

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;
But his delight is in the law of the Lord,
And in His law he meditates day and night. (Psalm 1:1-2)

These opening words from the first Psalm warn us against bad company. The man who is blessed by the Lord does not walk in the counsel of the ungodly. He doesn't take advice from those who have no regard for God's Word. Instead, he meditates on God's law. That is to say, he meditates on the entire teaching of Holy Scripture, both God's commands as well as his promises, continually applying them to himself. He doesn't stand in the path of sinners, hanging out and partying with those who only want to satisfy their own passions while ignoring the only thing that can give them a good conscience. He doesn't sit in the seat of scoffers. He doesn't desire to be liked by those who think they are so funny because they don't take God's truth seriously. Instead, he seeks the fellowship of the saints who call on the name of the Lord and are not put to shame.

As the Apostle Paul says, "Bad company ruins good morals." Don't find your refuge with unbelievers. Don't let the world influence you. Instead, seek out Christian friends, those who love God's Word and will keep you focused on the one thing needful. This is good counsel.

And yet, unless we understand what good company truly is, then this counsel amounts to nothing other than a judgmental attitude toward those whom we deem to be less desirable. The Scribes and Pharisees heard from this Psalm that a man was blessed when he didn't hang out with sinners. But they missed the whole point of the Psalm. The Psalm goes on to describe the blessed man as planted by rivers of water and bearing fruit. This isn't describing someone who is good simply because he avoids hanging out with the wrong crowd. No, he is righteous, because he has been planted by God. God has declared him righteous. God has established him by his grace. God has given him faith to trust in his promise. Though the man is by nature ungodly, sinful, and scornful, God has sought him out. God has redeemed him. God has embraced him, turned his heart, and planted him in good soil. And God continues to bless him with his mercy.

We all, by nature, walk in the counsel of the ungodly, stand in the path of sinners, and sit in the seat of scoffers. By our own powers we can't do anything else. Sure, we might manage to polish these things up. Perhaps the counsel comes from someone with a PhD or some other sort of dignified expert. The company we keep might be made up of seemingly responsible people who can hold jobs, perhaps even attend church and probably don't beat their children. But unless God gives us his counsel, sets us on his paths of righteousness for his name's sake, and welcomes us to sit and dine with him, then we remain utterly lost. We can boast in the company we keep, listen to songs describing our kind of people, and take pride in our good stock. But if we don't see ourselves as sinners who need to be sought out, embraced, and planted by our Lord, then we are no better than anyone we might deem bad company.

When the Scribes and Pharisees saw Jesus welcoming tax collectors and public sinners, they couldn't recognize what God was doing. Luke records that the tax collectors and sinners came close to Jesus in order to hear him. That is to say, they came to meditate on his Word, which he was teaching them. His instructions were their delight. By his Word, Jesus called them to repentance. He forgave them of their sins. He gave them faith to lay hold of this forgiveness. He planted them with rivers of living water, and he was continuing to nurture them. This is what the Psalm is talking about. It is describing what God's Word does. It blesses those who would otherwise be completely lost, ungodly, disgraceful sinners. It plants them firmly upon the solid ground of Christ and his righteousness.

And this is the good company. It is the congregation of those who hear their Shepherd's voice. It is the company of those who mourn over their sins and find their only refuge in Christ. They might have some poor manners. They might lack all sorts of social skills. They might have problems you'd rather not hear about. But they are taught by God. His Word has led them to recognize the sin of their hearts. God's Word has given them repentance and faith. And for this, there is great joy in the company of God's angels.

But again, the Scribes and Pharisees couldn't recognize this heavenly company. Instead, they judged only with worldly, uppity judgment. "This man," they say, "receives sinners and eats with them." They can't rejoice in what they are seeing, because they are blinded by their own hardened hearts. They dwell in their own echo chambers, imagining they are receiving some good counsel and wisdom. But there they stand, condemning themselves while they hate those whom God has declared righteous. There they sit in the seat of the scornful, mocking the very Lord who knows the way of the righteous. And as long as they sit and grumble, they can't know the joy of the angels. They can't know the joy of God himself. And they won't be able to stand in the congregation of the righteous. They will perish as they imagine that their friends are good people.

When we can't recognize what truly makes for good company, when we can't acknowledge that there is no greater blessing than to be a part of the company of those who plead guilty of their sins and claim only Christ and his righteousness as their inheritance before God, then we are no better than the Scribes and Pharisees. We are left with nothing but worldly, shallow cliques. Such cliques might share some moral values and have other wholesome things in common. But they are void of God's blessing. God's Word of grace becomes less and less part of their conversations. And they lose the ability to rejoice in what gives God and his heavenly angels joy.

But how does Jesus respond to this grumbling? He invites them to rejoice. He tells of a shepherd who has a hundred sheep and loses one. He leaves the other ninety nine in the wilderness and searches for that lost sheep. He finds it and then puts it on his shoulders, inviting his fellow countrymen to rejoice with him. He tells of a woman who has ten coins and loses one. She sweeps the house and lights a lamp until she finds it, and when she does, she rejoices with all her friends. How often do we rejoice over finding even the smallest things we had lost? Much more is the joy God has when he welcomes those who have gone astray like lost sheep. Christ himself bore the burden of our sin on his own shoulders. Christ himself swept through the filth of our sin, and he shines the light of his gospel into the darkness of our sinful hearts. Christ himself rejoices to find what has been lost.

So rejoice with him! Jesus finally tells a parable of two sons, one responsible and the other wasteful. The younger son asked for his share of his dad's livelihood, left for a far-off country, and squandered it all. He was walking in the counsel of those who cared nothing about God's Word. He was standing in the path of slavery, and he was sitting in the seat of pigs. He had nothing. And as he headed home, hoping to become his father's hired servant, his father saw him from a distance, ran up to him, and embraced him. The father heard his son's confession of guilt, but he wouldn't hear anymore of his talk about being one of his slaves. He forgave him. He threw a party for him. He clothed him in new clothes. He invited everyone to rejoice, because he had found his lost boy.

Here is the company God wants us to seek. It is the company of those who were lost and then found, who were dead in their trespasses and sins but made alive in Christ Jesus. The older son wouldn't join this joyful company. He was angry. After all, he already had good friends. He didn't hang out with the wrong crowd. He did all the right things. But no matter how good he thought his company of friends was, he couldn't experience the joy he witnessed that day at his father's house. He resented his brother, and he resented his father for embracing him.

But how did this father respond? The same way Jesus did with those who grumbled against him. He welcomed him to rejoice. He doesn't treat him simply as a slave who does a good job staying out of trouble. No, he treats him as a son. All I have is yours, he says. You have always been with me, he says. This is the company that matters. It is to be with your forgiving, merciful, compassionate, and generous Father. It is to dwell in his grace, embracing his Son through faith, planted by his Spirit in the waters of your baptism, and rejoicing with all those who have been granted repentance and life.

If you have friends and good company, remember that there is nothing you have that you didn't first receive. Don't boast in your own ability to make friends. All good things come from God. And the greatest and most blessed company, which shares the joy of all the host of heaven, is the congregation of those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered, against whom the Lord counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. Amen.