

Bellaire Community United Methodist Church

September 11, 2016

“Dig into the Word”

Psalm 119:9-16

Good morning. Would you do me a favor? Turn to the person next to you and tell them, “I’m glad you’re here.” It’s a simple fact that none of us can be the church by ourselves. We need Jesus, and we need each other. That might sound strange to you, given our society’s focus on individuality and success, but here, we consider ourselves successful when we admit our brokenness, our loneliness, and our collective need for grace. If you are a looking for perfection this morning, you won’t find it here. But if you are looking for a community that wants to support each other, love each other, and find Christ together, stick with us.

I invite you to pray with me this morning by opening your hands in front you. This is a symbol to God that you are ready to receive His Word this morning.

God Almighty, we ask that you make us more reliant on you and your word this morning. You see us and you know everything about us. You especially know where we need to grow – individually and corporately. Help us trust you and make changes in our lives so that we can live according to your purpose for us. Give us the strength that comes only through the power of Jesus Christ. We pray this in his name and for his sake. Amen.

What’s the longest hike you’ve ever taken? I’ve been on a few – Mt. Katahdin in Maine, Tahquamenon Falls in the U.P., and recently, in Yosemite National Park in California. In each of these places I have learned, especially on your first time in the park, it is essential that you have a good map and you study it well. Maps are invaluable in the wilderness. A great map will not only have a picture of where you want to go but also a trail guide to give you all sorts of

information: like what to do if you encounter a wild animal, like a mountain lion; where the ranger stations are in case of an emergency; where to find the cool exhibits and waterfalls and best views from the mountains. Maps and guides don't tell you exactly where to go and what to do, but they allow you to create your own plan and make it work well so that you can enjoy the park.

Going off the trail, not following the map, or even forsaking the map altogether can lead to serious trouble. It might be enticing – “What a great idea, to follow an unmarked path, or stray closer to the edge of a trail!” – but what seems like a good idea can quickly backfire. While we were hiking the “Mist Trail” on the Merced River up to Vernal Fall in Yosemite, and we passed a sobering sign – in recent years, a mother had watched her two boys be swept to death down the raging river because, despite the warnings, they had left the trail.

A trail-guide and map are only useful if you read them, understand them, and apply them. But if you only use part of the information, it can give you a false sense of security, or frustrate you. You have to know what is actually in the guide you are using.

I think you know where this analogy is going. I'll bet you, like me, are trying your best to follow the path of life, and negotiating the twists and turns is tricky. Just when you think you know where your life is going, the trail does a switch back – through illness, divorce, a fight, a financial burden you weren't expecting. Someone you trusted betrayed you. A temptation you swore you've never commit suddenly becomes a destructive habit you can't break. You've gotten off the path, and you want to get back on it.

The question we all want to answer, whether we are young or old, is “How can we stay on the path that leads to life?” It's exactly what the psalmist was

asking, rhetorically, in Psalm 119. “How can a young person stay on the path of purity?” And he gave the answer: “By living according to your word.” The psalmist was so absolutely sure that God’s Word is the trail guide for life, that he wrote 176 verses about it. Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the entire Bible, Old or New Testament. It’s a powerful psalm that has impacted the lives of many, including Martin Luther (German Reformer), William Wilberforce (19th century British politician who led the movement to abolish the slave trade in the British Empire), and David Livingstone (19th century pioneer missionary to Africa).

Psalm 119 even literally saved someone’s life, George Wishart, the Bishop of Edinburgh in the 17th century. Wishart was condemned to death and was about to be executed. On the scaffold he made use of a custom that allowed the condemned person to choose one psalm to be sung, and he chose Psalm 119. Before two-thirds of the psalm was sung, his pardon arrived and his life was spared. (story from David Guzik commentary).

Psalm 119 is an incredible psalm, not just because of its length. Every verse has a synonym for God’s law – his word, his promise, his directive for our lives. And even though the psalmist was referring to the Old Testament when this was written, we can certainly apply his advice to the New Testament scriptures as well.

You may be thinking, but isn’t “The Law” a downer? Isn’t it bad? Maybe you know the song, “I broke the law and the law won.” I realize that the word “law” might have a negative meaning in your life. Unless you work for the government in some fashion, it may seem like the law is there to work against you. But that’s not the purpose of God’s law at all. God’s law is there to protect us and guide us.

The memory verse I chose today is Psalm 119:105. “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.” What is the difference between a flashlight and a lantern? With a flashlight, you can direct the light, but a lantern sends out light in all directions. God’s word is more like a lamp or a lantern than a flashlight. God’s word will always illuminate the truth, even if it’s something we want to hide.

You see, God’s law, if we follow it, will protect from the bondage of sin. The young person who wants to keep his path pure knows, when enticed to leave the path, it gets harder and harder to return. We live in a world that tells us, “Have your good time when you are young; get it all out of your system. When you are older you can settle down and be religious and proper.” (Guzik) But God’s answer is very different. God says, “If you are going to live for me, you must begin at the earliest possible moment, without delay, preferably when you are very young.” (Boice) God deserves the very best from us.

Loving God’s word is not just practicing robotic obedience. It’s not, “[YAWN] OK, God. Whatever you say.” Jesus said in John 10:10 that we could have abundant life. By listening and obeying God’s word, we can have more joy than if we constantly go against God’s plan for us. Obeying God’s law brings freedom, not restriction. It’s like driving your car: if you obey the speed limit, you can go anywhere you want. But if you break the speed limit, you put your life in danger and restrict other people’s freedom as well. So God asks us to love his law because of what it does for our lives.

We all know people who do not choose to obey God’s law. And when we break God’s law, it shows, in our families, in our jobs, in our stress and anxiety. So how can we keep our paths pure? I can think of three ways.

#1 – Know the trail guide. Sometimes the Bible is called the “Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth.” Most of us would say, “I would like to hear from God. If God would just speak to me, I could follow his commands.” Guess what? The Bible is God’s Word. It is God’s voice. It’s like a love letter than was written to you so that you could know what God was saying to you.

The psalmist says that God’s word is sweeter than honey. It is more precious than gold. Sure, the Bible might be hard to read at times, but it is the word of God. If you approach it with respect, if you dig into it, you will hear God’s voice. That’s a promise. Study the trail guide, and it won’t lead you astray.

#2 – Stay on the path. The more we surrender to any temptation, the harder it is to resist in the future? Why? Because the thought goes from our brain to our heart to our body. Just like an athlete conditions their body to respond a certain way to certain stimuli, when we give into temptation, we are training our bodies to react a certain way. The word used in scripture for “path” is like a track or a rut left by a wheel. You know what that’s like in the winter, I’m sure. Once your car is dragged into that rut, you might need a tow truck to get back on the road. It is much easier to live a life of purity if you stay on the path.

Finally, #3 – Listen to the ranger, who is there to help you, not harm you. Danny Gokey has an excellent song out right now about Jesus called “More Than You Think I Am.” Here are some of the lyrics.

“You always think I'm somewhere on a mountain top but never think behind bars
You'd be amazed the places that I'd go to be with you where you are
So forget what you've heard, what you think that you know
There's a lot about me that's never been told
Rumor has it there's a gavel in my hand, I'm only here to condemn
But let me tell you secrets you would've never known, I think of you as my best friend

So much has been said, even done my name
But I'm showing you now who I really am
I'm more than you dreamed, more than you understand
Your days and your times were destined for our dance
I catch all your tears, Burn your name on my heart
Be still and trust my plan. I'm more than you think I am

God didn't set an impossible task in front of us, to try to be perfect. None of us can follow God's law perfectly. Only one person ever did. God's own son, Jesus Christ. He is the one who perfectly loved the law, and set for us the example to follow.

Know the trail guide, stay on the path, and listen to the ranger. You see, giving Bibles away this morning is only one small part of keeping our way pure. We have to read the Word, study the Word, interact with others around the Word. I love the fact that there is a group of men so serious about keeping their paths pure that they meet at 6:30 on Wednesday morning in this building, to study God's word. This isn't an issue for young people – it's for all of us.

So what about you? Have you asked yourself how you can keep your life pure and follow God's law? Do you have some darkness in your life and need a light for your path? If you are honest and say, "God, I want you to direct my life," be prepared, because God will ask things of you. He will require a response. God's love is offered freely to all, but it is a costly love. Priceless, in fact, because it cost him his own son. For all you Harry Potter fans, it's like Dumbledore what said: "At some point, we are going to have to choose between what is easy and what is right." Obeying God's law is not easy. But it is right. And God will always give us the grace we need to get on the path, stay on the path, and help others find the path.

Memory Verse

Psalm 119:105 “Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.”

Reflection questions

1. Have you ever been lost? What was it like? How did you get back on the path?
2. Do you want the things that God wants for you? Do you know what they are?
3. Is your life pure? In what ways are you following God’s law? In what ways could Christ help you improve your path?
4. How often do you dig deep into God’s word? What could you do to improve your Bible study? Who could help you?
5. Thank God for his word, that he would give us such a great revelation of himself in the Bible.