

Studies in the Psalms Keys to the Joyful Life 9

Summary: The joyful life is found by those who are led by God; they follow Him diligently and turn to back to Him when they fail.

We've spent the summer moving through the Psalms following this phrase: "Blessed is the man who" or "Blessed are the people who" and then listening to what God has to say.

This morning, in our final study, we'll see that there's a blessing for everyone who is led by God, who diligently seeks Him and follows Him. But we'll also see the honest admission that that's not easy to do. And we'll learn of the hope God offers to those who fail.

We start here in:

Ps 119:1 Blessed *are* the undefiled in the way,
Who walk in the law of the LORD!

Now, I'm reading from the New King James Translation, but I think several other translations put it better: **Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD!**

No matter which way you say it though, you're saying the same thing: there is a way of living which results in being found blameless, or undefiled, and it comes from **walking in the law of the LORD**, following God's instructions for life.

We might not say it in exactly these words, but this idea of being found blameless is one of the deepest desires in our lives.

You and I want to be found blameless by our friends – in fact, this is often how we try to make friends. We look around and we assess, who are people I like here, and what are they doing? And then we figure out what we need to do to fit in.

It doesn't matter what age you are – this happens on the playground, on campus during high school and college and it happens with adults in the professional world. It follows you to the neighborhood and even into the church. No one wants to stick out as the weirdo. We want people to look at us or listen to us and notice that we're blameless, we fit in, there's nothing wrong with us.

We want to be found blameless physically. You want to be the girl with the pretty hair – *whatever that means* – you may hate your straight hair and wish it was wavy, or you may hate your amazing curls or kinky hair and wish it was straight or braided – whatever will fit in instead of standing out, whatever will make your blameless in your own sight and the opinions of others. And men are the same way – we want to suck in that waistline a bit, pull back those shoulders, and keep hair growing in the right places while it keeps trying to grow in all the wrong ones like in and on your ears. Because, both men and women, young and old, want to fit in, not stand out, we want to be judged blameless physically.

We all want our teachers to look on our work and find it blameless. We want that “A.” We want our boss to tell us we did good work, it was blameless.

Do you see what I mean? We all have this innate desire deep, deep down inside our chests to be accepted, to be approved of. And when we think we’ve found it, when we experience acceptance and approval, it feels good. It gives us confidence; it removes a burden and anxiety.

Which is why Scripture calls it a [blessing](#) to be found [blameless by God, undefiled](#). And, Scripture tells us, we don’t find acceptance with God by keeping up with the latest trends, studying hard, or doing good work, we find it by living life according to His commandments and directives – by [walking in the Law of the Lord](#).

Psalm 119 is a very unique Psalm. The psalms are actually songs, poetry written in Hebrew. We typically think of poetry as something that rhymes, but when you study it you realize pretty quickly that’s not always the case. Poetry is best defined by its creative structure as is the case here.

There are 26 letters in the English alphabet. There are 22 in Hebrew, the language the Psalms were originally written in. Psalm 119 takes each of those 22 letters, beginning with Aleph, the first, and writes eight lines of poetry, each beginning with that letter, before moving on to write 8 more lines, each beginning with the second letter Beth, and repeating the cycle all the way through the alphabet. So, you have 22 letters, each with eight lines, which means Psalm 119 has 176 verses total, making it the longest Psalm and the longest chapter, in Scripture.

And what is the subject of all those verses, all this grand linguistic craft? It’s the Word of God. Scripture. The Bible. The whole poem is a series of reflections on the value of God’s commandments and instructions. The poet crafts this long, complex, beautiful, reflection on the value of what God has given to correct us, direct us, inform us, and encourage us *because there is a blessing for those will receive it*.

The author is trying to say: come to this book. Listen to this book. Because it tells you about God and what He wants you to know – and if you will receive it, you *will*

be **blessed**, you *will* be **blameless - undefiled**, in the sight of God.

But, you can't do that haphazardly, it doesn't just happen accidentally, look with me at what he says next:

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

You can go wrong by focusing too much on your finances. You can go wrong by spending too much time on video games or watching videos on line. You can go wrong by pouring too much time and energy into your work, or the gym, or your hobby. But you cannot go wrong by seeking God and His directives **with your whole heart**. In fact, that's how the blessing is found.

Now, that's not saying you totally withdraw from your family and friends and work and school because you're busy seeking God. To the contrary, when you seek God **with all your heart**, He sends you back out into the world to be a blessing. When you seek God He gives you wisdom and discernment and direction to know what to do about all those other people and situations you face. In fact, that's the end goal – to know God and then represent Him well to the rest of the world.

So, over and over again Scripture encourages us to pursue God with our **whole heart**.

Some of you know and have memorized the verses just a little farther down in the Psalm, they fall in that category of things that need to be highlighted, starred, marked, and memorized:

Ps 119:9 How can a young man cleanse his way?
By taking heed according to Your word.
10 With my whole heart I have sought You;
Oh, let me not wander from Your commandments!
11 Your word I have **hidden in my heart**,
That I might not sin against You.

Or think about the Jewish Shema, the foundation of what Jesus would later call the Great Commandment, we read in:

Deuteronomy 6:4 "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD *is* one! **5** You shall love the LORD your God **with all your heart**, with all your soul, and with all your strength.

Or Proverbs 3, another verse that needs to be marked up in your Bible and memorized:

Proverbs 3:5 Trust in the LORD **with all your heart,**
And lean not on your own understanding;
6 In all your ways acknowledge Him,
And He shall direct your paths.

Some of you know the words of comfort we find from God through the prophet Jeremiah

Jeremiah 29:11... For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. 12 Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. 13 And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me **with all your heart.**

Friends, I want you to see, time and time again, God encourages this all-in, beautifully obsessive behavior – **to seek God with all our heart.** There's an invitation to go deeper and wider and grow spiritually and you'll never go wrong, you'll never regret it. You will never regret giving more and more of your heart to God and letting Him show you how to live.

It won't always be easy. There will be pain and heartache along the way. Unfortunately, some of the people you want to find acceptance with will reject you, but that's because they're not seeking God and don't want to be found by Him. They don't want you bringing that Jesus stuff over here.

So you have to choose – would you rather be found blameless by people, or blameless by God? If you search for God and His directions **with all your heart,** He'll point you back towards people. But if you search for acceptance and belonging with people, chances are very small that they will point you back toward God. You have to choose: which will I pursue? And Scripture says there's a blessing for those who start with, and seek after, God.

3 They also do no iniquity;
They **walk** in His ways.

The man or woman who is blameless **does no iniquity,** that's an old English way of saying, **they do nothing wrong.** Why? Because **they walk in God's ways.**

Now, that does not mean that they never do anything wrong. If that was true, no one could ever be blessed. We all fail, we all stumble. We all have moments when we're not the person we want to be, we're not proud of what we've done or said and we'd really, really, like to have a do-over.

But look with me again at what the verse says:

3 They also do no iniquity;
They **walk** in His ways.

The *pattern of their life* is to follow God. If they could do it all over again, they would choose to walk in His ways and be blessed.

Which, to be clear, is not easy. Look at:

4 You have commanded *us*
To **keep** Your precepts diligently.



It's following God diligently and desiring Him greatly that keeps us from moments of regret. But here's the problem – somehow, we, the church in the West, have developed this idea that following God is supposed to be easy. That if it feels hard, you must be doing it wrong. We've heard too many sermons about cold, empty, religion, so we think anything that requires effort must be wrong and if we're really Spirit-filled and Spirit-led, then we'll be able to walk through life like powered-up Mario stomping on our problems and impervious to harm from anything we come in contact with.

The reality is, God says it will not be easy to follow Him at all times. Scripture is very, very, clear about the fact that monsters don't just exist in video games, but we battle spiritual forces of wickedness on this earth who make it hard to follow God. There will be times when your flesh, your natural desires, will want to go another way. You will want to respond in anger and God says 'be gentle and gracious.' Or you will want to pull back and God says, 'press in.' There will also be times when you're tempted – friends and other people around you will say, "Oh, come on, why not? Just once, or just for a while?" All of these are reasons why we need to be **diligent** to keep God's commandments.

And all of these are reasons why Scripture encourages us with things like:

Galatians 6:9 And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap *if we do not lose heart*. 10 Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.

My friends, do not think that just because following God, worshipping God, knowing God feels difficult at times, that you're doing it wrong. Scripture clearly tells us there is a blessing for all who are willing to **diligently** follow Him. If you go to the gym and walk out without sweating, did you really have a good workout? If you seek to follow

God and it never takes any effort, are you really following that close? What does spiritual **diligence** look like in your life? It's easy to wish it was more automatic, and you would not be alone:

**5 Oh, that my ways were directed
To keep Your statutes!**

Can you identify with that lament? Ever wished your life just flowed naturally toward holiness? Christian, be encouraged by what you read in Scripture! I don't know, maybe you have this down, but this is me. I feel what he's saying here. **Oh that my ways were directed to keep God's directions**, to naturally do what He says is best.

It's the desire for an easy button for the spiritual life. You're not the only one who has ever felt that.

The apostle Paul was a giant of the faith, he wrote many of the books of the New Testament and in one of them, the book of Romans, he has this extended reflection on the fact that even though he wants to know, serve, and follow God he still fails at times, he says:

Romans 7:15 For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do.

Can you relate? I want to change, I want to do better. I want to be different. I even know what I want to do or be instead of what I am doing and being, but I keep falling, I keep stumbling.

He goes on to say:

Romans 7:24 O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? 25 I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!

It would be great if following God were automatic, if it were easy. But it's not. It is not. Fortunately, we have the gospel to fall into. The knowledge that no matter how much we fail, or how far we fall, God is always, always, ready and willing to pick us up, clean us up, and straighten us up, in Christ.

It's a benefit we have, this side of the cross that the psalmist did not, look at what he has to say about the times when we fail.

**6 Then I would not be ashamed,
When I look into all Your commandments.**

Friends, shame is a thing. Guilt is a thing. The Holy Spirit brings us a sense of conviction when we have done wrong, but we also beat ourselves up making judgements about our performance, and we fixate on the opinions of others because we're not as good as we want to be.

And we have all kinds of ways of coping with that shame as result. Some try to ignore it, to shut it out – activity is probably the most common response to shame, ‘I don't want to think about that, give me something else to do.’ You and I are surrounded by people who complain about being busy but are also afraid of being left alone to deal with their thoughts in quiet because they don't want to hear what's being said in their head and heart.

Others try to drown it or numb it with alcohol or other substances. Some walk around beating themselves up with negative self-talk – ‘there you go again you loser, look at what you've done.’ People walk around for years, maybe even their whole life bearing the crushing weight of condemnation and for some it then leads to self-harm of various forms.

None of those responses is from God. To be clear: God does want you to know that you fail, that you come up short, that you need a savior. God does want you to feel inadequate and ashamed on your own – but listen: He wants that feeling to propel you toward Christ – to find forgiveness, renewal, cleansing, counseling, refreshing and regeneration in Jesus *who takes away all your shame!*

That's what the intersection of justice and mercy looks like: justice says you're guilty, you're wrong, you're not enough; and then mercy says, yes, but you're loved anyway. Listen to me, the gospel says: you are known to the very core and loved to the very end. You are fully exposed *and* fully received.

The apostle John spoke to Christians in the early church like a loving father instructing his children. He said:

1 John 2:28 And now, little children, abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be **ashamed** before Him at His coming.

Both John and the Psalmist are saying the same thing – if you draw near to God, diligently, continuously, if you allow Him to shape, mold, and direct your life, if you are led by His commandments and covered by Jesus when you fail, you have nothing to be **ashamed** of.

My friends, why are we so **ashamed**? Why we are so vulnerable? Why are we so unsure of ourselves? It's because we're not listening enough to God and not abiding enough in Christ. That's the problem, but the solution is right here – God offers as much of Himself to us as we want to take.

You know you have a problem. I know I have my own problems, my own stuff, that even as a pastor I'm working through and I'm telling you exactly what I've been telling myself this week – the answer is found by turning to God and receiving His commandments in Scripture and His covering in Christ.

I need to keep reminding myself, over and over, it's not what I think about myself that matters most, it's what He thinks of me. It's not what I think of the world and what's happening that matters most, it's what He says. And when I get that straight, my heart starts to turn and I begin to praise God instead of praising my problems. Look with me at

7 I will **praise** You with uprightness of heart,
When I learn Your righteous judgments.

When I reflect on what God says is true, my heart slowly begins to turn from shame, anger, anxiety, depression, and distraction toward praise. I'm able to see and say, yes God, this is right and good, You are right and good, and **I will praise you** for it. It gives me a new outlook formed by determination and dependence.

8 I will keep Your statutes;
Oh, **do not forsake** me utterly!

What a great way to end – caught in the tension between diligence and dependence. After thinking on all of these things, my final answer is: I want to know God's commandments, I want to learn and walk in His ways, but I know I can never do it all by myself, so God, please continue to show me Your mercy. Show me Jesus because no matter how diligently I seek you, I'm utterly dependent on your grace.

This morning we're going to celebrate communion and it's a good time for you to take a moment and reflect on all the things we've considered. It's a good time for us to remember that God Himself came down and bore our shame because we couldn't keep all His commands. And that means it's a good time for you to take any blame, or any shame that you're feeling and work it out with God.

You have broken His commandments, so have I, but if we will sense the shame and conviction that come from that and let them turn us around and point us back to Him, there is a blessing to be found.

So, let's pray.

Fully, freely, and forever forgiven

Sermon Application and Discussion Questions

Studies in the Psalms Keys to the Joyful Life 9

Summary: The joyful life is found by those who are led by God; they follow Him diligently and turn to back to Him when they fail.

- What stands out to you the most from our time in the Psalms this summer? What ideas or Scriptures have you been reflecting on the most?
- Do you have any favorite Psalms, ones we did or did not cover?
- What kind of things do you blame yourself for, or what have you blamed yourself for in the past – what are the things about you that you always critique and criticize and wish were better?
 - How does the gospel help you with that self-condemnation, even if it's deserved, even if you really have done wrong?
- Think about the challenge of finding good information on the internet, finding the right answer to the question you're asking. Have you ever run a search and typed in the current year to get the most recent results instead of something from several years ago? Now consider that Ps 119 says it is a blessing to know and follow God's commandments for life. Why is that a blessing?
- How are you most likely to react when you feel ashamed? Do you bury it and try to stay busy? Do you turn to some form of distraction to deal with the pain?
 - What would you say to someone who told you they just feel so ashamed about what they've done or what they've been through? How would you tell them to handle it?
- Review Psalm 119:9-11; Deuteronomy 6:4-5; and Proverbs 3:5-6
 - What does it mean to seek God with your whole heart?

- What gets in the way of doing that?
 - What action steps are found in these passages? Which could be most helpful to you today?
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- Read Ephesians 1:3-6. What do you notice about being blameless and how we become that way? Those interested in spiritual leadership should consider what 1 Tim 3:10 and Titus 1:6 say about being blameless.