

Obedience is hard.

It's hard to obey a boss who is tyrannical and unfair. It's hard to obey a parent that demands his children do what he will not do. It's hard for a wife to submit to a husband whose leadership is foolish and uncaring. It's hard for a citizen to obey immoral, lying, weak, and dishonest political leaders.

And for many people, it's hard to obey the Word of God because it seems so demanding, and its principles are so contrary to the culture and what we are encouraged to do in the world every day. The Bible seems out of touch with reality. Do we really need to obey?

Yes. We do. And even more than that, obedience is good and delightful for us, as Kevin DeYoung notes:

“The law is good because firmness is good. God cares enough to show us his ways and direct our paths. How awful it would be to inhabit this world, have some idea that there is a God, and yet not know what he desires from us. Divine statutes are a gift to us. God gives us law because he loves.” [*The Hole in our Holiness*, 50.]

So this morning, I'd like to take us to the greatest extended passage on the work of the Word of God, Psalm 119, and remind us of the priority of obeying God. Obedience is the theme of the stanza beginning in v. 57:

OBEY GOD AND HIS WORD IN EVERY WAY AND AT ALL TIMES.

We come to Psalm 119 because several years ago I thought it would be good to take one Sunday at the beginning of each year and think about the necessity of the Word of God; and what better way to do that, but to spend one Sunday each year in Psalm 119? I was 46 when I started that, and didn't do the math. Last year I realized that if I kept up that pace, I would be 68 before I finished the psalm. So I thought I might pick up the pace a little — and one way to do that would be to do an annual mid-year Bible check-up. How are you doing in your quest for God in the Scriptures? How faithful have you been to this Word, and what work has the Word done in your life? So, as this is the middle Sunday in the year, here we are, back in Psalm 119 (which I now plan to finish preaching when I'm 60!).

Let me remind you about Psalm 119. It is the longest Psalm (and chapter) in the Bible — 176 verses. It is made up of 22 8-verse stanzas — one stanza for each consecutive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. And within each section, each line begins with that letter of the alphabet, as a means to help the hearers remember and memorize the psalm (that's why many of your Bibles have words you may not know between each of these sections — those are the letters of the Hebrew alphabet).

We don't know who the author of the Psalm is, but he is pre-occupied with the Scriptures. He uses eight primary words to refer to the Scriptures, and most of those words appear in each of the stanzas. It is his way of affirming the breadth and authority of the Word of God.

He also speaks in many different ways about how we should respond to the Scriptures. A few years ago, I found at least 45 distinct responses that we should have to the Word of God: we should be in awe of it, believe it, choose it, counsel with it, esteem it, not forget it, not go astray from it, praise it, rejoice in it, seek it, sing it, speak it, give thanks for it, treasure it, turn to it, and be zealous for it.

But if there is one theme that is dominant among all those, it is the various words that he uses for obedience: we should cling to it, consider it, incline our hearts to it, keep it, obey it, not turn from it, remember it, and turn to it. God has given us His Word and He wants us to obey it (because it's good for us). It may not always seem convenient to obey; it will almost always be hard to obey. But it is always good to obey.

As the psalmist meditates on the value of God's Word, he affirms there are six times when it is wise to obey God and His Word.

1. **When Times Are GOOD, Obey God (vv. 57-58)**
2. **When You SIN, Repent and Obey God (vv. 59-60)**
3. **When You Are OPPOSED, Remember God and His Word (v. 61)**
4. **When You Are WEARY, Thank God for His Word (v. 62)**
5. **When Pursuing FELLOWSHIP, Choose God-Fearing Friends (v. 63)**
6. **In ALL Things, Let God Teach You from His Word (v. 64)**

Here are six times that it is wise to obey the Lord:

1. When Times Are “Good,” Obey God (vv. 57-58)

- The first thing the psalmist mentions in this stanza is that ***the Lord is [his] portion.***
 - ✓ This is a reference to an event that happened after Israel wandered for 40 years in the wilderness after leaving Egypt (the wandering was punishment for her disobedient rebellion and lack of trust in God in entering the land under the leadership of Moses, Joshua, and Caleb). The nation finally entered Canaan and defeated all the inhabitants. And then it came time to apportion the land — and God was very specific: all the 12 tribes would receive a portion of the land, except one. Levi got no land. And God said this (three times):

- *Num. 18:20 Then the LORD said to Aaron, “You shall have no inheritance in their land nor own any portion among them; I am your portion and your inheritance among the sons of Israel.*
- *Deut. 10:9 Therefore, Levi does not have a portion or inheritance with his brothers; the LORD is his inheritance, just as the LORD your God spoke to him.)*
- *Josh. 13:14 Only to the tribe of Levi he did not give an inheritance; the offerings by fire to the LORD, the God of Israel, are their inheritance, as He spoke to him.*

- ✓ Initially it might appear that Levi was treated unfairly. Yet the rest of the OT seems to indicate that Levi, in fact, received the best blessing and gift. The blessing of receiving God as their portion became a figure of speech for all men who receive the blessing of God. It meant that to receive God as one's portion was to be tied and connected to God.

- *Ps. 16:5 The LORD is the portion of my inheritance and my cup; You support my lot.*
- *Ps. 73:26 My flesh and my heart may fail, But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.*
- *Ps. 142:5 I cried out to You, O LORD; I said, “You are my refuge, My portion in the land of the living.”*
- *Lam. 3:24 “The LORD is my portion,” says my soul, Therefore I have hope in Him.*

- ✓ So when the psalmist says, ***The Lord is my portion***, he means that God is his life (as Christ is for the believer, Col. 3:4).
- ✓ For the psalmist, the Lord is better to him than any land that would provide for him and his family.
 - He does not find God and His Word burdensome; God and the Scriptures are a blessing and a pleasant inheritance.
 - Charles Bridges is particularly helpful here:

“...a portion implies, not a source of ordinary pleasure, but of rest and satisfaction, such as leaves nothing else to be desired.... Other objects indeed may be subordinately loved: but of none but himself must we say — ‘He is *altogether lovely*.’ (Cant. v. 16.) ‘In all things he must have the pre-eminence’ (Col. i. 18)...The moment that any rival is allowed to usurp the throne of the heart, we open the door to disappointment and unsatisfied desires.” [Bridges, *Exposition of Psalm 119*, 142-3.]

- ✓ So times are “good” for this psalmist. He has all that he wants. He has God and is in fellowship with Him, so he wants nothing else. He’s satisfied. “Life is good,” as we say.
- As a result of meditating on the goodness of his fellowship and relationship with God, the psalmist makes two declarations (promises) and makes one request:
 - ✓ ***I have promised to keep Your words*** = Because God is his inheritance, he is happy to obey and in fact, he is intentional and purposeful in his commitment. And the ***words*** that he refers to is the most general reference to Scripture — it is God’s truth in any form. So the psalmist is saying that whatever God demands anywhere in His revealed Word, the psalmist will do.
 - ✓ He also says, ***I sought Your favor with all my heart***. What he is particularly emphasizing here is that he has sought God internally and from the heart. His obedience is not merely external compliance (a problem for the Israelites then and for us now), but he obeys because he has a yearning and longing for God. He is not half-hearted towards God.
 - ✓ And so he also makes a request — ***be gracious to me according to Your Word***.
 - No matter what we have already received from the Lord, we are ever-dependent on His grace.
 - We can never say, “That’s enough grace, Lord; I don’t need anymore.”
 - He is in a good place — the Lord is his portion — but he still needs grace.
 - Grace is what he needs (and we need), and grace is what God gives (e.g., Jn. 1:16).
 - And notice that God’s grace is mediated through His Word — and the commands of His Word.
- If you are in a place of grace, do not take it for granted.
 - ✓ If you are in a “good place,” take time to meditate on the ways that God has demonstrated that He has given you Himself as your inheritance — and all that you have received from that (might I suggest that you begin by meditating on Eph. 1:3-14 and the grace of salvation?).
 - ✓ If you are in a good and graced place in life, it is also appropriate to re-affirm your allegiance to God. He has been kind; don’t forget that all that you have is because of grace, but that grace doesn’t mean you can ignore His Words. With the psalmist, we do well to reaffirm that we will obey Him.
- Not everyone is living in that “graced” place, however. Some are living in bitter and hard places. And the bitterest and hardest of places is the place of sin. As the psalmist reflected on his life, he remembered his times of sin and what he did when he sinned —

2. When You **SIN**, Repent and Obey God (vv. 59-60)

- He says, ***I considered my ways***. He has examined himself — particularly his ***ways***, the path he was following, the things he was doing. Now he doesn't explicitly say that he had sinned, but from his response, it is clear that his self-examination had revealed a pattern of sin.
 - ✓ He has thought about and meditated on his conduct. He is resolved to see himself as he is. He is more afraid of ignoring his sin and the consequences of that, than of examining himself and finding something heinous and ugly.
 - ✓ Here the man asks, "What am I? What have I been? Where have I been and where am I going? What is the state and condition of my soul with God?" And he sees sinful inclinations and patterns.
- And having considered himself, he has a three-fold response:
 - ✓ He ***turned my feet to Your testimonies***. The turning is an act of repentance. His life has been on one path (headed to destruction) and he turns away from that and to God and His ***testimonies***. He is going back to his former life with God.
 - Those testimonies refer to Scripture with all of its warnings and promises. It is a true guide to lead him to the place of peace and joy, and he will follow it.
 - Wherever he was not in compliance with God, he put himself in submission to God and obeyed.
 - Notice that self-examination is essential, but it demands something else. Some people are afraid to examine themselves; they don't want to peel back the true layers of their souls. The psalmist was willing to do that, but he was also willing to repent and change. The self-examination revealed sin and inadequacy, and he did the only reasonable thing about it. He repented. And that repentance was demonstrated by his next response —
 - ✓ He obeyed by ***keep[ing] Your commandments*** (v. 60b). God's Word is filled with ***commandments***. They are not suggestions. They are authoritative. God has a right to give orders because of His position and person. His commands demand our compliance and allegiance. And the psalmist said that he would ***keep*** (obey) them.
 - ✓ And he obeyed immediately — ***I hastened and did not delay***.
 - When God made a command related to his sin, he hurried to obey and did not hesitate. He does not argue, but immediately works to change and obey.
 - The word ***delay*** was used about Lot, who "lingered" to leave Sodom. Sin was still attractive to him; he didn't want to give it up. Not so with the psalmist. His compliance was immediate. And immediate obedience is the only kind of obedience there is. When we delay, we disobey.
 - One high school student was frustrated with his father's demands to do things like clean his room; he always said that he would do it, but then he never did. After high school, he joined the Marine Corps. When he came home for leave after basic training, his father asked what he learned. "Dad, I learned what 'now' means."

- Laziness in obeying God means we don't want what He wants. When He exposes your sin in His word, don't waste any time in becoming obedient. There is no benefit in continuing to sin; and there is much benefit in repenting and beginning to obey.
- This morning, if you are living in a pattern of sin, there is nothing better for you to do than repent.
 - ✓ You might not be a Christian — a follower of Jesus. You've never confessed your sin to Him and asked for forgiveness and you've never been interested in following Him. Friend, if that's you, make haste to go to God, confess your sin, and ask Him to forgive you, believing that Jesus has died on the cross to pay the penalty of your sin, and ask Him to free you from the power of the sin that has dominated your life.
 - ✓ You might be a Christian — but you have allowed the attraction of the world to confuse you and you have become ensnared in various patterns of sin. Stop. Confess. Repent. And follow the path of our psalmist to begin obeying God in all things.
- There is a third circumstance in which it is good to obey God — when we are afflicted by the world.

3. When You Are OPPOSED, Remember God and His Word (v. 61)

- The psalmist talked about the reality that ***the cords of the wicked have encircled me.***
 - ✓ He is talking about people who are opposed to him, who seek to do him harm. They have set up a trap to ensnare him. In verses 59-60, he was talking about internal resistance to obedience, but here he is talking about external resistance to his obedience. The wicked have opposed and oppressed him. They hate his righteousness and will do all they can to compel him to stop.
 - ✓ As Bridges notes, "Our resolution to keep his commandments will soon be put to the test. Some trial to the flesh will prove whether we flinch from the cross, or study to prepare ourselves for it." [Bridges, 151.]
- You do understand that the world does not love you, if you are a follower of Christ, don't you? You do understand that the world hates, and has always hated, Christ and His people, right?
 - ✓ I'm afraid that we Christians in America have been deluded into thinking that the world should be friendly towards us and that it will be friendly towards us. It won't. It never has been. And it never will be. And we are (fortunately) seeing that with increasing clarity these days.
 - ✓ The psalmist says he is treated contemptibly (vv. 22, 39), he is slandered (v. 69), he is despised (v. 141), and he is spoken and plotted against (vv. 23, 85). He is persecuted (vv. 87, 109). He is drained of all vitality of life (vv. 25, 28, 83). He is tearful because of the disobedience of others (v. 136), and angry because of their rejection of God (vv. 53, 158).
 - ✓ And add to that his own fleshly inclination to sin (v. 26, 36, **110**).

- ✓ The world does not want God, Christ, the gospel, salvation, or *knowledge of their sin* (Jn. 15:18-21).
And they will persecute all who follow the Lord (2 Tim. 3:12; 1 Pt. 4:12).
- When we feel such pressures, there is an inclination to give up. “I quit...I just need to join forces with the world to make the best of it...” Not so with the psalmist. He says, ***I have not forgotten your Law.***
 - ✓ The word **Law** is “Torah,” and is used often of the Mosaic Law; but it can also refer to the totality of all that God has said, and that’s the way the psalmist means it here.
 - ✓ When pressured to turn to the world, the psalmist has remembered and ***not forgotten*** what God has said. He has *trusted* that what God has said is worth doing, even if he suffers harm while obeying God. And this is what has always sustained God’s people (Heb. 10:34; 11:39-40).
 - ✓ To be persecuted for following Christ is normal; when we are persecuted, we are following in the tradition of (and imitating) other godly men and women (**1 Thess. 1:6**). When we are persecuted, that is the time to submit to the Spirit, rejoice in God, and obey His Word all the more (1:6-7).

“We have, indeed, little reason to be frightened from religion by the anticipation of its trials. The exchange of the world for God, and of the service of sin for the ways of heaven, leaves no room for regret in life, in death, or in eternity. The Christian’s darkest hour is ten thousand times brighter than the brightest day of the ungodly. The hope of the crown will enable us to bear the cross, and to realize its sanctifying support as a matter for unbounded praise.” [Bridges, 152.]

- There is a fourth circumstance when we should obey God...

4. When You Are WEARY, Thank God for His Word (v. 62)

- The psalmist mentions ***midnight***. He is in bed, sleeping (or attempting to sleep) — we know because he also says he ***rises***. He’s doing what we normally do at night. He is weary from the day and the activities and he just wants to get his needed rest.
 - ✓ And then he is awakened, or perhaps because of the afflictions of the wicked (v. 61), he can’t sleep.
 - ✓ And he gets up to ***give thanks to You***.
 - ✓ In the previous verse he says, “I have not forgotten your law.” Indeed, he goes so far as to get up in the middle of the night to recite the goodness of God’s law!
- Why? Why get up in the middle of the night (and the psalmist isn’t speaking figuratively)?
 - ✓ He gets up in the middle of the night ***because of Your righteous ordinances***. The ordinances refers to God’s revealed duties. These duties don’t say, “get up in the middle of the night.”
 - ✓ But the fact that they are ***righteous*** compels the psalmist to get up and thank God for them.
 - ✓ Yes, he is still battling against sin, and yes he is weary from the persecutions of the wicked, but as he reflects on his circumstances and what God has provided for him, his heart shouts in gratitude.

- The way of the righteous is always to give thanks to God in affliction and for His Word — and it is our joy to do that day and night. Our entire life is made up of obedience and praise.

- *Ps. 1:2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night.*
- *Ps. 42:8 The LORD will command His lovingkindness in the daytime; And His song will be with me in the night, A prayer to the God of my life.*
- *Ps. 63:6 When I remember You on my bed, I meditate on You in the night watches,*
- *Ps. 149:5 Let the godly ones exult in glory; Let them sing for joy on their beds.*

- Apart from the time of night that he does this, notice particularly that he is giving thanks. How do you cultivate gratitude? Our natural hearts and flesh are inclined to ingratitude and bitterness and resentment and jealousy and anger. Those things arise because we aren't thankful. And if we are going to fight against covetousness and jealousy and anger, we will do it (in part) with gratitude.
 - ✓ When your mind (during the day and especially at night) slips into fear and anger, you need to not only put off being anxious, but you also need to add a righteous replacement to that fear.
 - ✓ How about cultivating gratitude? For what was the psalmist thankful? Specifically, for the decrees that are righteous. When you and I are fearful, we do well by remembering that all that God has called us to do (and that seems crazy to the world and the flesh) is righteous and good.
 - ✓ Because he is so thankful, he is happy to get up in the middle of the night to praise and thank God.

5. When Pursuing **FELLOWSHIP**, Choose God-Fearing Friends (v. 63)

- The psalmist has sought fellowship and friendship while in this battle against the flesh and world. But he has been *exceedingly* discerning about who might be his friend: ***I am a companion of all those who fear you.*** Notice two dominant ideas in this verse:
 - ✓ The criteria for who will be his companion is that they must ***fear You.*** He only wanted intimacy and company and fellowship with other God-fearers. And he explains what it means to be a God-fearer in the next line — they are ***those who keep your precepts.*** They are those who revere God and honor Him by keeping (obeying) all the particular instructions God has given. As meticulous as God has been in giving precepts and commands, they have been that meticulous to obey. This is the OT version of 2 Cor. 6:14 — the follower of God has relationships for the purpose of evangelism, but his intimate relationships and fellowship are only with believers. We are tied together with one another and we seek each other's fellowship as above every other relationship.
 - ✓ Not everyone makes a good friend. But everyone who fears God *does* make a good friend. And that's the second point here: he is a companion to ***all*** who fear God. The basis of fellowship is not similarity in life stage and circumstance or congeniality or similar political and cultural viewpoints or parenting choices or similar personalities. What binds us together is God and our love for Him.

- If we share love for God, we have everything in common; if we do not share love and fear for God, we have nothing in common. It really is that simple.
 - ✓ That means that one way that we demonstrate our obedience to God is who we hang out with.
 - ✓ If you are a teen, you need to know that not everyone who “likes” you is good for you; and those who are best for you are those who love Christ the most. Find the person who loves God and bind your heart to him or her (and that’s also how to find a mate). Settle for nothing less.
 - ✓ If you are a mature adult (us older folk), we have the same priority. The priority relationships are in this room, in our church fellowship, not work or the neighborhood or the golf course or the civic club. Find your fellowship and encouragement with others who love Christ and obey God.

6. **In ALL Things, Let God Teach You from His Word (v. 64)**

- In summary, the psalmist notices that ***the earth is full of your lovingkindness***. Everywhere the psalmist looks in the earth, he sees evidence of God’s loyal love to His people. The earth is full of demonstrations of God’s grace and kindness (e.g., Ps. 136:1-9; 104:10-30).
- In spite of man’s rebellion against Him, God still is unrelentingly kind and gracious all through the world. And that means that everything He dictates (in His Word) is also a manifestation of His grace. He cannot demand anything that is ungracious. And that means that to obey Him is to invite and experience His grace. And to disobey Him is to resist and reject His grace.
- And that’s why the psalmist concludes, ***Teach me Your statutes!*** Because everything of God is grace and goodness, the psalmist wants to know everything that God has to say about everything.
 - ✓ To know God’s Word is to know grace.
 - ✓ To ignore and be ignorant of God’s Word is to reject be devoid of grace.
 - ✓ We want and need grace — the place we will find it is in this Word.

CONCLUSION: One writer has appropriately said, “There is no book like the Bible. It is a miracle of literature, a perennial spring of wisdom, a wonderful book of surprises, a revelation of mystery, an infallible guide of conduct, an unspeakable source of comfort.”

And because that is true, it is also a book that is worth obeying and following. We don’t dictate what it says and means; we read what it says and we do what it says. And that is the (only) pathway to grace and joy.

BENEDICTION: Joshua 1:8-9