

Drawing Circles for All the Right Reasons

Songs of David: Volume 2, Part 4

Psalm 1

I mentioned this morning, after that story about the old couple and that hard of hearing wife that I'd even the score tonight.

I read this some time ago . . . a newlywed woman named JoAnn called her pastor at home late one Friday night. It was just three weeks after JoAnn had married Bill, and the pastor had performed their wedding ceremony. She was frantic on the phone; she was crying – she was beside herself, “Pastor” she said, “Bill and I had our first argument . . . it was terrible . . . it was awful . . . now what am I going to do?”

The pastor said, “Well just calm down . . . this is normal . . . every marriage has that first big argument – it'll be okay.”

She said, “But . . . but . . . what do I do with the body?”

Ladies, you can understand, right? You're not thinking about divorce, but murder has crossed your mind.

Okay, ladies, does that even the score?

No?

Well here's one more for you – little Susie was in the church lobby with her mom, dad, and her grandmother – on her mother's side. They were talking to the pastor, and Susie piped up and said, “Pastor, my grandma told me that my mommy married my daddy because she didn't have her thinking cap on.”

Men, aren't you glad when you proposed, our wives didn't have their thinking caps on? And all the men said?

Amen would have been good right there.

Listen, we all know, one of the significant problems in marriage is that men and women are so different.

One author put it this way: women want to be loved, listened to, desired, needed, cherished, affirmed, and sometimes they just want to be held.

Men, just want tickets to the Super Bowl!

Enough said . . . you're dismissed.

Not so fast.

Marriage is much more than that, isn't it?

And much of the challenges of marriage and relationships and even life itself is the fact that the underlying, root issues matter more than whatever the differences are between men and women that we can easily detect.

Some time ago I read about the construction of a town hall building in a small northern Pennsylvania town. All the citizens were so proud of this little red brick building . . . a long awaited dream come true for their town. Not too many weeks after moving in, however, strange things began to happen. Several doors failed to shut completely, and windows weren't opening and closing smoothly. As time passed, cracks began appearing in the walls. Within a few more months, the front door would not even shut, and the roof had begun to leak. An intense investigation revealed that deep underground, blasts from a mine several miles away was causing underground shock waves that were weakening the earth beneath the building of that little town hall.¹

It was almost imperceptible . . . it was happening ever so slowly . . . one tiny rumble after another.

One of the problems of the average marriage counseling session is that they deal with the stuff above ground – symptoms and stuff you can see.

What we need to do is go underground . . . marriage – and life, in general, has to do with the underground, deeply held issues of the heart that are hidden away.

You see, most people believe they can fix their marriage like they pave their driveway, work on the windows; renovate the family room or change the color of the front door – in fact, most marriage counseling in the world today begins and ends with – fix this thing, change that thing; get your spouse to do something different; cook something nice, wear something pretty, go out more often . . . so their counseling assigns exercises in really nothing more than self-focus – it merely makes a husband or wife even more self-absorbed and even self-centered than they might have been before getting married.

One survey I read recently said that roughly 70% of Americans believe the main purpose of marriage is mutual fulfillment.ⁱⁱ

Hey, I married her because she was supposed to fulfill me; he was going to meet all my needs.

Which makes the main purpose of marriage all about I, me and mine . . . and if that other person isn't fulfilling me, the marriage just isn't going to work out.

- To the vast majority of Americans, even American so-called Christians – marriage has nothing to do with servanthood;
- it has nothing to do with demonstrating the dying to self, seen in Christ's relationship to His bride, the church;
- it has nothing to do with a desire to bring glory to the Creator of life and marriage;
- it has nothing to do with the raising of a godly heritage;
- it has nothing to do with mentoring younger believers as examples of faithful, joyful monogamy;
- it has nothing to do with living out the character of Christ . . . to the average American, marriage is simply about them getting what they want.

Most marriage material out there today is simply giving people even more ammunition to make them even more self-centered and even more self-absorbed than ever before.

In fact, the dating services that have exploded in popularity today are designed to help people find a spouse who fits who they are and what you like and what they want.

Never mind the entirely different person God intends us to become as He changes us, breaks us, and molds us into the image of Christ.

One counselor I read recently was rather bold and humorous too when he wrote that most men who come to see him complain about their wives and describe what they want out of marriage; he said this, "I've discovered that they really didn't want a wife, what they really wanted was a golden retriever." Because that's the kind of relationship they describe – somebody to fetch and play whenever they want.

The trouble is when we focus on each other . . . we look only at the visible . . . we never travel deep underground.

You see, much of what makes a marriage work isn't even your relationship to your spouse, but your relationship to Christ; much of what makes your marriage sweet isn't your submissiveness and responsiveness to each other, but your submissiveness and responsiveness to Christ.

So we got to start, not by dealing with what's visible, let's address what's invisible . . . like the roots of a tree.

Turn to *Psalm chapter 1* as we continue studying selected Psalms in this ancient, inspired Hebrew hymnal.

Let's get out your miner's gear and go underground and examine what God through the Psalmist says about making a good and godly relationship, certainly in marriage and every relationship in life.

Notice *verse 1. How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of the scoffers. 2. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night. 3. He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither and in whatever he does, he prospers.*

What the Psalmist does first in *verse 1* is tell us what *not* to do if we want to protect our lives – and you can certainly apply this to protecting your marriage.

The Psalm begins, "How blessed is the man."

The Hebrew word for *blessed* means joyous or happy, but it goes deeper than surface happiness that depends entirely upon whatever happens.

The root meaning of this word *blessed* refers to someone who is actually moving forward . . . someone who is advancing; it can even relate to someone who is leading the way.

The Hebrew word paints the picture of a person who is pressing on – advancing in life with goals and a godly purpose in life.ⁱⁱⁱ

This is the same concept of the Apostle Paul, who wrote that he was “*pressing on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*” (*Philippians 3:14*)

So the blessed person in Psalm 1 is someone who is advancing toward godliness.

And would you notice the progression of this person’s movement.

I want you to circle three key words in *verse 1: walk, stand and sit.*

These three words are related to three negatives in a godly person’s life – in other words, here are three things he will not do if he truly wants to progress in life:

Notice *verse 1 again; How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked.*

The word *walk* suggests that a person is listening to the counsel of the ungodly. It’s the idea of a casual relationship – you’re just casually walking somewhere, listening as you go.^{iv}

The picture here is that someone who is wicked or ungodly has merged onto your path – your lane . . . your paths merge, and now he’s walking with you and, evidently, ready to give you advice.

So in this first negative, the believer is someone who doesn’t listen to the advice of the ungodly . . . in fact, they’re not even going to walk casually near it . . . they’re certainly not going to flirt with it . . . they going to steer clear of ungodly counsel.

We could paraphrase this to read, “Blessed is the man who doesn’t walk down the path and listen to ungodly advice.”

The Psalmist takes us to the next negative; in fact, you could think of these three negatives as three steps downward; the first dangerous step downward is to walk next to ungodly counsel; step 2 comes next: *Notice, nor stand in the way of sinners.*

The word “*stand*” here in this verse is another key word – it has the idea of taking one’s place with the unbeliever. It refers to a certain way of life – a way of thinking.^v

So the first step is where you’re just listening to unbelievers . . . but now you’re agreeing with them. You’re taking their side – you’re standing alongside them.

The best time to say no is at the first invitation from sin.

Your marriage – in fact, your life – depends on you deciding what you will *not* do – where you will *not* walk – where you will *not* agree with ungodly counsel.

Here in Psalm 1, the godly individual says no to even casual counsel – then he refuses to stop and stand by those who are sinners – unless it’s to gain an opportunity to witness to them with the gospel of Christ.

By the way, the words here translated *wicked*, and *sinners* are references to unbelievers; and the way they’re described here doesn’t imply they’re cursing God or denying God or anything particularly vulgar; they are simply presented as people who live on a horizontal plane with absolutely no vertical relationship with or desire for God.^{vi}

To them, all that matters is life . . . here and now . . . getting ahead in life . . . making the most out of life.

In other words, these people aren’t necessarily cursing God – they’re just ignoring God.

You might work around people like this, you might live in the same house as them; you might even go to church with them.

On the surface, they seem to be okay . . . but if you dig underground . . . if you take a deeper look at their counsel and their advice and their perspective, you’ll hear nothing of the word of God; in fact, God never factors in.

Decisions are made without Him. Life is lived without any connection to Him, except for an hour or so on Sunday.

And listen to this warning in Psalm 1 – their presence in your life can be like an undertow . . . it can be dangerous to your life – your relationships, and even your marriage.

Someone is sure to say, but Stephen didn’t Jesus make friends with sinners. Wasn’t he condemned for eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners? Yes, He was, *Matthew 11:19.*

But don’t miss His purpose. He wasn’t eating with tax collectors because He was lonely. He wasn’t eating with prostitutes because He wanted some new friends . . . he didn’t eat with unbeliever

because he wanted to have a party to go to over the weekend.

He wasn't mingling with them so they could influence *Him* but so that He could influence *them* – not because he needed them, but because they needed Him.

He had come to seek and to save those who were lost (Luke 19:10)

He wasn't there to entertain them – He was there to redeem them.

Let me challenge you to think of friendships or people and influences in your life three different ways.

In fact, **think of drawing three circles around your life.**

The first circle is very close to you; the second circle is farther out, and the third is even farther out.

1. **The furthest circle out represents passive acquaintances.**

These are kids that sit in your science class or ride the bus home with you.

These are the people who work in cubicles next to you. You share the same water fountain and elevator – you know the name of that receptionist or bank manager, and they know yours, but that's as far as it gets – unless they call you into their office and give you a bonus because you're doing such an incredible job – which I'm sure for you happens often, as it should.

You know these people, but you don't know anything about them, nor they you.

They are passive acquaintances.

2. **The next circle closer to you is casual friendships.**

These are the guys you play on the soccer team with; they not only sit on the same bus as you do, but they share a seat with you and you end up talking to them as you ride to your next game.

These are the people who serve in the same board room as you do – they're on your business team, and you travel with them from time to time.

These are your neighbors that you chat with or invite over for hamburgers on Saturday afternoon.

These are guys or girls in your dorm room or on the floor; they are much more than passive acquaintances . . . in fact, they are pretty much locked into your sphere of living.

You get to know these people pretty well, and they get to know you.

These are the people you get into discussions with about current events; you invite them to church and strike up meaningful conversations about Christ. These are the people on your prayer list.

You're not with them so they can influence you, you assume God has placed them in the sphere of your life so that you influence *them*. You don't invite them to your home because you want something to do for the weekend. You, like Christ, are taking opportunities to seek and pray that they will be saved.

These are not passive acquaintances; these are casual friendships – the people whom God has placed in your world so that you introduce them to Christianity – to influence them, and not the other way around.

That's reserved for the inner circle.

3. **The last circle, the circle closest to you, represents close companions.**

These are the people you allow into your life to share your life. They are your counselors and confidants. If you're married to a believer, this is your closest confidant; beyond that, you're fortunate to have 1 or 2 others that are in this inner circle – and you choose carefully and wisely.

And that's because you've effectively given these people the right of influence and direction.

These are the people you ask, "What do you think I ought to do?" "Which decision do you think I ought to make?" "Pray with me and for me as I decide which path the Lord wants me to take."

Be very careful how you let inside that circle.

So let's review: here's how the circles work:

- The furthest circle is a **passive acquaintance** . . . there's no real personal connection or obligation;
- The next circle in is **casual friendship** . . . with these people there is a similar circle of experience – a school or job connection that puts you in personal contact regularly with them; with these people you remain alert and aware that Christ has brought you into their world in order to influence them for Christ;
- The third and closest circle to your life moves from casual friendship to a **close companionship** . . . these are the ones

you have given the right of persuasion and influence; these are the people you've granted access to impact your mind and heart and life.

For the believer, no one who is without Christ should gain access to this inner circle.

This is what Paul warned the believer of in Corinth when he reminded them, he writes, *for what close companionship can light have with darkness? (2 Corinthians 6:14)*

Listen, this relates to who you date . . . who you spend weekends with . . . who you seek out for counsel.

If your counselor or confidant doesn't know Jesus Christ, they have no right to get inside the inner circle to influence your mind. They may very well lead you astray.

I cannot tell you how many people I've counseled who've been told by some unbelieving counselor or friend that what they need to do is dump their spouse and pursue happiness.

That they need to do is to let their teenage children experiment with sin so they can learn for themselves.

What ungodly advice . . . listen, the best thing you can do for your spiritual walk is to start moving the sinner, the wicked to that outer circle.

Solomon wrote it this way in *Proverbs 13:20*. ***He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm.***

The Psalmist here in Psalm 1 is effectively saying, "Don't slow down as you press on; don't get sidetracked . . . don't invite the counsel of the ungodly into the inner circle of your life – don't stop on their path or allow them to gain your ear, because:

- what you listen to, you just might buy into;
- what you buy into, you just might act upon.

And the voices of the ungodly are everywhere.

ABC News carried the story of a law firm that created a billboard in the Chicago area targeting the young, wealthy Gold Coast clientele. The billboard read, "Life's short – Get a divorce." And on either side of the words were sensual photographs of a scantily clad man and a woman.

Within a week, the city took down the ad citing technical problems. The truth was, too many people complained.

The legal firm defended their billboard by actually saying, and I quote, "We find the advertisement *refreshingly honest* and insightful . . . people are unhappy, there are plenty of options out there – get a divorce and get on with your life."^{vii}

Again, if the primary purpose of marriage and even life is self-fulfillment, then the ad makes perfect sense, and it can be praised as honest and insightful. Because if marriage is ruining your party, get rid of it.

One writer to the editor of the news program that ran a story on this racy billboard said, "For those that think this is a clever billboard advertisement, they really ought to consider taking down the pictures of that scantily clad couple and instead, put a picture of a 8 year old girl and an 5 year old boy in the background, clutching daddy or mommy as they leave the house for somebody else."

Now *that* would be refreshingly honest and insightful.

The Psalmist spells out the dangerous progression in the opening verse of this Psalm: to listen to them, leads you to stand with them . . . and eventually, you join them – and that's the 3rd step in this digression – notice, *verse 1b*, "***nor sit in the seat of scoffers.***"

The Hebrew word for scoffers is *letsim* – it refers to those who openly mock the counsel of God.^{viii}

This is the third negative for the godly disciple. Don't sit down in the seat of the scoffer!

What the Psalmist calls the "seat" we would call the "chair" of the scornful. It's a reference to the place of authority or prestige or teaching. In *Matthew 23:2* we read the scribes sat in Moses' seat – that is, they were professors of the law.^{ix}

Today we refer to as a professor's chair. We talk about graduate's school having endowed chairs of engineering or science or theology.

That's the idea here. And this particular *seat* in *Psalm 1* is occupied by a teacher, a cynic – a critic – a scoffer of biblical truth.

Our land is filled with them, by the way. They use their chair to undermine and ridicule and mock the things of God.

Avoid people like this as much as possible.

However, notice that the Psalmist is telling us that the godly man doesn't sit in it himself!

Which would be the third step downward . . . he's now seated; he's now entrenched.

Did you notice the progression from *walking by* to *standing around* to *sitting down!*

In other words, what began with a casual walk became a way of life.

So the path of blessedness – spiritual progress – is abandoned and now self-rules every relationship, every activity, every pursuit. People – especially spouses – only matter for whatever they can give you and however they can serve you.

This is death to the joy of marriage – this is the loss of the blessedness of marital union.

One book that has made headlines, now in its third printing, revised and expanded, is a book simply entitled, “Affair” with the subtitle, *How to Manage Every Aspect of Your Extramarital Relationship with Passion, Discretion and Dignity*.

On the back cover it reads, “In the face of near universal disapproval, between one quarter and one half of all married Americans will at some point engage in an extramarital affair. They will have either an enriching experience or the sad, destructive ugly mess for which affairs are far better known. [In this book] many of the major pitfalls are avoidable and an extramarital relationship can bring a person greater happiness and personal growth if properly managed.” Chapter titles inside ranged from “Preparing to meet that special someone”; Tending to your Spouse” and “Graceful Goodbyes”.

That’s what you call the counsel of the wicked.

The truth is nobody gets married with a copy of this book on their nightstand.

But the warning is for us.

Even as you’re pressing on – are you giving the counsel of the world a hearing?

What about that co-worker in the lunchroom who repeatedly tells you how great their life is since they dumped their spouse?

Listen, find somebody else to eat lunch with.

What about that friend who tells you, you really ought to do what you want to do, forget the restriction and responsibility of marriage and family – that’s just tying you down and holding you back . . . you are the most important thing to you.

Listen, find another friend! And move that person to the outer circle where they belong.

What about movies and television – have you given scoffers of God’s counsel a hearing?

What about books you’re reading and music you’re listening too?

The average Christian today would say, “Man, you’re sounding like a legalist . . . you need to lighten up!”

The Psalmist would say, “you need to look out . . . not lighten up; don’t stop and listen . . . change the channel . . . steer clear . . . and whatever you do, don’t pull up a chair and sit down.”

Don’t let the roots of your life go down into the counsel of the ungodly.

Eventually, as the Psalmist will imply, it will affect the leaves and the fruit on the branches of your life.

It will impact your mind; it will impact your friendships; it will impact your marriage – it will impact your life.

So here’s what the godly person does not do . . . he doesn’t slow down, stand around or sit down with the wicked; the sinner and the scoffer.

He moves them out to the outer periphery of his life – unless he is going out there to influence them.

Now having told us what we are *not* to do, the Psalmist begins to tell us what we *are* to do; that’s for our next session together.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 10/11/2015 by Stephen Davey.

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i Charles Swindoll, *Living Beyond the Daily Grind: Volume 1* (Word Publishing, 1988), p. 5

ii David Crary, “Key to a Good Marriage?” www.ap.org

iii Lloyd John Ogilvie, *Falling Into Greatness* (Thomas Nelson, 1984), p. 17

iv Adapted from Swindoll, p. 7

v Ibid

vi Ogilvie, p. 18

vii ABCnews.com, "Billboard Turns Heads" (5/7/07)

viii Ogilvie, p. 19

ix John Phillips, Exploring the Psalms: Volume One (Loizeaux Brothers, 1988), p. 18