

Fifteenth Sunday of Pentecost
(Christian Education Sunday)
September 12, 2004
Psalm 119:1-8

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

The LORD Blesses Those Who Walk According to His Law

1. Seek the LORD
2. Learn his righteous laws
3. Obey his decrees

^{NIV} **Psalm 119:1** *Blessed are they whose ways are blameless,
who walk according to the law of the LORD.*
² *Blessed are they who keep his statutes
and seek him with all their heart.*
³ *They do nothing wrong;
they walk in his ways.*
⁴ *You have laid down precepts
that are to be fully obeyed.*
⁵ *Oh, that my ways were steadfast
in obeying your decrees!*
⁶ *Then I would not be put to shame
when I consider all your commands.*
⁷ *I will praise you with an upright heart
as I learn your righteous laws.*
⁸ *I will obey your decrees;
do not utterly forsake me.*

Fellow Students of God's Word,

Now that American swimmer Michael Phelps has brought eight medals back from the Athens Olympics, speculation has turned to how Phelps will turn his gold medals into even more gold. What products will he endorse? Actually the question should be, "What *other* products will he endorse?" He's already lent his face and his voice to Speedo swimwear, Visa, AT&T Wireless, and Power Bar. Will his face appear on a box of Wheaties? Probably. Will this athlete with his finely tuned body show up on television urging us to dine on the carbs and cholesterol at McDonald's? Perhaps. I'm not sure most of us care, though. We can't help wondering whether the celebrity endorsers really believe what they're saying or whether they're just reading a script for the money.

On this Christian Education Sunday, the focus of our attention is a psalm that is also an endorsement—a ringing endorsement of the Bible. But this endorsement doesn't come from a famous person who pocketed a fat check in exchange for saying nice things about the Bible. It comes from a man who is persecuted, the object of taunts and contempt. In that dark valley of affliction, he came to see that the Scriptures are priceless. God's Word is his comfort and delight. It guides him through this life and reveals to him the joys of eternal life. Hence the endorsement. The opening verses of this psalm promise us that **The LORD Blesses Those Who Walk According to His Law.** That being the case, the psalmist urges us 1) to seek the LORD, 2) to learn his righteous laws, and 3) to obey his decrees.

1. Seek the LORD

The psalm begins, *"Blessed are they whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the LORD."* Psalm 119 is an amazing piece of poetry. At 176 verses, it's the longest of the 150 psalms. It's written in acrostic form: each of its twenty-two eight-verse stanzas begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This first stanza begins with the letter "aleph," the Hebrew version of the letter A. And in all but one of the verses of this psalm there's a reference to God's Word—his ways, his statutes, his decrees, his precepts, his law, his promises, his commands. This psalm was written by someone who loved God's Word and here he lists the reason why we should love it too.

But I'm not sure that Psalm 119 is always so widely appreciated. For one thing, it's long. It's 176 verses long. And these verses tend to be repetitious, stating the same thought in slightly altered form over and over again. But maybe what puts us off most about this psalm is that in the very first verse already it doesn't seem to be realistic. It says, *"Blessed are they whose ways are blameless..."* You read that you're apt to think, "This is not about me; I'm hardly blameless. I sin every day." And your next thought is probably, "Who are these blameless people? I don't believe I've met one."

But don't drop this psalm just yet. We do meet some "blameless" people in the Bible. In Genesis it tells us that Noah, the man God told to build the ark, was **"a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time."** And there's Job. The LORD himself said that Job was blameless. (Job 1:8) And don't forget that time the LORD told Abraham, **"I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless."** It's not that the Bible is presenting these men as

blameless in the sense that they were sinless. They weren't. That's clear from the Bible. Instead, the word "blameless" has behind it the idea of being "complete." These were men who lacked no vital feature of the Godly life. They had faith in God's promises (including his promise to send a Savior) and they lived their faith. They believed that God would give them what he had promised. Elderly Abraham believed that the LORD would give him a son. In faith Noah built the ark. In faith Job, despite his losses and afflictions, said, "**I know that my Redeemer lives.**" They were grown-up believers, seasoned veterans of the faith, tested and approved.

That's what we want. That's what we want our children to have. We want to leave our baby Christian days behind. So how do we get there? Listen: *"(They) walk according to the law of the LORD. Blessed are they who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart."* Here's the key thing about the blameless: they seek the LORD with all their heart. They want to know him better. But they don't seek the LORD by pressing their eyes tight shut and trying to find God in themselves. They seek him in his law. That's where the LORD reveals himself: in his law.

But now be advised that the psalmist uses the word "law" in its broad sense, to refer to all that God teaches us in the Bible. Sometimes when we talk about the law, we mean just those parts of the Bible where God issues commands or makes threats. But not here. Here "law" includes the gospel of Jesus, too. In fact, that's where we really find God: in Jesus. Our God is "**a God who hides himself.**" (Is. 45:15) We can't know him through our own investigating. The Bible says, "**No one has ever seen God, but God the one and only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.**" When we see Jesus, searching for the lost, blessing little children, binding up the wounded, preaching peace, then we see the Father. In Holy Baptism we find God, washing away sins. In Holy Communion we find God, absolving us of the guilt of our sins. In the Scriptures, in that glorious message of the gospel, we find the God who ransomed us from Satan's death-grip.

That's where we seek God.

When the psalmist says here, *"Oh, that my ways were steadfast in obeying your decrees,"* it's clear that he's aware that there are still some deficiencies in his faith. He isn't steadfast in obeying God's laws. In fact, the contemplation of God's law fills him with shame when he considers his sins. But he also knows God's mercy and that mercy causes him to make a pledge: *"I will praise you with an upright heart*

as I learn your righteous laws." Here's another reason for giving the Word of God a ringing endorsement: as we learn God's righteous laws our hearts are transformed from bastions of opposition to God into centers of praise for God.

2. Learn his laws

Today is the beginning of a new year of Sunday school. The Sunday school teachers are being installed. Today we're starting new teen and adult Bible classes. This past week new Bible classes met on Wednesday morning and Thursday evening. St. Peter Lutheran School and Preschool now have two weeks of their new academic year under the belt. The motivation for all this activity in Christian education is the belief that as we learn God's Word, the Holy Spirit works on our hearts. Paul says it clearly in Romans 10: **"Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word of Christ."** The Holy Spirit uses the Word to touch our consciences with the knowledge of our sins. He leads us to turn from sin in repentance. Through the gospel he pours God's grace into our hearts, so that the peace of forgiveness replaces guilt, condemnation, and the sentence of death. And when our inner life has been transformed, there will be changes on the outside, too: joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness, and self-control.

Are you a lover of learning? Some people are. They're always reading something. They have a pulsing curiosity about the way things work and they love to investigate. But not everybody's that way. For some people, school is a bad memory. Some people chafe under the classroom setting. I think we encounter the same things in Christian education. Not every child is bursting with joy at the chance to go to Sunday school. It's not unusual for the parents of confirmation class students to have to resort to strong measures to get their children to do their lessons and memory work. And it's not just young people. Some older Christians do very little to disguise the fact that they long ago lost interest in learning more about what the Bible says. I don't think that all of this can be chalked up to personality differences, though. Sure, there are pastors and teachers whose presentation skills are lacking. And there are formats for learning that we may find confining or unproductive. But within each of us there's also a sinful nature that resists learning to know God better through his Word. And, of course, the devil is happy to see this resistance because he'd do anything he can to keep the Word out of our hands. What's necessary is that we recognize our coldness toward God's Word as what it really is: ingratitude that comes from unbelief. Despising the Word is the most dangerous of sins because it keeps us away from the very source of spiritual growth and life. If the group Bible study

format with its classroom setting isn't for you, fine. Study the Bible on your own. If you can't or don't like to read, then listen to the Bible on tape or CD. But—somehow—let Christ's word dwell in you.

We have to admit, though, that all the Bible learning in the world means little if it's not accompanied by obeying what we've learned. It was Jesus who said, "**Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.**" And it says in the book of James, "**Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.**" Our psalmist understands this. That's why in the closing verse of this stanza he says, "*I will obey your decrees.*"

3. Obey his decrees

Obedience to God's decrees is a tall order. In fact, it's far taller than we can reach. If all we had were God's demands and our good intentions, we'd never be able to obey as God desires. That's why it was necessary for Jesus to come. He's the great Shepherd of the sheep. He looks for the lost and gathers the strays. He shed his blood of the covenant at the cross and the God of peace brought him back from the dead. As a result, God now credits Christ's obedience to all who trust in him. As far as God is concerned, it's as if we had obeyed all those laws ourselves. Now we're equipped for doing God's will and obeying his decrees. It's another reason for endorsing the use of God's Word: Faith in Jesus' obedience on our behalf enables us to live lives of obedience.

Martin Luther believed that in this 119th Psalm God lays out three rules for profitable study of the Bible. The first rule is prayer. Let me explain. Luther believed, correctly, that in the Bible the Holy Spirit is speaking to us through the prophets and apostles. So, if we want to understand what the Spirit is saying, if we want the Bible to be more than words on a page, we must pray that the Holy Spirit will enlighten us. Whether it's my Bible study in preparation for a sermon, or your Bible study in your home, or our Bible studies here at church, the prayer at the outset is important. You see here in this psalm how the inspired writer weaves prayers into the fabric of this psalm. Prayer and Bible study go together.

The second rule, Luther said, is meditation. It sounds so simple and so obvious: If you want to grow in your knowledge of God and become mature in the Christian faith, you must meditate on the Scriptures, really thinking carefully about what they're saying. It may be obvious, but it's not widely done. The noise and frantic pace of daily life for so many of us combine with our sinful reluctance to listen

when God speaks to render much of the Bible a closed book for us. And even when we do set out to improve our knowledge of God, we too often read about the Bible rather than reading the Bible. But nothing is more beneficial for growth in the Christian faith than occupying our minds with the actual words of God in the Bible. The Triune God is speaking to us here. What's needed is the humble resolve to listen when God speaks.

The third rule is affliction. Doesn't that sound odd? But remember, it was a persecuted man who wrote this psalm. He tells us in this psalm that he had been **"laid low in the dust"** and that **"his soul was weary with sorrow."** But rather than accusing the LORD of injustice or a failure to care for him, the psalmist confessed, **"It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees."** This isn't an encouragement to go out and look for affliction. Those afflictions will come anyway. They might come from inside of us, from our own weakness of faith and sinful inclinations. Or they could come from the outside, the scorn of those who hate Christ and his followers. But God has the last word on this. When the affliction comes, God can use it to turn us back into his Word where we search for peace and strength. If we face afflictions this way by turning to the Word, then the outcome is sure to be good. Our faith will have been strengthened through the testing.

With these opening eight verses of Psalm 119 we've heard less than 5% of the psalmist's endorsement of God's Word. I encourage you to read the rest for yourself. You can't miss the holy writer's confidence in the power and value of God's Word. And when you've read it, I hope you will be moved to ask, "How can I, how can my family, more fully reap the blessings that God promises to those who study his Word?" I know you'll be blessed as you seek to answer that question. Amen.