

This season confronts us with that question of where you do find your happiness. We know the answer we're supposed to say. This question of where you find your happiness is about as old as Adam and Eve. It's the question that humans have asked for all of history. Every major philosopher or philosophy will present some sort of answer to this. Dating all the way back to Aristotle. Aristotle had this Greek word called *eudaimonia*, and he said this was the ultimate aim of what it meant to be human. If you translate that, it means happiness. He said that's the ultimate aim of what it means to be human. We are people in search of happiness, and so we bump up to it in these seasons. We think it's just around that corner, just after that purchase or whatever it is.

This season brings this question to the forefront because, in many ways, in good ways, we experience joy like we don't in the rest of the season. But we ask the question of where do you find your happiness because all of us are pursuing that. Where do we find the good life?

Charles Taylor and his magnum opus, *A Secular Age*, would define it in his introduction. Taylor's not writing from a Christian perspective. He's a sociologist, and he's just saying that for all of us, to be human is to search for fullness. You are longing to be made full. And as he looks out over the secular age in which we live, he says that whether you are a religious person or not, you have a religious ache in your heart. We all recognize that something feels like it's missing. This is life between the two trees. We sense something missing. Listen to the way he says it in the introduction of his book.

"We all see our lives, and/or the space wherein we live our lives, as having a certain moral/spiritual shape." What he's getting at is we subconsciously view life as having a spiritual depth to it; all of us live, whether you're a believer or not, from a position that says, "This is the good life." That's what he means when he uses the word moral. He goes on, "Somewhere, in some activity, or condition, lies a fullness, a richness; that is, in that place (activity or condition), life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worthwhile, more admirable, more what it should be."

Taylor, from a non-Christian perspective, is saying that there is this ache within all of us. It's what I reference a lot when Solomon says eternity has been placed in the hearts of man. He says there's something within us that even in as secular in age as we are in, there's this ache within us that we fill with something.

Church, where do you find your happiness? Because that's what we humans are seeking, and for us as followers of Jesus, we recognize the very tension that Taylor talks about. We say that we know where that fullness is. All right, this is Jesus and John 10:10. *"I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."* He came to satisfy that. I've come to usher you into that space. The Advent longing for fullness is placed there

by God himself in our souls. It's meant to point us back to him. And so, in this season, we tap into that. We ask that question.

One of the things about the Psalms, and particularly Psalm 1, is that Psalm 1 was placed strategically by the editors of Psalms. The Psalms is a collection of poems, songs, and prayers that are offered up to God through the Israelite people, many of them written by David. And so the Psalms became the sort of prayer book of the Hebrew people as well as the early church. Psalm 1, when they were compiling all of these beautiful poems and songs, was placed at the beginning because it's meant to be a preface to not just the Psalms but all of the scriptures. It lays out before the reader the very essence of what it means to navigate this world, which, again, should feel a little similar to the very contrast in comparisons that were being made in Genesis 1-3 last week.

It's saying there's a way that leads to blessedness, and there's a way that leads to wickedness or ungodliness. He says there are two ways before you. Psalm 1 is this beautiful preface to the tension from Psalms 3 onward. You see this tension played out in the life of the humans with their raw motive response to God, their wrestling with what it means to be before God.

(Click on the link for the full passage.) [Psalm 1](#) begins with the word blessed. This word blessed can also be translated as happiness. And what's interesting is it's followed up by the word "is," which necessitates that blessedness and happiness are possible. Some of us suffer from a deficit in thinking that happiness could be possible. But it said blessed is; happiness is. It's the author saying there's an answer to that age-old question. There is a way in which happiness can be found, and then he details the rest of it.

So he goes on "blessed is," and then he begins, not with a positive description, but with a negative description. He'll get to the positive in a second, but he says blessed is the one who does not. *"Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers"* (v. 1). He begins with three things that the happy one, the blessed one, is not.

The first is the blessed one does not walk in step with the wicked, or depending on the age of your translation, there's another way that actually helps bring color to this phrase, *"Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly"* (NKJV). To be human is to live according to a vision of the good life. And that good life is informed by all sorts of different sources through the very habits that we create that give shape to our loves and our longings. The instruction that we receive, the messages that encounter us, all these things.

And the psalmist is saying blessed is the one who doesn't walk in the counsel of the ungodly. This word wicked or ungodly, we think of when

we tend to think of demons behind a bush or something. It's not a sort of boogeyman. It means very much "ungodly." It just means those who are not in the path of God. He's saying there's a way to live where you can walk in the very council, the instruction, the form, the pattern of how the world operates, which gives no regard for God. And he says that way doesn't lead to blessedness because the blessed one does not walk in step with the wicked.

The second one is "or stand in the way that sinners take." There's a sense that not only is the one rejecting the council of the ungodly, but they're also not standing on the same path that sinners seem to take. They're conscious of the way in which the inputs of their life are giving shape to who they are.

Then it gets to this third one. It says that they do not sit in the company of mockers. They don't slow down enough to sit and dwell in the presence of those who are mocking others, who have a negative bent on the world, or who are arrogant and believe they know how the world operates. He says the blessed one doesn't do these three things—walk, stand, and sit with the wicked. Now notice the beautiful digression here. The biblical authors are brilliant. It's beautiful poetry here.

It begins with this idea of walking in step with the wicked, which is the beginning of what you could call a bad actor. They're walking in that way, or they don't stand. So now we've moved from a walking pace to now we're just standing, and you are not standing there. You're not lingering in the way that sinners take.

And then notice the last one is you don't sit in the company of mockers. There's a digression to sin that gets you from walking, to standing, to sitting, and sitting is a conscious choice. You don't sit by accident. Sitting is a conscious decision where maybe walking can be like you just found yourself in the company of sinners. Maybe even standing, one could say they didn't realize they were in the path of the sinners.

But sitting is a conscious choice in which the natural outflow is to say, I will sit here, and I will entertain this. I'll remain in this space. It moves from maybe a bad actor to a habitual wrongdoer to someone who's fixed in their ways. It's a sense when you sit in the company of mockers; it's you assuming that you have the right outlook and are then just mocking others who are off track.

Psalm 1 says that's not the happy one. The happy one doesn't do that digression. But the author switches here in verse 2. He says that's why the blessed one, the happy one, does not do that. What does the blessed or happy one do? "*but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night*" (v. 2).

Let's do a little work around this word law. This is the word torah in Hebrew, which may sound familiar if you've been around the church for a while. The Torah is what's known as the first five books of the Bible. Within the Torah are the law codes. Those things you would think of in Leviticus or Deuteronomy, the 10 Commandments that's in the Torah. But the word torah fundamentally just means instruction.

And so here we can, if we're not careful, read in a sort of crippling legalism that demands we have to uphold all 613 laws. But what the

psalmist intends by this word law, which we're blinded because the English language is a little limited, is the instruction of the Lord, which will entail commandments and instructions directly like that, but it's much broader than that.

He says this person, the blessed one; the happy one isn't the one who walks in the way of the sinner or stands there or sits in the company of mockers. He says if you want to find your happiness, it's the one who does two things—delights in the instruction of the Lord and meditates on it day and night. He says that's what the happy one does.

A word about both. First, this word "delight" carries this connotation of you longing for something, to take pleasure in something. When you get to Psalm 119, which is the longest chapter, it's the sort of marathon chapter in the Bible. It's this long poem in which David is essentially just expressing his affection for the instruction of God. At one point, he says, it's like honey on my lips. He says I long for it. It's sweet to taste. It's good. It brings life. The psalmist says the happy one is the one who delights in the instruction of the Lord.

Church, do you delight in the instruction of the Lord? Again, you know the right answer. You know what you're supposed to say, but do you delight in it? It's not always easy. It's not always the right thing. The problem with trying to delight in the law of the Lord is most of us in the modern world in which Taylor's talking about, that secular age, lives from a place of authenticity. And what I mean by that is we believe what is right and wrong is based on how authentic it is to what I feel. And so if I feel right, then it must be right. If I feel this is what I should do, to not follow that is to actually transgress. That's the sin of the modern age. The problem is any outside imposition becomes just that; it becomes a sin against the self.

When you find happiness in that, what we'll see in a few verses, you'll find yourself more like the chaff, the one who's blown to and fro. He says the blessed one, the happy one, isn't the one who delights in the law of the self, but it's who delights in the law of the Lord. The psalmist says there's a different way, there's a different understanding.

It's Adam and Eve before the trees again, with God asking will you delight in my instruction. I've planted you in the garden to enjoy from the tree of eternal life. It's there for you. It's all available for you. It's there for your taking, your enjoyment. But there's a different way. And if you transgress against my way, you can take that path. But that one leads to destruction. And God is saying, "I don't want you to go that route. But you have a choice. Will you delight in the law of the Lord or will you delight in the law of the self?"

Most of us know the answer to that question, but I think maybe a different angle to get at is where do you find happiness. Because where you seek happiness tends to be the very thing that organizes the internal motivation of your living. And so it's easy to give the right answer to do I delight in the law of the Lord. I know what I'm supposed to say on Sunday morning, but where do you find your happiness? Where are you searching for happiness?

And here's the tricky thing with delight. Delight is an experiential word. You cannot think your way into delight, which is why it's followed up in the next verse with this second verb. The second thing you do is meditate on the law. You meditate on the instruction of the Lord. We have to do a little work on this word "meditate" as well. We tend to bring all sorts of connotations to this word.

Meditate doesn't mean just reading something that's good. We have the scriptures before us. That's a good thing to read. But reading isn't meditating. Memorizing is a really good thing. It's how you etch the scriptures into your heart and into, quite literally, your neural pathways so they're accessible to you. Scriptures I memorized as a young child are still buried within me. Those are good things, but memorizing isn't meditating.

Meditating is actually a visceral word. It's a very experiential word, meaning you bring your whole self to it. Read the way pastor and author Eugene Peterson in his book *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*, speaks of this particular passage.

In the language of the psalmist, this word meditate has to do with slow eating, literally to slowly chew or masticate or suck on a lollipop... [meditate] is a word our Hebrew ancestors used for reading the kind of writing that deals with our souls. But meditate is far too tame a word for what is being signified. Eugene Peterson

He'll go on in a page or two in that book and talk about how to meditate is like when a dog gets a new toy bone. That's what it means to slowly chew, to feast on, to sit in, to give it your fullest attention, to let it consume every corner of who you are, just like a dog feasting on a bone. He says that's what the blessed one does.

The happy one, the blessed one meditates on the law of the Lord, meditates on the instruction. This is how we get about this happiness. What do you meditate on? What do you slowly chew on? What do you slowly ingest? What are the things that give shape to your deepest loves and longings? What are the things that provide the sort of internal architecture for your life? What are the things that are shaping your mind and your imagination? You can't think your way into delighting. You have to experience it. You have to meditate on it.

The psalmist says that the blessed one is the one who delights in the law of the Lord and who meditates on his law day and night. That person, the one who doesn't walk in step with the wicked, who doesn't stand in the way, sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but delights and meditates on the instruction of the law. That person "*is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers*" (v. 3).

Why a tree? We've looked in and seen through scripture trees are important, and they could have used any metaphor, but the authors come back over and over to the metaphor of a tree. Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Jesus all love this imagery of a tree. They're in the Near East. They're in this desert wasteland, and it says that the tree is this symbol of vitality. It's a symbol of life. It's got roots. It's strong. It can endure. It's something that lasts beyond just the present moment. There's a vitality to trees.

And the psalmist says the happy one doesn't get caught up in the way of sinners. They meditate on the instruction of the law. When you do that, you dig roots down, and you become like a tree.

Two things to know. The tree is planted. It's a domesticated tree. It's not wild. It's been strategically put there by someone else. This tree is planted, which leads to the second thing. It's planted right next to the streams of water, which is this image of an unending life source that's available right there for the tree.

If your happiness is based on these external circumstances, those will come and go. If your happiness is built on those things, they will someday not be there. It's the nature of anything. Read the *Book of Ecclesiastes*. There is a time for everything, a time for cheering, a time for mourning. Some of these things are good, some of these last, and other things are empty and hollow. But this tree is planted next to the streams of water, this unending source of life.

You know what's fascinating about this is this was written while the Israelites were in exile. So they've been plucked up from their land. They've been taken and removed by this neighboring country that conquered them, who came in by force, destroyed their way of life, and destroyed everything they know about themselves. They're cast out into exile, and they're in this moment of confusion, of asking questions like we ask a God, "Where are you? How could this happen? This wasn't the plan. God, what's going on?" But somewhere in the midst of that, this psalm breaks through, and the psalmist says we're planted here next to the streams of water, even in exile.

He says that there's a way to be happy, to be blessed in the midst of whatever season you're in. It's not based on circumstances because we tend to impose this idea of blessing or happiness onto the material. And that's because we've been shaped; we've been meditating on the modern world. We've been chewing on it, dreaming about it, envisioning it, and that is so visceral this time of year as we long for this or that purchase to bring hope; maybe that accomplishment will bring cheer. Maybe this size of the end-of-year bonus will bring about happiness, whatever it is.

We've been meditating on the world's understanding of what it means to be happy and blessed for the Israelites. They had everything taken from them. And most likely, what they had in their imagination, these streams of water were the Babylonian creeks that were running and keeping the very country that destroyed theirs healthy by bringing life to the agriculture. They have, dare I say, the gall to say "No. Maybe God's got us here because I can still be blessed here in the midst of this next to the streams of life. This unending source of. It says this person is like a tree planted by streams of water.

But not only is it planted by the streams of water, but it also yields fruit in its season. To yield fruit in season means the tree is subject to different seasons. If you are going to bring fruit about in its proper season, that means you have to endure the other seasons. Again, the tree is not magic. It has to face the wind in the storms. It's planted and rooted deep enough so it can face those different seasons. And when its proper

season comes, it will begin to bear fruit. It will thrive, and it will give that vitality of life. It will come to that, but it will be subject to seasons.

Church, what season are you in? A room this size means there are people here that this is the first Christmas without that loved one. It's the first Christmas where job security is all sorts of out of whack. It's the first Christmas when there is a family member whose relationship is broken and tarnished, and you don't know how you're going to get through that. There's a way, as you face those things this season, where you can still find happiness.

It isn't rooted in that. It's not a blind covering; it's not hiding. Advent is not about hiding from the struggles of this life. Advent is about the light of those candles breaking into the darkness. It's about the reminder that the second tree is coming. Yes, it's hard right now, but you don't have to close your eyes to that. You can actually bring God into that. He says because this tree, the one planted by the streams of water that meditates on the law both day and night, yields fruit in season. It's going to endure seasons. It's not always good. It's not always easy. But the tree survives.

Look at the second thing about this tree. It yields its fruit in season, and its leaf does not wither. I love this. This is an evergreen tree, similar to the ones in your homes where the leaves don't wither.

They may not produce fruit. They're subject to seasons that come and go in their due time. But he says this tree doesn't wither; it doesn't give in to despair. It doesn't give over to that. Yes, life is hard. Yes, seasons come, but in the very essence of the tree, because it's connected to the streams of water, because it's been planted there, it finds a way through the seasons, and the leaves never wither.

If you meditate on the law, if you meditate on God's instructions, what you find is that over and over, God is not plucking us from the hard circumstances and taking us out of them. He's with us in them. And that sort of stability means that life isn't just void of circumstances, but it's in the circumstances in which we can find life and vitality.

Here's the thing, when a tree is in a dry spell, it has to dig down deeper to find the source of life. It has to dig further into the streams of water. It's there, it's planted next to it, but it's in that season in which it's actually rooting itself further. The leaves don't wither. It doubles down. It pursues; it seeks out life because if you've meditated on the law, if you've meditated on the instruction of God, you recognize he never promised that there wouldn't be dry seasons. It's the nature of life between two trees. It's for you and me to have free choice.

For us to have free will, to have autonomy in our decision making, to either choose to love God or to not choose love means we will experience the fallout of others not choosing the way of God. We will have to live with our own choices when we reject God and wreak havoc in our own lives with poor decisions. He says, this tree, its leaves though, doesn't wither. It'll take its hits. It'll endure seasons, but it doesn't wither.

And lastly, it says whatever they do prospers. Don't think material. That's a different thing that we've meditated on. Psalm 1 is speaking not of a one-time decision. It's speaking of the very trajectory of life. It's speaking of your character, the whole of who you are. As that takes

shape, as that takes root, you begin to prosper because you recognize that all the things you were chasing before aren't what your heart most longs for.

I think of that beautiful parable Jesus told. There's a man, and he's walking across this field, and he finds this treasure, and he says, "I'll give up everything else because that's the actual treasure." Now, if that treasure is the house, the job, the whatever, that will come and go, you can sell everything you want. You can have that, but it won't endure. It's where moths and rust destroy, as Jesus would say. But he says there is a treasure that endures. It roots down deep; it yields its fruit in season; its leaves don't wither.

I mean, aren't you longing for happiness that sustains in those seasons? You don't look flippantly. You don't close your eyes to the reality of the world, but there's something in you in those seasons where you recognize God's moving; God's working. I can't see the way, but my purpose and my meaning are not in those things that we're bringing about happiness. There's something deeper, and so these things come and go. I don't have silver and gold for you, but I can tell you about Jesus, as Peter said to the beggar at the temple gate. This is that tree when you meditate on the word of the Lord, when you delight in the instruction of God. You find a whole different paradigm and way of life that opens up the possibility of happiness in the midst of whatever you're facing.

But verse 4 shows there's another way to live. Again, this goes right back to Adam and Eve, even Genesis 1-3. *"Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away"* (v. 4). The best example I can think of for chaff is like a husk on an ear of corn. When you pluck an ear of corn out, and you see the husk, it slowly dies. It withers; it gets rigid. It succumbs to the winds and destruction. He says this is the way of the wicked, the ungodly. The ways that are contrary to you pursuing God. He says that it's like chaff. For all of the vision of vitality and strength and endurance of the tree; chaff is very much the opposite.

If the tree represents life, the chaff represents a corpse of what once was life. The chaff is the thing that you discard that you throw away, that slowly crumbles, that is blown to and fro. See, the chaff is very much subject to the same seasons as the tree, but there's no root system for it to endure. The chaff can't endure and sustain itself. The psalmist says that the ungodly are like chaff. You can be like the chaff, but you'll probably be a little more subject to how the economy's doing. You'll be a little more subject to the housing market, to your health, to your beauty, to your job, whatever it is.

He says that if you can't find meaning and purpose for which your heart was created, it's like chaff that just blows to and fro. There's a way you can live, and you can have that. He says, but wouldn't you rather be like the tree?

"Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous" (v. 5). He says it stands in such sharp contrast that when judgment comes when God sees like is there life here? Is there vitality here? Is this representative of who I am? Is it the work of God? He says the chaff they can't stand in judgment. There's no root.

They are not connected to the streams of water. They are not partaking in the Tree of Life. They can't stand in the assembly of the righteous because it is such a sharp contrast against the righteous.

He ends with this beautiful summary, which again is not just the summary of Psalm 1, but of all the Psalms and really the whole scriptures. *"For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction"* (v. 6). The word "watches over" in Hebrew means to know, but it's not know head knowledge. It's the exact same word as when Adam knew Eve, and they had a child. It's intimate, it's relational, it's connection. It's a deeper understanding. And the psalmist reflects on all this. He says, "Listen, the Lord, he knows the way of the righteous. He embodies that so that when it becomes the center point of your affection when you begin to organize your life around God, what happens is that life overflows into you, and you begin to experience that life.

He says this is the way of the righteous. The Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction. If you want to seize authority, if you want to live your life on your own accord, if you want to believe that you were the one who dictates and arbitrates between right and wrong, he says, you can do that. It's there for you. But God's warning, he says it leads to destruction. It's like the chaff. He says you can have it. Jesus was ruthlessly practical. So often he'd tell them that the choice was before them. If they wanted it, they could take it, but he was offering something different.

He won't coerce you. He won't overpower your will, but he will invite you into a new way of living that will mean a thousand different deaths as we allow the self to shrivel up and let that part die off so that we can become like that tree.

Here's the kicker. I want to come back to the question, where do you find your happiness? Because notice here, and notice everywhere in scripture, that when this word blessed or happy is used, it never says blessed is the one who seeks blessedness. Happy is the one who seeks happiness. That's what our modern impulse would say is that we have to then pursue happiness. I want to be happy. I need to seek happiness. But happiness is always a byproduct of a different life. It is never a direct effort. You cannot achieve happiness by direct effort. That's a well that will never be filled. It will always run dry. It will always leak out because, again, blessed is the one who doesn't walk in the way of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the company of mockers but delights and meditates in the law.

Think of when Jesus used the word blessed. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are the humble. See, blessedness is always a byproduct, but we live in a world that seeks happiness as its direct effort. You can seek it; you can try, but I'm telling you, it will run dry. It will not satisfy. Because

blessedness, according to the plain teaching of this text, is a byproduct of a life rooted in God.

God either exists or doesn't. If he doesn't exist, you can't go to him for happiness anyway. And so if he exists and you're going to God to find happiness, you're not going to God; you're going to yourself and instrumentalizing God. You're saying God is the means to my own ends, which means you are not actually going to God. You are going to have a vision and a version of yourself as God. I have heard people say, "Oh, I'll come to God, but he has to make me happy. He has to do this or that. That's not going to God. That's going to you but in a bigger, grander version. Because it's still you deciding what is right and wrong. It's still you holding on to the allegiance that says, "I know what's right for me, not God."

If you go to God to get your happiness, you won't find it because you're not going to. But the paradox is Psalm 1 says if you go to God and meditate on the law, blessedness or happiness seems to happen. But the moment you think you can game the system, God won't be gamed because it exposes your heart that you are pursuing yourself and not God.

I think Advent is the season for that introspection. In this season of life, whether it's the painful season, the joyous season, or the season of uncertainty and the unknown, Advent allows you to sit in that tension. Before you rush to Christmas morning, you sit in the tension and say, where is my allegiance ultimately at? Is it rooted in me like the chaff, or is it rooted next to the streams of water, recognizing that I need to meditate in the law and delight in the law? The psalmist says that's the choice before you.

Advent allows us to wrestle with that complexity and ask, "Am I using God for what God can get me? Or do I recognize the real treasure?" Like that man who walked across the field and said, "That's the treasure." The treasure wasn't a blessing. It was the Kingdom of God, by the way. That's the spoiler. When he found it, that was the treasure. It's what satisfies. It's what Taylor would say is that fullness. You ache for that fullness, that longing where life is richer, deeper, more whole. God says that's eternity that's been placed in your heart, and God will satisfy that. Advent is the season that we dig around in our own souls, and ask, "Am I attached to God, or am I attached to what I think God can get me?"

Church, this Advent, may we do that work. May we, like Jesus' teaching in Matthew 6, *"But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well"* (v. 33). Because it transforms us from the inside out to where he doesn't give us what we want, he gives us new wants. We recognize God is the deepest longing, the pole star of our hearts. That is what will satisfy. So church, may we this Advent, come to this text and say, "I want to be like that tree."

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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