

2. Psalm 119: Obeying the Word of the Lord

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[0 : 00] Amen. We'll pray together for a moment. Teach us, O Lord, your way of truth, and from it we will not depart.

We indeed pray, dear Father, that you will teach us now and that you will give us hearts that are increasingly determined and decided. Not to depart from your truth.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, this evening we come to the second in our series of five sermons on Psalm 119.

Last week we were looking at the subject of delighting in God's words, or rather the teaching of this psalm on delighting in God's words. And tonight I want to take the theme of obeying God's words.

Now there are many individual verses in Psalm 119 which speak of either obeying God's words, or keeping his commandments, or not turning aside from his rules, or observing his testimonies.

[1 : 13] It's put in a number of different ways. In fact, I think you could say that the theme of Psalm 119 is that apart from God's words, there's no life worthy of the name.

To be under God's instruction is the only way to live. And if that's what this psalm is all about, it is in effect a wake-up call to the world.

It's saying to the worldly man, you think, don't you, that you can live without your creator's instruction. You imagine that it's perfectly right and proper and reasonable to spend your three score years and ten living as if God were beneath your notice, as if he were just like the man in the moon, a childish myth.

But he isn't. He isn't. To live under his glorious and wonderful instruction is life indeed. And this psalm is teaching us that if we want to know the real richness and joy of life in God's world, then God's words must ring in our ears day by day and fashion and change the whole course and shape of our life.

And of course, obedience is an essential ingredient in that kind of life. Now, it may be that when I use this word obedience, or the phrase obedience to God's words, possibly a shadow falls across your heart.

[2 : 37] Now, if that's the case, there could be two reasons for the shadow. The first is that you might have decided to be disobedient to God in some part of your life.

And therefore, you don't want to hear a sermon about obedience because it will challenge what your heart wants to do. Now, if that's the case with anyone here tonight, you will need to come to the Lord and face up to the problem and ask him to help you to repent and to turn from the wrong pursuit.

Of course, a crisis like that will come to all of us sooner or later. And joy will only come when we turn away from our idol. But a second reason why we might feel uncomfortable about this theme of obeying the Lord is that it perhaps sounds rather moralistic and heavy.

And Christians who are taught by the Bible are very wary, and rightly wary, of mere moralism.

Because we've come to realize, and gladly, that the Bible is a book of good news rather than mere good advice.

The emphasis in the Bible is not do all this, which would be good advice, but rather, God has done all this, which is good news.

[3 : 55] Good news about what God, in his great love, has done for morally bankrupt and incapable people. So what is the place of obedience to God's words in this big Bible view of things?

I'm still talking about this danger of being heavy or moralistic. How does obedience tie in with the good news of what God has done? Well, the Bible teaches that obedience to God's commands is never the way into membership of the kingdom of heaven.

It's never the way into membership of God's people. Obedience to God's commands is rather the outcome of membership of God's people. It's an inevitable right and fitting expression of what it means to have been saved by Christ.

So obedience doesn't get us into the kingdom of heaven. It can never do that. We're sinners up to the neck before we come to Christ. What we need before we come to Christ is rescue from God's anger, not a pat on the head for good behavior.

But after we're brought to Christ, obedience to God becomes the only appropriate way of life. The growing Christian realizes how sinful he still is, but he begins to want to obey God in every area of life.

[5 : 13] Home life, leisure life, sex life, life at work, life in all the relationships we have with different people and our social contacts. And he cries out often, as does this writer of Psalm 119, teach me the way of your statutes, O Lord.

In other words, I want to obey, but I'm still a novice in obedience, so please teach me how to do it. And then as the growing Christian becomes more obedient, he discovers that obedience brings blessings and joys and liberty and a sense of purpose and delight, which is unknown to the world's pop idols and playboys and multimillionaires.

Now the world will think that people like that have it all, but the Christian who's growing in obedience comes to see that in the end, those people have nothing. To obey the words of God as a way of life is the very thing that Christ rescued us for.

It's the way of joy. It's the way of truth. You cannot read this psalm and come away with a feeling of being burdened by some heavy weight of moralism. It just isn't like that.

The writer of Psalm 119 is a man who delights in God's commands and who knows that to obey them is the greatest thing in the world. But the apostle John knew this centuries later when he wrote in 1 John 5, verse 3, and his commands are not...

[6 : 42] What's that adjective? Grievous or burdensome. His commands are not heavy or burdensome. They don't give a sense of weight and burden and restriction.

Rather, they open before us a prospect of delightful liberty and of living human life in the way that God always intended. And his intentions for us are very good. Now, just one more thing before we get down to business.

I'd like to ask you, friends, to read this psalm right the way through in one sitting before this time next week. Would you do that? You might need to find half an hour or so. But I think you'd find it a really good thing to do, particularly if you can read it out loud in one sitting.

You might need to warn your neighbours or your family before you're going to do it. But I would suggest it's a very good thing to do. What you want to do is to arm yourself with a large strong mug of tea and a seriously thick slice of chocolate cake.

And then sit down and read it through in one go. And I think you will find that an almost overwhelming experience. See, here is this man, this psalmist. We don't know whether it was King David or somebody else.

[7 : 48] It really doesn't matter. But here is this man who knows his God. And at the heart of his relationship to God is obedience to what God has said. Now, according to the Bible, the relationship between God and man is word-shaped.

God speaks his wonderful words to us and man gladly and wonderingly opens his ears to them and drinks them in and then fashions his life according to them.

All right, well let's turn now to the text and we'll look at some of the more detailed teaching about obeying the words of the Lord. The interest and the power is often in the detail in this psalm.

And I hope we'll see something of that now. Well, I want to take as our theme, I want to just modify it a little bit. Not simply obedience to God's words. But let me put it like this.

How does the believer learn to obey God's words? That's really my theme. How the believer learns to obey the words of God. This psalm is not just bluntly saying to us obey God or you're in a mess.

[8 : 56] It's teaching us how to learn obedience. You see, the psalmist is picturing himself as a student in the school of obedience and he doesn't assume that he's yet in the top class of the school.

He hasn't yet learned all there is to know about obedience. He's learning obedience and he's encouraging his fellow believers to learn along with him. So here's my first main point and I've got three in all this evening.

First main point. Psalm 119 teaches us to recognize our moral frailty. The psalm teaches us to recognize our moral frailty.

Let me point out one or two examples of this. I think we see it first at verse 5. Oh that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes.

Now that's an expression of anxiety, isn't it? I'm anxious and fearful, he's saying, that my ways may prove to be wobbly, not steadfast. You see, if this man thought that he had already learned every lesson about obedience, he would have written verse 5 differently.

[10:02] He would have said, look at me and follow my shining example of perfect steadfastness. Look at me, I'm a grade one specimen of humanity when it comes to obeying the words of God.

But that's not his tone at all. He knows that he's not yet steadfast in obedience. So he expresses here his longing to become obedient.

Or look at verse 9. How can a young man keep his way pure? Now probably this psalmist was a young man when he wrote that verse. He might have been a greybeard by the time he wrote verse 176.

Now I say that seriously. It is perfectly possible that this psalm was gradually put together over decades. And when he wrote verse 9, he was perhaps still a very young believer with all a young man's powerful temptations.

Alcohol, sex outside marriage, self-indulgence in many forms, how can a young man keep his way pure? So this is not this man, this writer, he's not a plaster saint with a heavenly smile on his face.

[11:12] This is a red-blooded young man who is struggling with the raw material of his sinful self. And he cries out in some pain, how can a young man keep his way pure?

Now he answers his own question in the second half of the verse. But the question itself is a real pressing question and every young Christian has asked it.

Or look at verses 36 and 37. incline my heart to your testimonies and not to selfish gain. Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things and give me life in your ways.

His heart there in verse 36 is often lusting after money and his eyes in verse 37 are often looking at things that are simply not worth looking at.

Now if he thought that he'd already reached the top of the sixth form in the school of obedience to God's laws he would never have written like that. Or look at verse 176 the very last one in the psalm.

[12:22] He says I have gone astray like a lost sheep seek your servant for I do not forget your commandments. It's so refreshing to read something that is so honest.

This is not the legalistic self-righteousness of the Pharisees. Here we have a humble man who knows that he has not yet learned how to be fully obedient.

Now friends isn't this an encouragement for you and me? It gives us the courage to be honest with ourselves. In the history of the church there have been movements which have taught that Christians need to reach a stage in their Christian life when they are fully surrendered.

to the lordship of Christ. In other words this teaching runs. The Christian life is to be seen as a two stage experience. First of all you are converted to Christ and you toddle along as a young Christian for a time.

But then perhaps a few years down the track you reach a second stage where you surrender everything. As though you say to the Lord Lord really up to now I have been fiddle faddling around in a half hearted way.

[13:31] But now I'm fully yours so now I surrender all as the old hymn puts it. From this moment onwards you have full possession of my brain my heart my hands my feet my will my emotions my money my time my energies and my abilities it's all yours the whole hog hook line and sinker lock stock and barrel.

Now the motivation behind that attitude is entirely good. Of course it's right that we should desire the Lord to take possession of every fiber of our being.

But the problem with that teaching is that it doesn't take properly into account the fact that the Christian continues to be a sinner. We could have a great surrendering all service here one Sunday evening at the Tron Church just imagine it we'd plan it rather carefully we'd sing a whole group of highly charged and powerful hymns we'd perhaps get a few extra brass instruments into the orchestra to heighten the effect of the whole thing and then the preacher eventually would work himself up into a great lather as he expounds this doctrine of full surrender brothers and sisters

tonight all of us are going to repent of our half-heartedness for too long we have lived shallow wavering Christian lives but tonight all that is coming to an end together we will lay everything on the altar God will be pleased with a church that is fully surrendered to him amen amen amen amen and everyone has their coffee and goes home euphoric at last we say we've surrendered everything then Monday morning comes and it's a grey wet

November morning and we are dismayed to find as we go off about our daily business that we're still wrestling with the familiar temptations so we're bewildered how can this be we say I'm a surrendered Christian now aren't I so why am I still wanting to do sinful things now this desire to surrender all at one level it's thoroughly commendable entirely so but if it's not tempered by an understanding that the believer remains a sinner until his dying day it will only lead us to distress and confusion there will be a credibility gap in our hearts between what we think we're supposed to be and what we know that we actually are now Psalm 119 is so refreshing because it is so realistic this Psalm is long to be fully obedient to the Lord but at the same time he's honest in telling us that he's still struggling that's why it's so encouraging are you struggling brother or sister to live a holy life well so am I and our Psalm tells us that that's the way it is while we're still on the green side of the turf he's a straying sheep you see here in verse 176 or look at verse 25 my soul he says clings to the dust now what does that mean it means my soul still partakes of the nature of death dust you are and to dust you will return to cling to the dust means to be clogged up with the marks of sin and death it's much the same as what

Paul the Apostle meant in Romans 7 when he cried out who will deliver me from this body of death look at our verse 25 the second half of the verse explains the first half it's because his soul is so full of the dust of death that he cries out to the Lord give me life so let's be encouraged by our Psalmist indeed he is teaching us obedience but he's showing us what we're made of as we seek to obey the Lord he's teaching us that as the Christian seeks to obey he does so as a person of ongoing moral frailty we will wake up tomorrow morning wrestling with all the familiar temptations we mustn't be dismayed by that we will never be fully surrendered this side of the grave it is as morally frail people that we are called to learn obedience so there's the first thing this Psalm teaches us to recognize our moral frailty not to be complacent about it but to recognize it now secondly our Psalm teaches us to long to be taught the word of God to long to be taught the word of God let's look at a few verses together here verse 12 first blessed are you oh Lord teach me your statutes teach me your statutes now we might ask had this man not read the Ten Commandments or the five books of [18:44] Moses well of course he had he knew them very well and yet this man who is very familiar with the law of God is still asking the Lord to teach it to him he knows it but he says teach me or look at verse 18 open my eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of your law I need an optician Lord he's saying I've got cataracts I'm short sighted I'm long sighted I'm myopic open my eyes help me to see to perceive what your law is all about yes I've read it but I cry to you to give me more understanding of it or verse 20 my soul is consumed with longing for your rules at all times isn't that striking what do you long for what does your soul long for my soul sometimes longs for the summer holidays my Christmas dinner best in show with one of the chickens from my hen pen now this man teaches us to long for God's rules to develop an insatiable appetite for them in fact that phrase teach me your statutes comes seven times in the course of the psalm it's almost like a chorus or refrain now surely this longing to be taught the word of God is a necessary ingredient in our lives if we're to learn obedience but can you manufacture it can you make it appear can you go through some set of spiritual exercises that will make you sincerely cry out teach me your statutes or do we just have to accept rather sadly that just as some people have an appetite for stilt and cheese and others do not so it is with the word of God there are some who long to be taught it but others just lack the appetite that's the way they are you can't create appetite where there's no capacity for appetite no friends surely not that would be a counsel of despair wouldn't it to think like that one of God's purposes in putting this psalm in the Bible is to stimulate our appetite for his words to make us long to be like this man who cries out teach me your statutes

I think in fact that we can see elements within the psalm which will act as real stimulants to our appetite for God's words let me pick out two such elements under this heading of longing to be taught the word of God first as we learn God's ways we begin to praise him we begin to praise him look at verse seven I will praise you with an upright heart when I learn or more accurately whenever I learn your righteous rules so what the psalmist is saying is whenever I come to understand something from the word of God I praise God so a believer of today might look back over their lives

and they might say in the year 2001 I learned the meaning of being a quick forgiver I've been a pretty slow forgiver up to then I've been in the habit of nursing grudges against other people but in 2001

I learned from the Bible that if God has forgiven me fully and freely for all the sin that I've committed I must gladly hasten to forgive those who have hurt me who am I to withhold forgiveness for that much sin against me when the Lord has forgiven me that much sin against him so I've learned the joy and the need for quick forgiveness and I was so thankful to the Lord when I learned that lesson I praised him for opening my eyes to it then a year or two later 2003 I learned from the Bible a new attitude to my job and my boss now my job is rather boring and my boss is a bit of a wretch but I've learned from the letters of Paul the apostle to do my work as to the Lord that he's the one that I'm really serving not my mean little boss who's never given me so much as a Mars bar let alone a bonus and learning this from Paul the apostle has transformed my attitude to my boss and to my work and I praised

God for showing me from the scriptures the right way to approach such an important area in my life as my daily work now that's an incentive to us isn't it from verse 7 as we learn God's righteous rules whenever we learn something new about God's laws rules and rules at all those many points in our life when we come to understand the Bible's teaching better we praise him afresh we're so glad to know him and to have him as our teacher there is great joy in learning to obey the words of the Lord but then secondly growing obedience comes with growing understanding this is a rather similar point but there's a slightly different slant to it come with me to verse 34 give me understanding that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart now the logic of that verse is that if we're to keep the law and observe it we need to understand it our understanding will promote our obedience now let me give you a very practical and very important example of this the seventh of the ten commandments is the commandment against adultery you shall not commit adultery says the Lord now when you're a young Christian perhaps still quite a young person you may not think very much about that particular commandment it's not that you despise it you simply don't give it much thought it hardly registers on your radar screen you think of it as something which probably concerns other people who are rather older than you are but let's imagine now that you're a young Christian man and you fall in love with a delightful

Christian girl and you marry her now a few years pass maybe five or ten or fifteen you're very busy at work and your wife perhaps has some young children now at home and she's busy with them and in your place of work you work with a number of different people and amongst your work colleagues there is an attractive woman of about your age she's cheerful she's good humoured she's energetic she's a lot of fun to be with and one day and this might take you quite by surprise you realise that in the air between you and this attractive woman there is a charge of sexual electricity and alarm bells begin to ring in your head now what is going to keep you faithful to your wife what is going to keep you at that point from breaking the seventh commandment verse 34 shows us the link between understanding and obedience give me understanding that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart so if this young man can understand the seventh commandment in its biblical depth and breadth he will be strengthened to keep that commandment now as he studies his bible over the years he will come to grasp what this commandment means and why the lord should give it such prominence he'll come to understand deeply how wrong the unbelieving playboy is who dismisses the seventh commandment as a piece of repressive

[26 : 35] Victorian morality our young man will come to see as he reads and learns his bible that the commandment against adultery which sounds so negative is in fact a wonderfully positive divine commandment in favour of fidelity he'll come to understand that human fidelity to the marriage bond reflects God's rock solid fidelity to the promises that he has made to his people that he is theirs forever just as they are his forever so our young man is to be faithful to his wife because God is faithful to his marriage vows to his people so therefore faithfulness within marriage is a subset of what it means to be faithful to the lord and our young man will also learn as he reads his bible that God has given marriage from Genesis chapter 2 onwards to be one of the fundamental building blocks of human society one of the factors that will enable human society to cohere and be viable in the midst of a fallen world and that when marriage is undermined and despised civilizations crumble and he'll come to understand the importance of the seventh commandment not only in terms of the big picture of human society but also in terms of his own personal future and destiny some of the most eloquent commentary on the seventh commandment is found in the book of Proverbs so much of the

Old Testament is in fact an exposition of the law of Moses and our young man will read for example these words from Proverbs chapter 7 which portray the words of a woman as she seduces a foolish young man she says to him pictured here in Proverbs 7 she says I've perfumed my bed with myrrh aloes and cinnamon come let us take our fill of love till morning for my husband is not at home he's gone on a long journey he took a bag of money with him he'll not be home until the full moon in other words the coast is clear with much seductive speech she persuades him with her smooth talk she compels him now here comes the moment of capitulation all at once he follows her as an ox goes to the slaughter or as a stag is caught fast till an arrow pierces its liver as a bird rushes into a snare he does not know that it will cost him his life you see when our young man reads those words they will shock him into realizing that if he commits adultery he is destroying himself now friends I'm not saying that there is no possibility of repentance and forgiveness after adultery thank God there is that wonderful possibility and many people have found the joy of it but those passages in the book of Proverbs stand like a lighthouse on the rocks they are there to warn us they are there to explain the seventh commandment to us to help us to understand why God gives such prominence to this commandment against adultery now returning to Psalm 119 and verse 34 if we are to keep God's law we need that kind of understanding it isn't enough just to have the ten commandments thrust at us like a kind of rule book we also need to learn from all over the Bible what those commandments mean the Bible expounds them to us gives us the detailed picture of what lies behind them and how they are to be applied and it's as our understanding grows that we will be given greater strength greater ability to obey the commandments it's understanding them that helps us to obey them and it's understanding that helps us also to love them and to hate the things that they forbid so this Psalm 119 teaches us to long to be taught the word of God and then third and last Psalm 119 teaches us to obey God's word because it is wonderful because it is wonderful look at verse 129 129 your testimonies are wonderful therefore my soul keeps them now just notice the logic of the verse it is because God's testimonies God's laws and words and precepts are wonderful that the psalmist soul keeps them so the more he looks at them and learns them the more his jaw drops open with astonishment the appetite comes with the eating the sense of wonder grows as we read them as we think and pray and then read again do you know how people sometimes say especially as Christmas approaches that the capacity to feel wonder is something which children have but then it disappears as we grow up well I want to say very politely poppycock to that verse 129 is not written by a child it's written by a grown up and a grown up who was suffering considerable afflictions as we'll see next week

I'd like at this point to read you a quotation C.H. Spurgeon in about 1880 wrote a terrific commentary on the Psalms in I think about seven volumes and I've got just the one volume here and in his commentary he includes a lot of quotations from other commentators of former days and there's a little paragraph here written by a man called MacLagan in 1853 which Spurgeon quotes on this verse verse 129 I don't know who Mr.

MacLagan was but I imagine with a fine name like that that he didn't live in Tunbridge Wells so here we go and let me just say before I read this little paragraph he's talking about the wonder of the word of the Lord in the sense that it is so diverse and yet so unified so thy testimonies are wonderful the Bible itself is an astonishing and standing miracle written fragment by fragment through the course of fifteen centuries under different states of society and in different languages by persons of the most opposite tempers talents and conditions learned and unlearned prince and peasant bond and free cast into every form of instructive composition and good writing history prophecy poetry allegory emblematic representation judicious interpretation literal statement precept example proverb disquisition I'm not quite sure I know what a disquisition is but anyway it's there epistle sermon prayer in short all rational shapes of human discourse and treating moreover of subjects not obvious but most difficult its authors are not found like other men contradicting each other upon the most ordinary matters of fact and opinion but are at harmony upon the whole of their sublime and momentous scheme now that's written in flowery Victorian 1853 language but Mr.

[34 : 08] McLagan is expressing there his sense of wonder that a Bible that is so diverse in its subject matter and human authorship and style and language is nevertheless so profoundly unified in his theme he is saying don't imagine that the Bible is full of contradictory ideas and contradictory views of God it's not it doesn't present us with a series of incompatible accounts of God it speaks to us with one voice about the being of God and about his great plan and purpose and that says Mr.

McLagan is wonderful but friends it's not only the unity of scripture that fills the christian with wonder there's so much more there's the majesty of the bible's theme the sheer breathtaking prospect of a perfect god who when deeply sinned against and deeply rebelled against by those who should have loved him did not cast them off but put into action his eternal plan to rescue them us he did it at a cost so great that only he and his son know what had to be paid he did it so that those who were under his curse and his anger should be transferred to the bliss of the new creation is that not wonderful is it not wonderful that one rebel should have been rescued and yet he has rescued countless rebels i'm not assuming that every person here tonight is a christian but i know that all of us here who are christians have in the past defied the loving authority of the only god and yet despite our defiance he has had mercy upon us is that not wonderful look again at the force of verse 129 your testimonies are wonderful therefore my soul keeps them it's the wonderfulness of god's words as he testifies to the truth about himself that compels us to keep them and to obey them let's bow our heads and we'll pray now dear god our father the bible takes us straight to you and to your own heart and mind we thank you so much that though you might have clouded yourself with mystery and told us nothing about yourself you have on the other hand told us so much and we are so grateful we're grateful that you have revealed to us your true nature and the extraordinary character of your love towards us which we have not deserved and our prayer dear father as we come to understand these scriptures through the course of our lives all the decades decades that lie behind us but decades lying in front of us we pray that you will help us to love your testimonies to see increasingly how wonderful they are and that we should learn in the school of obedience so that our hearts grow in the desire and the ability given by you to do as you say and we ask it all in

Jesus name amen amen and we also and we listen to this as as as as as as as as as as as