

Psalms 119:33-36

Teach me, O Lord, the way of Thy statutes; and I shall keep it unto the end.

Ethical instruction

I. Ethical instruction is instruction in duty. There is no knowledge so important as the knowledge of our obligations to ourselves, to society, and to God. Scientific instruction is nothing to this, even theological instruction is not to be compared to this in importance. Ethical instruction is the great want of man. This instruction is here represented as instruction in the “statutes,” the law, “commandments, testimonies.” All words representing the same thing—duty.

II. Ethical instruction is to be sought of God. There is no teaching so difficult as effectual moral teaching. Men are more disposed to learn anything rather than their duty—history, science, philosophy, anything. Hence God alone can effectually teach it.

III. Ethical instruction is to be sought of God in order to be practised. Why does the author of these words pray for God to instruct him in His commandments? In order that he might speculate in moral science and talk eloquently on such subjects? No; but in order that he might “keep it unto the end,” “observe it with my whole heart,” “go in the path of Thy commandments.” Moral knowledge is to be practised. (*Homilist.*)

The Divine Teacher and scholar

1. What be these statutes?

(1) As a statute-law the Word written sets down limits and rules, how far we are to go, and what to do, and leave undone.

(2) As statutes are enforced with rewards and penalties, so are the Lord’s precepts, in keeping of which is great reward, and no less danger in transgressing any of them.

2. Whose be they?

(1) God is the Author of them all.

(2) He is the principal object or subject-matter of them.

(3) He is the preserver and maintainer of them.

(4) They are His by eminency, for the excellence and perfection of them, and to distinguish them from all the laws and statutes of men.

3. Why doth David call the Word the way of God’s statutes?

(1) A metaphor, implying—

(a) That we are all travellers here in a strange country ([Heb 11:13-14](#)). But the way we know not, nor can man or angel teach us the way, unless God show it to us, as He did to Adam, who could lose his way, but of himself could never find it.

(b) That God hath made known the way in His Word; called the way, because it points us the way, as also because it leads us to heaven and happiness, as a way tends to some end, or intended place.

(c) That this way and Word of God must be known of us, as the way must be of a traveller. And therefore as travellers, and as David here, we must be ever asking after the way.

(d) That as a traveller must keep the beaten and high-way, so must these statutes be pathed and trodden of all the travellers of heaven; neither must we turn out of this way to the right or left hand.

(e) That whosoever are out of this way, and transgress these statutes, they wander from the God of peace, and from life, are out of God's protection, and liable to all the curses of the law, as men out of the king's highway are out of the king's protection. Hence it is said of wicked men ([Psa 14:3](#)). These things lie in the metaphor.

(2) Then for the singularity of this way: he saith, Thy way, not ways; for God's way is but one, but by-paths are many. Many are the sciences, and other knowledges worthy our labour and pains; but David above all desires the knowledge of this one and only way of God and of salvation.

4. Why doth David desire to be taught of God?

(1) David had good means, and was most diligent in the use of them; he was a diligent reader, and spent nights and days in meditation of the Word; but yet to all these, and above all these, he desires God's teaching, without which all these are in vain.

(2) He knows that all other teachers can but teach the ear; God alone teacheth and openeth the heart ([Act 16:14](#)). And whereas Satan and wicked men may have a great deal of speculative knowledge, and go to hell, he desires an inward teacher, and to be inwardly taught by the teaching of the Spirit.

(3) He here craveth four things in this one petition, beyond all men's teaching:

(a) Teach me to attend the way of Thy statutes, that I may understand them, and Thy Word be not a clasped book unto me; neither may I, by missing the right scope, pervert the same to mine own destruction.

(b) Teach me to affect the way of Thy statutes, that my heart may melt as Josiah's at the hearing of the law, and be pricked and broken with the threats of it, as were those converts that cried, Men and brethren, what shall we do to be saved? ([Act 2:37](#)). When the promises are preached, or promulgated, let my heart dilate and open itself, as the thirsty ground, and rejoice that it understandeth the Word taught, as ([Neh 8:13](#)).

(c) Teach me to believe Thy statutes; for all true and comfortable knowledge is applicatory; it rests not in the understanding, but is a firm assent in the will, laying hold on the thing known. And this must we pray, seeing all knowledge, not mingled with faith, is unprofitable.

(d) Teach me to obey Thy statutes; for all sound knowledge is practical; and to know Christ as the truth is in Christ, is to cast off the old man with his lusts, and put on the new. This must be our prayer, that the Lord would so teach us His way as we may walk in it; that He would so take us into His school as to become both more skilful and more holy; that seeing not hearers, but doers are justified, our portion may be in their blessedness, that hear the Word and keep *it*. (*T. Taylor, D. D.*)

God the source of instruction

I. Who it is that teaches.

II. What it is that God teaches.

III. How God teaches.

IV. The result of being taught the way of God's statutes by God himself. We shall "keep them unto the end." (*T. Dale, M. A.*)

The province of reason in matters of religion

I shall consider the word reason, as denoting the power, generally, of apprehending truth, and applying it to its proper uses;—a power which distinguishes man from all other animated beings around him, and fits him for performing duties and enjoying pleasures, of which they are totally incapable. That God is our teacher, and that He communicates instruction by His works and by His Word, is one of the first lessons which human reason should learn. After becoming satisfied of this, we are to make it our object to discover what is the instruction which He actually communicates. And as our chief concern is with the truths of revelation, our chief business is to apply ourselves, in the proper use of our rational powers, to the study of the Holy Scriptures. The position which I take on this subject will require that two things in particular should be set aside, as not falling within the province of reason. The first is, attempting to originate truth. And the second is, sitting in judgment upon any of the doctrines or facts, which God makes known. The remarks I have made may furnish a ready answer to a question often proposed to us by rationalists. "If," say they, "we are to bow with such submission to the Word of God, and receive so implicitly all its doctrines and precepts, and are never at liberty to call in question the reasonableness or truth of any of its dictates; then what has reason to do?" I reply, it has everything to do, which falls within its province; everything for which it was designed; everything to which it is competent.

1. The province I have assigned to reason, evidently corresponds with its nature. To learn is an employment peculiarly congenial to the essential properties of the human mind. Every created, finite mind must, from its very nature, be dependent for all its knowledge on the uncreated, infinite mind. While our reason is duly sensible of this, and confines itself to the business of learning what God reveals, its efforts are all natural and safe. But whenever it leaves the place of a learner, and undertakes, by its own power, to originate any doctrine or fact, it undertakes a work which is unnatural and dangerous, and which will inevitably lead to false and hurtful conceptions.

2. Confining reason to the province which I have now assigned it, will conduce to the honour of God. He is, in fact, the fountain of all created intelligence; and to acknowledge Him as such, is only to treat Him according to truth,—to render Him the honour which is His due.

3. Confining our reason to the work which I have assigned to it, will conduce directly to intellectual improvement. An acquaintance with the truths of religion will enlarge and elevate our understandings; and it will produce this effect in a much higher degree than our acquaintance with objects of inferior value. But there is no way for us to become acquainted with the truths of religion, except by learning them of our Divine teacher, in the use of the means which He has appointed.

4. Confining reason to its legitimate province will contribute in the highest degree to our moral improvement. If we pass in review all that God has made known to us; the holy law He has given us; the sin and ruin of all men in consequence of one man's disobedience; the eternal purposes of God; the Trinity; the whole work of the Redeemer; regeneration by the Holy Spirit; the perseverance of the saints, considered as a duty on their part, and a matter of promise on God's part; and the everlasting retributions of the future world; we shall find, in each case, that the doctrine which produces the salutary effect is just that which God has clearly revealed, and which every person of common understanding is capable of knowing. It is the belief of the simple truths, the plain, intelligible facts taught in the Scriptures, which has raised the character of the saints to the highest elevation; has given strength to the weak, comfort to the afflicted, and freedom to the slaves of sin; and has prepared the people of God for the most glorious achievements. (*L. Woods, D. D.*)

God the teacher

This psalmist held that a man could see nothing unless God showed it to him. He held that a man could learn nothing unless God taught him; and taught him, moreover, in two ways. First taught him what he ought to do, and then taught him how to do it. Surely this man was, at least, a reasonable and prudent man, and showed his common sense. For supposing that you were set adrift in a ship at sea, to shift for yourself, would it not be mere common sense to try and learn how to manage that ship, that you might keep her afloat and get her safe to land? You would try to learn the statutes, laws, and

commandments, and testimonies, and judgments concerning the ship, lest by your own ignorance you should sink her, and be drowned. You would try to learn the laws about the ship; namely the laws of flotation, by fulfilling which vessels swim, and by breaking which vessels sink. You would try to learn the commandments about her. They would be any books which you could find of rules of navigation, and instruction in seamanship. You would try to learn the testimonies about the ship. And what would they be? The witness, of course, which the ship bore to herself. The experience which you or others got from seeing how she behaved—as they say—at sea. And from whom would you try to learn all this? from yourself? I trust not. You would go to the shipbuilder and the shipmaster for your information. Just as—if you be a reasonable man—you will go for your information about this world to the builder and maker of the world—God Himself. And lastly; you would try to learn the judgments about the ship: and what would they be? The results of good or bad seamanship; what happens to ships, when they are well-managed or ill-managed. It would be too hard to have to learn that by experience; for the price which you would have to pay would be, probably, that you would be wrecked and drowned. But if you saw other ships wrecked near you, you would form judgments from their fate of what you ought to do. If you could find accounts of shipwrecks, you would study them with the most intense interest; lest you too should be wrecked, and so judgment overtake you for your bad seamanship. Now, the only way to attain eternal life is to know, and keep, and profit by God's laws, God's commandments, God's testimonies, God's judgments; and therefore it is that the psalmist says so often that these laws and commandments are life. But some will say, How shall I learn? I am very stupid, and I confess that freely. And when I have learnt, how shall I act up to my lesson? For I am very weak; and that I confess freely likewise. How, indeed? Stupid we are, the cleverest of us; and weak we are, the strongest of us. And if God left us to find out for ourselves, and to take care of ourselves, we should not sail far on the voyage of life without being wrecked, and going down body and soul to hell. But, blessed be God, He has not left us to ourselves. He has not only commanded us to learn: He has promised to teach. And he who wrote the 119th psalm knew that well; and therefore his psalm is a prayer, a prayer for teaching, and a prayer for light; he cries to God—My soul cleaveth to the dust. I am low-minded, stupid, and earthly at the best. Oh, quicken Thou me; that is—Oh, give me life—more life—according to Thy Word. (C.

Kingsley, M. A.)

Psalms 119:34

Give me understanding, and I shall keep Thy law; yes, I shall observe it with my whole heart.

David's prayer and resolution

I. Their order. Knowledge must necessarily precede obedience, since there can be nothing chosen by the will but what the understanding has first allowed; the will being destitute of all light save what is borrowed: for as the stars derive their light from the sun, so does the will her light from the understanding, that directive faculty of the soul, "the candle of the Lord," that light whereby we discern good from evil.

II. Their connection.

1. Knowledge and obedience are not things inseparable, for one may be without the other; we may have understanding, and yet not keep God's law; for knowledge does not change the will, but direct it; it does only rationally persuade, not effectually convert it; so that the will must be sanctified, as well as the understanding illuminated, before our obedience to God's law can be answerable to our knowledge of it.

2. We may both understand God's law, and keep it. God that employs, enables us; the law that calls us gives us a power to come, otherwise His invitation would be a mockery; the law that saith, "Depart from evil, and do good," has doubtless made us capable of so doing.

III. The main scope and design of the words. Do this for me, and I do promise on my part to keep Thy law, to meditate upon Thy precepts, and to have respect unto Thy ways, to delight myself in Thy statutes, and not to forget Thy Word. Our obedience must be—

1. Sincere. This renders our endeavours acceptable to God, and profitable to ourselves.

2. Universal. Catholic faith without catholic obedience is of little value.

3. Constant. If we faint, we shall never reap; if we are weary of running, we shall never obtain the prize. (*E. Lake, D. D.*)

The need of understanding

"Understanding." That is what he urgently prays for. If only the poor man could understand what God was about; if only he could detect the track, catch the clue, hear the voice behind him saying, "This is the way"? what a relief, what a strength it would be. He is ready, eager, willing; his heart is aflame; he desires keenly to do the right, to walk with God—so, at least, it seems to him; so he thinks. He may discover, later on, that his will is not so strong as he imagines. But, at any rate, as he stands, it is his head, rather than his heart, which he feels to be at fault. He feels, but cannot see; he desires, but cannot decide. That will of God which he would so delightedly follow refuses to pronounce itself and give clear utterance. It vanishes. It hides itself. It is dissipated into hesitating and disappointing negations. Just when he fancied he had got his grip upon it it slips through his fingers. What ought he to do? What ought he not to do? How much does God ask of him? or how little? What is the rule he must obey? If he did but know, he would be loyal enough. "O give me understanding, and I shall keep Thy law! Yea, I shall keep it with my whole heart." "His whole heart," for then the whole man would go along with what it saw to be so right. The fitness, the meaning, the method, the end would all commend themselves. As the reason joyfully assented, the heart would commit itself to a plan so sound and so intelligible. And there would be no disappointing blunders to check the heart's advance; no slips, no doubtful experiments, no foolish hesitation in moments of uncertain suspense. The heart would not cringe in fear, trying its road before it with trembling anxiety. It would go with a swing, sure of itself; sure of its direction, sure of its success.

Oh! to have this confidence, this security, this understanding—then he would keep the “law with all his heart and soul.” “Give me understanding!” A true prayer for us all! What a lot of harm is done in the world by the folly, the stupidity, the blindness of those who are on God’s side, and genuinely desire to keep His law! We make so little way in carrying God’s law into effective action, because our grasp on its principles is so frail, our apprehension of its height and depth is so cheap, and poor, and thin. A whole world of assumptions, moral and religious, are under challenge; and are undergoing the transformation which such challenges enforce. We are compelled to reconsider our familiar language; to recast our phrases; to review our apologetics. A resettlement of the entire position is proceeding, in the sense that the proportion and balance of our modes of expressing and defending our convictions are shifting. It seems as if the world of spirit and of grace had slipped out of our ken—as if we had lost our way in it, and could not move in it with any confidence. It has grown to feel far-off and out of touch—a strange land, where we are not at home. So our religious life comes to a halt, gets in a tangle, grows timid and dolorous. If we did but know better what it is that God is saying to us! If our ears were but open, if our apprehension of Him were but more firm and clear! “Understanding,” moral insight, spiritual intelligence, an instructed conscience, a purer and truer judgment, a power to decide, to resolve, a skill in discernment. Oh, pray for that—our grievous lack! It can come from God only. He not only commands, but enables us to understand His commands. Yet this is left us—to bring our faculties under His handling, under His discipline. We have got minds; we have got the gift of reason. We can set these to work, with a little more seriousness and efficiency. First, we can recognize that this law of God which we do genuinely desire to keep with our whole heart is no light and easy affair, to be known straight off at a hearing. It is a serious business; and calls upon our reason to search it out. Can we apply the moral law, as Christ gave it to us, to modern life, to commerce, to luxury, to social intercourse? Can the modern conditions of big cities allow for Sunday? Can the Christian ideal of marriage stand the strain of the present freedom of relationship between man and woman? Can it justify its rigidity? Can we say why, or how it should be when we are asked? These questions cannot be answered without thought and care and trouble; they cry out for an intelligent understanding. Oh, grant us understanding “that we may keep Thy law.” Secondly, it is a prayer that implies the incessant revelation of fresh law to be kept. We desire to serve God not only better than we now do, but better than we yet know how to serve. He has a law for us which is far above out of our sight. His law is making demands of us of which we have as yet no intelligence. Oh, if we saw and knew, how bitter would be our shame at failing Him so totally! Oh, pray to understand more of what He wants of us! Be ever occupied in lifting your standard, in pushing forward your moral frontiers, in raising the demands. (*Canon Scott Holland.*)

On the identity of wisdom and religion

Let us survey,, one by one, the characteristic marks of wisdom; and examine whether they are not, singly and collectively, exemplified in the conduct of the man who fixes his heart upon God through Jesus Christ.

I. Wisdom selects such objects of pursuit as she discerns a satisfactory prospect of attaining.

II. Wisdom sets its affections upon those things which are in their own nature the most excellent.

III. Wisdom chooses for its portion those acquisitions which, in the possession, are accompanied with the highest delight. How, then, stands the case with respect to religion?

1. Consider the point first with regard to present satisfaction.

2. With respect to the life to come, comparison cannot be mentioned. Whether the blessedness of heaven or the pains of hell be preferable; whether it be wisdom to choose the future rewards of religion, or the future punishments of guilt; these are questions which require not an answer.

IV. Wisdom occupies itself in the pursuit of efficient remedies for evils actual or probable. Is this position descriptive of religion? Evils are temporal, or spiritual. Compare as to evils of each class the advantages of the righteous and of the unrighteous.

V. Wisdom fixes her attention on those desirable objects which, other circumstances being equal, are the most durable. Is this characteristic of wisdom to be found in religion? How long do the pleasures of sin continue? Suppose that the wicked man grasps his good things, be they what they may, until death. The righteous man, travelling by his side, enjoys his delights unto the same period. So far as to duration, the servant of God is not under any disadvantage. But from the instant of death how stands the comparison? That instant which for ever extinguishes the pleasures of the wicked, sees the happiness of the righteous only in its commencement. (*T. Gisborne, M. A.*)