

WHAT COMPANY DO YOU KEEP?

Today's Text: Ps. 1: 1-6; 1 Cor. 5: 9-13

Extracts:

1. ***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. He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, ... and whatever he does shall prosper [Ps. 1: 1-3]***
2. ***I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people; yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, ... since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I have written to you *not to keep company with anyone named a brother who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner- not even to eat with such a person [1 Cor. 5: 9, 11]****

On Wednesday, 2 June 2004, HBO aired a docudrama, "Something the Lord made," which is based on the true story of a white surgeon and his African-American surgical research assistant at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, during the heydays of institutional racism in America. Dr. Alfred Blalock had returned to Johns Hopkins, his alma mater, in 1941, as surgeon-in-chief of the hospital and professor/director of the department of surgery of the medical school after over ten years at Vanderbilt University, Memphis, Tennessee. He brought with him Vivien Thomas, whom he had hired as surgical assistant in 1930. On 29 November 1944, Blalock offered to perform the first ever heart surgery to correct blood flow between the heart and the lungs of a small, frail child. In the operating room, it was Vivien Thomas who stood at his back to offer a number of helpful suggestions on the actual technique of the procedure. The success of the operation gave Blalock international fame and awards. Blalock retired in 1964 but Thomas supervised Hopkins' surgical laboratories for over 35 years. In 1976, he was made instructor in surgery at its medical school, the same year that Thomas, the black boy who had dropped out of college in 1930 for lack of funds, was awarded the honorary Doctor of Laws degree by John Hopkins University.¹

Vivien succeeded because of the company that he had kept, in spite of the enormous odds against him. So, what company do you keep? That is the subject of today's lesson. We shall use Psalm 1 as our study guide.

¹ Sources: "The Blue Baby Operation," www.medicalarchives.jhmi.edu/page1.htm; "Alfred Blalock, M.D. Surgeon, 1899-1964," www.medicalarchives.jhmi.edu/blbio.htm; "Vivien T. Thomas, Supervisor of Surgical Research Laboratories, 1910-1985," www.medicalarchives.jhmi.edu/vthomas.htm

1. We all keep company with others- by chance or by choice!

Right from the Garden of Eden, the need for company was underlined. There were millions of animals and other creations of God in that garden. Yet, there was none of them fit to keep Adam company. God said, “It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper *comparable to him*” [Gen. 2: 18]. Then, God made Eve as Adam’s wife and companion.

The important words in God’s statement are “comparable to him.” When we go in search of company, we are looking for people who are comparable to us. Therefore, to a large extent, we can be defined by the company that we keep. For example, when John the Baptist began his ministry, different groups of people came to meet him by the Jordan River to be baptized. As he preached against their vices, tax collectors and soldiers also came among them, asking him what they should do. To the tax collectors, John said, “Collect no more than what is appointed for you.” To the soldiers, John said, “Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages” [Lk 3: 7-14]. It is quite possible that the tax collectors and soldiers that met John were righteous people [after all, did they not come forward by faith to be baptized?], but the institutions that they represented carried the *stigma* of corruption and intimidation! Therefore, the company you keep matters.

Unfortunately, we all keep one kind of company or another, some of which we chose by ourselves while others were forced on us by circumstances.

a) *The company we keep by chance*

Just by mere circumstances of birth, we find ourselves classified as members of a particular company. For example:

- By the *colour of your skin*, you found yourself classified as white or black or mixed. You had no say in the matter. Your *race* has its profile and even before you open your mouth to speak, those who do not share your cultural values have already made up their minds about your person! If you watch TBN, you will find that white pastors tend to have white congregations and pastors of colour also tend to have congregations that look like themselves. Do you think that that is an accident?
- By accident of *family of birth*, you may find yourself a prince/princess or a pauper. Royalty goes with royalty. The poor goes with the poor! The family name that you answer reveals where you come from and tends to select your choices in such things as marriage or residence.
- By *gender*, you were born male or female. Without your own making, there are certain companies you cannot keep. Up to this day, female golfers cannot participate in the *Masters* tournament

because women golfers are not yet admitted into the Augusta (Georgia) Golf Club, which hosts the annual event!

b) *The company we keep by choice*

However, we do have choice over some companies that we keep. For example:

- We choose our *friends* by ourselves. Jonathan was David's best friend even when his father, King Saul, was looking for David to kill. If you look at your best friends today, you will be amazed about their variety of backgrounds, depending on how multicultural is your sphere of activities. A good friendship can be a blessing. However, some friends may lead us into street gangs or cults or secret societies which are hardly for our own good.
- We choose our *religion or place of worship*. Notwithstanding that some of us were born into a particular religion, denomination or sect, we may be able to exercise the right to change our minds along the way. Nevertheless, by our religious labels, we may be branded terrorists or targets for persecution.

No matter how we found ourselves in certain companies, whether by chance or by choice, we bear certain *vicarious liabilities*. In other words, by virtue of being members of that company, we are held accountable for the actions of every member of that group. Some Moslems were killed in Plateau State in the predominantly Christian part of Nigeria and Moslems in Kano State in the predominantly Moslem part of the country attacked *any* Christians that they could lay hands on! If that is the case, we have to worry about the company that we keep. In Psalm 1 that we shall study presently, there are two men who have chosen two different routes that lead to two different destinations, if not destinies. We shall call the first case the "Low Road," and the second one the "High Road."

2. The Low Road Company

The first man chose the low road company. Here is the profile of this company:

a) *Its members walk in the counsel of the ungodly*

An ungodly person is morally corrupt and bankrupt. S(he) does not fear God but chooses to "turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ" [**Jude 4**]. S(he) "digs up evil and it is on his lips like a burning fire" [**Prov. 16: 27**]. The lure of this group is that its members appear to be at ease and increase in riches [**Ps. 73: 12**]. Unfortunately for the ungodly, they "are like chaff which the wind blows away" and they will ultimately perish [**Ps. 1: 4, 6**].

b) *They stand in the path of sinners*

A sinner is a wrongdoer, a person who disobeys God's law, *as a way of life*. Members of this company are not ready to repent and they prevent others from doing so by blocking their attempts to do so. A gang member who tries to break ranks or to squeal to the police faces execution. A young girl who wants to remain abstinent until her marriage is laughed at and made miserable among her high school colleagues. A board member who hates bribery is excluded from key decisions. Happily, they may be able to stand in the path of sinners but not "in the congregation of the righteous" [Ps. 1: 5].

c) *They sit in the seat of the scornful*

Have you ever come across people who arrogantly disdain others? Those are the scorers, and they delight in it! They are very wicked [Prov. 9:7], incorrigible [Prov. 15: 12], and will not tolerate any rebuke or correction [Prov. 9: 7-8]. Have you come across people who only feel good about you as long as you are below them in social status? As soon as your head begins to show at their level, you are in deep trouble! All of a sudden, you wake up with wicked envy in them and all they can think of is how to destroy you. They are occupying the seat of the scornful. But God will set them "in slippery places" and will cast them down to destruction "as in a moment" [Ps. 73: 18-19].

Clearly, the low road company is not worth keeping because it will not give you the blessings of God your Father. May be you can try the high road!

3. The High Road Company

The person who belongs to this company does not walk in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of the scornful [Ps. 1: 1]. Instead, s(he) *delights* "in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates *day and night*" [v. 2]. What will be his/her reward? "He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither; and whatever he does shall prosper" [v. 3].

When Joshua took over the leadership of the nation of Israel from Moses, God spoke to him the following words:

This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success [Josh. 1: 8]

Since the word of God is a lamp to our feet and a light to our paths [Ps. 119: 105], and it is “profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” [2 Tim. 3: 15], then whoever keeps the high road company is bound to be blessed and swim in prosperity and righteousness. That is the message of Psalm 1.

4. Lessons

The following lessons are striking:

a) *It takes an act of the will*

As we had said earlier, we may find ourselves thrust into the low road company by accident of birth or circumstances. But should we remain there?

By virtue of being an African-American during the dark days of racial discrimination in America, Vivien Thomas could have remained a lowly person after dropping out of college in January 1930. Even after he had significantly contributed to the pioneering work of Professor Alfred Blalock, he was not initially recognized by the white establishment. Was he discouraged? As the movie, *Something the Lord Made [2004]* depicts it, he was at first tempted to take the low road. He went to some black colleges [to try to complete a college degree] and businessmen [to sell his ideas] but they were worse than what he had obtained through the professor. He returned to Johns Hopkins, by which time the professor had also become repentant for not giving due recognition to his surgical technician. In fact, their high road company began thereafter and the rest is history. It takes an act of the will.

It is your choice to get even or to get ahead. It is your choice to give up on gangs, bribery and corruption, sexual immorality or lying. Rahab *chose* to give up being a harlot. She gave up the company of harlots and accepted the God of Israel as her Lord and Saviour. Today, she is mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus Christ [Matt. 1: 5].

b) *It takes only one bad apple to spoil a whole bunch!*

Do not deceive yourself to hold the view that *most* of the people you move with are good. Once you are in a company, you share its gains and pains. It is like the parts of the human body. A toothache is felt by the whole body, not just the particular tooth that aches. A mere needle pinch to one of your fingers can trigger tears from your eyes and the rest of your body soon joins in “mourning!” For example, it was only Achan who had done the accursed thing when he stole treasures during the raid on Jericho. For that, the whole nation of Israel [a kind of company by nationality] incurred

God's punishment when it was defeated by tiny Ai. God told Joshua, "Israel has sinned" [**Josh. 7: 1-13**]. One bad apple can spoil the whole bunch!

This is the point that Paul made when he wrote to the church in Corinth as follows [**1 Cor. 5: 11-13**]:

I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner- not even to eat with such a person. For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore, put away from yourselves the evil person.

Your place of worship is an important company that you keep. Therefore, one bad apple there, especially if it is at the leadership level is a threat to the spiritual health and well being of its members. If you do not do something about it, God will do something about you!

5. Conclusion

In your daily walk with God, you will come across people who have made it their responsibility to divert your attention. Unwittingly, there are also many people who are watching your steps and you may be the only Bible that they may ever read. In both cases, watch your steps and where they are leading you and your company. Make sure that you do not walk in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of the scornful. That is the high road which will lead you to blessings and prosperity and salvation. To do otherwise is to take the low road which leads to destruction. It is bad enough to mislead yourself to hell. It is worse if you take others along with you.

What company do you keep?