

Biblical Change 7 – The Source of Change

Psalm 1:1 Blessed is the man Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, Nor stands in the path of sinners, Nor sits in the seat of the scornful;
2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night. 3 He shall be like a tree Planted by the rivers of water, That brings forth its fruit in its season, Whose leaf also shall not wither; And whatever he does shall prosper.
4 The ungodly are not so, But are like the chaff which the wind drives away. 5 Therefore the ungodly shall 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 ungodly shall perish. (Psa 1:1-6)

You've heard the saying "You are what you eat." It's supposed to mean, what you take in, really becomes you and the general health of your body. I've read of some different experiments people have done with fast food. One man ate nothing but fast food for three meals a day, to see how it would affect him. He documented the changes in his body, he gained around 11 kgs, increased his cholesterol, and began having heart palpitations. But what no one denies is what you put in, is very much what you become physically.

That idea is very much what Psalm 1 is about. If you are what you eat physically, you are what you eat spiritually. Psalm 1 says, what you take in, what is the primary influence on your heart and mind, very much shapes the kind of person you will become. Two people are contrasted in this psalm: the righteous and the wicked. They have very different existences and because they drink from very different sources. The primary influence in the life of the righteous is completely different to the primary influence in the life of the wicked.

And the result couldn't be more different. The Bible gives us two pictures here of two very different kinds of organic material. One is a tree, strong, luscious, healthy, fruitful, planted by a river and always blooming. It is a picture of growth, life, health, and permanence. It is what the first word of the psalm describes : blessed. It is actually in the plural: blessings. It could be translated, "Oh, how very happy is the man" This person has his roots down, will weather the storms, keep growing, keep bearing fruit, keep becoming shade for others. This is the person who makes one thing his primary source.

The other picture is of the very lightest and most forgettable plant matter, the chaff of the wheat. This is the dry scaly casings of plants like wheat or rice or barley. It is the husk, the protective shell. It is inedible for humans, made to be peeled away, or separated by winnowing, tossed up into the air that the wind will dispose of it. Made for nothing else except to be put back into the ground as fertiliser. This is the person who makes the opposite things his primary influence, and his end is to be blown away by the judgement of God.

If you want biblical change, you need to settle on what will be your primary influence. You will begin to resemble what you love most. If you are what you eat physically, then according to this psalm, the same is true spiritually.

The psalm is going to show us the two secrets to the growing, changing, flourishing life of the righteous. And if we want to know how to have the rotting, deadening, and ultimately useless life of the wicked, all we need to is to take these secrets and do the opposite.

I. Refuses The World's Influence

The blessed, changing righteous man chooses his primary influence by negatively refusing to be influenced by those who are wicked. Look at the sets of three: who walks not in the counsel of the

ungodly, Nor stands in the path of sinners, Nor sits in the seat of the scornful; He doesn't walk, stand or sit, with the counsel, the path or the seat of the ungodly, the sinners, the scornful. There's a progression here. First you walk with people on the go. Then as you get to know them, you are willing to stand with them and converse, and eventually, you will sit with them in fellowship, share meals with them.

The righteous man does not allow unbelievers to be his primary shaping influence. They are not the ones he goes to for counsel on matters of the soul. Their path in life is not the path he is pursuing and seeking. Where they sit, their vantage point on life is not where he sits. Why? Because they are ungodly, sinners, scornful. They mock God, they act as if he is not there, they willfully violate His Word. So because the righteous man wants to please God, he doesn't let these people and their ways become his own.

Yes, he must trade with them and work with them. Yes, he must sometimes through no choice of his own, live with them. He must engage with them, and yes, he must love them. But if these people are the friends of his heart, his confidants, his counsellors, his models, his advisors, he will not be a tree planted by the rivers. It's the simple truth of Proverbs 13:20.

20 He who walks with wise men will be wise, But the companion of fools will be destroyed. (Pro 13:20)

Do not be deceived: "Bad company corrupts good morals." (1Co 15:33)

Who you would prefer to be with when you are completely free says a lot about you. It tells us what you love, what you are interested in, what you want to be like.

In today's world, it is possible to walk in the counsel of the ungodly, stand in the path of sinners, and sit in the seat of the scornful without leaving your home. Just switch on the TV, or go on the web, and there is enough promotion of evil, rejoicing in sin, glorifying of worldliness to last a lifetime. And even though you may be alone, you can make those people and their views your companions. You can laugh at what they laugh at, rejoice at what they rejoice at, believe in what they believe, listen to their wisdom and counsel, and agree with it.

And for many people, they spend hours every day in the company of such people. I'm not saying there is nothing to watch on TV or elsewhere. The point is, are those who reject God, are they your primary shaping influence? The one who wants to change into Christ's image cuts off or severely limits what kind of shaping effect the world will have on him.

You might remember the story of the boys who caught two crows. They decided they wanted their black and ugly crows to at least have beautiful voices. So they put the crows in a cage, and placed the cage next to that of a canary with a beautiful voice. Weeks went by with no change in the squawking and ugly croaking of the crows. Then one day they heard a strange sound. "Listen", said the one boy to the other. "We've never heard that before". They moved closer to hear. Their eyes went wide and they said at almost the same time –"the canary is croaking like a crow!"

The blessed, righteous man does not allow the world to be his primary influence.

II. Receives the Word's Influence

If the righteous man does not want sinners, the ungodly or the scornful to be his primary influence, what does he make as his primary influence? He does not simply avoid certain people and remove

certain influences, for then he would have a vacuum in his life. No, he takes out, but then he replaces it and fills it with his primary and key source.

2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night. 3 He shall be like a tree Planted by the rivers of water, That brings forth its fruit in its season, Whose leaf also shall not wither; And whatever he does shall prosper.

The godly man who is changing makes God's Word his delight. This is where he draws meaning, fulfillment, direction, wisdom, delight and joy from. God's Word is his living water. So much so that what is the picture given to us of the righteous man?

He is like a tree planted by the riverside. I'm sure you've seen that when driving cross country. Across a brown landscape of dead grass you see a sudden spot of green. There it is a: a tree, growing next to a smallish winding river. And as you see its green leaves in contrast to the brown deadness around, you know that this tree is in some ways cheating the odds. The rest of the landscape is at the mercy of the weather and the seasons, when the rain comes and how much comes. But that tree is oblivious to wet or dry seasons, because its supply of water does not come from the sky, but from the river it sits on. It has a permanent supply of life-giving water. The result is that not only is the tree fruitful on time, but its leaf doesn't wither. It doesn't have to endure times of dryness and drought.

This is the man whose primary influence is the Word of God. When it comes to his soul, it is evergreen. He is not at the mercy of circumstances. He can keep drawing on God's living Word to get him through the driest of times. He bears fruit, the fruit of Christlikeness, the fruit of drawing others to the Saviour. What he does prospers. He sees success in his efforts to serve God.

But the most important thing about this image is something that people miss. A tree planted by the waters is two things – it is in the water, and so the water is in it. The tree has its roots literally in the river water, and as a result, the river water is drawn up into the tree.

So the idea is, the righteous man is in the Word, but not only is he in the Word, but the Word is in him. He comes at the Word in a way that not only is he exposed to it, but it becomes a part of him.

The problem is, many people are not like a tree planted by the rivers, they are more like children splashing in the river, or picnickers dipping their feet in the water. They are in the water, but the water is not getting into them, like the tree with its roots in the water. Many Christians are in the Word in various ways, but the Word is not in them. There are plenty of ways you you can seemingly be in the Word, but the Word never really gets into you.

First is *formalism*. You can make sure you are present at every service, and there for every study, and collect all the material, and be very involved and very present, but feel as if simply doing that means the Word is getting into you. You can use your actual church attendance, involvement and membership as a substitute for actually being in the Word, as if just being present means the Word is getting into you. You become like a collector – you collect sermons and books and websites, as if the sheer number of what you are exposed to translates to getting the Word in you. You can treat the social experience of being around people you love, who are interested in the same things, and who affirm you and enjoy you, and make yourself believe that you are really in the Word and the Word is in you. But this can be a mere substitute. There may in fact be no real drinking in of the Word evidenced by the fact that there is no real meditation which follows it. You're in the Word, but the Word isn't really in you.

Another is *polemism*. *Polemics* means the art of argument or controversy, and many Christians make a practice of chasing down all those doctrines or teachings that are controversial. You meet the fellow whose whole Christian life is taken up in controversies and debates. When he isn't chasing down Calvinism and Arminianism, he is chasing down Bible version debate. When it's not that, it is eschatology and rapture positions, or Replacement Theology vs. dispensationalism, creation vs. evolution, or else it is the latest cult, or the latest heresy by some Word-Faith false teacher, or the behaviour of some prominent Christian teacher. Now I think it is vital to know your theology, know where you stand. I love theology. I know the controversies and have a position on them. It is vital to contend for the faith. It is vital to mark those who cause heresies. But if this is the bread and butter of your Christianity, I can tell you, you won't grow. Because the meat of the Word is not controversies and divisions, it is a deeper and deeper knowledge of who Christ is in all His ways. Ask yourself, the people you know who are consumed with this stuff, are they the godliest people you know? Do they exhibit the fruit of the Spirit? Would they be the people you would look to in a time of deep trial when you need Spirit-filled counsel? Or think of your own experience. As interesting as this stuff may be, have you ever really found yourself convicted of sin and drawn closer to God when you get into this? Not usually. Why? Because the nature of this kind of thing is that you can study it at arm's length. It remains abstract, it doesn't really tell me to do anything. I can study this stuff till the day is long and enjoy the intellectual pursuit of it and never draw nearer to God. You're in the Word, but the Word isn't getting into you.

A third is *activism*. Some people find an issue that comes out of the Bible, and it becomes their cause that they are always after. It might be abortion, or death penalty, or the right to bear arms, or maybe an issue that involves current affairs, like Israel and the Middle East, Islam and end-time prophecy, and for some people this becomes the one string on their banjo. Once again, I don't think those things are non-issues at all. But it is all too easy to feel that because I am able to find connections between passages in Amos and some events happening now, that I am really into the deep stuff of the Word, or because I am actually willing to take a petition to parliament about home education, that I'm really changing. But you can have the issue you are an activist for and completely ignore all the character changes God wishes to make in you. You're in the Word, but the Word isn't getting into you.

A fourth way to be in the Word but without the Word getting into you is *mysticism*. Here the believer looks for an experience, where something from the Bible will trigger an experience of the presence of God that will bring him deep joy, and assurance that he is right with God. So he measures the value of a sermon by how much it 'touched him'. And he can go away with very little change, of course. All the time he is looking for some experience, he is ignoring the kind of disciplined and concrete changes he needs to make in his life. He is waiting on the experience to supposedly change him automatically. The Word of God is more like a magic amulet which he hopes will come alive under certain circumstances.

Now I believe in a real and good kind of mysticism – where we seek God in His Word, and trust His Spirit to open our eyes to His glory, and we leave it to Him what that will be, when it will be, and how intense it will be. But we do not live like junkies waiting for our next spiritual high, and feeling that something failed because we didn't get kicked into ecstasy during the sermon. That kind of attitude will again deceive you because you will be in the Word, but the Word won't really be in you.

A fifth way is *legalism*. This is where we want every time in the Word to provide us with some very clear do's and don'ts, which we can tick off and feel we are on the right side of God's favour. So you find the person who quickly turns his whole Christian life into a list, and sticks to standards of

personal holiness, and separates from the world, and feels this is change.

I think you should adopt standards of personal holiness. I think you should draw clear lines between your life and that of the world's. I think you should have it clear in your mind what you do and don't do. But if this is all your Christianity becomes, you are not really letting the Word get into you. The Word just becomes a kind of verificational tool for your personal standards.

A final way of doing this is *therapeutism*. This is the person who feels every sermon and every meeting should bring out our inner feelings, soothe us and encourage us. She actually talks a lot about change, but the change she has in mind is a change that will affirm us and motivate us. She talks mostly about how people are hurting, and how those people need to be healed. And so everything revolves around healing those hurting people. But what she doesn't see is that she has a saviour-complex, and isn't interested in personal change. She just wants the Word to provide therapy for hurting people. In the Word, but the Word is not in her.

Each of these is a replacement. I get to keep my own sinfulness at arm's length, while feeling that I am dealing with it. I get to feel as if I am serious about the Word, while not allowing the Word to confront my heart with my idols. I get to stay in control and I remain independent. And probably worst of all, my self-righteousness grows.

What then does it mean to be in the Word and to have the Word in you? Look at your text again:
2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night.

The key here is the attitude to the Word and the consequent action. This man delights in God's Law. He does not simply try to use the Word to settle theological scores, or to satisfy curiosity about the future, or to trigger a personal religious high, or to affirm his self-righteousness, or to do pop psychology. Those are not a delight in God's Word, they are a delight in something else.

The godly man delights in God's Word because it is the Word and will of his Father. Because I love God, I love His thoughts. When couples are courting, the one thing they long for and wait for is letters, words from one another.

You will delight in the Word, when you are deliberately seeking to know and love God Himself. When you are not keeping Him at arm's length, and talking around God, and dealing with things tangentially connected to God, but when you draw near to God (Jas 4:8). Remember Psalm 139? Stop running from God. He already knows you. So come to His Word not as a tool for something else, but as His letter to you.

Isn't it fascinating that we have these multi-billion dollar programs like SETI, which are scanning the cosmos for radio signals from supposed alien civilisations, while we hold in our hands a book, with over 783 137 words in the English translation, from the Creator, from the Triune God of the Universe.

The attitude is one of delight because it is God's Word. That leads to the action.

And in His law he meditates day and night.

When you love God's Word because it is God's letter to you, the response is to meditate on it continually. This is how you are not only in the Word, but the Word gets into you.

What does it mean to meditate? The Hebrew word actually means to mutter, to chatter. The idea is someone talking to himself about the Word of God. He is having a conversation with the Word,

where he begins to almost talk quietly to himself about what he is reading or thinking.

Now our problem is not that we are strangers to meditation. Anytime someone is worrying, he is meditating. Anytime someone is stressing, she is meditating. When a man sits and frets, and nurses his resentments and plans his revenge, he is meditating. When someone tortures himself over past decisions, and stewes in his own guilt, he is meditating. He is taking a single thought, and working it through his mind from every angle, chewing on it, squeezing out every last drop of thought on that one topic. When you worry, fret, brood, envy, resent, you are meditating, but meditating on the wrong thing.

We know how to meditate. But it is getting harder, and rarer. In 2010 Nicolas Carr wrote a book called, "The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brain". Carr looked at a lot of research and found that the habits people are picking up online, that is jumping from page to page, clicking on links, briefly scanning pages, checking emails, checking brief Facebook posts, jumping to another page, were in fact making it very hard for people to concentrate on longer stretches of text, listen to extended arguments, or patiently work with one book. So that even when people were away from the Internet, they kept acting as if they were still online. What some of the neuroscience suggested was something called *plasticity*: that our brains actually respond and are shaped by the way we use them. If we keep using them for quick little bits of info, an an interrupted, multi-tasking kind of way, then those parts of the brain that are good at that strengthen. But correspondingly those parts of the brains that do things like deep thinking, constant attention, patient reflection, contemplation, weaken. Any thought process that requires long focus on one thing is being destroyed.

Now it doesn't take long to think what kind of thinking meditation refers to. It clearly refers to that kind of thinking which focuses on one thing, and thinks it through for long, undistracted periods of time. And I'm going to suggest to you that if you don't master these technologies, and gadgets and apps and websites, they will master you. They will not only crowd out any time you do have for meditation, but if you let them take over, they will destroy your mind's ability to meditate at all.

To be a tree planted by the waters is to resist the continual call to check the update, and respond to the beep, and keep bouncing from link to link, story to story, clip to clip. It is to give yourself enough time to take a truth from the Word of God and think it through. That means you need time, and the discipline to not allow anything to intrude on your time. Whether it is morning before work, or on the way to work, with no radio playing, or at night, you need to take time to do nothing except think about what God has said to you in His Word. It might help you to take time to write. You do that when it comes to business plans. You do that when it comes to thinking about your family, or your relationships. What if you did it with the Word of God?

If you did it enough, this is what would happen. Scriptural thoughts become a kind of backdrop for all your other thoughts. Scriptural truth becomes the lens through which you see all other thoughts. Truths about God, His Gospel, who you are in Him, His plans, work their way into all your other thoughts. That's what the psalmist means when he says the righteous man meditates on God's law day and night. It is not that the man has no other thoughts. But since he takes time to deeply drink in the Word, it weaves its way in and out of all his thoughts.

When this psalm was written, the average believer didn't have a personal copy of the Bible at home. But what they did have, and what they heard when they went to corporate worship, they treasured up, internalised, and thought about when they were ploughing the field, milking the goat, making the leather, spinning the cloth. I am fearful that we may soon be a culture of people who have more

Bibles in more formats than any other culture in history, but be the people least able to read it.

Charles Spurgeon said, “Why is it that some Christians, although they hear many sermons, make but slow advances in the divine life? Because they neglect their closets, and do not thoughtfully meditate on God's Word. They love the wheat, but they do not grind it; they would have the corn, but they will not go forth into the fields to gather it; the fruit hangs upon the tree, but they will not pluck it; the water flows at their feet, but they will not stoop to drink it. From such folly deliver us, O Lord.”

The ungodly, according to the last part of this psalm are weightless. *4 The ungodly are not so, But are like the chaff which the wind drives away. 5 Therefore the ungodly shall 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 ungodly shall perish. (Psa 1:1-6)*

They have given their lives to what is futile and empty, and so in the Last Judgement, they will not stand. God's righteous judgement will destroy them, the way of the ungodly will perish. As powerful and illustrious they may see in their heyday, before God they are weightless, useless. They will appear before him empty-handed, and worse, without the merits of Christ.

But, O how happy is the man who shuns this world as his primary influence. Instead, he loves God, so he sinks his thinking into God's Word, until it becomes his constant companion for all he does. This man will change in to the image of Jesus Christ.