

## “The Way of the Righteous”

### Psalm 1

We must exercise caution in assuming our fellow Americans are on the wrong course — or even vile — because they make different decisions about politics or social issues. That judgment is up to God.

Psalm 1 speaks of two and only two kinds of people: the righteous and the wicked. It declares that “the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.”

We might wonder how the Lord deals with people who don’t fit neatly into either category — those who are neither altogether righteous nor altogether wicked, which probably includes most of us — but this psalm doesn’t tell us. Of course, because the Lord is *God*, he can view us however he wants to, and we trust him to deal with each of us appropriately.

We get into trouble when we usurp the divine prerogative and start assigning our fellow mortals to the way of the righteous or the way of the wicked.

Consider, for example, a column that appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* after Donald Trump was no longer in office. The columnist, Virginia Heffernan, clearly not a Trump supporter, sounded surprised by the fact that a neighbor whom she called a “Trumpite” had just plowed her driveway without being asked and had done a great job.

In trying to understand this act, which she described as “aggressive niceness,” Heffernan theorized that this generous deed was freely done because both she and her neighbors were white people in an all-white neighborhood.

Gee, what's wrong with just calling it "being neighborly"? Is there any reason not to believe that a black neighbor with a snowplow might have just as generously plowed Heffernan's drive? Neighbors come in all colors.

Heffernan went on to acknowledge that she owed her neighbor thanks, but it was a reluctant admission: "It really looks like the guy back-dragged the driveway like a pro," she said. But she wondered "how *much* thanks" she was willing to give someone on the other side of the political divide.

That's a lot of freight to dump on an act of kindness!

Eventually, Heffernan cited a comment from Sen. Ben Sasse (R-Neb.) following the January 6 Capitol attack: The United States, Sasse said, "isn't Hatfields and McCoys, this blood feud forever." And, he added, "You can't hate someone who shovels your driveway."

"So, here's my response to my plowed driveway, for now," Heffernan wrote. "Politely, but not profusely, I'll acknowledge the gift move. With a wave and a thanks, a minimal start on building back trust. I'm not ready to knock on the door with a covered dish yet."

The partisan divide is not the only way in which we sort others into the way of the righteous or the way of the wicked. We do the same in judging people by how literally they take the Bible, and we do it regarding social issues over which we disagree. But political partisanship is one that often stalls or blocks efforts toward the common good.

Back in 2002, the late columnist Charles Krauthammer, who self-identified as a conservative but was often hard to nail down to any one ideology and was widely read by liberals as well, posted a column in which he said,

“To understand the workings of American politics, you have to understand this fundamental law: Conservatives think liberals are stupid. Liberals think conservatives are evil.”

Krauthammer’s point was that both groups see the other as caricatures, though he didn’t use that term in the column. This is a caricature of Danette and I by an artist at William and Nicole’s wedding three years ago. A caricature is when certain characteristics of a person or a group are exaggerated to a comic or grotesque effect. But the trouble, as Krauthammer suggested, is that both groups treat the other as though the caricature is an accurate portrayal.

He said, for example, that when conservatives say liberals are stupid, they mean this “in the nicest way. Liberals tend to be nice, and they believe — here is where they go stupid — that most everybody else is nice, too. Deep down, that is. Sure, you’ve got your multiple felon and your occasional war criminal, but they’re undoubtedly depraved ‘cause they’re deprived. If only we could get social conditions right — eliminate poverty, teach anger management, restore the ozone ... everyone would be holding hands smiley-faced, rocking back and forth to ‘We Shall Overcome.’”

Regarding liberals’ view of conservatives, Krauthammer said, “Liberals are not quite as reciprocally charitable. It is natural. They think conservatives are mean. How can conservatives believe in the things they do — self-reliance, self-discipline, competition, military power — without being soulless? How to understand the conservative desire to actually abolish welfare, if it is not to punish the poor? The argument that it would increase self-reliance and thus ultimately reduce poverty is dismissed as meanness rationalized.”

No wonder politics include so many episodes of “irreconcilable differences”!

Some aspects of these caricatures may have changed or even flipped in the current political climate. For example, liberals thinking conservatives are stupid and conservatives thinking liberals are evil. Yet Krauthammer's primary point remains the same: that we pigeonhole people who see things differently from us and assign them motivations that may be inaccurate or overstated. Using the vocabulary of Psalm 1, we are assuming our way is the way of the righteous, and the others' way is the way of the wicked.

Admittedly, we may not be able to do much about the state of the political scene, but Heffernan was talking about her *neighborhood*. And for her, the neighbor plowing snow from her driveway was an incongruity that didn't fit with the caricatures she had formed about people who voted for the candidate she didn't support, and she was having trouble getting past it.

It's easy to see how assigning evil motives to others plays out in legislative bodies, including the U.S. Congress and state assemblies. But when we get away from elected officials, many of the rest of us are in more agreement than we think. At least that's what a recent survey tells us.

The survey, titled "The American Aspirations Index," is the work of a Massachusetts-based think tank called Populace. The survey revealed that despite a widespread belief that Americans are quite divided, it's not as bad as we might think. "Across race, gender, income, education, generation, and the 2020 presidential vote, there is stunning agreement on the long-term national priorities that should come to characterize America," the survey found.

Three priorities emerged on which we agree: "high-quality healthcare as a necessity, not a privilege; an overwhelming commitment to individual rights; and upholding equal treatment for all, but not necessarily equal outcomes," the survey said.

The survey data showed that division in the country stems from intense disagreement on a small number of issues, rather than breadth of disagreement across many issues. And that small number of issues does not mean those are small issues. They include competing views about climate change, abortion, immigration, availability of high-quality education, what workers should receive from their labor, and the degree to which people should actively participate in the democratic process.

And then there was this finding: The American people don't prioritize national unity as a long-term aspiration. They do, however, privately value restoring respect for one another.

All of that is too much to process while listening to a sermon, and surveys are only as good as the questions they ask and the honesty of the responses they elicit. But perhaps we can conclude from this survey that there is enough common ground on which to build respect for one another and tone down divisive accusations.

Rather than leave it at that, let's go back to Psalm 1 and remind ourselves that its division of life lived in one of two ways — righteous or wicked — is not based on politics. Psalm 1 is not a description of what our political views should be. Rather, the psalm is a meditation on what happiness is. (The first word in the psalm is “Happy” or, depending on the translation you are reading, “Blessed,” which in the Bible, means the same as happy.) The underlying thought in Psalm 1 is that the truly blessed have values that are *God*-centered, whereas those who are not blessed are *self*-centered. In the Psalm 1 view, happiness comes not from enjoying oneself but from delighting in the teaching of the Lord.

Psalm 1's use of the word "way," as in "the way of the righteous" and "the way of the wicked," tells us that the psalm is not about a political position or a social action, but a course of life. The Hebrew word underlying "way" is *derek*, which refers to a path worn by constant walking. So, delighting in the teaching of the Lord is not an occasional meander, but a chosen route for one's journey through life. For us, that way may coincide from time to time with how we vote or what social programs we support, but it is not synonymous with either of those things. We need to exercise caution in assuming our fellow Americans who make different decisions about politics or social issues are on the wrong course or, worse, are vile. That judgment is up to God.

We can still point out things we see as clearly wrong, but in the realms of politics and social issues, we often agree on the ultimate goals. The struggle is more about how to get there than about right and wrong.

There are two ways, says Psalm 1, but we humans get over our heads when we make ourselves arbiters of who fits into which category. One thing we can do is work on seeing our neighbors as whole people rather than representatives of a conspiracy of meanness. In so doing, we can build respect for one another — whether they've plowed our driveway or not.

May the peace of God . . .

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