

Sermon for September 1, 2024 – The 15th Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 119:1-8 (NASB95)

Sermon Theme: **Oh, that my ways may be established to keep Your statutes!**

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

*¹ How blessed are those whose way is blameless,
Who walk in the law of the Lord.*

*² How blessed are those who observe His testimonies,
Who seek Him with all their heart.*

*³ They also do no unrighteousness;
They walk in His ways.*

*⁴ You have ordained Your precepts,
That we should keep them diligently.*

*⁵ Oh that my ways may be established
To keep Your statutes!*

*⁶ Then I shall not be ashamed
When I look upon all Your commandments.*

*⁷ I shall give thanks to You with uprightness of heart,
When I learn Your righteous judgments.*

*⁸ I shall keep Your statutes;
Do not forsake me utterly!*

What does happiness mean to you? Is it having a cozy home, a safe and friendly neighbourhood, and a close-knit network of family and friends? Does it mean freedom to pursue your hobbies or travel the world?

Of course, these things can bring us a lot of joy, but they won't provide the kind of happiness that lasts forever. They won't keep us going when life gets tough or give us hope when facing death. So, where can you find true happiness? Only in the Lord and His Word. Let's contemplate this truth, under the theme: **Oh, that my ways may be established to keep Your statutes!** 1) 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 comes from the longest psalm in the Bible, a true masterpiece of Hebrew poetry whose structure is hard to convey in English. Psalm 119 is made up of 22 sections, each with 8 verses. And here's the cool part: the first word of every verse in each section starts with a specific letter of the alphabet. For example, the first section of 8 verses all start with the Hebrew letter "A," the next section of 8 verses with "B," and so on.

The main idea behind this psalm is to praise God for His amazing Word. The Bible is like a treasure chest full of God's grace and wisdom, upon which the LORD wants us to build our lives. It offers us true, everlasting happiness, as the first verse of our text indicates:

*¹ How blessed are those whose way is blameless,
Who walk in the law of the Lord.*

We need to know a few things to understand this verse. The Psalmist isn't saying that if you flawlessly follow God's rules, you'll instantly become wealthy and live a life of comfort and ease.

The Hebrew word translated as "blessed" is better understood as "happy," and the word translated as "Law" really means all the Bible's teachings: both Law and Gospel. So, this verse says that happy are those who live scandal-free lives, free from public blame. And why are their lives scandal-free? Because they live their lives according to God's Word, avoiding sin whenever they can and repenting when they mess up. They do this not to earn God's favour and love, but because they know they already have his forgiveness through faith in Christ.

*² How blessed are those who observe His testimonies,
Who seek Him with all their heart.*

In other words: those who truly desire God will take great care in how they handle and understand His Word. Just like restaurant cooks follow the head chef's recipe exactly (not adding, subtracting, or changing it), we Christians need to carefully follow everything God tells us in his Word - not adding to it, subtracting from it, or changing it in any way. Why? Because God's Word is perfect just the way it is. We might not understand why God commands, forbids, and tells us all the things he does, but God knows. He inspired every Word of the Bible to lead us to Christ, so that, through repentance and faith, we can receive His gift of everlasting life.

Yes, when we truly follow God's Word, we become happy and blessed! It gives us a glimpse into his awesome wisdom and allows us to experience the goodness of his salvation.

*³ They also do no unrighteousness;
They walk in His ways.*

Believers who faithfully trust God's Gospel are covered with Christ's righteousness. God sees no wrong in them because when God looks at a believer, He sees Christ. And in the peace of God's gifted righteousness, we live as His beloved children. And, just like little children often want to show their love to their parents by obeying them, we desire to please God by doing what He says. When children obey their parents, it's because they trust that their parent's rules are meant for their good. The same is true for our relationship with God. As the Psalmist wrote,

*⁴ You have ordained Your precepts,
That we should keep them diligently.*

Just like parents want their kids to always listen and obey them, the LORD wants us to listen to him too; not just picking and choosing which commands to follow and which to ignore.

Parents, when you tell your kids to clean their rooms, you want them to clean the entire room, right? And why do you ask your kids to clean their rooms? Well, aside from the obvious (that their rooms are messy), you also want your kids to learn to take care of their stuff so they can grow up to be responsible adults. For a similar reason, God wants us to diligently keep all His commandments and not just obey the ones we like. Why? Because He wants us to grow into mature Christians who shine His grace and goodness to the world. Everything He commands and forbids is meant to help us and keep us safe. It is all meant for our good. That's why we can find happiness in doing what He says.

Unfortunately, even though we understand that true happiness comes from keeping God's Word (and that all of it is written for His glory and our good), we often complain, grumble, and question His Word. We find ourselves tempted to explain away teachings we don't like, like what the LORD says about keeping the marriage bed pure, the roles of men and women, loving our enemies, or making the study of His Word our top priority. We may find ourselves quick to defend things that the Bible clearly says are wrong by saying, "Well, that's just your interpretation" - instead of humbly studying and accepting what God's Word says.

Yes, we all have a rebellious nature that does not want to submit to God's Word. That's why we cry out to God with the Psalmist:

*⁵ Oh that my ways may be established
To keep Your statutes!
⁶ Then I shall not be ashamed
When I look upon all Your commandments.*

Part Two: As I learn your righteous judgments

The apostle Paul was a Christian who struggled with sinful desires. He wanted to follow God's law and keep the LORD's commandments in everything, but his sinful nature kept getting in the way – enticing him to do the wicked things he hated, all the while leaving undone the good things he wanted to do.ⁱ In his letter to the Romans, he wrote: "*What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?*"ⁱⁱ

Yes, who will rescue us from ourselves? We Christians are incapable of obeying God's commandments as He desires. Oh, that our ways were established to keep God's Word! Then we wouldn't feel the shame we feel every day as we succumb to our fleshly desires. "Who will save us from ourselves?"

"*Thanks be to God--through Jesus Christ our Lord!*"ⁱⁱⁱ Why? Because *there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*^{iv} 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. How so? Since Jesus paid for all our sins on His cross, God judges us as innocent, free, and forgiven. We're at peace with God and don't have to fear his condemnation. This is why the Psalmist writes:

⁷ I shall give thanks to You with uprightness of heart,

When I learn Your righteous judgments.

God's righteous judgments aren't just about punishing sin; they're also about God declaring our forgiveness for Christ's sake. As we embrace this declaration in faith, the Holy Spirit cleanses us from all our sins and makes us right with God. Even if we once were the worst sinner the world has ever seen, we can still thank God with a pure heart for his salvation.^v Why? Because believers are covered with Christ's righteousness. That amazing truth makes us want to learn more and more about our Saviour. We want to please him out of gratitude for everything he's done for us. So, we pray with the Psalmist:

*⁸ I shall keep Your statutes;
Do not forsake me utterly!*

Christians truly desire to keep God's Word as their most precious treasure—constantly learning and living it in response to the wonderful salvation Jesus won for us through his cross. But there's a problem: we can't keep God's Word the way he wants on our own. We need help. More specifically, we need God's help, without whom we could never remain in the faith.

Guess what: Jesus offers us His help! Just before He ascended to heaven, He promised us: "*Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*"^{vi} Not only is that the case, but He also gave us His Holy Spirit through Baptism to guide, comfort, forgive, and encourage us as we use His Word and Sacraments. Isn't that amazing? The Lord answered our prayer! He hasn't abandoned us: He's still right here with us. Therefore, we can be *confident of this, that he who began a good work in [us] will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*^{vii}

Brothers and sisters in Christ, where do we find true happiness? Is it in all the cool toys we have, or in spending time with our loved ones? Sure, these things can bring us some joy, but true, everlasting happiness can only be found in Christ as we believe and keep 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 get the advice and guidance we need to live our lives for God's glory and avoid the pitfalls that lead us back into sin and burden our consciences. But even when we do fall into 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.*^{viii}

Because of this amazing 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've freed me from all sin and declared me to be your holy child through faith in Jesus. Help me, therefore, live as your dear child—all to the glory of your name. Amen."

ⁱ Cf. Romans 7:14-25

ⁱⁱ Rom 7:24 NIV84

ⁱⁱⁱ Rom 7:25 NIV84

^{iv} Rom 8:1 NIV84

^v Cf. 1 Timothy 1:12-17

^{vi} Mat 28:20 NIV84

^{vii} Phi 1:6 NIV84

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