

Psalm 119:97-105 (NRSV)

⁹⁷Oh, how I love your law!

It is my meditation all day long.

⁹⁸Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies,
for it is always with me.

⁹⁹I have more understanding than all my teachers,
for your decrees are my meditation.

¹⁰⁰I understand more than the aged,
for I keep your precepts.

¹⁰¹I hold back my feet from every evil way,
in order to keep your word.

¹⁰²I do not turn away from your ordinances,
for you have taught me.

¹⁰³How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth!

¹⁰⁴Through your precepts I get understanding;
therefore I hate every false way.

¹⁰⁵Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path.

We come today to our third holy habit, learning. By definition, disciples are learners, but do we rejoice in what we learn? Do we love all that God has revealed to us?

St. Andrew stands within the people of God's long heritage of a commitment to learning. The Bible Academy, Alpha, the new teaching service, these background studies, and more express our congregation's commitment to the importance of learning in our spiritual growth and our maturing as disciples of Jesus Christ.

When this series began, we saw that "apprentice" is probably the best synonym for "disciple." As disciples of Jesus, we are learning to be like the Master in all things. And we learn in many ways: with our head, our heart, and our hands. We learn from the study of Scripture. We learn from our experiences. We learn from imitating more mature disciples. We learn in all the ways that we learn anything of importance.

Today's Scripture passage draws our attention to the importance of learning to read Scripture well if we really hope to know God better – and the "unlearning" that goes with it.

The "Law"

In the first half of verse 97, the word "law" is used to translate the underlying Hebrew word, תּוֹרָה/*torah*. This is the case across most of the Old Testament and reflects a long tradition in the English translation of the Bible. But it presents a problem, because I'm quite sure that most of us hear "law" and we think of a list of rules, at the heart which sits the Ten Commandments. A list of do's and don'ts, each with its accompanying reward or punishment. As a result, we reduce much of the Old Testament to admonitions to obey God's "Law," this list of rules.

Very often, "teaching" or "instruction" would be a better translation of *torah* and is sometimes, though not often enough, the translators' choice. For we can think of the "list of rules" as life's instruction book, in which God teaches us what we really need to know about ourselves, the world we inhabit, the problems that plague us, and their solution. Obviously, knowing the truth about such things is far better than living in ignorance or misunderstanding. Thus, God's "*torah/teaching*" is something for which the people of God have always been thankful. Even in the context of rules, it is far better knowing what they are. If God lives with you, you'd better know the house rules!

But the writer of the artistic masterpiece, Psalm 119, has an even larger meaning of *torah* in view. Peterson's rendering of verse 97 in *The Message* is enlightening: "Oh, how I love all you've revealed; I reverently ponder it all the day long." This echoes Rabbi Jacob Neusner

in *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus*, where he discusses Jesus and Sabbath-keeping: “From the perspective of the Torah as I understand it, only God is lord of the Sabbath. All things that

Learn How to Study the Bible in One Day!

Dr. Michael Reeves, Senior Associate Pastor, writes:

“John Wesley taught that there were four primary resources to guide a life of faith. They are Scripture, reason, experience, and tradition. This is called the quadrilateral. One of the core values of discipleship is the ability to continue to learn and grow from our experience with Scripture. One of the parallel passages that supports the Psalms passage is Paul’s admonition to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:15 where Timothy is encouraged to ‘study to show yourself approved, a workman that rightly divides the word of truth.’

Another passage is 2 Timothy 3:16 and 17 where Paul says that our experience with the Bible ‘equips us for all good works’ and helps as mature as disciples. Discipleship without biblical experience is empty and driven by cultural norms rather than Godly principles.

The sad fact is that many of us are intimidated by the Bible and most of the experience we have with the Bible is second hand – one question we need to consider is how much more biblically aware and mature will I be as a disciple in a year or five years or beyond? We do not want your growth as a disciple to be limited to what you hear once a week. So we have developed the Bible Academy where you can choose from several courses by various teachers several times a year.”

As a part of the winter Bible Academy session, Dr. Reeves will be teaching a one day course on Saturday, February 23, on the subject of “How To Study the Bible.” As you probably know, Michael is an experienced teacher and an Adjunctive Professor at Perkins School of Theology. This course will include basic Bible study methods, available resources, and a study of some of the classic passages that help our spiritual formation. You can find out about it on line at www.TheBibleAcademy.com.

Some of us made a commitment to read the Bible through over the last couple of years. Don’t stop there! Look at what is offered in the Academy, be faithful in attending worship, and take advantage of the many opportunities provided for us to grow in our biblical understanding.

God wants me to know God had delivered to me in Torah, and it is to all Israel that Moses has revealed the Torah. The Torah teaches me to rest on the Sabbath, because it is how I learn to act like God.” The Torah, this “law” in which the psalmist delights is everything that God has revealed, all the things that God wants us to know. Torah provides God’s answers to the deepest and most important questions of life.

Rabbi Neusner goes on to note the Christian claims about Jesus: “Christ now stands on the mountain, he now takes the place of Torah.” Or more correctly, Christ *is* Torah. Rabbi Neusner doesn’t agree with our claims about Jesus, but he understands them. We proclaim that Jesus is the full revelation of God. Jesus is everything that God wants us to know. When we see Jesus, we see God. When we know Jesus, we know God.

Look closely at today’s passage and note all the different words used to describe God’s revelation: law, commandment, decrees, precepts, word, and ordinances. In every section of the psalm, these words function as synonyms for God’s revelation, pointing to one place, Torah, and one person, Jesus.

The Joy of Torah

Among commentators on Psalm 119, there is general agreement that verses 89-96 are the zenith of the psalm, followed immediately by the celebratory passage that is today’s Scripture passage. After embracing Torah as the expression of God’s faithfulness, the psalmist sings out with joy for the gift of God’s

revelation. Clinton McCann calls verses 97 and 103 “downright sensual.” He writes that “The psalmist is in love with God’s revelation. . . . As is always the case with a beloved person or thing, the psalmist has God’s revelation always in mind.”¹ I guess it’s like the old Frankie Valli song, “You’re just too good to be true; can’t take my eyes off of you.”

How many of us read Scripture for the sheer joy of it? How blessed do we really feel that we are able to come together to study and discuss all that God has revealed to us? Do we celebrate Bible study? Do we treasure the words of Scripture? We talk a lot about loving God and loving Jesus, but do we also love God’s revelation? These are the right questions to ask ourselves as we learn how to be more genuine, light-bearing disciples of Jesus Christ.

¹From McCann’s commentary on the psalms in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*.

Our Heritage of Learning

In obedience to Jesus' commission to his disciples, The United Methodist Church affirms that "the mission of the Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ." Further, we Methodists assert that "Local churches provide the most significant arena through which disciple-making occurs." At St. Andrew, our renewed vision statement expresses how we will go about carrying out the church's mission to make disciples of Jesus.

In the New Testament, the word "disciple" appears more than 250 times, usually when referring to Jesus' followers, and translates the Greek word *mathetes*. It is a word based on the idea of learning, of being a pupil, apprentice, or student. Often, *mathetes* connotes a master and apprentice relationship. In the New Testament, discipleship begins with a call from Jesus to follow him. This was different from typical Judaism of Jesus' day, in which the burden was on the student to find a teacher. Furthermore, disciples of Jesus were called by him to be committed to him. For example, Peter had probably heard about Jesus before being confronted by him (Matthew 4:18-22), but it is the impact of Jesus himself that makes Peter into a disciple. Similarly, we are confronted by the reality of the living Jesus and called to be his disciples, to be his students, and to begin a life-long process of learning what this really means.

The people of God have always had a deep and abiding respect for learning. Today's Scripture passage is from Psalm 119, the longest of all the Psalms. It is an extended meditation on the joy of God's law. We usually think of God's Old Testament law as an extended and burdensome list of detailed rules. However, "instruction" is a better way to think of God's law, for the Law told the Israelites how they were to live in relationship with God – what a wondrous thing to be told! So, we shouldn't be surprised when the Psalmist says, "I told you my plans, and you answered. Now teach me your principles. Help me understand the meaning of your commandments, and I will meditate on your wonderful miracles" (Psalm 119:26-27 NLT). The book of Proverbs is, in essence, the lived experience of the Jewish community of learning to walk in God's ways. The Jews understood that they had to teach their children the story of Israel and its God. Walter Brueggeman asks us, What does it mean to be Israel? Why do we live the way we live and do what we do? Given their heritage of devotion to God's word and the importance of learning, it is not surprising that the study of Torah replaced the temple as the center of Jewish religious practices after the destruction of the temple in 70AD.

The apostles and early Christians were no less committed to learning and study. Timothy was told to "continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ" (2 Tim 3:14-15). Peter urged that Christians "long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation" (1 Pet 2:2).

In John 8, Jesus tells believers, "If you truly continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free" (v.31-32). What does Jesus mean by "continue?" It might be translated "stay in" or "dwell." Dallas Willard writes that continuing/dwelling in Jesus' word means focusing on the good news of God's kingdom and devoting ourselves to Jesus' teaching through both private study and public instruction. This is not occasional dabbling in God's word, but dwelling there, being thoughtfully serious, devoting regular time and effort, and asking God to open our heart and mind to his word.

READING WITH HEART & MIND, JAN 20 – JAN 26

How do these passages inform our understanding of learning, the third holy habit?

Monday, Psalm 119:1-24 The beginning of a meditation on God's word.

Tuesday, Psalm 119:89-96 After questioning whether God would ever come to his rescues, the psalmist embraces God's faithfulness.

Wednesday, Psalm 119:169-176 Praising God for the gift of his law and teachings.

Thursday, Luke 2:41-52 Jesus, the boy, at the temple.

Friday, Matthew 5:1-16 Jesus teaches his disciples.

Saturday, 2 Timothy 2 & 3:14-17 Paul instructs Timothy on the importance of staying true to what he has learned.

Sermon Notes

Continuing This Sunday! *Exploring World Religions*

Taught by Scott Engle at 11:00 in Festival Hall on Sunday morning

This series is an introduction to the major world religions – but with a twist!

Join us any week that you can, as each week will stand on its own.

This week and next week: Hinduism. This week we have a guest from India!

***Holy Habits Makeover* with Rev. Doug Meyer**

Doug is offering a Bible Academy class on the holy habits. It is being offered at two times: Sunday mornings and Thursday lunch. The series will explore the biblical foundations and practical hands-on methods for growing our discipleship through intentionally focusing on the seven “holy habits.”

You are welcome to drop in any Sunday or Thursday!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Do you find joy in the reading and study of Scripture? Has reading Scripture ever made your heart race? Has it ever seemed like play? How can more of us experience this joy? What would help us find the same joy in Torah, God’s revelation, that the psalmist experiences?
2. Christians and Christian denominations have started countless schools, colleges, and universities – for explicitly Christian reasons. What might those reasons be? Why have many Christians always been so committed to education and learning?
3. Methodists have always been committed to living a faith that embraces our heads, our hearts, and our hands. Our learning must reach our whole person, just as must our love for God and our neighbor. What sorts of learning have been most helpful to you in your Christian growth? Which have been least helpful? What can the church do to help all our members grow in their discipleship?
3. In the UMC, there is a General Board of Discipleship whose “primary purpose [is] to assist annual conferences, districts, and local churches of all membership sizes in their efforts to win persons to Jesus Christ as his disciples and to help these persons to grow in their understanding of God that they may respond in faith and love, to the end that they may know who they are and what their human situation means, increasingly identifying themselves as children of God and members of the Christian community, to live in the Spirit of God in every relationship, to fulfill their common discipleship in the world, and to abide in the Christian hope.” There is a lot packed into this statement! Were you aware that such a group existed in the UMC? If you were in charge of this Board, how would you go about helping local congregations in the task of disciple-making?