

God's Word Shapes Us

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[0 : 0 0] verse 1, and let's do it again. Well, if you know anything about Psalm 119, the one thing that you probably will know is that it is not only the longest chapter in the Bible, but actually the one with most references to the Word of God. There are only a few verses throughout this entire psalm that doesn't actually specifically state anything in reference to the Word of God. It's surrounded, but it's not specifically stated. Well, this evening, I want to concentrate not on the many points that the psalm can make, and of course the psalm can make, you know, a good sort of 20, 30, 40 points that are then repeated over and over again, because the psalmist understands, as does Solomon in Proverbs understand, that repetition is absolutely key to Christian learning and Christian living. You just can't make progress without repetition, and of course I use the illustration, it's one worth remembering, that the carpenter that starts off with a rough piece of timber, that then at the end of it you have a beautiful piece of furniture, gets from one stage to the other stage by repeating the same action over and over and over and over again.

He uses different grains of sandpaper, but it's the same principle, okay? It's through the repetition do you go from being rough to being beautiful. And so the reason why the psalmist and the proverbs do this is because it's exactly the same thing when it comes to understanding God's word and understanding how you change as a person. And that's the point behind Psalm 119. How is it that we can be like God in character and conduct? That's the point of the psalm. You want to be like God in character in conduct. Well, how do we get to be like that? Only through being shaped by God's word. God's word in this sense, you could say, is the sanding paper, is the tools, is the varnish. It is everything that we need in order to be conformed into the image of Christ. Now there are four points I have. There's only three I really want to make because one of the points we've heard already this evening, but I want to state it again for the simple reason it's worth not forgetting. So a few verses here. The verses are going to concentrate on the acknowledgement that God's word shapes us in character and conduct to be like God. Now God's word turns up in a number of ways. It turns up in the word word. It turns up in the word law, testimonies, precepts, statutes, commandments, rules. All of these are still referring to the same thing and that is the word of God. So all these things are simply references to

God's word which changes us in both character and conduct. So how does a person reflect God's own character? Well that's how. By being completely immersed and surrounded by God's word. Now this is how I generally want us to go about looking at this and here are a few parts for your notes if you take notes or at least for your memory. Number one, living to love God. That's one of the things that the psalmist wants to make quite clear. That we actually live to love God. The Christian who wants to be like God actually lives to love God. Love is something that existed in the Godhead before anything else was created in the universe. Love existed. And the blessing here is that we live to love God. True life is living to love God. Secondly, how we learn is misunderstood. I think most Christians misunderstand how Christians learn. Thirdly, there is a place for real devotion. And by real devotion I don't mean reading your Bible without fully understanding it. Which is where most devotion tends to fall into that category.

But there is a place for real devotion. Fourthly, this is more of a statement rather than a point, that whatever we're dealing with in life, we are always dealing with God. And that is something that I don't think we can actually afford to forget. The reason why we have Psalm 119 is simply because whatever we're dealing with in life, we're always dealing with God. The psalmist clearly understands that point. Now he doesn't understand it simply because he's a believer, but he also understands it for the multitude of people who are not believers. That God, whether they know it or not or acknowledge it or not, he knows that God is dealing with them. They may not know it, but he knows it. And so the point remains that whatever anybody is dealing with in life, we are at some level

always dealing with God.

Now the psalm begins, you'll notice in verse 1, and it makes its way through with a point of comparison. The comparison is a happy man in comparison to an unhappy man, which you read about later on in the psalm. One who is blessed and one who is not blessed. Now I know it's almost a born right in the United States of America to pursue happiness, the pursuit of happiness.

[6 : 28] Now what the psalmist says here is that everybody seems to want to pursue happiness. The trouble is, is that if we don't seek for it in God, then we are led to ruin. True happiness, not as the world defines it, but as God defines it, is only found in God. That doesn't mean that you can't be happy in the world. You can't be happy with certain things, but we're talking about a kind of happiness here that transcends things, a happiness in the world that things can bring. I don't know about you, there are certain things that bring me happiness and there are certain things that don't bring me happiness. Growing up, you know, eating vegetables was one of those things that didn't bring any kind happiness at all. And even to this day, it hasn't changed. I have no enjoyment whatsoever in eating things I don't like. It doesn't make me happy. If, however, you said, you know, let's get in a

Charleston Harbor, we'll go swimming, put on a wetsuit, some more. Now that makes me happy. It makes me really happy. I think there's often a good reason why, one, when I got called into ministry, my wetsuit got stolen and I was called to the northwest of England where there is no water apart from Blackpool and the sea is exactly that color, black. True happiness can't really be found in the things that we enjoy because God has given those things. God gives us water, vegetables, holidays. But we can't get more happiness from the things that God gives us than we can get from God himself. And that's what the psalmist really begins to notice here, that true happiness, a true blessedness comes directly from God.

It doesn't just come from the things that we get from God. Okay, a true happiness can come from the things we get from God, but a real happiness that's even higher than that still comes from God himself.

And so when people are greedy for happiness but are not greedy for God, in a very positive way, and their lives can be summed up as one hurried state of affairs, you can find a very unhappy person.

They're rushing around, they're hurried, but they're happy. And so there's a question that raises itself, which is, what happens when you really believe that happiness is found in the places furthest from God?

[9 : 13] What do you do with such people who really believe that true happiness are found in the places that are furthest from God? That's a real and immediate concern for the psalmist here. So here's the first point, living to love God. The blessed person knows that true happiness is found in living to love God. Verse 1. Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord.

You'll notice that the psalmist also says things like, as he goes through, with my whole heart, my whole heart, he speaks of real devotion, a life that lives to love God and to love God completely. And what that means is, is that there are some things in our life that we have to renounce, daily renounce. One of those things is the guidance from our own affections. So we go back to this principle of, do we love the gift more than the giver?

Do you love God's gifts more than God himself? And so this is summed up in the two lost sons in Luke 15, both of whom really wanted what the father had, but neither of them actually wanted the father.

They loved the gifts of the father more than they loved the father himself. And they both sought their own guidance through life in loving the things that the father could give them, not actually from loving the father himself. And so what looks like real guidance ends up getting both of them lost with only actually one finding his way back home because he got lost through loving the gift more than the giver.

[11 : 22] What this means is, is that we must renounce the guidance of our own affections. All the things that we love should not be the things that guide us. God, the God whom we love, we live to love God and God alone should guide us. All the other things that we love, which are good and perfectly good, we must renounce as guides. We can't follow those affections or else we will get lost. And the place that we will get lost is furthest from God. That's the real danger.

That even the good things of God can lead us away from God if we put them in place of God. So we live to love God. The proverb states it this way, that we are not to lean on our own understanding, but that we are to trust God, okay, with our whole heart. Okay, lean not on your own understanding, but put your whole trust from your whole heart in God. You are not to trust in your own heart, as many people do. We are not to trust there for a moment. So this man knows that the way to make it through life safely and the way to make it through life happily is to live to love God.

God. So I ask you this question this evening. Do you live to love God? Or do you simply live to love the things that God has given you? And there's a big difference between the two. And I hope and pray that for all of us, we can actually say that I recognize that the life that God has given me finds its way through this world by living to love God first. That's how I stay at a trouble.

That's how I get to enjoy the things that God has got for me. Because I live to love God. So this man knows that in order to make it his way through life safely, that he is to love God. And the way that he loves God here is by loving his word, by loving his precepts, his statutes, his testimonies, his commandments. And Jesus says exactly the same thing in John 14. He says, if you love me, then I can tell you what you're about to do next. If you love me, then you will keep my commandments. commandments. And what are the commandments? Well, they are God's word. The commandments are God's word. So we live to love God with our whole heart. And we lean not on our own understanding, but we actually ask God to give us understanding, which is what he does next. You see, loving God is a choice and an action that most of the time doesn't always fit in with what we're feeling at the time.

[14:28] To actually wake up in the morning and to choose to love God when you don't feel like it is a choice that you have to make. To wake up in the morning and to love God when you don't feel like it is an action that we really have to carry through. Love is a doing word. And living to love God means that we have to make a choice and follow that up with actions. Not towards others, but directly towards God himself. And when that happens, the feeling comes. Now you might think that blessed is some kind of spiritual blessing, but blessed here simply means happy. Happy are those whose way is blameless. Happy are those who keep his testimonies. Happy is that person. This is a real, genuine gift of God.

Real happiness is found in the person who lives to love God. Well, the second thing is then, how we learn is misunderstood. And I think that's one of the reasons why we don't get there. Because I think we've reduced how we learn down to something to the point where we no longer learn. We don't learn and we don't grow. It's not a criticism, but it's an observation. Now I know that in speaking on this subject and with teachers in the fellowship, I've got to be careful because a lot of people have written a lot on this subject of how we learn.

my intention is not to add another opinion or to say that all the other ways are wrong, but simply to point out the most obvious things that we ought not to forget. And the most obvious thing is this. God created us. Second thing, God created us with five senses. And God created us with five senses because we have to live in a world where we have to hear things, see things, do things, smell things, taste things, okay? God has made us complete in that sense to take in the world around us. And then he's given us a body to carry out the things that he wants us to do. His point is that we are to use all the senses all the time to live in a world and where we are to practice Christianity, where we are to be formed into the character and conduct of Jesus Christ, that that's what we are to be like. Now when one of these senses are not there in a person's life, we call that person disabled. That person has been disabled because one of their senses is missing. So a blind person will be registered as disabled. A person who can't physically walk and who is in a wheelchair will be medically labeled as disabled. It's a disability. The ability is no longer there because for some reason, whether it be an accident or whether they were born that way, that ablement is not there. And so when the Christian comes into the church and says, well, I'm a visual learner or I'm an auditory learner or I learned this way rather than that way, what are you doing to yourself?

You're disabling yourself. You're disabling yourself in the sense, that's not to say that you, that's not to say that that's not the way that you learn best. You may learn best visually. You may learn best by listening. You may learn best by doing it practically. You may learn best in these areas, but that is not the only way you can learn. And if you choose that I'm only going to learn through visual means or listening means, you are disabling yourself from the way that God actually made you. And so this, you think, well, how is that even important in a church? Well, we have reasons that people don't go to Bible studies because they can't learn. I can't go to house groups because I can't learn

in that type of environment. But the point is you can because God made you to. What you're doing is you're disabling yourself in areas that you don't need to be. Now, you may be a better listener than you are a better seer. You may learn better visually than you do by hearing. You may learn better by doing it practically than you do just by reading about it. I'm not saying what you're best at. What I'm saying is, is this, if you choose one over the rest, you're disabling yourself from the way that God actually created you to learn and to live in this world. So how we learn could actually be misunderstood.

And it could be misunderstood because you've chosen one way over the other. Not that that's wrong, but it becomes wrong when you're disabling yourself from the way that God actually made you to work, to live, to listen, to do. And so this is frequently expressed by the psalmist who says, give me understanding. He knows he doesn't know. Now, do you remember the spiritual development triangle? At the very bottom, there is the person who doesn't know that they don't know.

[20 : 06] So how can you tell a person who doesn't know that they don't know something that they need to know? Because they don't know that they don't know that they don't know need to hear it. There's a big problem. It's only when you know that you don't know do you actually begin to learn.

And this is why the psalmist here is saying, I know that I don't know. Give me understanding. The only reason a person would ask for that is because they have got to the point of knowing that they don't know. But when a person doesn't know that they don't know, they think everything's fine. I know everything. Or if I don't know everything, I don't need to know it. You understand the problem? So the psalmist here is saying, give me understanding. I know that there are things that I don't know that are important for me to live this life that you want me to live. The other thing that he has to say, which is quite striking, and this also might challenge of how we learn, is that he puts into the category of learning, learning how not to do something is as equally as important as learning how to do something. Okay, learning how to do something is as important as learning how not to do something. In verse 26, if you want to look down at your Bibles, he asked God to teach him. In verse 27, he asks God to give him understanding. Make me, make me understand the way of your precepts, and I will meditate on your wondrous works. Then in verse 30, he says, now because of this, because you've given me understanding, I have chosen the way of faithfulness. In other words, he says, look, I haven't got here by myself. I've got here because, God, you gave me the understanding I needed to get here. In other words, what he's saying is, there's absolutely no way I could live a faithful life unless it was granted by you to give me the understanding I need to live a faithful life. He knows he doesn't know what's required until God tells him. But then back in verses 9 through to 11, the focus isn't so much on how to obey, but rather on how not to sin.

And there's a big difference between the two. The lesson here is not on what to do, but rather on what not to do. And how much time do you actually spend on learning how not to do something? Think about it. We do our Bible studies, we come to church. Most of the time we focus on how to obey or what to obey. But what the psalmist puts here is, is we need to spend at least a good amount of time on learning how not to do something. So we'll pick it up in verse 9. How can a young man keep his way pure? Well, that's in a positive sense, that's what he wants to do, by guarding it according to your word. 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. So this young man's concern, or the concern for the young man is, is how do we teach young people not to sin? How do we set the pattern that we become people who, when we get old, have learned not to sin? How do we learn how not to do something?

And his conclusion is, well, you have to store the word of God up in your heart. You want to keep your way pure? Well, the only way to do it is to store the word of God up in your heart. His point is that not sinning is not so much about what we have read and then try and go away and obey it.

[24 : 20] But actually, when a person doesn't sin, it's because they're drawing on what they need in the moment. A person doesn't sin because of what they've got stored up in their heart. That's what he's saying.

Now, normally when we go into a job, we have all this information and we put it into practice. Well, he's kind of saying in a negative way that the way that you don't sin is by drawing on all the word of God that you've got stored up in your heart. So when we sin, it's not because we don't know any difference. We do know a lot of difference. If I sin, I know I ought not to sin, even though I've sinned.

So my head is filled with the knowledge. I'm qualified to answer the question of what is sin and what is not sin. But I am totally unprepared to not sin if the word of God is not stored up in my heart. I have not learned how not to do something. And the way I learn how not to sin is by storing this word of God up in my heart, not just knowing what sin is. That's the difference.

A person can still sin when they know the difference between sin and righteousness. But a person who doesn't sin or who might not sin is a person who stores the word of God up in their heart. But how often do we actually spend time on that type of learning?

We just try and get it in our head. What is sin? What is righteousness? And then do it. But that's not what he's saying here. So if you're thinking this evening, do you know, I just don't need to know this because it's not relevant for me today. Well, that's the problem.

[26 : 14] If you think things are not relevant today, what do you think the problem will be tomorrow when it is relevant? So you go to your house groups, you go to your Bible studies, you come here on a Sunday morning and a Sunday evening, and you leave thinking, do you know what? I don't think that was relevant for me today. And you dismiss it because it's not relevant. And if relevance is defined as immediate concerns, what do you think the problem is? Well, you'll get to tomorrow or you'll get to next week and something will happen in your life. And you'll go, I learned this at the Bible study.

I'm sure Daniel was saying something about this on Sunday morning. And because you dismissed it when you heard it, because it was irrelevant then, you get to next week when you need to draw on it, like you would money in a bank account where you need it the most. And it's not there.

Because it went into your head and you dismissed it before it managed to get stored in your heart. And so at the very moment that you need it, it's not that you know that it's gone in your head somewhere, but it never made its all way down into your heart. And so the thing that you considered to be irrelevant is actually the most relevant thing that you need at the moment. The trouble is, is that you dismissed it. You didn't store it up in your heart. Because most people, and here's the problem, define relevance as what is immediate. What's my immediate concern? What is my immediate need? But that's not the way how scripture defines relevance. Relevance is defined as what will I need if this happens? What will I need if that happens? Relevance is defined in the context of not knowing what will happen tomorrow, but making sure I'm prepared to live the Christian life anywhere at any time.

That's relevance. The trouble is, we don't do it because we dismiss what we think we don't need to know today. And we leave ourselves short for tomorrow. That's the problem. That's the problem. We dismiss it before we stored it in our heart. Thirdly then, and we'll conclude with this, a place for real devotion. Now, I don't know if you have devotional aids at home. I'm fond of some others. You know, you think, you know, there's not much Bible content here.

[28 : 48] One of the dangers I feel that happens when people do their devotions is that they end up reading the Bible without fully understanding it. And that's always been a concern for me because in order to get the most out of God's word, it comes from give me understanding, Lord. Okay, the psalmist here is saying, look, I know I don't know. Give me understanding. But the moment a person is content with doing their daily devotions without fully understanding what it is that they have read, then it's a bit like plowing water. I don't know if you've ever tried to plow water, but you get the image. You put your plow in the sea off the back of your boat, and you go, and you turn around, and where's the furrows? There's nothing there. Well, when you have a kind of devotion where it's like that, where you're going through the motions, but without really getting into understanding, you're going to look back and realize all these furrows that you've plowed are not there. You've plowed water.

It's just splashed back in, and it's disappeared. And my fear is that most devotion falls into that kind of category. And the reason is, or the problem is this, that there is a place for real devotion in Christian living because of practical reasons.

However, the danger is this, that you can hide a poor devotional life in a robust, practical Christian life. Okay? You mark my words. You look at some of the most practical people in any of the churches, okay, by and large, and a high percentage of them will struggle spiritually. They'll struggle praying. They'll struggle reading their Bible devotionally. They'll struggle getting close to God. Why? Because that's what God says is often the case. That it is hide, it is easy to hide a weak devotional life in a robust, practical Christian life. The more I serve, the more it appears that I'm a strong and robust Christian. And so what these people tend to do is they tend to look after the

practical side of their life, thinking that the spiritual side will take care of itself. The trouble is, it's completely the other way around. You take care of the spiritual side, and the practical side will take care of itself. But again, we've divided our life up into categories. I'm a practical person. I'm a spiritual person. No. No. God created you with mind, heart, soul, and body. You are a complete person, and all areas need feeding and nurturing and growing if you are to be a Christian. They're all to be filled, not just one area in particular. So don't convince yourself that by going through the motions of a devotional life, that the practical side, going through the motions of a practical Christianity, that the devotional side will take care of itself. It's the other way around. Notice what he says in verse 20. My soul is consumed with longing for your roles at all times. Elsewhere, he says things like, with my whole heart, I desire you. I meditate on your precepts. Verse 15, he says, I delight in your statutes. Verse 16, he says, the Lord is my portion. In other words, there's nothing mechanical here. In the Bible studies a few weeks ago, I gave you this challenge to go and find an apple tree, and to put your ear to it for a good 10 minutes and not move.

[32 : 47] And then to come back and tell me whether or not you could hear the cogs turning, and the engine that pumped the apples to its leaf. And you all looked at me as though I'd lost my mind because you realized how silly that is. But how often is it that we think that we can actually produce fruit in our life by turning the cogs, by going through the mechanics? An apple tree doesn't produce apples because it's got an engine in its trunk. And a Christian doesn't produce fruit in their life mechanically. Let me put it this way. It is possible for a believer to confuse the difference between growth and accumulation. So imagine a person that starts off with one book. After three years, he has or she has 2,000 books. And somebody walks into the house and goes, my word, hasn't your library grown? It's not grown at all. It's just accumulated more of the same thing. I just have more books. I have more of the same thing, like days of my life.

I may have grown through the days, but the days itself is simply an accumulation. I've been alive for more days now than I was 10 years ago. And so real devotion is not an accumulation of quiet times. And growth is not measured by how many you have had. And yet most of us, most of us actually think that a true measurement of spiritual growth is found in the accumulation of quiet times, going through the mechanics. But according to the psalmist here, a real devotion is the renouncing of self, the renouncing of my own affections, the denial of myself, to put it in the words of Jesus and taking up my cross and following him. In other words, not to be governed by my own will and affections, but to be governed by God. And so the psalmist says in verse 25b, give me life according to your word. Give me life according to your word.

So remember this as we close. God has made us a complete person and we're to be filled up in all the areas. We are not to disable ourself saying, well, I'm good here, but I'm not good over there. This is what I like and this is what I don't like. No, God has made us complete and he wants to fill us up complete. He wants to make us complete in Christ through the word. So we ought to remember that Jesus is the word, the word who became flesh and who dwelt amongst us. Okay, we are becoming what we're becoming, complete in our character and our conduct because of Jesus. Amen.