

**Sardis Oaks**  
**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**  
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**Psalm One**  
**9-4-2016**

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; for their delight is in the teachings of the Lord; and on such teachings they meditate day and night.

They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all they do they prosper.

On Friday afternoon, I read these words, I took a deep breath, and I glanced outside through the office window. Inside the edges of a rectangular frame, I spotted six majestic oak trees. Each one so straight, so sturdy, so strong, so grounded. On most days these oaks sit atop a grassy lawn, but on Friday, they were flanked by a little stream.

Hermine's winds were blowing. Raindrops pinged on the roof, little rivers cascaded down our gutters, blades of grass flip-flopped backwards and forwards, the leaves on the trees danced; even the door on our mailbox was clattering. But those trees. Those Sardis Oaks. They stood tall and still.

Happy are those who delight in the teachings of the Lord, for they are like trees, tall, still, strong trees planted by streams of water. Happy are those who delight in the teachings of the Lord, for they are like Sardis Oaks!

The wicked are not so, but like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore, the wicked will not stand in the judgment nor the sinners in the congregation of the righteous; For the Lord watches over the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

We live in the city, so I didn't see any wheat when I looked out of our office window on Friday. But wheat has a bi-product called chaff. It's a thin casing that covers the seeds. The casing is removed when wheat is winnowed and threshed. If you've ever shucked an ear of corn at Harris Teeter and discarded the husk, you were throwing away the chaff.

When a farmer discards the chaff, it's left on the ground to the devices of the wind. Before too long it is picked up and spread to the far corners of the fields, eventually disappearing altogether. Chaff has no value. No stability. No roots.

The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

In today's lection, the Psalmist compares two paths: the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked.

I love the first part of this Psalm!!! And then I get to that last part, and I'm not so crazy about it. It feels so black and white, so right and wrong, so exact. I'm sort of hoping I'm righteous, and that my friends are too. But there doesn't seem to be a whole lot of room for error!

But maybe that makes today a good time to read this psalm. It's election season, and our country is polarized, perhaps more so than ever. And folks on every side of the aisle are staking out their claims of self-declared righteousness. Every camp is quick to point out they are full of oak trees and short on chaff, while their opponents are just the opposite.

In such an environment, it's easy for us to follow suit. After all, we're Sardis Oaks! Good, righteous, wonderful, God-fearing people. And in such an environment it's easy for us to read Psalm One as a litmus test for righteousness. As you walk the tight-rope of righteousness, be sure to choose wisely...for one false step, one wrong check of the box, one moment of imperfection, will send you teetering over the edge. And woe be unto chaff!!!

In such an environment, Psalm One is turned into a black and white text. The righteous are rewarded, and the wicked are punished. And when this type of theology is implemented, innocent children are discarded, immigrants are dehumanized, prisoners are denied grace, and strangers are turned away.

And when this type of theology is implemented, it makes us read a wonderful text like Psalm One, and react with words like, "ugh" or "ew" or "no thanks!"

So here's this morning's challenge: How we can reject a "litmus-test" reading of Psalm One and replace it with a reading that uses intelligence, compassion, and hope? And how can we make this text want us to shout, "Amen," or "Hallelujah," or "Yesssss!!!" And how can we do all of this, and STILL be true to our text?

First, we need to be smart – we need to read Psalm One within its context. Psalm One is an introduction to a book that contains 150 psalms. These psalms span the wide array of human emotion – love, hate, fear, hope, despair, emptiness, fullness, compassion, mercy, joy, anger, loneliness, desperation, exhaustion, and did I mention hope. Hope, hope, hope! Psalm One reminds us that we can follow two paths – a path that seeks to be obedient to our Creator, or a path that chooses to reject God's presence in our lives. When you read this book of Psalms, you will see that none of us stay completely on one path or the other. But when we follow an obedient path, the path that values God's presence, we will find God's love, and that love will provide us with deep, lasting roots. We shall be like a tree planted by a stream of water. Should we choose to follow another path – that path that strays from God and dismisses the value of God's presence – we may find roots, but they will not be strong – they will simply give way to turmoil, in the same way chaff blows away in the wind. If we read this text with the discerning minds that God gave us, we shall be like Sardis Oaks!

Second, we must use compassion. Psalm One is not a litmus test. And Psalm One is not an opportunity to lord our righteousness over others. Our text never makes explicit mention of how we should treat our modern day Samaritans – the LGBT community, the poor and disinherited, criminals, immigrants, and other marginalized persons. But the whole of First Testament resonates with a call to protect the orphan, the widow, and the alien – those who are society's most vulnerable. So I ask you, can we claim to be righteous and still neglect those society deems unrighteous? Can we claim to be righteous if we ignore Micah's charge to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God? Psalm One is not a three strikes and you're out kind of statement. Psalm One is a reminder of how to live in a healthy relationship with God. It is not an ultimatum. It is an open-ended invitation, soaked in grace. If we read this text with the discerning minds that God gave us, and we love our neighbors with the hearts that God gave us, we shall be like Sardis Oaks!

And finally, we must read with hope – a hope that breeds confidence in the redeeming power of our God. We will find many forks along the road of life. We'll stop to pause and consider that place in the woods where two roads diverge. Perhaps we'll be tempted to take the well-worn path – that path that leads us astray. And a few times, we'll even take it. But our hope and confidence will remind us of that remarkable God of ours – the one who will gently nudge us back onto the proper path. That God who does not slumber and who does not sleep. That God who leads us through still waters, and treacherous valleys – that one who made heaven and earth, and will provide our help. That God of ours, who is always waiting with open arms to offer a warm embrace, and open ears, to hear our humble cries. For in our hope, we know the God who IS! Friends, if we read this text with the discerning minds that God gave us, and we love our neighbors with the hearts that God gave us, and we hope with all the hope that our faith in God gives us, we shall be like Sardis Oaks.

Happy are those who delight in the good teachings of a good God. The psalmist says:

Read these texts before you. Think on them. Meditate on them. Struggle. Discern. Rinse and Repeat. For when you read these texts, when you follow their teachings, you will also value the presence of God in your life. And in the presence of a good God, you will stand tall and still and sturdy like a Sardis Oak.

May it be so! Amen.