

Sermon for February 12, 2017 - 6th Sunday after Epiphany

Psalm 119:1-8 (Evangelical Heritage Version)

Sermon Theme: **Oh, that my ways were established to keep your statutes!**

- 1) For there is happiness in keeping them,
- 2) As I learn your righteous judgments

¹ *How blessed are all who are blameless in their way, who walk in the law of the LORD.*

² *How blessed are all who guard his testimonies. With all their heart they seek him.*

³ *Indeed, they do no wrong. They walk in his ways.*

⁴ *You have commanded that your precepts be kept completely.*

⁵ *Oh, that my ways were established to keep your statutes!*

⁶ *Then I would not be put to shame when I consider all your commandments.*

⁷ *I will thank you with an upright heart as I learn your righteous judgments.*

⁸ *I will keep your statutes. Do not abandon me completely.*

How do you define happiness? Is it being financially secure: having a comfortable house, in a safe, friendly community, surrounded with family and friends? Is happiness being able to do your hobbies unhindered or travel anywhere you want?

I suppose those things do bring about a certain kind of happiness, but not one that will last. They will not sustain you during the darkest, most trying days of your life. They will not give you hope beyond death. So, where can you find happiness that can do that? We find it in the LORD – living in Him and his Word. Let us consider this truth, under the theme: **Oh, that my ways were established to keep your statutes!** 2) *For there is happiness in keeping them, 2) as I learn your righteous judgments.*

Part One: For there is happiness in keeping them.

Our sermon text is taken from the longest psalm of the Bible. It is considered a masterpiece of Hebrew poetry, which is difficult to convey in English. Psalm 119 is composed of 22 sections of 8 verses, each of which starts with a word that starts with a specific letter of the alphabet. For example, every beginning word of every verse in our sermon text starts with the Hebrew letter for “A”. The next section with the Hebrew letter for “B”. The next section . . . well, you get the picture.

The overall theme of this Psalm expresses praise to God for His wonderful Word. The Bible truly is a treasure, upon which we would do well to establish our life. Why? Because it offers us true, eternal happiness, as the first verse of our text indicates:

¹ *How blessed are all who are blameless in their way, who walk in the law of the LORD.*

In order to understand this verse, we need to know a couple of things. The Psalmist is not saying: “If you keep God’s law, you will have a blessed life with lots of money, comfort and security”; nor that you must be “perfect” in order to be blessed.

The Hebrew word translated as “blessed” would be better understood as happy, and the word “law” as “instruction” - referring to the entirety of Scripture: both law and Gospel. In other words: Happy is the person who is free from “public” blame – that is, who lives a scandal free life. And why is his life scandal free? Because he lives his life according to God’s Word: avoiding sin wherever he can, and repenting whenever he falls – all in response to God’s great redeeming love that saved him. Yes, such a person happily keeps God’s commands – not in order to attain peace with God, but because he already is at peace with him through faith in the Gospel.

² How blessed are all who guard his testimonies. With all their heart they seek him.

That is to say: those who truly seek God with all their heart, wanting to know him and his salvation, are people who take care in how they handle and interpret God’s Word. Just as restaurant cooks will be careful to follow the head chef’s recipe – not adding, subtracting or changing it in anyway – so we Christians will be careful not to add, subtract or change God’s Word in any way. Why not? Because God’s Word is perfect – just the way it should be. We might not understand why God commands and forbids the things he does, but God knows. Everything written is written to lead us to Christ so that, through repentance and faith, we might receive God’s gift of eternal life.

Therefore, how happy we are when we faithfully follow his Word. Through it we taste the magnificence of his wisdom and enjoy the goodness of his salvation.

³ Indeed, they do no wrong. They walk in his ways.

Believers who faithfully follow God’s Word are covered with Christ’s righteousness. God sees no wrong in them because, when God looks at the believer, he sees Christ. And in the peace of God’s imputed righteousness we live as children of God – wanting to please him just as little children often want to express love to their parents by obeying them. When children do this, they do it because they know that their parent’s rules are meant for their good. The same is true regarding God’s commands to us, as the Psalmist writes:

⁴ You have commanded that your precepts be kept completely.

Just as parents want their children to listen and obey them at all times, so also the LORD wants us to listen to him - not picking and choosing which commands to follow and which we can leave undone. I mean parents, when you tell your children to clean their rooms, you want them to clean the whole room, right? And why do you ask your children to clean their rooms? Aside from the obvious (their rooms are messy) you also want your children to learn to take care of their stuff, so they can grow into responsible adults.

In a similar way, God wants us to keep all his commandments, not picking and choosing which ones we like. Why? Because He wants us to grow into mature Christians who are a light to the

world. Everything he commands is meant for our good – to preserve and help us in some way. This is why there is happiness in keeping them.

But here's the thing: even though we know that there is happiness in keeping God's Word - and that everything he has written, has been written for his glory and our good – how often don't we complain, grumble or question his Word? How often don't we try to reason away teachings we find disagreeable – like what the LORD says about the roles of men and women, keeping the marriage bed pure, loving our enemies, or making the study of his Word our top priority for our children and ourselves? How often aren't we quick to defend things that the Bible clearly condemns by saying: “Well, that's your interpretation” - instead of humbly studying and submitting ourselves to what God's word really says?

Yes, we all – myself included – have a sinful nature that does not want to submit to God's Word. For this reason, we cry out with the Psalmist:

⁵ Oh, that my ways were established to keep your statutes!

⁶ Then I would not be put to shame when I consider all your commandments

Part Two: As I learn your righteous judgments

St. Paul once wrote about the sinful nature inside of himself with which he had to contend. As a Christian, Paul truly wanted to follow God's law and keep his commandments. And yet his sinful nature warred against his pious thoughts – compelling him to do the evil things he did not want to do. “*What a wretched man I am!*”, he cried out, “*Who will rescue me from this body of death?*”ⁱ

Yes, who will rescue us from ourselves - for we Christians are clearly incapable of keeping the commandments as perfectly as God desires. Oh, that our ways were established to keep God's Word! Then we wouldn't feel the shame we feel day after day - as we find ourselves succumbing to the weaknesses of our flesh. “Who will save us from ourselves?”

“*Thanks be to God--through Jesus Christ our Lord!*”ⁱⁱ Why? Because *there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*ⁱⁱⁱ He won our righteousness and forgiveness through his perfect life, innocent death and glorious resurrection. Because of Christ's work on our behalf, we rejoice in God's judgments. And why is that? Because, in Christ, he acquits us of all sin. He judges us as innocent, free and forgiven. We are at peace with God and don't have to fear his condemnation. This is why the Psalmist writes:

⁷ I will thank you with an upright heart as I learn your righteous judgments.

God's righteous judgments are not only his condemnation of sin, but also our forgiveness proclaimed in the Gospel. Faith grabs hold of this promise, and we are made upright. Yes, even if we have been the worst sinner this world has ever seen, we can thank God with an upright heart for his salvation. Why? Because believers are clothed with Christ's righteousness. And this wonderful truth makes us want to learn more and more about our Savior. We do this in order to learn how to please him in gratitude for all that he has done. With the Psalmist we say:

⁸ *I will keep your statutes. Do not abandon me completely.*

Yes, the Christian truly wants to keep God's Word as his highest treasure – ever learning and living it in response to the wonderful salvation Christ's won for us. But there is a problem: in and of ourselves we can't keep God's Word as he wants. We need help. More specifically, we need God's help, without whom we would never remain in the faith.

Thankfully Christ offers us his help. Right before he ascended into heaven, he promised: "*surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*"^{iv} Not only this, but He has also given us his Holy Spirit in Baptism, through whom he guides, comforts, forgives and encourages us, as we make use of his Word and Sacraments. Yes, the LORD has answered our prayer: He has not abandoned, but remains with us. We can, therefore, be *confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*^v

Brothers and sisters in Christ: where is true happiness found? Is it in all the toys we own, or in being with family and friends? Even though those things can give us some degree of joy, true happiness is found in Christ and keeping His Word. Only in the Gospel do we find the forgiveness, hope and salvation we need to calm our troubled consciences. Only in His Word do we receive counsel and direction as to how we can live our lives to God's glory – avoiding all the pitfalls that lead us back into sin and burden our consciences. But even if we do sin, *we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense--Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.*² *He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.*^{vi}

Because of this wonderful hope, let us pray with the Psalmist: **Oh, that my ways were established to keep your statutes!** *For there is happiness in keeping them, as I learn your righteous judgments – through which you have free me from all sin, and declared me to be your holy child through faith in your Son. Help me, therefore, live as your dear child – all to the glory of your name. Amen.*

ⁱ Rom 7:24 NIV84

ⁱⁱ Rom 7:25 NIV84

ⁱⁱⁱ Rom 8:1 NIV84

^{iv} Mat 28:20 NIV84

^v Phi 1:6 NIV84

^{vi} 1Jo 2:1-2 NIV84