

PSALM 119:129-136

June 21, Pentecost 3

Smith

OUR LORD IS MERCIFUL

- ¹²⁹ **Your statutes are wonderful; therefore I obey them.**
¹³⁰ **The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple.**
¹³¹ **I open my mouth and pant, longing for your commands.**
¹³² **Turn to me and have mercy on me, as you always do to those who love your name.**
¹³³ **Direct my footsteps according to your word; let no sin rule over me.**
¹³⁴ **Redeem me from human oppression, that I may obey your precepts.**
¹³⁵ **Make your face shine on your servant and teach me your decrees.**
¹³⁶ **Streams of tears flow from my eyes, for your law is not obeyed.**

Earlier in this Psalm (the 9th stanza), we learn that the author had once been either an unbeliever or at least not a very devout believer in his younger days, until some dreadful thing happened to him. This Psalm might have been written by a Levite or a Priest, but not necessarily. Perhaps a prophet in the days of the divided kingdom was led to write this down-- a prophet like Jonah, or any of the prophets, for that matter.

I think it's clear to everyone who reads the 119th Psalm that the writer is concerned about the word of God, he grieves over his sins and the sins of the people around him, and as he lives his life in faith, he is all too aware of his shortcomings, and he constantly turns to the word of God for correction, guidance, and understanding.

This is the life of the believer, the life of the Christian, which the New Testament calls the Life of Sanctification. Anytime we talk about sanctification, we should at least remind ourselves of what comes before, which is justification. That's the Bible's teaching that we are rescued from our sins by the grace of God through Jesus' death on the cross. Because of Jesus, the guilt and shame and eternal consequences of our sins are set aside and removed as if they have been hurled into sun and destroyed forever. Through Jesus, we have a place with God in heaven forever.

But meanwhile, we have this life to live. And that's where a passage like Psalm 119 comes in. This stanza of the Psalm (each of the 22 stanzas have eight verses); this stanza begins by calling God's statutes '**wonderful.**' (129)

We think of 'statutes' as published legal regulations, like right-of-ways and stop signs. In the Bible, statutes include the civil laws, laws about land and animals and building inspections, but the word 'statutes' is also tied to the rituals of the tabernacle. Our Psalm calls these regulations, "wonderful." If you let your imagination wander a little and turn yourself into an ancient Israelite bringing a sacrifice to the tabernacle, we suddenly see why statutes would be wonderful things. How else would you know what to do? If the sacrifices had to be done in a specific way in order to be acceptable to God, a God who punishes improper sacrifices, then some rules would be a good thing to have around. So our poet says, "**Therefore I obey them** (129)."

But then he continues by saying that as God's word unfolds, it gives light and understanding. Let's go back to the doctrine on sanctification. **Sanctification from our standpoint is how every day the Christian (who has been justified, declared 'not guilty' of sin by God), lays aside his sinful nature that still clings to us, and day by day we are renewed, we live for God in hopefully increasing holiness and righteousness.**^a

Our Psalm writer says, **"I open my mouth and pant, longing for your commands, turn to me and have mercy on me, as you always do to those who love your name."** (131-132). He realizes as we do that even though we are forgiven and saved, we still live in a sinful state. We can be comforted that God looks at our sins differently than the way he looks at the sins of unbelievers.

The Bible makes a distinction between the believer who "has sin" (1 John 1:8) and the unbeliever who "constantly lives in a state of committing sin" (1 John 3:9). Christians do not permit sin to rule over them, but each of us resists sin. It might be a mere pang of guilt or it might be an all-out struggle against the tug of war with the devil, but the Holy Spirit works in us to fight against sin in our flesh in our lives. We want to live for Jesus, and God knows this and lovingly forgives and forgives and forgives. We ask him to have mercy, and he says, "I already have."

Another important point about sanctification is that **"The Holy Spirit works sanctification in us Christians through the means of grace, the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. He does this in such a way that as far as our struggle against sin and the life of showing our faith in Jesus, we actually cooperate with God by virtue of the powers God gives to us through faith."**^b This is what our Psalm writer is talking about when he prays, **"Direct my footsteps according to your word; let no sin rule over me."** (133). We want to live for Jesus, so we run back to the Gospel, to the word of God and to the sacraments, day after day, week after week, year after year throughout our whole lives. We can talk about cooperation in our sanctification whereas we cannot cooperate at all in our justification. God forgave us for the sake of Jesus-- we had no part in that except that we received it as a gift. But he guides our steps as we live and we take those steps, and so we have a cooperation with God in our sanctified living.

For example, about baptism, Paul says in Titus 3, "it is the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit." This renewal is daily sanctification. And about the Lord's Supper, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10 that the act of practicing fellowship in the Lord's Supper as we do is a result of faith and a way of showing our love for Jesus, as he says, "I do not want you to be participants with demons; you cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part of the Lord's table and any other table." And the desire to be told we are forgiven again and again in the sacrament is partly the work of sanctification, of God working in us. *Yet the forgiveness he give through it is entirely his doing.*

Now, **"Two important means of furthering sanctification are the cross and prayer."**^c By "the cross" here I mean the cross that each of us carries; heavier for some than for others, but

^a Hoenecke III "Sanctification" Thesis 1 of 5 (paraphrase).

^b Ibid., Thesis 2 of 5.

^c Ibid., Thesis 3 of 5.

whatever suffering and sorrow the Christian carries because we confess Christ. Our Psalm writer prays, **“Redeem me from the opposition of man that I may obey your precepts”** (134). This opposition he faces is something that runs all throughout Psalm 119. He faces taunting and persecution on every side because of his faith. You may feel that in your own life, too. Do you have co-workers or even family members who belittle your faith? Look to God for help in facing them, because you and I are naturally of two minds about those attacks from people we love.

On the one hand, we want to defend and preserve our faith and the faith of other people, and we want very much to stand up for Jesus. But on the other hand, we also grieve for and worry about the souls of people we love, souls that are in danger of being lost to unbelief. Our Psalm writer says, **“Streams of tears flow from my eyes for your law is not obeyed”** (136).

We want God’s word to reign supreme in our lives, but we also want that word to do its miraculous work and rescue the lost, convert the unbelieving, and reach out to the wandering to call them back once again.

Finally, our Palms writer turns back to an earlier part of the Old Testament, one of the first parts of the Bible to be written down, all the way back to the days of Moses, to the blessing or benediction God gave to Moses’ brother Aaron for whenever he blessed the people. We still say it today. It begins: “The LORD bless you and keep you, the LORD make his face shine upon you.” And that’s the line our Psalm writer picks up on, when he says, **“Make your face shine upon your servant”** (135). When we think of the Lord’s face in this way we think about God accepting us through forgiveness and the peace that now exists between God and man, as well as the peace he sends into our lives, a peace that an unbeliever cannot know, it is the peace of being right with God. And this blessing shines on us even in our darkest moments. It’s what enabled Job to say, “The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.”

All of this is possible, only because the Lord our God is merciful. Every sinful thought you and I think, every urge that we might consider to be nothing more than ‘gut instinct’ but which runs contrary to the will of God, every sinful act, every sinful word, every sinful moment-- all of it is covered by the blood of Jesus and only for the sake of Jesus.

His atoning sacrifice frees us from guilt, and permits us to live lives that actually please God even though we still stumble and slip and fall along the way. This life of sanctification, of responding to God’s forgiveness with fifty, sixty, eighty years of “thank you,” is made possible by God working in us.

As you read the Psalms and especially the longest, Psalm 119, remember your place in God’s kingdom. Don’t be afraid to shed a tear over sin, yours or someone else’s, don’t be too timid or too proud to ask God for help when you’re fighting a temptation that’s turning out to be a real doozy.

Never stop praying: **“Direct my footsteps according to your word; let no sin rule over me.”** That’s his will for you. The Lord is merciful. Keep asking for his help. Amen.