

Attitude Towards the Word - 2

Not only is this attitude towards the Word one of delight, but it is also one of *desire*.

Psalm 119:20 My soul breaks with longing For Your judgments at all times.

Psalm 119:40 Behold, I long for Your precepts; Revive me in Your righteousness.

Psalm 119:174 I long for Your salvation, O LORD, And Your law is my delight.

When he isn't in the Word, he thirsts for them, longs to have them again, longs to hear them read, preached, taught, sung, prayed.

Thirdly, his attitude is one of *devotion*.

Psalm 119:42 So shall I have an answer for him who reproaches me, For I trust in Your word.

Psalm 119:49 Remember the word to Your servant, Upon which You have caused me to hope.

Eight times he says it is his *hope*.

You can summarise this attitude in three ways: devotion, desire, and delight. He feels devoted to the Word, and speaks of his trust, and hope in it. He feels desire for the Word, and speaks of his longing, and his appetite, and his anticipation. He feels delight, and speaks of rejoicing and pleasure and gladness. By the way, those three are an accurate description of what the Bible means by love. To love is to be devoted in covenant loyalty, to desire earnestly the good of your beloved, and to delight in and enjoy the beloved. In your wedding vows, you pledge devotion for a lifetime, you desire to bless and enjoy the other, and you delight in one another. The attitude toward the Word should be your attitude toward God: love. The first and greatest commandment is love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. And if your encounter with the Word is your encounter with God, then rightly understood, your love for the Word is your love for God.

I don't mean you must love the Bible as literature with all your heart, soul, and mind. I do mean you love the communicated words of God, which make up the Bible with all your heart, soul, and mind, because they are the means of knowing and communing with Him.

Suppose you came to my house, and there you found in the living room and the kitchen a curious thing: envelopes with unopened letters, with stamps from Australia. Not one or two, but stacks, whole bundles, forty, sixty, 100. You might be curious and ask. If I told you, "Oh those, are letters from my dear mother in Australia.", you'd be a bit perplexed. "But why don't you open them?" you might ask. "Oh," I reply, "I keep meaning to, but life is just so busy. So much to do, so many things on the go." "I assume you then email or phone," you say. "No, actually these letters are the only way we communicate." Now, what would you assume about the state of the relationship if you saw unopened letters dating back years, tossed aside, coffee mug stains on them, some of them used as scraps to write phone numbers and reminders on, some trampled, some being used as bookmarks, but all unopened? You would have to say, for all my excuses, for all my statements about how I mean to and want to and plan to read her letters, I don't care enough to read her letters. You would say, if you loved her, you would make the time. If I got offended and said, "How dare you question my love, you could rightly reply, If her words meant something to you, you would put aside some of the many other words you read in a day, to read her words. The way you treat her words, is the way you treat her. Your love for her words or your lack thereof, translates to your love for her.

Well, lying on many a Christian's shelf are 66 unopened letters from God. Sixty-six books from God to man, and many a Christian says, "I mean to, I plan to, but I just don't get to it." Could God not rightly say, "But you find time for other people's words. You find time for blogs and Instagram, and Facebook and WhatsApp and Youtube and WeChat and Reddit and Pinterest. You found time

for other books and magazines and websites, for music and TV, sport, and hobbies computer games and Playstation and Xbox.”

You see, our attitude toward the Word is no small matter. It reflects the state of our heart towards God's voice. Do we want to hear Him? Do we want to have Him instruct us, teach us, convict us, challenge us, encourage us?

Well, perhaps we all are convicted by this standard. Delighting, desiring, being devoted to God's Word. If this is the attitude, then we might be convicted today of not having the right attitude to God's Word. But that seems to put us in a catch-22.

If I must have a right attitude before the Word works, and I will only get that attitude from the Word, it seems as if I am stuck. If I need my heart to be warm for the Word to work, but right now it is cold, how do I get it warm? Isn't this like saying I need a fire to start a fire.

It looks like there is a cycle in place: I need to love the Word, in order for the Word to work on me, which will cause me to love the Word more. And perhaps there is the opposite: a negative cycle. If you are cold to the Word, you won't want the Word, and the Word which would melt your heart remains on the shelf, keeping you cold.

In deed, this cycle is exactly what Jesus said takes place.

Matthew 25:29 ‘For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away. 13:12. Mar. 4:25. Lu. 8:18; 19:26.. The one loving the Word, keeps growing in appetite for the Word. The one spurning the Word will lose even what appetite he has.

Why would God make this paradox? First, to humble us. God's Word is a privilege, and we need to know that it is in God's power to take the Word out of our mouths. We need to know this is something granted to us as a gift. God's Word is not static information, waiting for your convenient attention. God's Word is a letter to you, and letters that are unopened and unreturned are offensive. To reject God's Word deserves discipline from God. To receive it is to accept the gift. Second, to cause us to repent if we are in the wrong cycle and look to God for grace to get into the right cycle.

Now here the believer confronts the paradox of desire. Desire is something we must have, but it is also a gift from God. So when you don't have the desire for the Word, but know you should, you are two steps removed from God's Word. You need to want to, but you don't. But you can want to want to. You may lack the desire, but you can desire to have the desire. That is still a good sign, and evidence of God working. The right response is to look to what Psalm 119 says about nurturing the desire.

The Approach Towards God's Word

If we could transport the author of Psalm 119 into the present moment, I think he would be bewildered by what many modern Christians do with their Bibles. For one, he'd be amazed that most believers own Bible. The author of Psalm 119 may never have had his own personal copy of the Scriptures. He would have been absolutely staggered to see that every professing believer in a congregation not only has every book of the Bible, but several copies, multiple translations and instant access through technology.

For another, he'd be amazed by what we do with our personal copies of the Word of God. Before the invention of the printing press, and for sometime afterwards, it was very rare for everyday believers to have a complete copy of the Scriptures. Books of the Bible on scroll or

parchments were kept in the synagogues and later in monasteries, abbeys, churches. Often churches only had access to portions of Scripture, and even these were usually locked away in monastery scriptoriums or the libraries of the wealthy. Wealthy individuals could own hand written Bibles. But even after the printing press was invented, printed Bible were bulky and expensive for many years. And until Martin Luther, John Wyckliffe and William Tyndale, the texts were only available in Greek, Hebrew and Latin.

Passages of the Bible were mostly heard orally as people heard preachers, friars, rabbis, recite them. Some portions of Scripture were memorised in school (particularly in Hebrew culture). Portions were read in church services. In fact, because most people could not read, the stories of the Bible were put into visual form in the stained glass windows of churches.

But all along Psalm 119 has existed, and been true for all believers. The practice of reading your Bible every day is a good one, done rightly, but it is not what the Psalmist was thinking about, because that is not how most believers in history have experienced the Word. The Psalmist was not talking about having a daily “quiet time” or “daily devotions” as people today think of it.

Actually, for many Christians, the way they read the Bible is not part of the solution for their Christian lives, but part of the problem. The way they listen to sermons is not getting closer to Psalm 119's approach, but getting further away. Some Christians read their Bibles in ways that actually inoculate them against ever really internalising the Bible. Some people listen to sermons in ways that make sure those sermons will never make a dent in their lives. They have more access to the Bible than our ancestors with far less recall and retention of the Bible. They are exposed to the Bible more often, have more Bible study resources in the form of commentaries and dictionaries and study helps and tools, but far less memory of Scripture, far less understanding. For modern Christians more Bible has become less Bible.

It is possible, James tells us, to play a game of self-deception with the Bible, where you do a pretend-glance into the mirror, but your eyes may as well be closed, because you have no intention of changing your appearance. The man who looks in a mirror, and walks away and instantly forgets what he just saw. It is possible to read the Bible but never internalise it. It is possible to hear sermons but never receive them as authoritative instructions from God. You can be in the Word but the Word never gets into you.

You can dab your tongue on something and tell yourself that you've tasted it and ate it. You can dip your toes into the surface of a pool and tell yourself that you swam and tried the water. You can scan the covers of books at a bookstore and tell yourself that you know what people are writing about these days.

But all of this is the opposite of what Psalm 119 is about. Many believers in history have been closer to Psalm 119's approach to the Word, without ever having owned their own copy of the Word.

So as we bring this series to a close, we want to consider how to approach God's Word so that it is effectual in our lives.

The psalmist reveals a four-sided approach to God's Word that can radically change someone's encounter with God in the Word. These four are bound to each other, so that you cannot have one without the others, and if you lose one you will begin to lose the others.

I. Settle on God's Word

The first approach to God's Word is not a reading method, not how you underline or diagram. The

first matter is to turn the direction of your life towards the Word, where you come to it with the attitude of wanting to be directed. Your posture of heart is not to hear with mere curiosity, but to come as a lost person wanting directions, as a student wanting to pass. You settle on it as the north star of your life, the operating system of your heart and mind.

Look at how the psalmist speaks of changing his orientation towards God.

Psalm 119:2 Blessed are those who keep His testimonies, Who seek Him with the whole heart!

Psalm 119:112 I have inclined my heart to perform Your statutes Forever, to the very end.

Psalm 119:59 I thought about my ways, And turned my feet to Your testimonies.

Psalm 119:30 I have chosen the way of truth; Your judgments I have laid before me.

Psalm 119:173 Let Your hand become my help, For I have chosen Your precepts.

This is closely tied to the attitude we looked at last week: delighting in God's Word, desiring it, being devoted to it. To seek God's Word is settle on it as the authority in your life. You are choosing to let God's Words become your thoughts, God's ways are going to be your ways. God's Word sets your limits, shows you the path.

There are many voices in our lives: the voice of your family, the voice of your friends and peers, and the people you want to impress, the voice of the media, with its celebrities and experts and influencers, the voice of secular education and politics and science, the voice of entertainment with its songs and movies and novels and games, the voice of your church, the voice of your workplace. Who is the dominant voice in your life? Who speaks loudest? Whose voice seems to mostly shape why you do what you do? Who speaks with authority? Where do you turn for counsel?

It's possible to be talking face-to-face with one person, and be eavesdropping on a conversation happening near you. You tune one out and tune in to another. It is possible for us to tune out God, even as we read His Word or hear it preached, and tune in to other voices we find more interesting.

This motion by the psalmist is one which says, there is one voice which, when it speaks, it binds me. I don't debate it, I don't compare it to the other voices. This voice speaks with final, absolute, binding authority. I have settled on God's Word as the one voice I do not debate with.

Let's not sugar-coat it. This action requires that you experience a kind of death to many of the other voices, including your own. It means saying no to voices that compete or contradict God's voice. It means when you want to simply be independent and listen to your own counsel, you choose to let God's thoughts be your thoughts.

If you don't do this, the Bible is just another opinion, just another voice you are browsing. Unless you orient your life to let God's voice be the loudest voice, and His Words be the final word, then reading the Bible every day can be just a kind of religious superstition. You can read it every day with no intention of turning your feet toward it, choosing its ways. You can read the Bible through every year according to a reading plan, but you may as well be reading the complete works of Shakespeare according to a reading plan. Unless you say with Samuel, "Speak, O Lord, for your servant is listening", you're just browsing a book, just listening to lectures on religion.

This comes back to our first sermon in this series. What is this book? Your encounter with the Word is your encounter with God. The way you treat its words are the way you treat His voice. Settle it in your heart that you want these Word lodged deeply and as it were audibly in your mind.