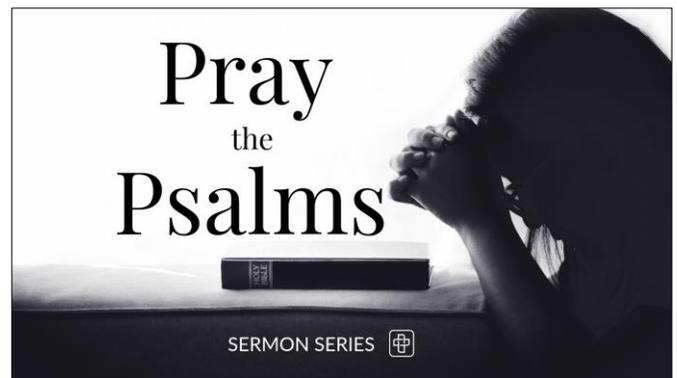




Renewing Your Wholehearted Devotion to God

Psalm 119:1-8, 33-40

Joe Jones August 4, 2019



Turn in your Bibles to Psalm 119. It's good to have the kids with us this morning. For the next couple weeks we'll be in Psalm 119, the longest chapter in the Bible. I'm not doing the entire Psalm this morning, but only a couple sections—thankfully. However, I want to start in 1 Kings 18:20-21. The prophet Elijah is confronting the prophets of Baal and the people of Israel, because their hearts are inclining toward this false god instead of the true God, the Lord.

A test was set up to see which is the true and living God. *“So Ahab,”* king of Israel, *“sent to all the people of Israel and gathered the prophets together at Mount Carmel. And Elijah came near to all the people and said,”*—now, listen carefully to his question. *“How long will you go limping between two different opinions?”* That's a good question, isn't it? *“How long will you go limping between two different opinions. If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.”*

Let's pray together.

Lord, I pray that You would help us see so clearly from Your Word in Psalm 119 this morning that You are the true and living God and that we would choose to wholeheartedly follow You and not the idols that ordinarily we're so tempted to follow. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

We'll be looking at Psalm 119:1-8, then verses 33-40. Before we go there, let's talk about self-examination—testing ourselves to see where we're at. This is an important part of the Christian life, but it's also a part we often neglect or don't do very intentionally. So listen to these verses that talk about self-examination.

- Psalm 139:23 says, *“Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!”*
- Lamentations 3:40 says, *“Let us test and examine our ways and return to the Lord.”* It's a very clear call: examine and test yourself.
- In 2 Corinthians 13:5 Paul wrote, *“Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves.”* Don't assume things. Don't assume that because you've been coming to church for a year or two or five or ten or 20, that everything is just fine. Test yourself. Paul goes on, *“Or do you not*

realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!”

Now I ride a dirt bike with my son Noah, who is six. He has a little 50 cc dirt bike while I have one that’s a little bit bigger than that. I recently had it idling outside my house and noticed it was leaking oil. It has leaked oil in the past out of a breather hose, but this time the oil seemed to be leaking from a different spot. I was tempted to say, “Hey, it’s leaked oil before and it ran fine. Just turn it off, go out and ride later and everything will be fine.” Wrong. If I had done that, the engine would literally have blown up while I would be riding this afternoon. So I looked closer at the engine and found a crack in the engine case. I was able, surprisingly, to fix it. Now when I ride, the engine will not blow up. Why? Because I looked further, I examined, I tested, I then fixed the problem I discovered.

So also we as Christians should periodically stop simply floating through life, assuming everything is just fine, but then at some point, things explode. Instead, let us take a step back and examine ourselves. Let’s test ourselves, genuinely asking the question: how am I doing spiritually? In the Bible, self-examination is for believers and unbelievers. It’s for unbelievers to see if they need to be saved. For us as believers to see where we need to change and grow.

Where are you at today? This sermon isn’t for the person sitting next to you or another person you’re thinking about. It’s for you. Where are you at spiritually, right now, this morning? Where are there issues that need to be tested, examined and fixed up. One good way to examine ourselves is to look at the Great Commandments of God’s Word. These commandments have two parts: love God and love others. Let’s take the opportunity this morning to honestly examine ourselves in light of some questions. But before we get to the questions, I want to offer three important qualifications as we think about these hard and searching questions.

First, these questions are not asking if you do these things perfectly. They’re asking, “Do you see the beginnings—the seeds—of these realities in your heart and life? Are they real? Not perfectly, but are they there in a foundational way?”

Second, as Christians, we sometimes backslide. Sometimes we go through seasons of life, even extended seasons, when we’re not close to the Lord. Instead, we’re often giving in to temptations and sin. Maybe you’re in that season now. The whole Christian life cannot be an entire season of backsliding. The Lord will call us back to Himself.

The third thing to keep in mind, as we go through these questions, is that sometimes the people who need to examine the most scrupulously are those who tune out during these questions. The people who really need to think hard about these questions are often the ones who say, “Hey, I’m okay.” Or, “I don’t really care.” Don’t let that be you this morning.

On the other hand, sometimes it's the people who really take these questions seriously who are doing well with the Lord and walking with the Lord. Sometimes they hear these questions and begin to doubt, asking, "Am I really a Christian? Am I saved? Uh oh. Where am I at?" Keep those dynamics in mind about how the Lord has wired you, what your personality is like and where you are with the Lord as we ask these questions.

Sometimes my wife Rachel and I come to church, having come from a home and a car ride that are full of noise and chaos with four little kids. So we come into church where it's quiet, where there's time for reflection and it's so precious to us, sitting next to each other like that. In our noisy and busy lives, here are a few minutes to quietly reflect on your life. We live in a noisy world, don't we?

So now is a good time to quietly reflect on some questions.

- Do I love God? Is relationship with Christ of highest importance to me, above spouse, children, parents, best friend, hobbies, work, any other relationship, vacation, money? Is relationship with Christ of highest importance to me?
- Have I experienced the joy of knowing God? Do I want to go to heaven primarily because God is there, or do I want to go to heaven primarily because I want to escape hell, or be reunited with people I love, or enjoy the new creation? All those things are good but what's the main reason I want to go to heaven? Is it because I love God?
- Do I read the Bible and pray primarily to enjoy God, His promises and His presence?
- Then this question that's going to come up again and again in the rest of this sermon. Could my life be accurately described as "devoted to God"? If someone looked at my life, took a snapshot of my life even from this past week, could they describe it as being devoted to God?
- Do I love others? Do I consider the interest of others in addition to or even above my own? Am I inclined to bear the burdens of others or am I mainly concerned about my own issues?
- Do I care particularly for the weak, the needy, the poor, the lonely and the outcast? A good indication that the Lord is softening and working in our hearts is care for the outcasts, the lonely and the needy.
- Do I share a special bond with fellow believers in Jesus or am I more drawn to spending quality time with those who don't really care about God?

- Finally, a searching question that Jesus brings up in the Gospels: do I forgive and pray for those who have wronged me?

Where are you at today? What does your spiritual barometer indicate? How are you doing this morning? How have you been doing this week, if you were to honestly examine your life? You see, to be a true and thriving Christian does not mainly mean going to church. To be a true and thriving Christian does not mainly mean following rules. To be a true and thriving Christian does not mainly mean getting baptized. To be a true and thriving Christian does not mainly mean going by the name of Christian. Even though all those things are good, to be a true and thriving Christian means simply to be a wholehearted follower of Jesus Christ. It's nothing less.

Christians who are only Christians by name are not Christians as the Bible defines them. It's nothing more than the very simple reality of loyalty to Jesus. Psalm 119 repeatedly gets at this truth of wholehearted devotion to God. Psalm 119 is the longest Psalm. It has 176 verses and it takes a while to read through it. There seems to be a lot of repetition, so it can feel long to read through. It's broken up into 22 sections of eight verses each, and the sections are in alphabetical order according to the Hebrew alphabet, as the Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew. *Aleph*, the first letter in the Hebrew alphabet, begins the first word of every verse in the first section. You can see it there in your Bible. Then *Beth*, verses 9-16; *Gimel*, verses 17-24; *Daleth*, verses 25-32 and so forth. It's a beautifully poetic and highly organized Psalm.

Psalm 119 has a central theme, namely the Word of God. The Word of God goes by different names here, like ordinances, commandments, precepts, statutes, words and judgments. Each of these words has a little bit different nuance, but they all really get at the same primary thing, which is God's communication to us in His Word. It's communication about Who God is, who we are and how we should respond to Him.

If you took Psalm 119 right now and read through the entire Psalm, you'd probably come away thinking, "The person who wrote this has very high esteem for the Word of God." This man, this poet, who wrote this Psalm loves God's Word very much. So an important calling of Psalm 119 on our lives today is to read, meditate on, study, examine, pray, live by and especially love God's Word. That's what we want to do. An important promise of Psalm 119 for us is that God's Word will flood into our lives with the deepest and most lasting and best joys. This is such a treasure to us, isn't it? This is God's Word; let's love it and live by it.

I was recently having a conversation about a conservative college that is turning liberal in a striking way and in a strikingly fast way. A lot of churches are going this way too. What's at the foundation of this increasing bent toward liberalism is denial of the full inerrancy and authority of

the Word of God. That, folks, is happening right now, in our culture, even in conservative colleges and churches in our country. Talk about sawing off the branch you're sitting on—what do we have if we don't have the Scriptures?

One call of Psalm 119 for us this morning is this: let's cling to the Bible! Let's not give up on what this truth is for us. This is truly our life and we need this. So let's not slowly go the way of our culture. Actually, you can go all sorts of weird ways when you get rid of this Book. You can think and say whatever you want, but ultimately, this Word gives us life eternal and brings us to God.

I want to make a claim, however, that there's an even deeper calling and promise in Psalm 119 than a love for the Word of God. You see, the one who wrote these poems doesn't love God's Word as an end in itself. Rather, he loves God's Word as a means to get him to God Himself. The primary calling of Psalm 119 is to know and love God. And the primary promise of Psalm 119 is that God knows and loves you. It's all about God Himself.

So over the next few weeks we're going to be looking at various sections and emphases of Psalm 119. It really is a rich and beautiful Psalm. I wonder if we, as New Covenant Bible Church, could read through this Psalm during the month of August. Can we commit to doing that together? If we read one section a day, I think that will work out well for the month. There are 22 sections, so one section a day—if we're faithful to do it every day—will leave a few days left in August when we finish. I believe our church will be richly blessed as we read and pray through Psalm 119 together and then hear some more sermons in the coming weeks on this Psalm.

That was all introduction. Now we're going to get into these two sections in Psalm 119 quickly. I want to make one point from verses 1-8 and one point from 33-40. Here's the point I want to make from verses 1-8: God wants our total, not half-hearted, devotion. Then from verses 33-40: we depend totally on God for total commitment to God. Here we go. I want to make clear that I'm not just making this up.

God wants our total, not half-hearted, devotion – Psalm 119:1-8

In verses one through eight, I want you to see that God is calling us to wholehearted devotion to Him.

First, the last word in verse four that the ESV translates as “diligently” is the same Hebrew word that's translated in verse eight as “utterly.” The Psalm is actually structured around this word, with verse four ending a first section and verse eight ending the second section of these verses.

The meaning of that word in Hebrew has to do with fullness or completeness—we could say “muchness.” It’s the word used in Genesis 1:31 when God says that what He made was “very good” or “complete.” It was wholly good. We could translate Psalm 119:4 in any one of these ways:

- “You have commanded Your precepts to be kept utterly.”
- “You have commanded Your precepts to be kept fully.”
- “You have commanded Your Word to be kept completely, wholly, very much or with muchness.”

In other words, the whole of who we are is to be surrendered to the whole of what God wants for our lives. This isn’t saying, “Take a few steps.” This is not saying, “Be a little bit in between.” This is not saying, “Outward devotion without inward commitment to God.” This is saying, “Wholehearted devotion—utter devotion—to God.”

Second, notice the word “blameless” in verse one. In the Bible, blameless does not mean perfection, like we think it means on first reading. Instead, it means “not to be split” —not to have a fork in your heart that’s split, with one side toward God and one side toward self. When the Bible uses the word blameless, it means single-minded or single-hearted commitment and living for God. It’s not just lip service. It’s not halfway in. It’s complete devotion.

Third, notice in verse two that God’s blessing is for those who seek Him with their “whole heart.”

Fourth, notice the word “walk” in verse one, which biblically has to do with how we live our lives in their entirety.

Fifth, notice how God’s blessing is for those who “do no wrong.” Again, this doesn’t mean perfection. It means a solid and decisive commitment to righteousness and justice.

Sixth, see the word “steadfastness” in verse five, indicating long-term commitment to the Lord and His Word, not fizzling out after a short while.

Seventh, notice in verse six that the psalmist sets himself as an example of someone who has his eyes fixed on God’s commandments.

Do you get the point? Time after time after time in Psalm 119:1-8, complete, long-lasting, total, absolute devotion to God is called for. Not limping between two opinions, not serving God one minute on Sunday, then worshiping sex and relationships and popularity and power and success and whatever else the next. Wholehearted devotion to God is the clear calling of Psalm 119:1-8 and of the Bible as a whole. It’s what God and the Lord Jesus Christ calls you to today.

My wife Rachel is a beautiful picture of this, I think. She was halfway in with God, especially in middle school and high school. She pushed the limits, although not wanting to go too far. She would say she was a Christian, but then a lot of times she lived like an unbeliever. She

wanted to live for Jesus, maybe, but also she wanted to find out what this world had to offer. Then in her sophomore year of college, at Taylor University, God got hold of Rachel Van Grubar's life and everything changed.

I can say, 16 years later, she's still all in with God. That's beautiful, right? She's not perfect. I know that. But Jesus is more precious to her than anything or anyone else. And she would come up here and say the same thing. I'm not perfect, but I believe I love Jesus above everything else. You see that loyalty in Rachel's life, from half-hearted to "I'm all in, Jesus."

We depend totally on God for total commitment to God – Psalm 119:33-40

What amazes me in this Psalm is the confidence the psalmist has that he's going to wholeheartedly follow God. Look back at Psalm 119:7-8, where a theme strongly emerges. The psalmist says, *"I will praise you with an upright heart... I will keep your statutes."* Wow! Look at that confidence. As I read that, I think, "How can this man be so confident that he's going to follow the Lord like that?"

We find out from verse eight, as well as verses 33-40, that the psalmist's only hope for living this way is not in himself, but in the power of God. So verse eight raises a question for me when I read it. It can feel like the last part of verse eight comes out of nowhere: *"Do not utterly forsake me!"* The entire verse reads, *"I will keep your statutes; do not utterly forsake me!"* I believe what the psalmist is saying is this: "The only way I can keep Your statutes, God, is if You help me." Or, "If You leave me, if You go away, God, I'll never be able to live as You want me to live and how You're calling me to live."

Isn't that so true? Haven't we experienced falling flat on our faces when we try to do it ourselves, without the power of God and His Spirit working in us? Total commitment to God requires total dependence on God. We actually can't be who God wants us to be in our own strength. In one sense, the commands and the calling to wholeheartedness in Psalm 119:1-8 are impossible commands. In our own experience, we get this. We need God and His work in our lives.

Look for a minute at Jeremiah 31:33: *"But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law..."* Now, think about this. Where is the law going? It's no longer outside of them. *"...I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people."* This is an amazing promise and this is what God has done in us as Christians. He's written His law on our hearts, so that we love to love God and love others. Paul says in Philippians 2:12-13, *"Work out*

your own salvation with fear and trembling...” That’s our part. But then it says, “*...for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*”

There’s a story of the paralyzed man who took his wife out on a date. His wife dressed him for the date, helped him into the car, drove him to dinner, helped him out of the car, wheeled him into the restaurant and to their table. Then she fed him, enjoyed his company, wheeled him back to the car, got him into the car and drove him back home. They pulled into the driveway and she said, “Thank you, Honey, for taking me out for dinner tonight.”

Now, I realize this analogy has flaws. We must strive and seek as Christians. But the Christian life is kind of like that. Jesus is going to come back and He’s going to say to you, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” And you’re going to look back and see that all along, it was Him. Therefore, the more we learn to actively depend on God, the better. And the central way we depend on God actively is through prayer.

Notice that verses 33-40 are a series of nine very direct and straightforward prayer requests. The psalmist is now praying to God. These are prayer requests that you can even be praying now as I read them:

- *“Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes...”* (verse 33).
- *“Give me understanding...”* (verse 34).
- *“Lead me in the path of your commandments...”* (verse 35).
- *“Incline my heart to your testimonies...”* (verse 36).
- *“Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things...”* (verse 37). Notice, the psalmist is dependent on God for this work in his life.
- *“Give me life in your ways...”* (verse 37).
- *“Confirm your promise to your servant...”* (verse 38).
- *“Turn away the reproach that I dread...”* (verse 39).
- *“In your righteousness give me life...”* (verse 40).

Notice that the psalmist is going directly to God with his needs in prayer. You might ask, “What is prayer? I’m a newer Christian, I’m newer to the church—I don’t really know what prayer is. I’ve never really prayed before. What is prayer? Can you explain it to me?” Prayer is simply a communication between your heart and the heart of God. Prayer is saying to God, “I want You and I need You.” Prayer is so vital, yet it’s so often neglected.

I think about my own life. “Joe, how much have you actually prayed this week? How many minutes or hours have you spent in prayer this week?” It’s too often neglected, considering what a gift it is to us. Why not pray? We have access to the God of the universe, the Creator of all, Who can help us in every way. Why not pray? So let’s recommit to praying lives, church. When we’re lost, prayer is our lifeline.

Let's look at what the psalmist says prayer does for us:

- When we're lost, prayer is our lifeline.
- When we're confused, prayer is the means of gaining true understanding.
- When we're off the straight path, prayer is the way we find it again.
- When we're dull and cold toward God, prayer is the way to be awakened and revived.
- When we're tempted to look at worthless and impure things, prayer is a way to fight temptation.
- When we've run out of hope, prayer is the way to be certain of God's bright future for us.
- When we're fearful and anxious, prayer is the path of peace and joy.
- When we're living selfishly and sinfully... Oh, how sad and stupid that is, to live selfishly. It's just unwise and prayer is the way back to revitalization.

So why not pray? Why not commit to praying lives? Prayer connects us needy sinners and sufferers to a God Who is absolutely sufficient and Who can really help us. Prayer is the privilege of our adoption into God's family, as we call out to Him as our Father. Prayer is the way to get near to God's very heart.

Again, why not pray? We tend to prioritize so many other things, don't we? In our busy schedules, with all we have going on, our Google calendars are just jam-packed, right? What often gets pushed to the side is prayer. But the psalmist knows he needs God, so he knows he needs to pray. He's pouring out his heart to God in prayer.

Derek Kidner, commenting on Psalm 119, said this: "This singer is no legalist, content with a round of duties. He will press for nothing short of God's vitalizing touch. Otherwise, his religion, he knows, will be dead." God's vitalizing touch—let's look to God for that in prayer.

As we finish, let us press this home into our lives. If you're here this morning and you don't know God—if you're not a believer in Jesus—maybe that's because you're new to the church or you haven't been around Christianity very much. You're hearing some new stuff and you know you're not a Christian. You wouldn't even say you're a Christian and you don't profess to follow Jesus. Maybe that's you. I'm really happy you're here this morning.

Or maybe you came to church thinking you're a believer, but the Lord has been revealing that you don't really know Him and you're not living your life for Him. You've never truly committed your life to Him or trusted in Him. If you are an unbeliever, here's what I think Psalm 119 would encourage you to do: ask God to give you a new heart. But don't just ask Him once, then if you don't notice anything happens, you think you have to keep living the way you did. No, ask

Him to give you a new heart—even right now where you’re sitting—and then ask Him again and again and again, until you’re sure He’s done it.

Also, don’t do this alone. Talk to other people, talk to me, talk to someone sitting next to you. Together we can work through this step of trusting in Jesus and surrendering your life to Him. God sent His Son Jesus to die for sinners and sufferers who are desperate for Him. His heart of welcome is open to you as you call out to Him this morning from an honest heart, “God, save me. Be merciful to me, a sinner.” You don’t need to go to a priest. You don’t need to go through a set of rituals. Go directly to God, just as you are this morning. Ask Him, ask Him, ask Him urgently to do a work in your life. If you ask from an honest heart, I know He’s going to respond.

If you know God this morning, if you’re a follower of Jesus, ask Him to revive you. Ask Him to renew that first love for Him. Do you remember that? Ask Him to bring you back to a renewed and full and decisive and total commitment to Him. You know Jesus is coming back one day and He is going to renew the whole universe. Everything is going to be made new when He comes back, including our bodies. What Jesus is up to in the meantime is doing that kind of renewal in people’s hearts—even for us as Christians. So ask God, “Lord, would You do a big, deep, decisive renewal and revival in my heart this morning?”

If you’ve been far from God, wandering and off pursuing your own thing, ignoring His call to you to come back, this morning come back to the joy of being wholeheartedly devoted to God. You’re made for Him. When you’re far from God, things just aren’t right and there’s no true joy there. So God is calling you back into His heart and into His joy this morning, to a revived affection for Him. New Covenant Bible Church, let’s be fully devoted to God.

Let’s pray together.

Lord, we thank You for Your Word and its power. I pray that we would never let go of our hope in and devotion to Your Word. I pray also, Lord, that it would lead us to be fully devoted to You. Where we fall and where we stray and where we backslide, Lord, forgive us. Cleanse us and bring us back to You and to the joy that’s found in knowing You. For those who don’t truly know You this morning, draw them to Yourself. Draw them to Your Son Jesus, by Your work and by Your grace. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

New Covenant Bible Church

4N780 Randall Road, St. Charles, IL 60175

(630) 584-2611 ♦ www.newcbc.org

All Scriptures quoted directly from the Christian Standard Bible unless otherwise noted.

Text provided by sermontranscribers.com ♦ emily@sermontranscribers.com