

BENEFITS TO YOUR COMMUNITY OF YOUR SPIRITUAL FITNESS
Psalm 1:1-4 (especially 1)

INTRODUCTION:

As you probably know, I meet in a sermon-writing group with a few other ministers, one of whom is Rusty Courson. Last week, Rusty took a week of vacation to go to Ft. Jackson, SC to watch his son, Marc, graduate from basic training for the United States Army. On Tuesday, when we met to work on sermons, Rusty could not hide his pride as he described Marc's graduation.

He told us a bit about what Marc had to do to complete basic. He told us how many graduate from Ft. Jackson every year and how many graduated in Marc's class. And he told us in some detail about how, during the graduation exercises, every soldier was a picture of discipline as they walked in step and stood in formation.

For Rusty, and now for us, this was an illustration of the truth taught in Psalm 1:1 where the poet wrote:

*Blessed is the man
who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked
or stand in the way of sinners
or sit in the seat of mockers.*

We can learn a lot from Marc's experience and from Rusty's observations. Do not ever forget that the church is the army of God. Do not ever forget that we have an adversary who, Jesus said, is out to steal, kill and destroy (John 10:10). Do not ever forget that we have a commander to follow, an enemy to defeat and a victory to win.

The church of Jesus Christ must live out its life on a battleground, not a playground or a parade ground. Lives are at stake, including our own, the lives of those whom we love the most and the lives of those who live in our community. Our strength for battle, our discipline for service, our example of spiritual fitness is the best gift we can give to our community.

In the armed forces of our country, a soldier's life depends on discipline. And it is no different in the Army of the Lord. A Christian's spiritual life, his abundant life and his eternal life depend on discipline.

"Discipline" and "disciple" come from the same root – a Latin word that means "instruction". Any teacher will tell you that there must be discipline in the classroom before there can be learning in the classroom. And there must be discipline in the Christian before he can learn from his master, Jesus the Christ.

Psalm 1:1 presents a picture of the person who is spiritually fit to engage the enemy and defend the cause.

I. WALK IN STEP *“who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked”*

The psalmist says that the person whose life is truly blessed is the one “who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked.”

One of the things that most caught Rusty’s eye when he watched Marc’s graduation was the way the soldiers all marched in step. As a former drummer in the marching band, I asked Rusty if there were drummers to keep the soldiers in step. He said, “No. They listen to their Drill Sergeant.”

That raises an interesting question: Whose instructions are you following? Is it Jesus, your Commander in Chief? Is it your peer group? Is it popular opinion? Is it your physical appetites and natural desires? Just whose instructions are you following?

It can be hard to listen for and to respond to the voice of our Master. There are several conflicting voices that vie for your loyalty. There are scores of distractions that fight for your attention. There are hundreds of options that compete for your allegiance. But the good soldier stays attuned to the orders of his Commander.

If soldiers get distracted, if their attention drifts, if they start to follow a different leader and listen to different orders, they will never remain in step with one another. If each goes his own way, there will be chaos on the parade ground and catastrophe on the battleground.

I wonder, over the years, how many casualties have there been in the army of God because Christians failed to follow their leader? I wonder, how many times have we surrendered to the enemy of our souls because we found ourselves alone instead of being in the company of our unit?

The wicked are very vocal. It can be hard to tune them out. And they certainly want to set the agenda, dictate the terms and establish the marching orders for the church. But don’t listen to them. We have one Commander and we must focus on what he has commanded.

II. STAND PROUD *“or stand in the way of sinners”*

Rusty was also impressed by the way Marc and his comrades stood at attention. Everything about their posture spoke of discipline and pride. Are you proud to stand for Jesus? Are you disciplined to take a stand against sin?

Sandy gave me a list of redneck computer terms. Perhaps you've seen these.

- Window: Glass panes you look through
- Mouse: A beady-eyed rodent that cats eat
- Mega-Hertz: What you get if you don't use your legs when you lift
- Hard Drive: What cars were like before power steering
- Chip: What you munch on
- Micro Chip: What's left in the bottom of the bag
- Modem: How you got rid of the dandelions
- Lap Top: Where I enjoy my granddaughters the most

Hey, even if you are up on all the computer terms, I'll bet you might get confused by some words that don't mean what they used to mean.

- When I was young, trying to keep the kids off the grass meant trying to keep them on the sidewalk. But by the 1960's it meant keeping them off of marijuana.
- Coke used to be a drink.
- Crank was the way to start an old tractor.
- Thongs were those rubber sandals with a strap between your first and second toes.
- We used to study cells in biology – now students supposed to bring them to school. And if they do, they have to leaven them in the locker.

There are a lot of things that we now call be different terms. And it can be confusing. And we don't call sin by its name much anymore, either. In the early '70s, psychiatrist Karl Menninger wrote a book titled *Whatever Became of Sin?* His thesis was that while people still violate God's law and God's will, they do so with impunity now. They feel no shame because they do not believe they are guilty of anything.

The church has contributed to the problem because we don't talk about sin, either. We don't want to hurt anybody's feelings. We want everybody to be comfortable and to like coming here. We want to be positive, supportive and uplifting. And guilt is such a downer! So in the interest of being sensitive to the feelings of the sinners, we don't talk about sin.

Well, guess what. I checked 20 different translations of the Bible. I found a variety of synonyms used for walking in the counsel of the wicked, the evil people, the ungodly. I saw several different words that were used for sitting in the seat of the scornful, the mockers, the scoffers or simply those who have no use for God. But, with one exception, every one of the 20 Bible translations I checked uses the same word for those who stand in the way of sinners: "sinners".

(The one exception is The Message paraphrase, which really isn't a translation at all – just a rephrasing of the text in one man's own words. That paraphrase is so flippant, it is hard to take it seriously. It reads:

*How well God must like you—
you don't hang out at Sin Saloon,
you don't slink along Dead-End Road,
you don't go to Smart-Mouth College.)*

So, other than Eugene Peterson writing about slinking along Dead-End Road, every one who translated this text, calls sinners "sinners". People, there really is no other word for sin than "sin" and there is no other word for those who commit it than "sinner". I love you and I don't want to hurt your feelings. But I love you too much to lie to you about sin.

Today is Valentine's Day. I had the youth give each of you a Valentine before I began to preach. I doubt that it was very meaningful to you. You knew it was cheap. In fact it was the cheapest I could find. You knew it wasn't personal: it didn't have your name on it and I didn't even sign it. You knew it was just a token that didn't convey any care or concern or commitment to you. If you haven't already thrown it away, you will soon.

People, it is not loving to hand out cheap Valentines and it is not loving to hand out the cheap grace of a cheap gospel. There is no Good News in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus unless you know you need a savior. There is no Good News about forgiveness unless you know you have sinned. And you will never know you have sinned unless we talk about it.

Oprah won't tell you. Rush won't mention it. Neither Leno nor Letterman will warn you. No one is going to tell you that you have sinned and that if you die without accepting Jesus Christ as your savior, you are doomed to hell for eternity. We HAVE to talk about sin because no one else is going to.

There really is no other word for sin than sin and there really is no other word for grace than amazing.

The blessed man is the one who refuses to stand in the way of sinners. Let me ask you, with whom do you hang out? Who are your closest friends? I Corinthians 15:33 warns us to be aware and to beware, "*Do not be misled: 'Bad company corrupts good character.'*"

The person who does not position himself where unrepentant sinners have easy access to him, will be blessed. Who is it that is walking the streets, hanging out in the parking lots and loafing at the video arcade? It is people with nothing better to do, nothing constructive to do: bored and

idle people. People who are at work, who are studying, who are spending time with their families: these people aren't wasting their lives in laziness and idle futility. They are doing something constructive and productive.

III. **SIT UPRIGHT** *“or sit in the seat of mockers”*

A student who obeys the rules, studies for tests, is polite to others, often does not get the respect of his peers. Often, that student will be called names, will be made fun of and will be pressured by his classmates for setting a higher standard. Today, many people think its cool to ridicule and that it is funny to make fun. The Christian, the Godly person, the one who ultimately will be blessed, will have understood that it is not cool to be cruel.

I am very concerned about the lack of respect that some of our youth show to their parents...to their youth leaders...to other adults...and to one another. Psalm 1 does not leave any room for doubt: God does not honor the disrespectful but he blesses those who show proper respect to others. Have I been clear enough about that?

Have you noticed how the comedians love to ridicule traditional Christian values? Have you noticed how the media presents moral people who live ethical lives and make decisions based on principles and values? The media frames Godly people as intolerant, unloving and judgmental when, in truth, they are being intolerant, unloving and judgmental toward these Christians.

The fact is that God honors those who do not settle in with the people who mock goodness, scoff at Godliness and ridicule righteousness.

CONCLUSION:

Today is Valentine's Day. On Valentine's Day, it is traditional to give gifts to those we love. Do you love your community? Do you love your friends and neighbors? Then what is the most loving gift can you give them? Is it not your Godly example? Your Christlike witness? Your disciplined living?

The history of Valentine's Day is shrouded in mystery. There were at least three St. Valentines in church history and we are not sure which one inspired the day that bears his name. Perhaps the most popular tradition is that it was the Valentine who was a minister during the time when Claudius II was emperor of Rome. Claudius believed he could increase the number of volunteers in his army if fewer men were encumbered with family responsibilities so Claudius delivered an edict that no clergy could perform marriage ceremonies. Valentine defied the decree, performed marriages for those who were in love and he was martyred for his service to his community.

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The more like Jesus we become, even at personal cost, the more our community benefits from our spiritual fitness. The finest gift we can give to our community is our own spiritual fitness. It is a costly gift because it comes at the investment of our lives. And it is not a luxury for it is a necessity. But it is outrageously loving to our society for us to pay the price to be spiritually fit – for life!

INVITATION: #566 – *“I Am Resolved”*