

## Psalm 119:9-16

### Taking Heed to God's Word

*Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed thereto according to thy word – v. 9*

*Take heed!* That's a common exhortation in Scripture. It's given by Christ – it's given by Paul and as we see in our text it's given by the Psalmist. Most often the exhortation applies to ourselves. *Take heed unto thyself* – Paul writes to Timothy (1Tim. 4:16). *Take heed to yourselves* Christ says in Lk. 17:3.

The exhortation calls on the people of God to be careful, to watch, and to be sure to put duty and discernment into practice. Among the things that give occasion for the exhortation to take heed is the presence of deceivers – Mk. 13:5 *And Jesus answering them began to say, Take heed lest any [man] deceive you.* The arising of false doctrine – Mk. 8:15 *And he charged them, saying, Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees* – And by the leaven of the Pharisees he meant the doctrine of the Pharisees. The exhortation sometimes is applied to particular sins - *Take heed, and beware of covetousness*, Christ says in Lk. 12:15 *for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth.*

The list could go on and it would make for a good and practical study perhaps for families to trace that phrase *take heed* through the Bible or perhaps through the New Testament in order to see how many specific ways that exhortation can be applied. I think the two most general categories are conveyed by Paul to Timothy when he writes to him in 1Tim. 4:16 *Take heed to thyself and to the doctrine.*

The two things go hand in hand, of course. By taking heed to the doctrine we will take heed to ourselves if we are rightly understanding and applying the doctrine to our lives. I think that idea comes across in our text this morning. *Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed thereto according to thy word.* God's word applies to salvation. God's word could be said to be the gospel. And so by applying the gospel to our way we can keep ourselves cleansed from sin and we can know the blessing described in the previous section of the Psalm which begins *Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the LORD.*

If we fail to take heed to the doctrine then we will not take proper heed to ourselves. I think it would be fair to say that the reason many Christians don't experience the joy that they're meant to have and fail to live at peace and find themselves very often steeped in misery and bondage is because they have not taken proper heed to their doctrine. They may have been taught that doctrine isn't all that important when in fact doctrine is everything. Doctrine, you see, will control how you think. It will control your motivation. It will shape your attitudes.

Dr. Cairns use to emphasize to us that wrong actions springs from wrong thinking. The battle for peace and joy in your salvation is a battle that's fought in your mind. And wrong

thinking arises through the failure to take heed to doctrine. Our text is saying the same thing in effect when it refers to *taking heed according to thy word*.

And so I want to make that our theme this morning – taking heed to God’s word. We’ve noted already how this 119<sup>th</sup> Psalm is a Psalm about the Bible. The Bible is meant to be heard but it’s also meant to be heeded. And so I’m going to analyze that topic within this section of the Psalm. We’ll discover in this study that this section of Psalm 119 will address the issues of How we take heed to God’s word – Where taking heed to God’s word leads – and Why taking heed to God’s word is necessary.

## Taking Heed to God’s Word

### I. How Taking Heed to God’s Word Done

I believe you’ll discover that the Psalmist is being very practical in this section. In v. 10 the Psalmist states that he had been seeking God with his whole heart. *With my whole heart have I sought thee: O let me not wander from thy commandments*. I love this statement because it captures the essence of how God’s word is to be heeded. God’s word is heeded when it becomes the means through which we seek God himself.

You remember, I’m sure, what Christ specified as being the first and greatest commandment – *Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and mind, and soul, and strength*. Christ identified this command as the essence of the law and the prophets. And what this plainly indicates to us then is that you can’t possibly be taking heed to God’s word without seeking God himself through that word.

His word, after all is what leads us to Christ. His word reveals our sins, shows us what our sins deserve, and then shows us what provision God has made for our sins in Christ. And when you see Christ’s condescension and Christ’s humility and passion knowing what you know that he’s enduring what you deserve then you fall in love with him and you desire to please him and walk in the ways that are pleasing to him. As a sinner you had no interest in God’s commandments except to hate them because they exposed your sin. But as a Christian your desire has become the Psalmist’s desire. Your prayer becomes the Psalmist’s prayer when he says *O let me not wander from thy commandments*.

It has been suggested, and I think rightfully so, that this Psalm speaks very clearly to Christian experience. It becomes, then, a good test by which to gauge the reality of your profession. And whereas your attitude use to be *let me not be bothered by thy commandments* now that attitude is changed and your heart cry is *let me not wander from thy commandments*.

How is taking heed to God’s word done then? It’s done by seeing the Bible as the means through which you seek God and Christ. You maintain communion with God and Christ. You seek him and you seek him earnestly. You may not be satisfied that you’re seeking him with all your heart but you know that such earnest seeking is the standard that you aspire toward.

But would you note also that we take heed to God's word by hiding that word in our hearts. Note the words of v. 11: *Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.* We should note that already this early in the Psalm we are seeing an emphasis on the heart. We're only in the second section of the Psalm and v. 11 mentions the heart for the 4<sup>th</sup> time.

Note the references:

- Ps 119:2 *Blessed [are] they that keep his testimonies, [and that] seek him with the whole heart.*
- Ps 119:7 *I will praise thee with uprightness of heart, when I shall have learned thy righteous judgments.*
- Ps 119:10 *With my whole heart have I sought thee: O let me not wander from thy commandments.*
- Ps 119:11 *Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.*

You begin to see, I trust, that Christianity is a religion of the heart. And by calling it a religion of the heart I mean that it's something that reaches us at the very core of our being and transforms our minds and affections. The word *heart* conveys various meanings that speak to us of the faculties of the soul. It can and does include the mind and the affections. And I think this is important to keep in mind when you read the statement *thy word have I hid in mine heart.*

You have, perhaps, heard this verse cited when it comes to memorizing scripture and I believe that is a valid application of the verse. But I think it goes further than that. When the word is hidden in the heart I think you could say that its gotten into the head but then gotten beyond the head and into the heart. In other words the word of God becomes internalized so that you know the reality and the certainty of the truth of the word.

I need to say here that this matter of internalizing the word is something that concerns me when it comes to young people especially. There are many, you see, that know what the Bible teaches. You may know the rules so to speak. And it's possible that you may even strive to live by those rules. It's possible given such knowledge and that kind of living that the Bible, nevertheless, has not reached your heart.

Have you ever met a mechanical Christian? He's someone who can give the right answers to questions that are put to him. He knows what's expected of him and knows what he should and shouldn't do and makes the effort to do what he should and avoid what he shouldn't do. And yet there's something missing in his life. He practices external conformity to his religion but you can't tell that there's any heart in that conformity. He's compliant but still lacking in vitality. It's very difficult to discern whether or not such a person is really a Christian at all. He may not give you any reason to say that he's not a Christian but if heart or vitality becomes the means to gauge his spirituality he may not be anything more than what Christ himself referred to as a white-washed sepulcher.

The word must reach your heart. Taking heed to God's word means that the word reaches your head but gets beyond your head to your heart. Verse 15 shows us how this is done. Notice what the Psalmist says in that verse – *I will meditate in thy precepts, and have respect unto thy ways.*

I will, in other words, read the word, memorize the word, think on the word, pray over the word, seek after God and Christ in the word until that word lights a fire of passion in my heart for Christ. How, then, do we take heed to God's word? We heed it by seeking God through it and we heed it by hiding it in our hearts – internalizing it by memorizing it and meditating upon it. Before I leave this point let me note again what we are going to see repeatedly in this Psalm – something we have seen already in the first section and see again here in the second section. Would you notice the Psalmist's resolution in vv. 15,16 *I will meditate in thy precepts, and have respect unto thy ways.* <sup>16</sup> *I will delight myself in thy statutes: I will not forget thy word.*

A part of heeding God's word is make such resolutions your own. In other words you are determined that by God's grace and with God's help you will meditate upon his precepts. You will respect his ways. You will set your affections on God's word in such a way that you will delight yourself in his statutes. Those are the positive resolutions and then there is one negative resolution to end the section. The negative resolution is this *I will not forget thy word.* It's interesting to note here isn't it that this is not an instance of the Psalmist preaching to himself. We have noted in recent weeks in our Sunday School studies how such a practice is found in the Psalms. The Psalmist is making this a very bold resolution by addressing it to God himself. He's talking to God and saying to God *I will not forget thy word.*

Taking heed to God's word, then, involves whole hearted seeking of God, whole hearted internalizing God's word and whole hearted resolution to remember God's word. There's really quite a bit involved in this matter of taking heed to God's word. But would you notice with me next not only what it means to heed God's word but:

## II. Where Taking Heed to God's Word Leads

This point will take into account most of the content of this section of the Psalm. We notice at the outset of this section that taking heed to God's word invariably will lead to cleansing. Notice again the words of v. 9 *Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word.*

This verse certainly establishes a connection to the previous section. You remember our study from last week? – how we took up the challenge of the very first verse in the Psalm – *Blessed are the undefiled in the way who walk in the law of the LORD.* We noted with regard to that verse that it seems, in the surface of it, to put blessing beyond us and out of our reach.

How can we call ourselves blessed who are conscious of the presence of sin in our lives? Like Paul in Romans 7 we acknowledge that the things we would and should do we find

ourselves not doing and the things that we shouldn't do we strangely find ourselves doing. We are mindful of the spiritual law in that chapter that tells us that even when we would do good evil is present with us. So how can we know the blessing that comes to those who are constantly defiled? The first verse of the next section, our text this morning provides the answer to the very question that should arise in our hearts when we read the first verse of the Psalm *Blessed are the undefiled in the way who walk in the law of the LORD* the Psalm begins. This naturally gives rise to the question and answer of v. 9 *Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word.*

Doesn't the answer to the question of cleansing in this verse teach us that the underlying theme to God's word is the gospel? *Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, Paul writes in 2Cor. 7:1 let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.* And James, who is so sharp and so blunt when it comes to gauging our faith by our works, even he says in his usual straightforward style *Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded* (James 4:8).

The gospel of Christ, you see, is the gospel of cleansing from sin. *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins* and not just to forgive us our sins but also *to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* So taking heed to God's word inevitably leads to cleansing. It must lead to cleansing because it first leads to conviction of sin. But it doesn't leave us in sin. Once our sins are exposed God's word should lead us to Christ where we see in his atoning death the provision for our cleansing.

But not only does God's word lead to constant cleansing but it also leads, at least in some measure to prevention of sin. Again the words of v. 11 *Thy word have I hid in mine heart* – we've considered what that means. It means to read the word, to think on the word, to pray over the word, to appropriate the promises of the word. The rest of the verse tells us where leads *Thy word have I hid in mine heart that I might not sin against thee.*

You see, when you meet with Christ in the book and you're taken up with his gracious and loving provision for your salvation it should have the effect on your life of causing you to fall in love with Christ. And when you're in love with Christ sin becomes repugnant to you. Like Joseph's refusal to commit sin with Potipher's wife you say in your heart and maybe even with your lips *How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?* (Gen. 39:9). In salvation, you see, you've gained a love for Christ and a hatred for sin. And so communion with God through the word which comes as the love and mercy and grace of God are internalized in your heart leads to the right kind of motivation to avoid sin and to fight against sin.

So heeding God's word leads to cleansing – it also leads to victory. Would you notice from v. 12 that it also leads to worship and the desire for more. *Blessed art thou, O LORD: teach me thy statutes* v. 12 says. Do you not find yourself compelled to bless the Lord when you've spent time in his word, when you've meditated on his word which has led you to think on Christ?

David says in Ps. 34:1 *I will bless the LORD at all times: his praise shall continually be in my mouth.* And in Ps. 103:1,2 – here is an example of David preaching to himself. Make this your next sermon to yourselves: *Bless the LORD, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.*

So heeding God's word leads to worship and to the desire for more. *Blessed art thou, O LORD: teach me thy statutes.* Obviously the Psalmist has learned those statutes in some measure. He's learned God's word enough to praise him for his goodness and mercy but he's developed an appetite for even more and so his worship is accompanied with the petition *teach me thy statutes.* I think the pattern of this verse finds its New Testament counterpart in Paul when he says in Phil. 3:10-12 *That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death;* <sup>11</sup> *If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead.* <sup>12</sup> *Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus.*

Would you notice also back in Ps. 119:13 that taking heed to God's word leads to outreach. *With my lips have I declared all the judgments of thy mouth.* The notion of *declaring* suggests that the Psalmist is so proclaiming the judgments of God's mouth in such a way that others hear it. The word *declare* in a few other places is translated by the phrase *show forth* and one time it is translated by the phrase *told out.*

And so he *declares* or he *shows forth* or he *tells out* the judgments of God's mouth. I don't think the application is far-fetched to say simply that he gives out the gospel and he demonstrates the gospel. There's a sense, you know, in which the gospel is the judgment of God's mouth. The gospel begins by convicting you of your sins and teaching you that you are worthy of the judgment of condemnation. But the gospel then points to another judgment – the judgment of God upon his Son when his Son was nailed to Calvary's cross. It's on account of that judgment that you and I are able to escape judgment. *There is therefore, now, no condemnation to those who are in Christ* Paul writes in Rom. 1 and the reason there's no condemnation is because the judgment of condemnation has already taken place upon Christ.

And because you and I know this and have appropriated this and have had our lives transformed by this there is found within us a burning desire to declare these things to the hearing of others. This is where heeding the word of God leads. And then let me just mention one more thing about where heeding the word of God leads.

It leads to rejoicing – v. 14 *I have rejoiced in the way of thy testimonies, as much as in all riches.* The world thinks that joy is to be found in the riches of this world. And it cannot be denied that if you have any measure of the riches of this world it does open a lot of doors to things that can rightfully bring pleasure. I'm glad that the riches of this world are not required, however, in order to know joy and rejoicing. The way of God's testimonies arguably leads to greater joy and rejoicing. Or you can say that it leads to same measure of rejoicing as the riches of this world. So we find the Psalmist comparing the two

and saying *I have rejoiced in the way of thy testimonies, as much as in all riches*. Do the men of this world find pleasure in riches? The Psalmist finds at least as much pleasure in his communion with God through the testimonies of God. Indeed I think we can draw the application that the Christian draws more joy and delight in his acceptance with God through Christ. And I say this for Christ himself said *What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?* You have gained your soul through the testimonies of God's word. You have gained treasure in heaven where neither moth nor rust can corrupt and where thieves cannot break through and steal.

You begin to see, I hope, the importance of taking heed to God's word. It leads to so many things. It leads to cleansing – it leads to victory – it leads to worship and increased desires for more of Christ – it leads to outreach and it leads to rejoicing.

Before we conclude this study we have to look at the flip side, as it were. We've considering the theme of taking heed to God's word – how it's done, and where it leads. We must consider finally and briefly:

### III. Why Taking Heed to God's Word is Necessary

Notice again how this section of the Psalm begins *Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word*. Doesn't this verse teach us then, that the failure to take heed to God's word robs us of the blessing of cleansing. You may recall from our last study that I described cleansing from two different perspectives. There is our positional cleansing. This was a definite accomplishment of Christ's atoning death. A believer can never lose this position.

But he can and sometimes does lose the assurance or the sense of his cleansing. You know this in your experience as a Christian that there are times when you feel so defiled by the world and the flesh. The reality of your cleansing seems so far removed from you because you're so taken up with other things other than God's word.

And if you're deprived of the blessing of your cleansing then you're certainly deprived of your joy. And if you're deprived of your joy then you have no strength for the joy of the Lord is your strength, we're told in Neh. 8:10. We've just finished a series in Sunday School by John Piper that dealt with the fight for joy. One of the things that I found most striking in that series was when John Piper shared how many Christians would come up to him following his messages on joy, messages in which he described the Christian's joy and contrasted that joy with the world's pleasures – and Christians would come up to John Piper following those messages and share with him how good and desirable and scriptural that joy sounded but then they would admit that they didn't really know much about that kind of joy.

And that part of that particular study struck me because I believe that the situation that Piper was revealing extends far beyond the bounds of that particular conference where he taught that series on the fight for joy. I think I could go so far as to say that the absence of Christian joy can be found across this land in epidemic proportions. And when I make such a statement, I'm not excluding this church from that condition.

It's easy isn't it when we deal with certain spiritual conditions or lack thereof to focus on what's beyond us and "out there." I don't want to simply preach about what's "out there" in such a way that leads us to the pride of thinking we can take exception to it. No – Christian joy is lacking in here.

And you remember Piper's first point in fighting to regain lost joy? It's the same as the Psalmist in this Psalm that we're now studying. *Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed, thereto, according to thy word.* And we can follow up this statement with the inverse of it by saying *Wherewithal shall a young man keep his way defiled? Wherewithal shall a young man rob himself of joy and vitality? Wherewithal shall a young man become a mechanical Christian at best, knowing external compliance but having no heart?*

And the answer is the same for each of these questions – by failing to take heed according to God's word – by depriving himself of Christ. You see why there is so much at stake in whether or not you heed God's word? There is one more reason we must heed God's word, and with this I'll finish even though this statement is a sermon in itself.

Look at the petition of v. 10 *With my whole heart have I sought thee: O let me not wander from thy commandments.* Apart from heeding God's word we will wander, we will drift and in our drifting we'll find ourselves in the way of sin, removed from God's commandments. We recently finished some simple devotional studies in Is. 53 during our Wednesday night prayer meetings. In those studies we noted the propensity of the Christian to wander. *All we like sheep have gone astray* it says in Isa. 53:6. And then Isaiah tells us where we go when we go astray *we have turned every one to his own way.* This is where we go when we wander. We turn to our own ways. We think at times that we have better ways or more necessary ways that we have to turn to.

We are as wandering sheep who know too well the experience of the hymn-writer when he writes *prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love.* Now I love the way Isaiah finishes that statement in v. 6. The way he finishes that statement becomes the compelling reason to turn again to Christ when we have wandered. Let me read it to you *All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned every one to his own way.* And what is God's response to our wandering and turning to our own way. Listen to how the verse ends – *and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

Isn't that a compelling argument to return to the Lord when we find ourselves wandering from the Lord? He doesn't respond to us by beating us, although chastisement is our portion at times when we wander but even in chastisement the aim is to bring us back to the truth that *the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.* How, then, do we heed God's word? I hope this morning that you've been reminded how to heed that word – read it, hide it in your heart, meditate upon it, pray over it and appropriate it by faith. Because if you do it will lead to cleansing, to victory, to worship, to outreach and to joy. And if you don't it will only lead to the defilement and misery that become the portion of those who wander from the ways of God.