

Psalm 119:9-16. Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in all of Scripture. Longer than 30 of the biblical books, it is a well-known psalm that passionately extols and honors God's Word. A small section of it is the focus of our time together this week.

What about John's Gospel? We are taking a hiatus from John since this may be our final legislative study. After covering the first two years of Jesus' public ministry, we will begin in January 2011 with His final year.

Augustine of Hippo stands as one of the towering sequoias of Western history. His theology laid a foundation for Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and John Calvin; his philosophy affected Rene Descartes, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Martin Heidegger. Many of the greatest thinkers in our world have basked to some degree in the broad shadow of Augustine; his influence is hard to overestimate.

After spending his twenties teaching rhetoric in Carthage, Augustine made a name for himself despite being consumed with lust. At age 30, he moved to Milan and befriended Ambrose. The bishop's teaching pricked his heart, and Augustine became increasingly drawn to know Christ. His carnal appetite, however, enslaved him and an inner battle ensued. The outcome became a question of pleasure: Would the trifles of sin triumph, or would he find a greater pleasure in serving Christ?

In *Confessions*, Augustine writes of his conversion:

How sweet all at once it was for me to be rid of those fruitless joys which I had once feared to lose... You drove them from me, you who are the true, the sovereign joy. You drove them from me and took their place, you who are sweeter than all pleasure... O Lord my God, my Light, my Wealth, and my Salvation.¹

Augustine's love for Christ eventually eclipsed his love for sin and his profligate lifestyle changed. The fruitless joys he so loved were replaced by a greater love as Christ became the object of his deepest affections.

In Psalm 119:9, an inquiry is made: "How can a young man keep his way pure?" The answer: "By guarding it according to Your Word." Care must be taken if one is to live an upright and honorable life. A

diligent watch of one's actions is required, continuously weighing them against the scales of Scripture.

Ironically, the focus of verses 10-16 in this psalm is not so much on actions but upon the heart. The implication is that guarding one's actions is foremost an act of guarding one's heart. Why? Because actions are always born out of the heart (Matt 15:19).

ACTIONS EXPRESS WHAT THE HEART LOVES AND DESIRES. AS WINDOWS INTO THE SOUL, THEY REVEAL WHAT IS TRULY ESTEEMED WITHIN.

Augustine never would have left a legacy if his heart remained saturated with immorality. When his heart changed, so did his actions and so did the course Western history.

Psalm 119:10-11—With my whole heart I seek you; let me not wander from your commandments! I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.

The psalmist seeks God with his whole heart and has stored up or hid God's Word within him. Since he esteems Scripture as a priceless treasure, he has chosen to bury it deep within the recesses of his being. Passion waxes powerfully throughout these verses. The psalmist has cultivated a love for God, and this is what keeps him living a pure and upright life.

The heart's proclivity towards sin is strong, and holiness never comes easily. Joseph knew this while serving in Potipher's house (Gen 39). Paul understood the struggle (Rom 7), and when writing to the Corinthians he urged them to "flee" (*fuego*) sin. They were to become as fugitives ever-running from being enslaved by a relentless pursuer (1 Cor 6:18).

The battle for personal holiness never ends in this life. The Christian has been declared holy in his position due to Christ's work, but is so very far from being holy in his everyday practice. A gap exists whereby the believer is called to become in practice what he has already been declared in position (Rom 5:1, 6:10-12).

As passionate as sin is about destroying the believer, so the believer must be passionate about destroying sin. To the degree he stores

Forfeiting Fruitless Joys

God's Word in his heart, the gap between his position and practice will diminish from one year to the next as he grows in holy living.

*Psalm 119:12-13—Blessed are you, O LORD; teach me your statutes!
With my lips I declare all the rules of your mouth.*

It has been said that Scripture keeps a man from sin, or sin keeps a man from Scripture. Like water cutting a fresh channel, so the Word cuts the heart of a believer eroding its every impurity. Scripture is powerful (Heb 4:12), but it must be buried within one's heart to take root and affect change.

The psalmist treasures God's Word. It has blessed him richly and so he blesses God with his lips. He is delighted to speak well of and to know the Lord more intimately—"teach me Your statutes!" What longing exists in his heart... what passion... what desire. Not bored with the things of God, he is consumed by them. The psalmist has acquired a taste for divine revelation and a hunger for more has developed. God has become the source of his joy (Psa 27:4), and this love for God expresses itself in his heartfelt praise.

*Psalm 119:14-16—In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as
in all riches. I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes
on your ways. I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget
your word.*

It is the believer's duty to delight in God (Psa 37:4), and the psalmist exemplifies it. All the wealth in the world could not buy him the kind of happiness the Lord has provided him. The hymnist expressed such love with these words:

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.*

The psalmist says he will continue to delight in, meditate upon and remember God's Word. Everything in him is set on enjoying God. As the Westminster Catechism states, "The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever." It is possible to enjoy God—Augustine did, so did the psalmist, and so can you or I. This is the greatest safeguard against sin and moral failure.

Can you see the thrust of Psalm 119:9-16? If a man is to avoid sin, he must cultivate a heart that loves God. A believer should know Scripture, but knowing and memorizing Scripture does not mean he has stored it within (Psa 119:11). Similarly, a believer should guard his actions, but guarding one's actions does not mean he is guarding his heart (Psa 119:9). If actions are born from a desire within, one's behavior will not change solely by

external measures. Like weeds, sinful habits will continue to grow back and may even overrun a life until their roots are destroyed.

What does it mean to guard the heart? Psalm 119 teaches it is cultivating a love for God and all that pleases Him; it is fanning the embers of holy affection. The psalmist makes a choice when he exclaims, "I will meditate...", "I will delight...", "I will not forget..." He chose to fix his eyes upon God, and in time his eyes became fixated upon God. Consider the words of the 18th-century preacher Jonathan Edwards:

Christians do not first see that God loves them, and later on find out that He is lovely. They first see that God is lovely, that Christ is excellent and glorious. Their hearts are captivated by this view of God, and their love of God arises chiefly from this view.²

**A MAN'S SPIRITUAL HEALTH IS PROPORTIONAL TO HIS
LOVE OF GOD.**

~ C.S. LEWIS ~

The human heart naturally loves what is unholy and unbecoming of the Lord. It is not easily steered from one love to another nor does it change directions like the wind; it cannot be commanded to suddenly love. What must occur is a process whereby old loves are slowly replaced with love for something or someone new. Augustine understood this and believed the sacrifice of his immorality held worth beyond measure. In time, the things his former loves were replaced and exceeded by his love for Christ.

*Proverbs 4:23—Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the
springs of life.*

The most blessed and happy person is not the one who clings to worldly joys. Rather, it is the one who sees past their illusion of fulfillment and longs for something with more substance. The happiest person is the one who believes by faith there is an exceedingly greater pleasure provided by Christ that awaits him in heaven (Heb 11:24-26).

¹ Augustine, *Confessions* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1961), 181

² "The Grace Tabernacle,"

<http://thegracetabernacle.org/quotes/love-god-for.htm>, (14 Aug 2009).