

# “With My Whole Heart I Seek You”

## 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting

### Day 6: May 8, 2018: More Than Silver and Gold

Psalm 119:14-16: *In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches. 15 I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways. 16 I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word.*

Just a few days ago a 57-year-old man who lives in Kalamazoo found a three-month old lottery ticket in his wallet. The once-forgotten ticket turned out to be a \$250,000.00 winner! The Detroit Free Press reported how timely this sudden windfall was: "I've had some hard times over the last several years," the man told the Michigan Lottery. "I lost my job and house when the economy was bad, and I've been working hard to get it all back."

How excited would you be if you unexpectedly won \$250,000.00? Would you jump for joy? Would you cry happy tears? Would you call your friends and family together to have a party? Most of us find it easy to imagine the happiness we would feel if we suddenly won the lottery. Most of us can readily dream about what we would do with the money. Few things delight us as much as riches!

But the psalmist said: “In the way of your testimonies **I delight as much as in all riches**”! We may find that sentiment hard to believe. After all, the Bible can be boring to read and hard to understand. How could it possibly be as exciting as “money, money, money”? The Bible doesn't pay bills, eliminate debt, make my dream vacation a reality, or put a new truck in the driveway. How could it provide anywhere near the joy that \$250,000.00 would give?

The Bible's own testimony is that riches are not all they are cracked-up to be. In the biblical vision riches are **deceitful** (Mk. 4:18-29): they

promise but cannot deliver security and well-being. Wealth is fleeting – it is here today, gone tomorrow – as the example of Job shows (Job 1). Those who trust in riches will fall (Prov. 11:28). People spend their lives amassing wealth but often fail to find any joy or pleasure in it. They are not able to take it with them when they die, and they therefore leave it to an uncertain future (Ps. 39:6, Eccl. 5:8-6:12, 1 Tim. 6:7). Riches will be of absolutely no value on the day of judgment (Prov. 11:4, Ps. 73:16-19, 2 Cor. 5:10). Coveting the possessions of others is idolatry (Eph. 5:5), and the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil (1 Tim. 6:10). Jesus said, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15).

By contrast, the word of God reveals the living and eternal God to us. Psalm 119 is an extended meditation on the Torah or Law of God given specifically in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The words which pervade this psalm – such as ‘testimonies,’ ‘precepts,’ ‘statutes,’ and ‘commandments’ – are all ways of referring to the Law. The Law was God's instruction to Israel for how they were to live as his covenant people. The psalmist found God's instruction in the ways of righteous and holiness to be far more sure, valuable, and blessed than the pleasures of wealth.

As followers of Jesus Christ we are privileged to be able to reflect on and enjoy the fullness of God's revelation found in both the Old and New Testaments. The apostle Paul wrote that, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). Further, Paul said that the “sacred writings” are able to make us “wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15), and Jesus said that the Scriptures bear witness about him (John 5:39, Lk. 24:27, 44-47). So, the word of God leads us to Jesus Christ “in whom are hidden all the **treasures** of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3).

So, we may not have a forgotten lottery ticket lying around that will suddenly bring us millions, but we do have Bibles that we often neglect in favor of other, lesser, pursuits. What riches we forfeit when we fail to consistently **meditate** on God's words and **fix our eyes** on his ways! We need to say with the psalmist 'I will not forget your word' for the Scriptures open up to us the **delight** of life lived with and for the Triune God who made and owns all things.

Take time now to seek God. This brief prayer can help you get started: *"Heavenly Father, I confess to you that sometimes I think what matters most is how much money or possessions I have. I confess that I worry about money, and that sometimes I spend more time and energy pursuing stuff that I do pursuing You. Please forgive me, Lord. Please help me to forsake this idolatry and to find my delight and joy in the Lord Jesus, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Help me each day to meditate on your word and fix my eyes on your ways, that I might be rich towards You. In Jesus' name, Amen."*

#### **Day 7: May 9, 2018: The Law of Influence**

2 Chronicles 12:1, 13-14: *When the rule of Rehoboam was established and he was strong, he abandoned the law of the Lord, and all Israel with him... 13 So King Rehoboam grew strong in Jerusalem and reigned. Rehoboam was forty-one years old when he began to reign, and he reigned seventeen years in Jerusalem, the city that the Lord had chosen out of all the tribes of Israel to put his name there. His mother's name was Naamah the Ammonite. 14 And he did evil, for he did not set his heart to seek the Lord.*

John Maxwell states that "the true measure of leadership is influence – nothing more, nothing less." A leader's level of influence can increase or diminish. It is also true that the ability to influence others can be used for good or for evil. The kings of Israel and Judah had a tremendous amount of influence on the spiritual condition of God's chosen people. Unfortunately, many of those kings used their

position of power to lead the people into doing evil in the eyes of the Lord.

Rehoboam was the son of Solomon. After Solomon died the nation of Israel was split into two kingdoms: Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Rehoboam was thus the first king of Judah after it was separated from Israel. The first king of the northern kingdom was Jeroboam. Jeroboam is infamous in the Old Testament for being the king who set Israel on a path of idolatry and wickedness from which it never returned (1 Kings 12:25-33). The Lord's verdict against Jeroboam was "and he will give Israel up because of the sins of Jeroboam, which he sinned and made Israel to sin" (1 Kings 14:16). All the subsequent kings of Israel are condemned for continuing to walk in the ways of Jeroboam and continuing to lead the nation in that same path of rebellion (1 Kings 15:25-26, 15:34, etc.). Jeroboam used his influence to inflict lasting damage on Israel which eventually resulted in their exile (2 Kings 17:21-23).

Rehoboam had the opportunity to do things differently. After Jeroboam turned Israel to idolatry many priests and Levites fled from the northern lands to come and live in Judah. The ranks of Judah thus swelled in the numbers of people who "had set their hearts to seek the Lord God of Israel" (2 Chronicles 11:16). Rehoboam thus had many capable people in Judah who could have helped him lead the nation in faithfulness to God. Instead, "**Rehoboam... abandoned the law of the Lord, and all Israel with him.**" Like Jeroboam, Rehoboam used his influence to lead God's people away from God. Rehoboam's actions set Judah on a course from which they never did recover either, and so the southern kingdom eventually followed Israel into exile because they also walked in the same sins of idolatry and rebellion (2 Kings 17:19-20; 2 Kings 25).

Now, none of us are kings. Some of us do not have official positions of leadership. However, all of us are leaders at one level or another. All of us have spheres of influence in which our decisions and actions

affect the people around us. Husbands and wives influence each other. Parents and grandparents influence their children and grandchildren. Friends influence one another. Teachers influence their students. Bosses influence their employees, and co-workers influence one another. The list could go on. What are your spheres of influence? Who are the people whose lives you impact through the way you live your life?

Most importantly, are you using your influence for good or for evil? Are you leading your spouse and children to love and serve the Lord? Are you – at work, in the neighborhood, at school, with your friends – serving as a good example of what it means to follow Jesus? Do you build people up in positive ways? Or, is your influence negative? Do you tear others down? Do you discourage them? Do you, like Rehoboam, pull others away from faithfulness to God?

These are challenging questions which we must take seriously. We often go through life without thinking carefully about how we are influencing others. But the Scriptures call us to examine ourselves in precisely this area. Jesus is the Light of the World, and he wants to shine his light through us to others (John 8:12, Matthew 5:14-16, Philippians 2:14-16). We will never be perfect reflections of Christ, but we can grow more and more in our walk with him, so that the influence we have on those around us will itself be influenced by the love and truth of Jesus.

Take time now to seek God. This brief prayer can help you get started: *“Heavenly Father, I want to influence the people around me toward You. However, I confess that my influence is sometimes careless and even harmful. Lord, help me not to be like Rehoboam. Instead, fill me with your Spirit and cause your light to shine through me to others. Give me wisdom so that the things I do and say will build others up and encourage them to walk with you. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”*

### **Day 8: May 10, 2018: What Do You Want?**

Luke 10:25-29: *And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?”* <sup>26</sup> *He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?”* <sup>27</sup> *And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.”* <sup>28</sup> *And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.”* <sup>29</sup> *But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”*

Just because we can read the Bible correctly does not mean that we will live it correctly. The “lawyer” in this episode was an expert in the Law of Moses. He had spent his lifetime studying the Law. He knew it thoroughly. He interpreted it accurately. When Jesus answered the lawyer’s question (v. 25) by asking in return a question about the man’s reading of the Law (v. 26), the man “answered correctly.” The lawyer stated what elsewhere Jesus identified as the greatest commandments: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself” (v. 27; cf. Mt. 22:34-40 and Mk. 12:28-34).

However, the lawyer was not satisfied with the straightforward implications of the commands which he understood so well. The text says that he wanted “to justify himself,” which means that he was looking for a way to prove that his actions were consistent with the commands to love God and neighbor. Almost certainly the lawyer was looking for justification for his decision to exclude some people from being regarded as his neighbor. He wanted to show that he was not, in fact, obligated to love every person. Commentator Robert Stein explains, “For most Jews a neighbor was another Jew, not a Samaritan or a Gentile. The Pharisees and the Essenes did not even include all Jews.” So, the lawyer asked, “And who is my neighbor?” because he wanted to see if Jesus would allow that some people – such as Gentiles and Samaritans – were exceptions to the rule of love.

The lawyer thus stands as a primary example of the spiritual short-circuit which so often afflicts God's people: he *knew the truth* in his head, but he did not *love the truth* in his heart. Something else – a hatred of Gentiles and Samaritans, perhaps – had a stronger grip on his heart than did the love of God which was to transform him into someone who loved each person he encountered as his neighbor.

Followers of Jesus, we must always be on our guard against the sin of loving something else more than we love the truth of God. We must not think that we can rest satisfied with studying the Bible deeply and understanding it correctly. If we are not living the truth of God out in practical ways, something has gone wrong. We must beware of our strong tendencies to look for “exceptions” to God's commands, and to find ways to “justify” our actions as legitimate to God, ourselves, and others. If our spiritual life is peppered with the language of excuses such as “but,” “because,” “I can't,” or “this person or that thing doesn't count,” then we are allowing our love of sin to dictate our obedience to God.

For many of us the problem does not lie with our level of biblical knowledge. Instead, the problem is to be found deeper, at the level of our affections. Our affections are our desires – what we want, and value, and cherish. Theologian and philosopher James K.A. Smith writes, “What do you *want*? That's the question. It is the first, last, and most fundamental question of Christian discipleship... we *are* want we want. Our wants and longings and desires are at the core of our identity, the wellspring from which our actions and behavior flow. Our wants reverberate from our heart, the epicenter of the human person.”

The lawyer '*wanted*' to justify himself in some form of disobedience to the command “love your neighbor as yourself.” What do you want? Do you long to know God and to align your entire being with His ways? Or do you desire to appear religious while at the same time clinging to your old sinful habits of exclusion, prejudice, greed,

lust, anger, or bitterness? As the parable of the ‘Good Samaritan’ (Luke 10:30-37) shows, Jesus saw clearly what was going on in the lawyer's heart and his teaching penetrated right to the core of the issue. Jesus also sees what is going on in our hearts. He knows who or what that we want and love more than him. His word will penetrate to the core of our being (Heb. 4:12-13). Let's allow His word to cut beneath the surface and into our souls, so that he can form in us the holy desire to fully and completely love him with all that we are, and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

Take time now to seek God. This brief prayer can help you get started: “*O God, I have wanted other things more than I have wanted you. I have loved my ways of sin more than I have loved you. I have sought to justify my actions and make excuses for my disobedience. I have not allowed your word to transform my heart. Please forgive me, and please change me. Holy Spirit, I invite you to change what I want and desire. Help me to long for God, and obedience to God, above everything else in my life. In Jesus' name, Amen.*”