

+ Psalm 119:1-8 + Love Speaks God's Word +
+ 16th Sunday after Pentecost: Back to School Sunday + 8 September 2013 +

(Sing the ABCs) Sound familiar? That song or something like it was probably one of the earliest lessons you learned in school. Maybe you even learned your ABCs before you started school, or for some of you, perhaps they weren't necessarily ABCs, but the alphabet of your native tongue. Nevertheless, you had to learn them before you could go on to further learning, before you could start reading books or taking spelling tests. To really learn any language you have to start with the basics, with your ABCs.

At the same time, learning your ABCs opened up the whole world to you. Wasn't it amazing when you could finally read what was on a page or on a sign? It's still amazing to watch children learn their ABCs and then learn how to read. The world in all its beauty just opens up. Suddenly there's a whole world of knowledge and understanding at your fingertips simply by using those ABCs that you learned years ago.

Today is what we call Back to School Sunday, when we kick off a new school year of Bible study for the adults and Sunday school for the kids and teens. Yet even here, we need to learn our ABCs—not the alphabet, but the basics of God's Word. Once we know the basics, then a whole world of knowledge and understanding opens up on the pages of Holy Scripture as we dig deeper and grow stronger through the study of God's Word, but it all has to start with the ABCs, the basic teachings of God's Holy Word.

Interestingly enough, Psalm 119 has been described as “the golden ABCs of God's Word”. If you were to look at the English text of this 176-verse Psalm, you'd see the letters of the Hebrew alphabet as headings for each section. In the original Hebrew, the Psalmist started out each verse of each section with that particular letter. For example, each of the first 8 verses of this Psalm start with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet—Aleph. These verses happen to be our text this morning, and since it's our Back to School Sunday, it's only fitting that we start at the very beginning of our Scriptural ABCs. In doing so, the Psalmist teaches us how we are to regard God's Word and why it's so important that every one of us spend time studying and meditating on it. That, of course, impacts how we speak to others as well, because when we're in the Word of God, our lives, our words, our **LOVE SPEAKS GOD'S WORD. Read Psalm 119:1-8**

What does the life of a Christian look like who spends time in God's Word, who applies that teaching, that study, that meditation to their daily life? The Psalmist gives us a glimpse at what kind of impact the Word of God can have on a Christian's life when he writes, **“How happy are those whose way is blameless, who live according to the LORD's instruction! Happy are those who keep His decrees and seek Him with all their heart. They do no wrong; they follow His ways.”** Did you notice that word **“happy”**? The Psalmist describes a believer whose life centers around the Word of God as **“happy”**. If we look back at the Psalm we sang earlier, you'll see the word **“blessed”** there. In this case, it means the same thing.

The believer whose life centers around God's Word is truly **“blessed”**, truly **“happy”** in God's sight. The Word has a blessed impact in every facet of that person's life, because in that Word, the believer finds true happiness—true happiness in the gracious God who reveals himself in that Word. This isn't some kind of Guy Smiley, Joel Osteen, pasted-on smile that breaks your face in an attempt to appear happy to others, when deep down inside there's nothing, but despair. No, this is real, blessed happiness that comes from the Lord of free and faithful grace who saves his people.

The person whose life centers around that Word of God, who reads that Word, who listens to that Word, who studies that Word, who speaks that Word, lives **“according to the LORD's instruction”**. That believer's **“way is blameless”**, not sinless, but a life in line with God's Word and will. That person devotes their life to protecting God's testimony like a watchman on a wall, standing up for and even speaking God's truth when it's necessary. That person devotes their life to the pure, unadulterated teaching of God's Word, and **“seeks Him with all their heart.”** Naturally, that devotion to the Lord and his Word leads to blameless living, where there is no evidence of wrongdoing, because the believer follows the Lord's ways, not his own.

That's quite a picture, isn't it? Isn't that what you'd like your life to look like? Your life devoted to the Word of God and time spent in his Word, which then enables you to speak that Word in love. After all, that is what our holy God commands. It can't be that hard, can it? The Psalmist sings, **“You have commanded that Your precepts be diligently kept. Oh, if only...”** Wait...did you hear that? The Psalmist looks at the precepts, at the commands of the Lord, at this picture of blessing, and what does he say? **“Oh, if only...my ways were committed to keeping your statutes! Then I would not be ashamed when I think about all Your commands.”**

Is that what you think when you hear that description of the blessed believer? Are your heart and mind filled with that same kind of wishful thinking when you think about God's commands? Are you like the Psalmist who wishes he would not be ashamed? Do you see that that blessed picture doesn't describe you? “Oh, if only...I had the time to study God's Word, but I'm so busy.” “Oh, if only...I could get myself out of bed in the morning to come to Bible

study, but I'm so tired." "Oh, if only...we studied some topic that I think is exciting or relevant, but I'm so not interested." "Oh, if only...I had training like the pastor, then I could study the Word of God, but I don't." "Oh, if only..." "Oh, if only..." "Oh, if only..."

Oh, if only I would realize how ashamed I should be. That beautiful picture of the life of a Christian doesn't describe you or me, does it? When you look at your life, when I look at mine, we see that we're not **"happy"**, because we've ignored the Lord's instruction. We've neglected our duty and failed to guard his precious testimony. We haven't kept his statutes or his commands or his precepts. Rather than diligently devote our lives to the Word of God and what he teaches us there, we've grown apathetic and complacent, satisfied with what little we learned from Sunday School or Confirmation Class or Bible Information Class or what we think we remember from last Sunday.

Why don't our lives look the Psalmist's **"happy"** picture? It's because we're not in his Word. We neglect it. We make excuses about not studying or reading or paying attention to it. Yet when you and I are encouraged to let love speak, we all nod our heads and say, "Yes, we should do that", but how can we let love speak if we don't spend time with God in his Word?

Like the Psalmist, it makes us hang our heads in shame, because we know we deserve God's righteous judgment for neglecting his Word and not living according to his instruction. Let's hear what the Psalmist has to say about that. **"I will praise You with a sincere heart when I learn Your righteous judgments."** What? Why would he sincerely praise the Lord when he learns the Lord's **"righteous judgments"**? He praises the Lord because God is not only holy, but gracious. He declares us righteous for Christ's sake. His **"righteous judgment"** is in your favor and mine through Christ.

You see, Jesus was truly blameless. Unlike any of us, he actually was sinless. As true God in our human flesh, he perfectly lived **"according to the LORD's instruction"**. He was completely and perfectly devoted not only to God's Word, but also to God's will. He didn't neglect God's Word or opportunities to hear and study the Word. He didn't make excuses about studying God's Word or attending worship. He was never apathetic. He was never complacent, and therefore he had no reason whatsoever to be ashamed, but he wasn't doing it for himself. Jesus didn't live a perfect life to save himself, but to rescue you from your neglect, from your guilt, from your shame, from your judgment by putting himself in your place.

That's why Jesus made no excuses when he endured suffering and went to the cross to die for all those times when you've neglected his Word and ignored his holy will. That's why Jesus didn't hold back when he had to endure in your place the righteous judgment you deserve. That's why Jesus doesn't hold back when he sends his Holy Spirit to work through the study and hearing of God's Word to create and strengthen faith in your heart, to clothe you with his righteousness through the water and Word of Holy Baptism. Now when the holy God looks at you, he sees Christ's holiness and blesses you with his grace, his forgiveness, his purpose, his joy.

Now there's no more reason for all those "oh, if only" excuses, because by faith you realize how important hearing and studying and reading and paying attention to the Word of God really is for your life right now. You can praise the Lord of free and faithful grace **"with a sincere heart when you learn [about] his righteous judgments"** in your favor through Christ.

So in view of all that mercy, what are you going to do? By faith, you and I can recommit ourselves to the Word of God and centering our lives around that Word. Instead of excuses, with Christ's help, we look for opportunities to study and learn and hear God's Word and we take those opportunities, whether that's reading God's Word on your own at home, having devotions with your spouse or family, or being part of a group Bible study. Instead of neglect, with Christ's help, we devote our lives not only to the study and preservation of God's Word, but also to the proclaiming of God's Word, to letting the love of Christ speak through us to the people around us who desperately need it, not holding back, because we know what God's love is. Instead of following our own way, with Christ's help, we let God's Word direct our lives **"according to the LORD's instruction"**. With the Psalmist, we can honestly say, **"I will keep you statutes; never abandon me."**

Your education didn't just stop with learning your ABCs. They were just the beginning. There's so much more to learn. Instead of depending only on the ABCs of God's Word, we keep growing as we explore the vast beauty of that Word. There's so much more to learn and at times, it will be challenging, yet we know we have a gracious Lord who will never abandon us. Knowing that means we will truly be **"blessed"** and **"happy"** as His followers. Amen.