

Title: *Our Ultimate Value*

Text: Psalm 119:33-40

What do you need more than anything else to sustain you in your Christian life? There are a lot of different answers to that question.

Churches over the last couple of decades have engaged in what have been known as the worship wars as a new and upcoming generation hungers for worship that is more in their style of music and more upbeat. Other folks insist on singing the old hymns that have meant so much to all of us out of the hymnal. That's why we have one service with hymns and another with contemporary praise music. I say all of that simply to say that there are some people for whom their greatest good is worship. They love to worship and they want to have a powerful worship experience more than anything else.

Some folks say, "I just want to make friends." I'm new in town. I want people to share my life with. I'm single. I'd like to meet someone nice that might be a good candidate for marriage and truth be told, that's one of my main motivators in finding a place to worship. For many years, that one applied to me.

The point of saying all of this is to ask the question, "What do we need more than anything else if we are to be effective in our knowledge of Jesus Christ?"

The other things that we mention are not unimportant. We want to feel as if we have participated in meaningful worship and that we leave inspired to do God's will in a world where that is difficult. We want to make friends, we want to find the one that God has for us to marry and when we get married and have kids, we want to pass the faith along to them.

We want to be effective in our knowledge of Jesus Christ. Peter writes and tells us, " ⁵ For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; ⁶ and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; ⁷ and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. ⁸ For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

How do we get these qualities? Romans 12 tells us to be transformed by the renewing of your mind. I've always believed that the best way to do that is to meditate upon Scripture. To immerse your mind in God's revealed word. Allow it to shape and to transform your character.

That leads to what it is that is most needed and is of ultimate value in our church life – the Word of God. Isn't Christianity about being in a relationship with God? Don't we say that Christianity really isn't a religion, but rather it is a relationship with God? All other relations describe humanity's search for the divine. Christianity describes God's search for us to call us back into a relationship with himself. If we value a relationship with God, doesn't that depend upon communicating with one another?

David Platt tells the story of a young lady who e-mailed him and expressed great disappointment with a large gathering she had just attended where the preacher virtually ignored

preaching the Word. This student was really perceptive when she said, “I’m at a point now where if preaching can’t come up with something other than inspirational speeches, then maybe they should just read from the Word for their sermon. The Spirit is pretty good to work with just that.”

Psalms 119 is the longest Psalm in the Bible and the longest chapter in the Bible. 176 verses it is an acrostic which consists of 1 stanza for each of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. It is a Psalm in praise of the value of the law or the word of God.

Law has mostly negative connotations for us. We don’t like law. Law sounds like ticky-tack. It sounds like things that are imposed on us for us to try to be good enough for God. We know that the law ultimately didn’t save us but we also have to recognize that as the Psalmist is writing, this is the revelation he has of God. Notice how hungry he is for it. Look at the verbs he uses as he continues this phenomenal piece of poetry about the value of God’s word.

The verbs that he uses are of a heart that desperately wants God and nothing else. Teach me, give me, direct me, turn my heart, turn my eyes, Fulfill your promise, take away the disgrace I dread.

One of the things that gave impetus to the writing of the book *Radical* was David Platt’s experience of worshiping with an underground church somewhere in Asia. He was taken to a prearranged location and dropped off. He was told that a believer there would escort him to his house church. They met at a time that would be least likely to stir up suspicion or to be noticed.

This house church consisted of people who were taking great risks and paying a great price just to be there. There weren’t any of the things that believers in the west are told that they need to attract “seekers” so that we may persuade them with the truth of the gospel. They didn’t have video projection screens. They didn’t have an air-conditioned sanctuary with padded pews or comfortable theater seats. They didn’t have a pastor who preached nice little positive thinking messages where he watered down the gospel so that he didn’t come on too strong or run the risk of turning people off.

What is it that could prompt people to risk everything they have to come sit in a room with not much in the way of the things that we think we have to have in order to have church? Number one, they’ve had a real encounter with Jesus Christ. Like we talked about last week, they’ve discovered along with Peter that Jesus alone has the words of life. Where else are they going to go? If you discover that ultimate reality and you don’t have much else to begin with, aren’t you more likely to give yourself more fully and completely to Jesus Christ?

Platt talks about being with these believers and meeting 10-12 hours a day for two weeks, during which time many farmers put off their planting and tending to their fields just so they could learn the Bible. These people are hungry for the word and we might be tempted to say that’s the case because that’s all they have.

What do we have that’s more valuable than Jesus? What is it that matters so much more to us than hearing his word? I shared a couple of weeks ago about a time in my life when I felt conviction that I was more eager to read the newspaper on Friday morning than I was to read my Bible. It’s so easy to get sidetracked, isn’t it? Do you have a hunger for the word? Is the deepest

prayer of your heart, “Lord, let me hear your voice speaking your word so that I may know you and what you want me to do in this world for you?”

Rob Wilton is a pastor in New Orleans. He’s ministering in the areas that were affected by Hurricane Katrina. He made a comment in a sermon I heard recently about the “Plattites” in his church, meaning the people who have read *Radical* and are ready to get radical in their lifestyle and decision making. He gave a very good word. He gave a very good word that helps us keep everything in perspective. Anyone who hears a word from Jesus and obeys is doing something radical. You see, the issue is not who can downsize the most and buy the smallest house so that they can give the most to the world’s poor. The issue in radical discipleship is hearing the voice of God and obeying.

So how do we hear God’s voice? How do we know what he’s saying to us? Short of some sort of mystical experience where we hear an audible voice, it’s through His word. We believe that God has spoken to us and given us eternal truth in his word, the Bible. In the Psalms, the prayer is often lifted up, “Teach me, O Lord.” In Psalm 27:11, he says, “¹¹ Teach me your way, O LORD; lead me in a straight path because of my oppressors. ¹² Do not turn me over to the desire of my foes, for false witnesses rise up against me, breathing out violence.” The Psalmist is praying, “Lord, I live in a dangerous place and there are people out there who are in hot pursuit of me and if you don’t lead me and guide me and teach me so that I may know your word, I’m going to be in a very bad way.

Psalm 86 says, “¹¹ Teach me your way, O LORD, and I will walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name. ¹² I will praise you, O Lord my God, with all my heart; I will glorify your name forever.” There is no way to live a life of radical discipleship other than to hear God’s voice and obey. He says, “I will walk in your truth if you will just teach me your way. If I want to have an undivided heart that is merely focused on following after Jesus, I’ll have to know what his word says.

That means I have to study it. It’s fine to come to church and hear the word preached. It’s good to sit in a Sunday School class or some other sort of small group and have a good teacher either teach or lead a discussion about the meaning of the text, but if you really want to go deeper and learn and grow, you need to study the word for yourself with the prayer that the Lord Himself will speak to you and teach you what’s in His word.

Then he prays, “Give me understanding, and I will keep your law and obey it with all my heart.” In the fall of 2010, the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life released a survey on religious knowledge in the United States. The survey that found that Americans who identified as Christian knew less about world religions in general, and often less about their own religious tradition in particular, than atheists, agnostics, or Jews. Forty-three percent of Christians did not, for example, know that "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" is not one of the Ten Commandments. The survey illustrated a disconnect within American Christianity between religious *feeling*, which appears to be ample, and religious *knowledge*, which is much more scarce. Why study my faith, when I can feel it in my heart?

Feelings are okay. I'd rather feel good than bad. I'd rather feel a spiritual high than be in a spiritual funk, but what can sustain us when the feelings aren't there any more? It is the sure knowledge of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ to give us life and give us a new reality in life that is deeper and greater than mere feelings.

Author and pastor Eugene Peterson tells the following story.

At age 35 I bought running shoes and began enjoying the smooth rhythms of long-distance running. Soon I was competing in 10K races every month or so, and then a marathon once a year. By then I was subscribing to and reading three running magazines! Then I pulled a muscle and couldn't run for a couple of months. Those magazines were still all over the house, but I never opened one. The moment I resumed running, though, I started reading again.

That's when I realized that my reading was an extension of something I was a part of. I was reading for companionship and affirmation of the experience of running. I learned a few things along the way, but mostly it was to deepen my world of running. If I wasn't running, there was nothing to deepen.

The parallel with reading Scripture is striking. If I'm not living in active response to the living God, reading about his creation/salvation/holiness won't hold my interest for long. The most important question isn't "What does this mean," but "What can I obey?" Simple obedience will open up our lives to a text more quickly than any number of Bible studies, dictionaries, and concordances.

We don't read or study to amass head knowledge. We don't read so that we can win the next game of Bible Trivia that we're involved in. We read so that we can find out, "What can I obey so that I can be an effective disciple of Jesus Christ?"

Notice then that the Psalmist prays, "Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight." In Psalm 25, the Psalmist prays, "⁴Show me your ways, O LORD, teach me your paths; ⁵ guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long." My hope is in you, Lord and I want to delight in the hope that I have in you. I want to want you more than anything else. Isn't it interesting that as he speaks of his desire for God, it's coupled with the prayer, "Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight."

There must be some high premium that God places on obedience. Walking in the way of obedience, as we know and understand his word will lead us to the place of truly understanding how great it is to know Jesus and to follow him. If you're not obeying, you're not really following.

He prays, "Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain." Notice his focus is not on what he can get out of serving God. There are people who use God to try to get things for themselves, but the heart of a radical disciple wants what God wants for His sake and for His glory and not our own.

There's a hymn that we sing quite often, "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of Earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and

grace.” The Psalmist, writing hundreds of years before Jesus, of course, recognizes that there are things in this world that are pretty worthless and it’s so easy to have them take our attention away from things that are really important. Lord, don’t let me waste my time with things that don’t really matter.

He concludes, “³⁸ Fulfill your promise to your servant, so that you may be feared. ³⁹ Take away the disgrace I dread, for your laws are good. ⁴⁰ How I long for your precepts! Preserve my life in your righteousness.”

One of the most effective commercials from last year’s Super Bowl was for Cars.com. It chronicled the life of a wunderkind who was an absolute genius at everything. . .[exploits].

In the last scene, the narrator explains, however, as Timothy stands with a scared look on his face in a new car lot, "When it came time to buy a new car, he was just as nervous as the rest of us."

Then Timothy sees a Cars.com sign and pulls out his cell phone. The narrator concludes, "So Timothy Richman got his knowledge at Cars.com, regained his confidence, and got the perfect car at the perfect price."

This little commercial entertainingly illustrates the fact that no matter how much knowledge and confidence you have in many areas of life, you can still be clueless in another important area of living. The fact is, no matter how smart you are, apart from God's help you are clueless about important spiritual truths. If you want to be an effective radical disciple, you need to know his word.

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