

Your testimonies are wonderful; therefore my soul keeps them. The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple. I open my mouth and pant, because I long for your commandments. Turn to me and be gracious to me, as is your way with those who love your name. Keep steady my steps according to your promise, and let no iniquity get dominion over me. Redeem me from man's oppression, that I may keep your precepts. Make your face shine upon your servant, and teach me your statutes. My eyes shed streams of tears, because people do not keep your law.

(Psalm 119:129–136)

Introduction

In late November 2017, a story broke, which, to quote one media outlet, “shocked” and “horrified” the American people. The headline was to the point: “Nation Shocked, Horrified As Christians Hold Christian Position.”

The media outlet that published the article was, in fact, *The Babylon Bee*, a Christian satire news website. The *Bee*, much in the vein of Paul in 1 Corinthians 4, employs satire to make its point when it comes to different events and behaviours. The full coverage of this shocking and horrifying story was as follows:

Reports from around the nation Thursday indicate that millions of American citizens were still reeling from the revelation that a prominent Christian couple holds a historically Christian position.

“We’re not saying people can’t be Christians,” a Seattle woman said in a Facebook comment. “This is a free country, after all. But when Christians decide to actually have Christian beliefs about things—I’m sorry, that’s just too far.”

A man in Denver agreed, stating that he prided himself on his deep appreciation of and support for freedom of beliefs and religious tolerance, “so long as Christians don’t publicly hold opinions I find disagreeable.”

“It’s almost as if they take the Bible seriously or something,” he added, shaking his head.

This revelation comes on the heels of a national Gallup poll released earlier this week indicating that over 95% of Americans agreed with the statement, “Christians are allowed to practice their beliefs, as long as everyone agrees with them.”

The article, as you can see is somewhat vague, but the featured image on the website was of Chip and Joanna Gaines, stars of HGTV’s popular home renovation show, *Fixer Upper*. A few days before the publication of the *Bee*’s article, *Buzzfeed* and *Cosmopolitan* each published an article revealing that the Gaineses were members of a church whose pastor—shock and horror—opposed same sex marriage.

Fans of *Fixer Upper* were divided. Those who supported same sex marriage hoped desperately that the Gaineses would voice their disagreement with their pastor’s position, while faithful Christians prayed that they would publicly affirm their biblical convictions. In the end, after a protracted silence, Chip Gaines issued a statement in which he basically affirmed their agreement with their pastor, though he did couch his language very carefully so as to avoid as much offence as possible.

The furore that erupted over the revelation of the Gainses' church membership is well encapsulated in the words of one recent philosopher: "Truth has been slain to provide a feast for unity." At least in the West, that is very much an accurate summary of the times in which we live, where truth frequently takes a back seat to the quest for unity. The writer of Psalm 119 shows that Christians should be unwilling to sacrifice truth for the sake of unity. In the section before us in this study—vv. 129–136—he displayed an absolute commitment to keeping God's truth. And his words are designed to encourage us to do the same.

The concept of *keeping* God's truth pervades this section (see vv. 129, 133, 134, 136). Being a truth-keeper is the heart of this section. As we study this section together, we will see the *reason* the psalmist kept God's truth (vv. 129–131), his *resolve* to keep God's truth (vv. 132–135), and one *result* for him of keeping God's truth (v. 136).

The Psalmist's Reason: Love for Truth-Keeping

The psalmist, first, expressed the reason that he was a truth-keeper: his deep love for God's truth. "Your testimonies are wonderful; therefore my soul keeps them. The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple. I open my mouth and pant, because I long for your commandments" (vv. 129–131).

Notice that the psalmist highlights one of the many benefits of God's truth in v. 130: "It imparts understanding to the simple." However, that benefit is sandwiched between outbursts expressing his love for the truth. It was not, primarily, the benefits of truth-keeping that drove the psalmist to keep God's truth, but simply his love for the truth. He kept God's truth because "your testimonies are wonderful" (v. 129). In other words, he loved God's truth because it was God's truth, not because of what it did (or could do) for him.

There are far too many people who fall away from church, and ultimately away from the faith, because they only responded to God's truth for the benefits it offered them. When they received those benefits, or when they didn't receive them as expected, they became disillusioned and fell away. Jesus spoke of some of these people in Matthew 13:20: "As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away."

Let me ask a question at this point: Are you—right now as you read this—committed to keeping God's truth? If so, why? Is your commitment only as strong as the benefits you might reap from God's truth: a better marriage, a better family, or workplace security? I'm afraid that this is the narrative that so much of contemporary Christianity: Do what the Bible tells you to do and you are guaranteed favourable circumstances. But that's not the way it always works!

A husband may sacrificially love his wife as Christ loved the church and gave himself for it and *still* find that love spurned. A Christian may honour God's truth in the workplace, doing her work as unto the Lord and not unto men, and still find her boss to be unreasonable. In fact, the section immediately preceding this one highlights that truth: Affliction is often the result of our commitment to, and not our disregard of, the truth.

If your commitment to God's truth is only as strong as the benefits you reap from it, you won't last very long. You need the commitment of the psalmist: "Your testimonies are wonderful; *therefore* my soul keeps them.... I open my mouth and pant, because I *long* for your commandments."

Can you honestly say that you *love* God’s word? That God’s truth is “wonderful” to you—even if it doesn’t immediately benefit you? Do you thirst to obey God’s commandments? That is the attitude toward truth for which we should all strive.

The Psalmist’s Resolve: Prayer for Truth-Keeping

Because the psalmist loved God’s truth, he responded in a right way to God’s truth. His right response took the form of prayer. In vv. 132–135, his expression of love for God’s truth becomes a prayer. The meat of this prayer is found in v. 132, and then three specific outworkings are seen in vv. 133–135.

In response to his love for the word, the psalmist prayed for God to be gracious to him: “Look upon me and be merciful to me” (v. 132). And it was not a hope-so plea, because he knew that this was God’s “way” with “those who love [his] name.” There is a glorious truth here: If you are one who loves God’s name and, consequently, loves his truth, you can confidently pray for God to be gracious toward you—because that is his custom toward those who love his name!

Of course, God’s graciousness toward you doesn’t mean that he will necessarily give you whatever you (selfishly) want. His graciousness confidently extends toward those who love his word because those who love his word love the things that he loves. The things that they want are things that God wants for them. The psalmist shows us this truth by praying for three specific ways in which he wishes God to be gracious.

Prayer for Consistent Victory Over Sin

First, the psalmist prayed for consistent victory over sin: “Keep steady my steps according to your promise, and let no iniquity get dominion over me” (v. 133).

Left to our own devices, sin will soon conquer us. The psalmist understood this, and so he deliberately prayed that God would, in New Testament terms, not lead him into temptation but deliver him from evil.

Do you wish to gain victory over sin in your life? (Let me suggest that, if you are a believer, you *do* want victory over sin!) Then do you pray for it? Do you pray for it very specifically? Specifically asking God to grant you victory over specific areas of weakness and temptation in your life? As Jeff Adams says, “If we would spend more time praying to be delivered from temptation and iniquity, we would spend much less time praying for cleansing and forgiveness.”

Prayer for Obedient Perseverance in Affliction

Second, the psalmist prayed for obedient perseverance in affliction: “Redeem me from man’s oppression, that I may keep your precepts” (v. 134).

This psalm has much to say about the subject of affliction. We have already seen much of this content in previous studies. The psalmist returns briefly to this theme here, praying for the ability to obediently persevere in such affliction.

But notice the psalmist’s motivation for asking for deliverance from oppression. He does not ask simply for greater circumstantial ease, but for the ability to more easily keep God’s precepts. Deliverance from oppression would leave him unencumbered, and therefore aid his obedience, consequently preventing sin from gaining dominion over him.

What motivates you to pray for deliverance from oppression? Are you driven by a desire to keep God's law, or do you simply want an easier life? There's nothing necessarily wrong with wanting an easier life, but our quest for ease should be motivated by godly, rather than selfish, desires. For example, why do we pray for freedom of religion? Not only so that we can escape persecution (though we do want that!), but so that the church can continue with its mission unencumbered.

If you are *not* motivated by a desire to keep God's precepts, then ease may well lead you *into* sin rather than *away from* sin!

Prayer for Grace-Filled Understanding of Truth

Third, the psalmist prayed for grace-filled understanding of truth: "Make your face shine upon your servant, and teach me your statutes" (v. 135).

Here, the psalmist pleads for God's favour ("make your face shine upon your servant") in teaching him truth. He was clearly a man who loved God's truth, but he never felt as if he did not need to know more. He always sought to learn from God's word.

No matter how long you have been a believer, you should make this a consistent prayer. When we are young in the faith, it is easy to lap up truth because we are always discovering something new in the Bible. The more you mature in the faith, the less genuinely *new* insights you will find as you read the Bible. Nevertheless, we should *never* approach Scripture with the attitude that we have learned all there is to know. *Always* pray that God would open your eyes so that you might behold wonderful things from his law (v. 18). And, remember, the motivation for learning is obedience!

The Psalmist's Result: Passion for Truth-Keeping

In the closing verse of the present section, the psalmist laments that not everyone has the same commitment to truth-keeping as he does: "My eyes shed streams of tears, because people do not keep your law" (v. 136). He utters a similar lament in v. 158: "I look at the faithless with disgust, because they do not keep your commands."

It may be helpful for me to make a technical note here: The word "people" is supplied by the translators. Literally, the text would read something like, "My eyes shed streams of tears, because your law is not kept." I suspect that the psalmist deliberately left the identity of the law-violators vague because it didn't matter to him whether the law-breakers were believers or unbelievers: He wept regardless.

Now, Paul makes the argument in 1 Corinthians 5:9–13 that there is a different way to approach sin *inside* the church than *outside* the church. Nevertheless, the believer who is committed to God's truth is as sad about the sin of unbelievers as the sin of believers. Sin should *never* be taken in a blasé manner—whether committed by believers or unbelievers. Sin is *always* an affront to God, whether committed by those under bondage to sin or by those freed from that bondage.

Can you genuinely say that you *weep* over those who have no regard for God's truth? Are you indifferent to the actions and attitudes of those who reject truth? Jesus wept over Jerusalem because the people would not believe God's truth (Matthew 23:37). And the fault there did not lie with Jesus, but with those who were unwilling to submit to the truth.

Why do people reject God's truth? It is because they do not love God. Obedience to God's truth is *evidence* of love for Christ (John 14:15). Conversely, love for Christ is the *cause* of obedience to God's truth. *People don't keep God's truth because they don't love Christ!* At root, the spiritual warfare in which we find ourselves is a war for our affections.

Do you love the Lord Jesus Christ? Do you love the one who demonstrated his love for sinners by dying for them (Romans 5:8)? You will never love and keep God's truth as the psalmist did if you do not love Christ. Love for Christ is not something that comes naturally. Naturally, we are enemies of God (Romans 5:10), and it takes a supernatural act of God to make us his friends. Perhaps you have no love for the truth, no desire to obey the truth. If so, could the problem be that you have not believed the truth? Jesus is the way, and the truth, and the life (John 14:6). It is only to the degree that we love him that we will be committed to loving, and therefore obeying, the truth.

AMEN