

OBEY GOD'S WORD

Psalm 119:1-16

Have you noticed that most people are looking for “what works” and when they find something that does work, they will stick with those things that were successful in the past? They may not know why it works, but many times it doesn't matter, the bottom line is that it works. “What works” gets passed on from one generation to the next - or at least, it used to be passed on. I'm not sure how much of that is happening in today's culture.

In speaking about “what works,” I heard a story that relates to the holiday season that involved cooking a ham for the holidays. The wife was preparing the ham and she was struggling to cut an inch off the shank end of the ham. She asked her husband to help and in the process of helping, he asked “Why are you cutting this off?” The reply was, “That's the way my mom did it.” It just happened that her mom was coming to dinner and after dinner she was asked why it necessary to cut off the shank end of the ham. The answer was, “That the way my mom did it.” So they called up grandma and posed the question to her. She had the answer: “Because the pan I had was too small.” Sometimes we need to go beyond simply knowing what works to understanding why it works.

God had dealt with the children of Israel and had given them instructions regarding their relationship to Himself and to others. The Ten Commandments were the basic rudiments of relationships. Over the years, these were expanded to include details of the practical applications of the basics to everyday life. They found that these laws and precepts worked and they were encouraged (commanded) to pass them onto their children. When this happened, people found that these principles worked in the conduct of life and relationships. The value of following God's laws is the subject of the longest chapter in the Bible. In Psalm 119 we find 22 octets of verses that speak to the benefits and blessing of correct response to the word of God.

The use of the number 8 is evident throughout this entire chapter. The writer uses eight different titles to describe the Bible and we find them mentioned at least once in the first nine verses: law of the Lord, testimonies, ways, precepts, statutes, commandments, judgments, and word. These are repeated many times throughout the psalm.

According to Warren Wiersbe there are eight descriptions of “what the Bible is” and eight descriptions of “what the Bible does” and eight descriptions of “what response” is expected of us. Since this present study covers only the first 16 verses we will not discover all of these response descriptions.

The first octet of verses focuses on obedience and the second octet deals with victory that comes from obedience.

The Benefits of Obedience

¹How blessed are those whose way is blameless, Who walk in the law of the LORD. ²How blessed are those who observe His testimonies, Who seek Him with all *their* heart. ³They also do no unrighteousness; They walk in His ways. Psalm 119:1-3 (NASB95)

The concept of the “law” as used here is simply the rule of conduct that is set before us as the expectation for appropriate behavior. It would include a wide range of such expectations from the “laws of nature” to those laws given through Moses and those revealed in Christ. The law, in and of itself, does not prescribe the blessing for obedience nor the penalty for disobedience. The psalmist focused on the benefit for those whose conduct is aligned with the law. The term “blessed” has been often described as meaning “happy.” However, that probably

misses the intended meaning in the original language. A better concept is “to make progress” or “to advance” or even “to move in the right direction.”

An atheist once told me that he never exceeded the speed limit since he did not want the worry of getting caught and fined. He did not want to complicate his life by breaking civil and criminal laws. If that philosophy works to give some degree of peace of mind to someone who does not even believe in God, think how much more assurance we can have to know and follow the law of the Lord. Typically, when we read about being blameless (or undefiled) we tend to relate that to some sort “sinless perfection” to which only the Lord Jesus attained. What is meant here is a lifestyle (way) of integrity. We live so much of the details of our lives on “auto pilot” in that we do not stop and think about what choices we should make. We call such operations “habits.” We have “preprogrammed” ourselves to certain predictable responses to the various stimuli we encounter in everyday living. The “programming” can be according to the way of the world or according to the law of the Lord. If we react according to the way of the world, then we will encounter needless problems that cause us consternation and reason to worry. It can also cost us money and maybe inflict bodily harm on ourselves. We could certainly argue that such results do not move us in the right direction or cause us to advance or make progress. How much happier (blessed) we are when we are free from consternation, worry, guilt, debt, and pain.

The testimonies literally mean “witness” or evidence. The scriptures have many examples of the results of obedience or disobedience. These results give testimony to what happens when a person does walk according to the law of the Lord. If we will but remember (or keep) these testimonies then we will be further blessed as they will help us move in the right direction and help us advance as we move through life.

Each of us should want to draw closer to God (to seek Him) and express our love to Him for the salvation we have in Christ Jesus. To do that requires that we be engaged in knowing and doing those things that please Him. In building relationships with people, unless we invest of ourselves and our time, relationships are either not formed or not nurtured and will fail to grow to any significant depth. Can we expect any different result in our relationship with God? If we are to seek (look for and find) the Lord, then we must search in the places He is likely to be found. We can find Him in His word, in His testimonies, in His commandments, etc. The more we know of His testimonies and that for which He stands, the closer we are drawn to Him.

As we are privileged to know His precepts and His advice, then we bear a responsibility to make the right choices to choose His way and to never deliberately do anything wrong (presumptive sin or turning the grace of God into license to sin).

The Extent of Obedience

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. Psalm 119:4-6 (NASB95)

The blessedness promised in this octet of verses is sometimes elusive in that we fail to fully obey the precepts and to follow the ideas that are the bases for the commandments we find in God’s word. Spurgeon pointed out that God’s precepts require careful obedience and there is no keeping of them by accident. Many times we take a “hit or miss” approach to the word of God and that is a far cry from what is implied by loving the Lord with all our heart, mind and will. We usually will obey the parts that are not difficult or do those things that cost us nothing and then we are surprised that we still have worries and concerns and are not gloriously happy in the way our life has turned out. The Psalmist recognized the problem in his lack of steadfastness (faithfulness) in fully obeying what God intended for him to do. Typically, we go about our

business and do not give a lot of thought about the choices we make until we encounter a problem that is of our own making. Only then do we start to examine what we were doing in relationship to God's council for us. If we examine why we have problems and why we fail we may find that the underlying reasons are bad assumptions or erroneous principles that are not aligned with God's word. By heeding all of God's commands, then we are more likely to avoid the embarrassment of problems and failures.

It is apparent that the psalmists recognized that he was not as diligent as he should be and he injected a brief prayer that he would be faithful in keeping God's decrees. Most people don't even realize that we are missing the mark because they are not aware of what Godly precepts and principles are. Most people are reduced to doing what is right in their own sight and is exactly the position that the Children of Israel were in the time of the Judges.

Learning to Obey

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! Psalm 119:7-8 (NASB95)

Having learned lessons "the hard way" we should be more inclined to better learn God's laws and to see how we can apply them to situations in life. As we put into practice "walking according to God's ways" we will see evidence of the rightness of such a lifestyle and we can better appreciate the benefits this brings. Praise will be a natural response of our appreciation. But beyond that, when we consider what life would be like if we did not know the Lord and were ignorant of His ways, then we can join the plea of David to never be absent from the presence of the Lord.

Source of Holiness

⁹ How can a young man keep his way pure? By keeping *it* according to Your word. Psalm 119:9 (NASB95)

This discourse on holiness forms an interesting sequence of verses that starts with the desired end result: purity or holiness. We are admonished to be holy because God is holy and He has chosen us to be part of His family. So how does a person keep himself pure. The answer is to live or walk in agreement with the word of God. However, all who attempt to do so will find many failures along the way. Though we may want to do what is good, we find as Paul stated in Romans 7, "The good that I would, I do not." Obviously, we need help in accomplishing what we desire to do. How do we avail ourselves of such help?

The Need for Dedication and the Need for Help

¹⁰ With all my heart I have sought You; Do not let me wander from Your commandments. Psalm 119:10 (NASB95)

As with any endeavor, a half-hearted attempt will not produce desirable results. In manifesting holiness in our lives even a wholehearted effort will not get the job done unless we have help beyond our own capabilities. We along with the Psalmist pray for God's help in the person of the Holy Spirit to keep us from wandering off the path of righteousness and to restore us to a right relationship.

Notice that the concern of the psalmist was not so much that of his deliberately choosing to do something wrong but that he would drift away (stray) from doing what was pleasing to God.

Practical Application to Life

¹¹ Your word I have treasured in my heart, That I may not sin against You. Psalm 119:11 (NASB95)

The “how to” of avoiding the tendency to stray is found in this verse and involves familiarity with God’s word and His expectations for us. It is by the word that the Holy Spirit guides us in our daily lives. These concepts are tools by which we are guided and if we are not familiar with them, then we are disadvantaged in following the leading of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes we miss the mark simply because we are not aware of the target. If we do not know what God’s word says, then we will use our own wit to determine what action we will take. Many times that will result in making things worse rather than better.

Appreciation of the Benefits of Obedience

¹² Blessed are You, O LORD; Teach me Your statutes. Psalm 119:12 (NASB95)

It is one thing to know the words in a document, but it is a different matter to really understand the full meaning of those words along with their implication for daily living and interacting with other people. Not only does the Holy Spirit use the precepts and concepts we have hidden in our hearts, He also helps us put them there with understanding and wisdom so that they are more than just words. It is through revelation by the Spirit that we come to “know” in our innermost being the decrees of God. This is why the things of God are foolishness to those who do not know Him.

Embracing the Word of God

¹³ With my lips I have told of All the ordinances of Your mouth. ¹⁴ I have rejoiced in the way of Your testimonies, As much as in all riches. ¹⁵ I will meditate on Your precepts And regard Your ways. ¹⁶ I shall delight in Your statutes; I shall not forget Your word. Psalm 119:13-16 (NASB95)

If holiness is our objective and we come to realize that the word of God is the pathway toward that objective, then we are not likely to persevere in that pathway unless we find some pleasure in the trip. As we get into the word of God, we will start to see how marvelous it really is. It is so simple even a child can understand the basics, yet it is so deep that the greatest human mind could never fathom all that is there. As we discover the obvious and the hidden mysteries of the word, then we find great delight and are drawn to think more and more about the word and how it applies to life. It becomes interwoven in our thought process (mediate on God’s precepts) and we will find ourselves recalling and quoting (with my lips I recount all the laws) the words of God in relationship to whatever comes our way.

Notice the various ways we can embrace the word of God and make it a part of who we are. You have probably noticed that people talk about that which is important to them. How many people do you know that all they want to talk about is the word of God? What do we think about when we are not having to concentrate on a specific task or activity that requires us to be mentally focused? To what subject does our minds naturally return when we have “free time?” What is the first thing we think about when we awake? With a little attention to what is going on in our thoughts, we can assess what is really important to us. If we find that we have misplaced priorities, then we can do something about it.