

Dear Friends,

Last week, in my “through the Bible in a year” reading program I was reading Psalm 119. Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the Bible. Its 176 verses are arranged in 22 stanzas of 8 verses each. God’s law and the psalmist’s relationship to it is the theme of the psalm. It is from beginning to end a prayer. About half of the lines in the psalm are a direct request for God to do something. For example, v. 18, “Open my eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of your law.” The other half are statements about how the psalmist feels about God’s law, how he is responding to God’s word or something he knows to be true about God’s law. For example, v. 21, “You rebuke the insolent, accursed ones, who wander from your commandments.” Or again, v. 24, “Your testimonies are my delight, they are my counselors.”

As I was reading I began to notice something that I did not remember noticing before. I saw that the psalmist often asks God to do something and then at another spot in the psalm he says that he is doing what he asked God to do for him. Notice for example, in v. 36, he asks, “Incline my heart to your testimonies and not to selfish gain (this word can also be translated “profit”).” Then in v. 72 he says, “The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces”. In verse 112 he says, “I incline my heart to perform your statutes forever, to the end.” In other words, he says that he does what he asks God to do for him. He values God’s word above money and he inclines his heart to perform God’s statutes. Do you see the question that these verses raise?

If he is able to incline his heart to God’s word in order to do it, then why does he ask God to incline his heart? If he is able to value God’s word above money, than why does he ask God to influence his heart away from “profit”? If we are able to obey (trust, love, etc.) God, then why do we ask God to enable us to obey (trust, love, etc.)? If we are not able to obey, then why do the psalmists regularly talk as if we are able to obey?

Psalm 119 is a vivid picture of how Christians pray and live. Every Christian knows, along with the apostle Paul that “I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is in my fallen, human nature. For I have the desire to do what is right, but I cannot carry it out.” (Romans 7:18). My heart is *naturally* inclined to selfish gain and not inclined to God’s word. However, God made us for the purpose of loving Him. So he, through Christ, “condemned sin in sinful man in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us who do not live according to our fallen, sinful nature, but according to the Spirit.” (Romans 8:3-4)

This is how we live. We acknowledge to God that we have no ability to obey. Then we cry out to him for the strength to obey a particular command. Next, we do what we have asked God to enable us to do. Finally, we thank God that he gave us the ability to do what we asked him. This is not the power of positive thinking. This is what it means to live by faith. I ask God to grant me the desire and courage and love and ambition that I need to live the Christian life. In this way I receive the joy of living a life that is pleasing to the only One I yearn to please and he receives all the glory because all that I do has been done by him.

Yours for a pleasing life,

P.S. Let me encourage you for the next 22 days to read through Psalm 119, eight verses each day. Try to read the 8 verses at least three times a day. Ask these three questions after each line you read. Can I honestly pray this prayer? If not, why not? What needs to change so that I can honestly pray this prayer?