ve just started a new spiritual practice that I would like to tell you about. It’s something I’ve heard about before, but I most recently read about it in a book called *Digital Disciple*, by Adam Thomas[[3]](#footnote-3). It’s called “the daily examen,” and it’s an old Jesuit practice. As Thomas describes it, at the end of the day, he does five things:

1. By writing the words, “Yes, Lord, you are here,” acknowledge God’s presence around you and within you.
2. Give thanks for all the ways you felt blessed today.
3. Reflect on the events of the day, and focus on one that brought you closer or pushed your further from God.
4. Reflect on a particular encounter or conversation with an individual during which you did or did not fulfill you promises as a disciple of Jesus Christ.
5. Read what you have written, and write a sentence about tomorrow in light of what happened today. Listen and breathe and pray.

I think this practice fits Psalm 1 very well. It helps us to focus on the Good, and move away from the Bad. It is a practical way to “delight in the law of the Lord, and meditate on it day and night.” I have made copies for you to take with you, and I hope it can be a useful practice for you.

1. *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Ps 1:1–6). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Lybrand, Scott, “Testimony,” http://gayrestorationist.blogspot.com/2011/06/testimony.html [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See my review, “‘We are also virtual,’” at http://erb.kingdomnow.org/featured-the-digital-disciple-adam-thomas-vol-4-14-2 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)