



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

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7th Sunday of Easter: May 16, 2021

Sermon Title: "The Two Ways"

Sermon Text: Psalm 1

When I was a kid growing up in Kane, one of my favorite places was the old McCrory's Five and Dime store. It's long gone now, and really wasn't all that noteworthy; it was just a variety store like thousands of others in small towns across Pennsylvania. But in the eyes of a child, it was a wonderland of possibilities. Though the place was filled with housewares and other practical things you'd expect in a variety store, it was the two aisles of toys that captivated my attention. Now, I know I'll be dating myself by admitting this, but with just a dollar or two I could find all sorts of great things there. For a kid with a couple bucks in the McCrory's toy aisle, the choices seemed *endless*.

That's the subject of today's psalm: *choices*. Scholars tell us that this psalm – the FIRST psalm – is one of the most important psalms of all. It was very intentionally placed at the beginning of all the other psalms because it acts as both an introduction for and a summary of a book that Christians have treasured and prayed for thousands of years. As one scholar put it, Psalm 1 invites "us to read and use the entire book [of Psalms] as a guide to a blessed life."¹ It does this by describing life as a choice of "two ways."

At first glance, the choice in Psalm 1 seems easy, right? After all, these *two ways* could not be more different. The *first* way is the *way of happiness* or the way of *blessing* – the Hebrew word there can be faithfully translated either way. This way is characterized by vibrancy and movement. It's not a way that lends itself to idly sitting around with the wicked, the sinners, or the scornful.

On the contrary, the *way of happiness* is a way marked by delight in God's *law* – God's *teaching* – God's *holy word*. That word from God is precious to the heart *and* to the head – so much so that one walking *the way of happiness* wants to meditate on God's word – to chew on it – to extract every last morsel of flavor and meaning from it. One walking the *way of happiness* recognizes that God's word and God's ways bring life, meaning, and wholeness. Not surprisingly then, the psalm compares the one who walks the *way of happiness* – the *way of blessing* – to a tree that is lovingly nourished by nearby waters, a tree that achieves its full God-given potential and blooms, bears fruit, and prospers.

Contrast that with the *other* way described in Psalm 1 – the *way of the wicked*. A life marked by following *that way* is compared to chaff – the casing of a seed or grain – something that's worthless, disposable, forgettable, useless, meaningless – here one second and blown away by a mere breeze the next, never to be remembered or missed. Can you imagine such a life? It

sounds so hopeless, so lonely, so sad. Who in their right mind would willingly choose the *way of the wicked*?

Well, I don't think anyone *intentionally* chooses the *way of the wicked*. It's something that happens gradually, the way we zealously commit to making a New Year's resolution and then one day it slips our mind... another day we decide we're too busy to follow through... and yet another day we're tired and decide that taking a little break from our resolution won't do any harm. Before you know it, that resolution has gone up in smoke. That's likewise how we stray from the *way of happiness*. One diversion *here*, a little compromise *there*, and before we realize it, we're heading toward a completely unintended destination.

Another challenge we face is that sometimes it just isn't clear which path really is the *path of happiness*. After all, God doesn't promise that the *way of happiness* will be free of suffering. Jesus suffered, and he was perfect. Sinless. We too will experience times of suffering, and in our despair, we may be tempted to seek comfort in people, places, and things that bring destruction, not blessing, and draw us toward the *way of the wicked*. That way may bring a temporary diversion from our troubles, but it's a counterfeit happiness that ultimately doesn't bring healing; it only magnifies our sadness and isolation.

Look, life is rarely as starkly black and white as the Psalm indicates. Most days we find ourselves in the gray. Each of us will spend time on *both* of these paths in our lives, because no one has it all figured out. No one is without sin. No one consistently travels the *way of happiness*. The same is true of the greatest saints in Christian history, like Paul. You can hear the pain in his letter to the Romans when he writes, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... I can will what is right, but I cannot do it."²

And so please – *please* – hear this. *When* you stray from the *way of happiness* onto the *way of wickedness* (note that I said *when*, not *if*) do not surrender to despair. Do not give up. There's nothing you have done or can do that's beyond the willingness of Jesus to forgive you. Likewise, there's nothing you have done or can do that can cause Jesus to stop loving you. You are beloved – *forever*. Even now Jesus is whispering words of hope to your heart. He's calling you to draw closer, because his entire being is devoted to forging a pathway so that every child of God might be saved. I believe Jesus even had love and forgiveness in his heart for Judas, and if I'm right, then just imagine how much Jesus loves *you*.

So be gentle with yourself. And just as importantly, be gentle with your neighbor. We're all trying to find our path to God's *way of happiness*. Somedays it will be as clear as crystal, while other days it will be as murky as mud. That's one important reason God calls us together as a church congregation. We need each other! There will be some days when you'll be a little lost, and you'll need me to blaze a trail for you to the *way of happiness*. And there will be just as many days when I'll be clinging to you so you can help me back on that way.

Here's some more good news. We are blessed with help beyond the boundaries of time, space, and the walls of this congregation. God has given us holy scripture to help us more clearly see that *way of happiness*; baptism, to give us hope rooted in our identity as God's

beloved children even when we stray; and Holy Communion, to nourish us with renewed strength and the assurance of forgiveness when our resolve needs strengthened.

Finally, let's not forget the Holy Spirit. You'll hear more about the Holy Spirit next week on Pentecost, so just listen to Luther's famous words about how the Holy Spirit always helped him find his pathway back to that *way of happiness*: "I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my LORD or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith."³

Friends, I began this sermon by reminiscing about some childhood choices a dollar or two gave me at the Five and Dime. I'm sure I bought a couple interesting things back then, but I suspect most of it was junk, long ago discarded and forgotten. Our choices – just like us - are rarely perfect. But never lose hope, because in the end, the choice that matters most is the choice *Jesus* made. Long ago, he chose *you*, and he keeps choosing you *every single day*. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Citations:

¹ James L. Mays, *Psalms*, p. 40.

² See Romans 7:14-20

³ Luther's *Small Catechism*, Third Article of the Creed