



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“A PLACE FOR PIETY”

John Galbreath
Bible Study Series

Text: Psalm 119:129-136
Date: August 16, 1981

About Westminster's Galbreath Bible Study Series:

This lesson is one taken from a sermon preached by John Galbreath at Westminster Presbyterian Church on August 16, 1981. Dr. Galbreath had returned that week to visit Westminster from his job as Director of the Council of Theological Seminaries for the denomination.

To complete the lesson, we suggest that you begin by reading the designated Bible passage (Psalm 119:129-136).

Next, review the outline of the sermon. Reflect on the chosen scripture and how you would “fill in” the remainder of the message from the chosen passage.

Then, review the study questions posed about the lesson — whether by yourself or in your small group.

Finally, share your thoughts on the Galbreath Bible Study blog on the Westminster Intranet.

The hymns that Sunday were "Immortal, Invisible," "How I Love Thy Law, O Lord!" and "The Light of God is Falling." There was also a note indicating that, at that time, the benediction was done from the back of the Nave.

I. What was the question to which Psalm 119 is the answer?

A. We must not claim more than we know.

B. Evidence is that it was written in the period soon after the return of the exiles from Babylon.

1. Those who had remained in Israel after the Babylonian conquest had adapted to the cultures surrounding them, intermarrying, and compromising their religious practices.

2. Those who had lived in exile and returned had lived a ghetto life -- with an acute awareness of their separation from the non-Jewish culture about them.

3. There was conflict between the resident Jews, and the returnees over the Torah.

4. This unusual psalm is a polemic, extolling Judaism, and its ways -- the Torah.

C. The form

1. Acrostic -- 22 stanzas of 8 verses each.

a) *Each stanza begins with a different letter.*

b) *Each line began with this letter.*

2. Theocentric -- vis-a-vis Esther where God is not mentioned, allusion is made in each of the 176 lines! Very heavy.

3. Some woodenness, if one tries to read through the entire chapter -- repetition and apparent contradiction.

a) *As though they took all they knew about the Torah and cast it into this form.*

D. Torah

1. "Law" -- an inadequate term, as demonstrated in this particular passage, the Pe stanza.

II. The Pe Stanza

A. Form: Each line speaks of the Torah, in one form or another -- of Yahweh -- and of the believer.

1. Each line speaks of a different facet of the Torah, using a different synonym in each case:

- v. 129 -- Testimonies
- 130 -- thy words
- 131 -- thy commandments
- 132 -- love thy name
- 133 -- Thy promise
- 134 -- thy precepts
- 135 -- thy statutes
- 136 -- thy law

B. Verses

Verse 129: Tradition -- a summing up

Fiddler on the Roof is making a comeback on Broadway. Tevye opens the play with a summing up of its message & theme.

"A fiddler on the roof. Sounds crazy, no? But in our little village of Anatevka, you might say every one of us is a fiddler on the roof, trying to scratch out a simple, pleasant tune without breaking his neck. It isn't easy! You may ask, why do we stay up here if it's so dangerous? We stay because Anatevka is our home. And how do we keep our balance? That I can tell you in one word -- Tradition. Because of our traditions, everyone knows who he is and what God expects him to do.!"

[Book by Joseph Stein, Lyrics by Sheldon Harnick, Music by Jerry Bock]

1. As Tevye announced the theme, of which all that follows is an elaboration, so in V. 129, the psalmist announces the theme of the stanza.
2. "Testimonies" is the synonym for Torah.
 - a) *God's presentation of the evidence.*
 - b) *The history of Israel, told in account, poem, drama.*
 - c) *First five books -- and more as well.*
 - d) *What God had done in the salvation drama, proving he is trustworthy.*
 - e) *The fulfillment of His covenants with Abraham, with Moses, with David.*
3. "my soul keeps them" -- total commitment.

v. 130 - The revelation of God is for the future -- even to the simple. Future tense of faith.

V. 131 -- "I pant" --Emotional commitment -- tension between the serenity of v. 129 -- and expressive frustration of seeking in the day to day experience.

v. 132 -- "Be gracious -- as is thy wont" -- not out of right, but out of God's own whim

v. 133 -- let no iniquity have dominion. No denial of evil

v. 134 -- Redeem me from man's oppression -- that I may keep my precepts. Liberation theology absolutizes liberation. The Psalmist gives a reason for liberation -- that without liberation, we cannot fulfill God's intent for our lives.

v. 135 -- Make thy face shine, and teach me thy statutes. The equation of obedience and joy.

v. 136 -- "Streams of tears because men do not keep thy law." A sympathy for God -- and for fellow beings -- compassion.

C. Sequel -- Jesus Christ.

1. Like Tevye, this is an emotion-charged passage.
2. But also like Tevye, the Law which had been their source of joy brought tragedy to Israel.
 - a) *They let the Tradition become mechanical and it disintegrated into legalism.*
3. Jesus was sent to incarnate all that Torah was intended to do and be, so that humanity could start over -- so that in place of these 8 synonyms we should add the Christ.

III. This passage in our experience.

A. This, the Psalmist's Confession of Faith, needs to be rewritten.

1. Religious tradition is in danger of going down the tube -- not because of communism, but the competition of the many appeals that call for our time, energy, resources.
 - a) *We need to address ourselves -- "What right have we to expect our children to be loyal to their upbringing?"*
 - (1) Now that I am a layman, I have a new sympathy for our children -- there are a lot of dispirited congregations, dull preaching.
 - (2) What now can I say that faith has meant to me? Why go to church?
2. Tevye -- "Because of our tradition, everyone knows who he is and what God expects him to do."
 - a) *Without this, we are a floundering generation.*
 - b) *The Amish Dutch do not give their children cars, travel -- but they have a tradition: they know who they are, and what God expects them to do.*
3. Worship gives us the symbols to live by -- the sacraments, the creeds, the songs, the holidays.
 - a) *Much of worship is dull, dull, dull.*
4. Worship gives us a community.
 - a) *In a world that seems to inundate our values, we are not alone.*
 - b) *Like myself, those in the pew are sinners, too -- but, like me, they are in there trying.*

c) *It is only because of this community that I received my value system.*

d) *In the end, it will be this community that will pass it on to our children's children.*

(1) Aside from the community of faith, my tradition is a cut flower which, away from its roots, will die.

e) *In the act of worship, those values rise out of the diffused longings, enable me to mobilize my values once again.*

5. Worship makes Jesus Christ come alive.

IV. Conclusion

This sermon is not complete until you go home and write out your own eight-liner confession of faith.

Study Questions -- Part I

Bible Reading: Psalm 119:129-136

Psalm 119:129 says: ¹²⁹ Thy testimonies are wonderful; Therefore doth my soul keep them.

- Which of God's testimonies do you find the most wonderful? Which are easiest for you to keep?

Psalm 119:130 says: ¹³⁰ The opening of thy words giveth light; It giveth understanding unto the simple.

- Are there particular passages of scripture that you turn to when you feel that you need to be uplifted?

Psalm 119:131 says: ¹³¹ I opened wide my mouth, and panted; For I longed for thy commandments.

- Which commandments do you find most helpful in your daily life?

Psalm 119:132 says: ¹³² Turn thee unto me, and have mercy upon me, As thou does unto those that love thy name.

- When do you turn to God for mercy?

Psalm 119:133 says: ¹³³ Establish my footsteps in thy word; And let not any iniquity have dominion over me.

- How do you "walk the talk" of the Bible?

Psalm 119:134 says: ¹³⁴ Redeem me from the oppression of man: So will I observe thy precepts.

- Are there ways in which you feel oppressed by others? How can your faith help you live with that oppression?

Psalm 119:135 and 136 says: ¹³⁵ Make thy face to shine upon thy servant; And teach me thy statutes. ¹³⁶ Streams of water run down mine eyes, Because they observe not thy law.

- When do you feel God's face shining on you? Not everyone actually cries when they do not observe God's law. How do you react when you fall short?

Study Questions -- Part II

Sermon :

Section I: This section provides something of a history lesson as to when this particular Psalm was written. It talks about the conflict between Jews over the Torah. Why do you think so much of the Old Testament is about law as compared to the New Testament?

II.A. -- There is a handwritten note -- a Confession of Faith.

II.B. Look at the passage from Fiddler on the Roof. What traditions of religion do you find comforting? Which do you find burdensome? What is your feeling about religion "changing with the times?"

II.B.3. If God acted like a teacher, what grade do you think He would give you for how well you keep His testimonies?

II.C. -- There is a handwritten note -- the gamut of emotion.

II.C. Some would say the New Testament fulfills and supersedes the old. How much of your Bible study time do you allot to each?

III.A. It has been thirty years since this sermon was preached. What do you see competing with religion in today's world? What can we do to combat that?

III.A.a. -- There is a handwritten note -- sensuality.

III.A.1.a.1. If you found yourself being asked by a stagnant church for ways to help to revitalize it, what advice would you give them?

III.A.1.a.2. What do you say to someone who says "I believe in God and Jesus. I just don't need to go to church."

III.A.2. What does God expect you to do?

III.A.3. -- There is a handwritten note -- Jesus Christ

III.A.4. How does sharing worship with others help you in your faith? In your life?

III.A.4.1. What are things you might do to help others connect or reconnect to a community of faith?

III.A.5. How do you make Jesus come alive the other six days of the week?

IV. Seminary students write a confession of faith as part of their ordination process. Our confirmands write a confession of faith in their process of joining the church. When will you complete this sermon by writing your confession of faith?