

**Christian Education Sunday**  
**September 9, 2007**  
**Psalm 119:9-16**

*Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke*

**God's Word Is Power for Purity**

1. Learn it
2. Live it
3. Have it on your lips

***<sup>NIV</sup> Psalm 119:9 How can a young man keep his way pure?***

***By living according to your word.***

***<sup>10</sup> I seek you with all my heart;  
do not let me stray from your commands.***

***<sup>11</sup> I have hidden your word in my heart  
that I might not sin against you.***

***<sup>12</sup> Praise be to you, O LORD;  
teach me your decrees.***

***<sup>13</sup> With my lips I recount all the laws  
that come from your mouth.***

***<sup>14</sup> I rejoice in following your statutes  
as one rejoices in great riches.***

***<sup>15</sup> I meditate on your precepts  
and consider your ways.***

***<sup>16</sup> I delight in your decrees;  
I will not neglect your word.***

Dear Christian Friends,

Our text this morning begins with a question: “*How can a young man keep his way pure?*” It’s a good question, not only for young men but also for young women and for Christians of all ages. We want to keep our ways pure. It says in the book of James, “**Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.**” (1:27) We believe that Jesus loved us and gave himself up for us to make us pure, cleansing us by the washing with water through the word. Now, rather than returning to the filth of sin, our new self wants to please God by living in purity. But how? The pull of the sinful nature is powerful. The world is awash in impurity, a landscape of lust and lies and lawlessness. And, of course, the devil is constantly at work to lure us right back into the impurity from which Jesus rescued us.

So how can we keep our way pure? Psalm 119 holds the answer: “*By living according to your word.*” The law of God is an unfailing guide for faith and life. It’s not opinion or conjecture; it charts God’s way and God’s will for us. More than that, the gospel of Jesus

Christ is the one legitimate power source for living a life of purity. The gospel of Jesus doesn't threaten or cajole us into lives of purity, as if it had to overcome our reluctance with force or flattery. The gospel is able to effect real change deep inside of us. The gospel is God's pronouncement that we are pure in his sight through Jesus Christ. It changes our hearts and transforms us into people who willing and eager to live lives of purity and righteousness.

Here in Psalm 119 we hear a believer express his desire to live for the LORD and also his express confidence that the word of the LORD is the source of power for such a way of living. His love for the LORD and his word leads him to recommit himself to studying the word and living according to it. These are good words for us to hear on Christian Education Sunday because all us, too, must regularly recommit ourselves to hearing and learning God's Word. Apathy and lack of appreciation for God's Word are ever-present threats and we're not immune. I have to believe that this is why Sunday school and Bible class participation are down here at St. Peter and why worship attendance has slipped significantly, too. The consequences of our drift from the Word will eventually show up in our lives, too, since we'll lack the power for lives of purity and pleasing God. So let's listen to the psalmist this morning and learn from him why we should recommit ourselves to the word of God.

### **1. Learn it**

Psalm 119 is the longest of the psalms. It has 176 verses. It's an acrostic psalm. That is, the first eight verses begin with a word that starts with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *aleph*. The next eight verses begin with a word that starts with the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *beth* and so on for all 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. In this stanza you can clearly hear the psalmist's desire to learn God's word. He says, "*I seek you with all my heart...teach me your decrees...I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways.*"

It's true that we can learn some things about God without ever opening the Bible. We can see his wisdom and power on display in the universe. We can also know from our consciences that God is holy and justifiably angry when we sin. But there's a whole lot more about God that we won't know if we don't study the Bible. Without the Scriptures we wouldn't know that there's only one true God. Aside from the Bible we wouldn't know that the true God is the Triune God who sent his Son, Jesus, to die for our sins and rise to give us life in heaven. The Bible is such a treasure trove for us because in it the true God reveals himself and his thoughts about us to a degree that he does nowhere else. This means that if we want to know God, then we must seek him in his Word. That's why in a psalm that is all about God's Word, the psalmist says, "*I seek you with all my heart.*" His search for God will be conducted not out in the desert or in an empty cell in a monastery or in the far corners of the universe, but in the Scriptures.

We have a lot of teachers in our congregation and I'm confident that they would agree with me that for a teacher there's no joy like teaching a group of students who genuinely want to learn. But there's also no misery like trying to teach a group of students who don't want to learn. The ideal student of the Word brings a desire to learn. He or she is

teachable with a mind that's open to what God says. Ideal students of the word also characteristically display reverence and humility before the Scriptures because of the understanding that this is God's Word and this is where God reveals himself to those who seek him. There's an eagerness to know what's inside the Bible, like a child sitting before a wrapped present on her birthday. And sitting like a bow on top of this package is God's promise, **"You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you," declares the LORD.**" (Jer. 29:13)

Then why is this so hard? Why is ignorance of the Bible a problem of epidemic proportions in the Christian church today? One survey of mainline Protestants in the U.S. revealed that barely half of Lutherans believe in the existence of the devil, but 56% said they believe in UFOs. Why is it so easy to while away an hour with a newspaper and a cup of coffee, but so hard to sit for an hour to hear or learn the Word? It's true that Americans aren't great readers anymore, but the latest *Harry Potter* volumes fly off the shelves, as did junk like *The Secret* and *The Da Vinci Code*. We're literate people, so we can only conclude that we read what we want to read. Why don't we want to read the Bible for 15 or 20 minutes a day? I think we know why. It's the perversity of human nature. We become enamored of the stuff that has no lasting value but neglect the Word of eternal life. And thus it's always been. So it's high time to see this lack of interest in God's Word for the potentially soul-destroying sin that it is and repent of it. As God forgives us for this sin for Jesus' sake, he also renews in us the determination to learn his Word, to resolve as the psalmist does here, *"I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word."*

Of course, God's intention is not simply to make us walking encyclopedias of Bible knowledge. His intention is to save us through his Word and his intention is to empower us to live for him through his Word. That's why after the exhortation to learn the Word we also hear the exhortation to live the Word.

## **2. Live it**

The psalmist writes in verse 11, *"I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you."* Here the psalmist moves from learning God's word to his desire to use God's Word in the fight against sin. Do you see your life as a believer the way the psalmist does? Is it your daily intention to follow God's commands and avoid sin? Does the realization that you have sinned by what you've thought or said or done move you to rapidly repent of the sin and seek to mend your ways? Or have we become quite comfortable with our sin? Has it in fact become a pattern that we're in no big hurry to change?

Listen to this assessment of Christianity in America today. It's by Thomas Reeves, a University of Wisconsin historian. "Christianity in modern America is, in large part, innocuous. It tends to be easy, upbeat, convenient and compatible. It does not require self-sacrifice, discipline, humility, an otherworldly outlook, a zeal for souls, a fear as well as a love for God. There is little guilt and no punishment, and the payoff in heaven is virtually certain." If we don't view the Christian life as a daily struggle against sin, as a

daily effort to live according to the Word, then it's not surprising that we aren't much interested in hiding God's Word in our hearts so that we can overcome sin.

Living a Christian life isn't easy. It's not a matter of slapping a "Christian" label on an unreformed life. The Bible describes the Christian life as warfare, a fierce struggle against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. This struggle involves constant vigilance and active resistance to the devil's schemes. And those engaged in such running warfare are well-advised to pray and to be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. That's where God's Word comes in. It is the sword of the Spirit. It is power for pure living. With God's Word as our daily companion, as we read in our second lesson this morning, the Christian is "thoroughly equipped for every good work."

But I want to be careful not to portray living a Christian life as if it were a sort of grim duty. We hear the psalmist say here, "*I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches.*" These are not the sentiments of someone who has been *forced* to live in conformity with God's Word. This is not something you say if you think that living for Christ was a wrong turn, a poor choice. This is what a believer says in the confidence that there are blessings in store for those who follow God's statutes. The idea that real happiness can be found in going counter to God's will is both false and dangerous. The truth is that when we want to do what God wants us to do, then we experience true freedom and joy.

Now we've heard the psalmist express his desire to learn God's Word. We've also heard him announce that he's committed to living according to God's Word. There's one other intention he mentions here and I think it's worth noting. He says, "*With my lips I recount all the laws that come from your mouth.*"

### **3. Have it on your lips**

When the psalmist speaks of recounting the laws that come from God's mouth, he's not talking about learning God's Word or living according to it; he's referring to speaking God's Word. It's the final stage of a progression the Bible mentions in other places like Colossians: "**Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.**" (Col. 3:16) In this progression we first of all learn God's Word, then we strive to live in keeping with it, and finally we share it with others. The sharing of God's Word can take the form of teaching it, whether that's done formally in classes for children or adults here at church or less formally in family devotions or informally in conversations with friends. Sharing God's Word is also what we do when we speak of our Christian hope to those who don't yet believe in Jesus.

But it's my impression that this last part of the progression, speaking to others what we've learned and live according to, is often not attained. We tell ourselves that we're not good at verbalizing our faith or we're intimidated by the thought of teaching others. It's true that not everyone has the gift of teaching the Christian faith, but here and elsewhere the Bible leads us to believe that having God's Word on our lips, whether here in worship or in conversation with family and friends, is a natural progression. What fills

our hearts and occupies our minds just naturally flows from our lips. Recounting what we've learned from God allows us to give voice to our faith and it builds others up in the faith.

It's not hard to spot our shortcomings as we read Psalm 119. We haven't always been eager to learn the Word of God. Nor have we consistently lived what we've learned from God's Word. And the slowness to speak God's Word is too often a malady we've suffered from, too. But this is exactly why we God's Word deserves to be such a rich part of our lives. We need the forgiveness God extends to us through his Word. We need his grace and his guidance if we are to live for him. It was, I believe, precisely this recognition that led the inspired author of Psalm 119 to write this beautiful psalm. God's Word is a great treasure. Those who know this will strive to learn it and live it and have it on their lips. Amen.