

**“Christian Education & Growing Solid, Rooted Christians”**  
**November 17, 2019**  
**Faith Presbyterian Church – Evening Service**  
*Pr. Nicoletti*

This evening, as we think about the role of Christian education in the life of the Church, we will be looking together at Psalm 1.

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this evening.

<sup>1:1</sup> Blessed is the man  
    who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,  
nor stands in the way of sinners,  
    nor sits in the seat of scoffers;  
<sup>2</sup> but his delight is in the law of the LORD [the law of Yahweh],  
    and on his law he meditates day and night.  
<sup>3</sup> He is like a tree  
    planted by streams of water  
that yields its fruit in its season,  
    and its leaf does not wither.  
In all that he does, he prospers.  
<sup>4</sup> The wicked are not so,  
    but are like chaff that the wind drives away.  
<sup>5</sup> Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
    nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;  
<sup>6</sup> for Yahweh [the Lord] knows the way of the righteous,  
    but the way of the wicked will perish.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

Let’s pray ...

[Prayer]

Our sermon will be a bit shorter this evening, as we have also been blessed tonight to hear Mr. Miller’s report and receive the special offering, and we have yet to hear from the Covenant Choir at the end of our service.

But of course we will still spend some solid time in the Word of God, because to gather in order to focus on Christian education and then neglect the Christian Scriptures as we do so, would be in a very real way to miss the point altogether.

That said, as we consider our relationship to Christian education as a church this evening, it is helpful for us to consider what the challenge is that we are seeking to meet, what solution the Word of God directs us to, and what results we hope to see. And if that is what we want to consider, then Psalm 1 is an excellent text for us to look at.

Psalm 1 is about the kind of people – the kind of Christians – we want to grow. Of course its words apply to Christians in all sorts of situations and stages of life. But this evening, with our

focus on Covenant High School and Christian education, we will look at what Psalm 1 has to tell us specifically about trying to grow covenant children into solid, rooted Christians.

And to that end, we will consider tonight what the challenge is, what the solution is, and what the results should be.

So first, let's consider together what the challenge is.

What Psalm 1 tells us is that the world around us desires to make us (and our covenant children) rootless and substanceless. The world desires to make us, and our children, and all people really, rootless and substanceless.

We see the active outreach of the world in verse one. In the second, third, and fourth lines of verse one we see an example of Hebrew poetry in which each line is parallel, but each line adds to the intensity.

In the Hebrew wisdom literature of the Bible, the wicked, the sinners, and the scoffers were not just interchangeable synonyms for the same group. They represented intensifications of human rebellion. The sinners were worse than the wicked. And the scoffers were worse than both. [Kirkpatrick, 2; Collins, 42]

We get the sense that each group is not only actively recruiting, but also passing people up from one level of rebellion to the next. There is something of a multi-level curriculum here in worldliness. One begins by learning from the wicked, then moves up to be taught by the sinners, and finally graduates from there to be instructed by the scoffers.

And as the rebelliousness of the instructors intensifies, so does the attention of the one who listens. One *walks* with the wicked, but then one ceases to walk and simply *stands* with the sinners, and finally one *sits down* with the scoffers.

The sense we get is that the world is actively seeking to instruct all who are in it, in its ways.

And as we think about that, we should press back against the stereotypical ways that we tend to think that this works. When it comes to our children, we can far too easily think of this in terms of overtly pagan or hedonistic peers, or outspokenly atheistic teachers. And of course peers can be unbelieving influences, and non-Christian curriculum and teachers can work to undermine someone's faith. But that is far too narrow a way to think of Psalm 1:1.

*The counsel of the wicked is all around us. The way of sinners is everywhere. The seat of the scoffers is offered in innumerable places.*

You can't box these things out, nor is the righteous man in Psalm 1 blessed because he found a way to wall off all those things. He is blessed because he has refused to walk in the counsel of the wicked ... he has refused to stand in the way of sinners ... he has refused to take that seat among the scoffers.

He didn't escape those offers, he resisted them. And so he is blessed.

And we cannot escape them either. They are all around us. They are in our relationships, in our workplaces, in the news we read, in our entertainment, in our social media – they are everywhere. The world is recruiting.

And as they recruit ... we might ask: What are they making us into?

Well, verse four tells us. They are making us into chaff. They are making us substanceless and rootless.

In verse four we read that the wicked – that those who conform to the instruction of the world – are like chaff that the wind drives away.

The chaff is the husk of the grain that is separated from the kernel on the threshing floor. And after the kernel had been separated from the chaff, the kernel would be heavier and the chaff would be lighter, and so the wind would often blow the chaff away. This was possible because the chaff was so light and substanceless.

The psalmist tells us that that is the result of the work of the world on an individual. It makes us substanceless and easily blown about by the wind.

What does that mean? Well, in short, it means that it makes us into people without a foundation. It makes us into people without a grounding. The world desires to make us into people who can be easily blown about by the winds of the world. Chaff does not resist the wind, but goes along with it.

The world seeks to make us into light and hollowed out people. People who do not resist its directions or temptations. People who do not stand against its ways. Various factions of the world around us want to make us people who are easily controlled to ... maybe buy what they want us to buy ... or do what they want us to do ... or support the political tribe they want us to support. It's not really a grand conspiracy of any kind, it's just the natural result of sinful human beings trying to get what they want from others. It tends to try to turn those others into substanceless chaff, easily manipulated.

What is particularly distressing about that though, is that that rootlessness and substancelessness, when it has shaped us to our core, can then last into eternity. In verses five and six we read that the weightless and substanceless of the world will not stand in the final judgment, but will perish. They will have rejected their Maker, they will have rejected his provision for them, and their intentional alienation from him will continue from this life into eternity.

The world, through various means and in various ways, seeks to instruct us. It seeks to shape us – to train us. It seeks to make us into rootless and substanceless people that will go with the flow of the culture around us. It seeks to make us into those who will choose alienation from God.

This is the challenge that all of us face of course. We face it in every aspect of our lives. In every avenue through which we interact with the world, we are being called to walk in the counsel of the wicked – we are being called to enroll ourselves in the education of the world, whose classroom is everywhere.

That is the challenge we face. But for our topic tonight we must note that that is particularly the challenge we face when it comes to the covenant children of Christ's church – both those in our

congregation and those in other congregations in our area. The next generation of the Church is being raised up, and as with *every* generation, the world seeks to recruit them. The world seeks to teach them its ways. The world seeks to shape them into light and rootless chaff that will blow wherever it tells them to go.

*That* is the challenge.

What then does Psalm 1 tell us should be our response?

What we can learn from Psalm 1 is that our calling as the Church is to help growing covenant children to be grounded and rooted in God's truth, in every way that we can.

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This is, of course, what we promise to do for every child baptized into our congregation.

Here at Faith, at every baptism of a new infant member, the congregation is asked to take a vow to assist the baby's parents in Christian nurture of that child. And we reply together by promising to do just that. Beyond that, as a part of the extended body of Christ, we desire not only to help nurture and grow the covenant children in our own congregation, but those beyond our walls as well.

And so, how do we do that? How do we act faithfully as the Church to help grow and nurture covenant children who are grounded in God's truth?

Well there are many answers to that. But one is that we as a church have dedicated ourselves to supporting Christian education in general, and to founding and running Covenant High School in particular.

Covenant High School is the largest ministry of our church by far. And that is fitting for a congregation interested in the nurture of covenant children, and the future of Christ's Church. Covenant High School is one way that we seek to come alongside Christian parents and to truly assist them in the Christian nurture of their children.

Because in order to flourish amid the challenges of this world, covenant children need to be grounded in God's truth, as we see in Psalm 1.

At the heart of Christian growth and nurture is the Word of God. We see that in verse two. Rather than draw close to the counsel of the wicked, the way of sinners, or the seat of scoffers, the blessed man does not just avoid such influences, but he actively pursues their opposite. He actively seeks after and delights in the law – the Word, the truth – of the Lord. He meditates on it day and night.

The truth of God lies at the heart of the path that is blessed. And making God's truth central is one of the great blessings of Christian education.

And the ways God's truth should be central in Christian education are hard to exhaust.

Of course we study God's word in Bible classes and in chapel. But that's only the beginning. When we study the natural world through math and science, we are reminded that we are studying the world that God has made, and that it, in some way, reveals who he is.

When we study history, we are reminded that we are learning about the ongoing back-and-forth between the City of God and the City of Man played out over the centuries and superintended by God's providence.

When we study literature and the arts, we are reminded that we are looking at the creations of humans who are both made in God's image and fallen, and in all such creations we can see or hear both the results of the fall, and the beauty of the world that points to its Maker.

In gym class students cultivate healthy bodies while remembering that God gave them their bodies and they are good things to be stewarded well.

In the hallways and in the lunchroom, in house activities or student clubs, God's call to love and kindness is encouraged, lived out, and displayed, helping students build habits of walking in the love of the gospel.

God's truth is to be foundational to everything that happens at a Christian school.

In all these ways, Christian education is to help our covenant children to meditate on God's truth at all times.

Psalms 1 calls us in verse two to lay hold of and meditate on God's truth. And then, verse three tells us that as we do that, we will be deeply rooted. The Hebrew term used in the second line of verse two emphasizes that the tree is not just near streams of water, but that it is "firmly planted" [Delitzsch, 85] and that its roots have gone "deep into the ground." [Hakham, 4]

Clinging to the word of God, one becomes deeply and firmly rooted, and thus experiences the approval of God. We see that in verse six.

It says that the Lord – that Yahweh – "knows" the way of the righteous, but again, the sense of that is much stronger than mere awareness. It means that the Lord not only approves of such a way, but associates himself with it. The Lord identifies himself with those who have rooted themselves in his Word.

At the heart of all of this is our relationship with God. And so, we might rightly ask ourselves what the relationship should be between education and our relationship with God.

Saint Augustine discusses this in Book V of his *Confessions* (which is actually part of the curriculum at CHS).

There, Augustine notes first how much intelligence and intellectual power the Lord has given to many non-believers, and how with it they have learned and discovered many things about the world.

An example he focuses on is their ability to predict both the timing and the scope of an eclipse well before it happens. They know all these things about the world ... but they do not know the One who made the world.

And so, when an eclipse happens, and they have forecasted it beforehand, he writes that “People think [that it is] wonderful: those who are ignorant of such matters are dumbfounded, while the experts strut and make merry. In their impious pride they draw away from [God] and lose [his] light, because these scholars who foresee a future eclipse of the sun long beforehand fail to see their own [eclipse] in the present,” because they fail to inquire from Whom it is that “they have received the very intelligence which enables them to inquire into these phenomena.” [V,3,4]

He goes on: “Many true statements do they make about creation, but they do not find the [One] who is artificer of creation because they do not seek him with reverence.” [V,3,4]

Finally, he says: “Someone who knows enough to become the owner of a tree, and gives thanks to [God] for the benefits it brings him, is in a better state, even if ignorant of its height in feet and the extent of its spread, than another who measures and counts all its branches but neither owns it nor knows its creator nor loves him.” [V,4,7]

Augustine’s point is that those who know God know the Maker of all that is around them, and they will one day inherit the earth that God has made, regardless of how well they understand its measurements and mechanisms.

Many who do not know God can tell us a lot about the measurements and mechanisms of this world ... but they do not know the One who made it, and they do not stand to inherit it.

Augustine is reminding us of the obvious fact that the first individual is in a much better position than the second.

That said ... the truth that lies at the heart of good Christian education is that the most blessed man is the one who has both gifts – the one who knows the One who made the world, who studies and understands its ways, and who stands to inherit it one day from Christ.

The goal of good Christian education is to grow Christians who possess all three blessings.

We want them to know the God of the universe who made all that is.

Then, because the world is God’s creation, we want them to know and to study this world – in the sciences, the humanities, the arts, and beyond.

And finally, we want to grow Christians who will trust in the Christ, and who will therefore, when he returns, stand to inherit the very world that they have studied.

And so, the goal of Christian education is to grow covenant children into solid, rooted Christians, who know how to walk with God *and* how to live well in this world.

That said, as we pursue these things in Psalm 1, what results do we hope to see?

Psalm 1 gives us three results of such grounding in God’s truth – results that we should be aiming for, working towards, and expecting by God’s grace.

In Psalm 1 we see that those rooted in God’s truth:

- persevere, themselves,

- provide refreshment and blessing to others, and
- press into the world around them.

They persevere, themselves, they provide refreshment and blessing to others, and they press into the world around them.

Let's briefly consider those three results.

The first result we see is that those rooted in God's truth persevere, themselves.

We see that in the fourth line of verse three. The tree firmly planted by streams of water – its leaf does not wither. In other words, it perseveres – it continues in life, rather than shriveling up in death.

One of the chief goals of Christian education is to strengthen and nurture covenant children so that they will persevere in the faith.

We recognize that we live in a world that is dry in and of itself – just as we discussed this morning. And not only that, but that same world wants to draw our children away from the very streams of water that will keep their leaves from withering – that will keep them spiritually alive. And we know that eventually, our covenant children will need to be the ones who resist such temptations themselves. And so, one of the aims of nurturing and discipling covenant children, which is taken up in Christian education, is to help them be firmly planted by streams of water so that they will persevere amid the spiritual deserts of this world.

The first result of being firmly rooted is perseverance.

The second result of being rooted in God's truth is that those who are, provide refreshment and blessing to others. And we see that in the third line of verse three: they yield fruit in its season.

And what is key to understanding the significance of this line is that trees don't provide fruit for themselves. They don't produce fruit so that they can enjoy them or be nourished by them – they produce fruit that blesses and nourishes others (and that also makes more trees). [Collins, 47]

So, while the ways of this world make people into chaff, which has no nutritional content for anyone else, being rooted in the truth of God makes people bear fruit that will bless and nourish others.

And so one of the results of covenant nurture and of Christian education is to grow Christians who will be a blessing to those around them. At a Christian school, students are not only to learn facts and skills, but are also to learn what to do with them. They are not only given information, but they are to be immersed in a Christian culture that teaches them to bear fruit for the specific purpose of blessing others. In a world where we are so often taught to look out for, and to work for, and only be true to ourselves, Christian education is to grow Christians who seek to bear fruit that will bless others.

So, being rooted in God's truth grows Christians who will persevere in their faith and who will provide blessings to others.

Third and finally, covenant children rooted in God's truth are to press into the world around them.

Psalm one verse two seems to pretty clearly point back to Joshua chapter one verse eight, and the events leading up to the conquest of the promised land. [Collins, 43] And as the psalmist urges us to meditate on God's word, and then alludes to another passage of Scripture, it is reasonable to assume that he would like us to go back and see how that Scripture might enrich our understanding of this one.

As you may remember, there were two generations that were each called to press into the promised land against the soldiers of Canaan. The first generation refused under Moses. The second generation obeyed under Joshua.

And the reason the first generation refused, back in Numbers thirteen was, they said, because "the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large" [Numbers 13:28], while the Israelites in comparison seemed to themselves to be "like grasshoppers," they said [Numbers 13:33].

In other words, the first generation of Israel refused to press into the world of Canaan because they felt substanceless while their worldly adversaries seemed solid and fortified.

In the second generation, as God calls Joshua to the conquest of the land, he urges Joshua to meditate on his Word day and night.

And then Psalm 1, drawing on that same command, tells God's people that when they are rooted in God's law, *they* are the ones who are solid and fortified, while those in rebellion against God are the ones who are like substanceless chaff blown by the wind.

In other words, it is a constant temptation for God's people to see the enemies of the Church as strong and fortified while the people of God are seen as weak and feeble, like grasshoppers. But when we meditate on God's truth, we begin to see that it is the world in rebellion against God that is without root or substance, and the people of God founded on God's Word are the ones that are firmly planted and strong.

And so Psalm 1 reminds us that the purpose of Christian nurture, and therefore the purpose of Christian education, is not merely defensive, but it is also offensive. It is not merely to conserve but to advance. Like the second generation of the exodus under Joshua, our covenant children are called to press into the world around them. Properly equipped by an education that is rooted in God's Word, filled with the truths of our world that God has made, and engaged with the challenges of the culture around us, Christian education is to equip each generation of the people of God to press into the world, make disciples, and extend the kingdom of Christ.

As the Church, our desire, our calling, our responsibility, is to raise up the next generation prepared for the challenges they will face in this world, not only in the decades ahead, but also long after we are gone.

*We must equip them to persevere in the faith,* so that they can fulfill what Jesus said was the greatest command, to love the Lord their God with all their heart and with all their soul and with all their mind and with all their strength – both now and for eternity. [Mark 12:30]

*We must train them to bear fruit that provides blessings to others, so that they will fulfill the second great command, and love their neighbors as themselves. [Mark 12:31]*

*And we must train them to be bold and courageous and to press into the unbelieving world around us, so that they can fulfill Christ's great commission for his people, and make disciples of all nations. [Matthew 28:19]*

We are to do this in many ways. We are to do this at home as Christian parents. We are to do this on Sundays as the gathered church.

But one of the most effective ways we have found to grow and nurture our covenant children – so that they will be firmly planted by streams of living water, and nurtured by the Word of God – is through Christian education.

Which is why we have supported and given thanks for Christian education in general and Covenant High School in particular, for many years up to now, and why we intend to continue to do that for many years to come.

Amen.

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**This sermon draws on material from:**

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