

Psalm 119:33-40

Overcoming Resistance to Our Desires

Make me to go in the path of thy commandments; for therein do I delight – v. 35

Imagine setting a piece of chocolate cake in front of your child. You've set this piece of chocolate cake in front of him because he's been good and because you know that he loves chocolate cake. You are very aware that in giving him this treat he'll be most happy because you know that he delights in chocolate cake.

How would you respond if your child said to you – *Thanks mom, you know that I love chocolate cake, now do me a favor and make me eat it.* That would certainly be an unusual request, wouldn't it? Make me eat the chocolate cake? You want me to use my power and authority as a parent to make you do something that you delight in doing?

In the physical world that would indeed be an unusual thing. But in the spiritual world it's not so unusual. In fact we see an instance of that very thing in our text this morning. Look at it again – This is a petition from the Psalmist addressed to God. He is praying these words – *Make me to go in the path of thy commandments; for therein do I delight.* Isn't that amazing? He delights to go in the path of God's commandments but still he must pray – *God, make me to go in that path.* Doesn't that show something of the degree to which we are entirely dependent upon God? Doesn't it further show the strength of inbred sin? When do you ever need effectual power to do something that you delight in?

In the material or physical realm the delighting aspect of your desire is all you need to prompt you to go in that direction. In fact, when you think about it, one of the problems we face in our society today is that men and women over indulge in the things they delight in so that we need the power of restraint when it comes to the things we delight in.

How different things are in the spiritual realm, however. Paul addresses the phenomenon of our text in Gal. 5:17 where it says: *For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other:* So we find this tension between the Spirit and the flesh and as a result of that tension Paul goes on to describe the consequence of that tension when he says in the rest of the verse *so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.*

Doesn't that verse align itself perfectly with the text in Psalm 119:35? *Lord, make me to go in the path of thy commandments, for therein do I delight.* I delight in your commandments, Lord. But in spite of my delight I have no power to go in that path. I need, thee, O Lord, to make me go in the very path that I delight in.

Now it's worth noting here that such desires are characteristic of a true Christian. The sinner has no desire to go in the path of God's commandments. The sinner's desires are expressed in the 2nd Psalm – *Let us break God's bands asunder and cast away his cords from us.* So strong are the desires to be free from all that God commands that the kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers take counsel together saying let us break their bands asunder and cast away their cords from us. Here is where you may find validity for the

varying conspiracy theories that are prevalent today. They amount to spiritual conspiracies to escape God's rule.

The true Christian, however, has escaped such conspiracies and has found that old things have passed away and all things have become new. So when it comes to gaining assurance of salvation the thing that needs to be examined is your desires – not your success in seeing those desires fulfilled but in the desires themselves. What do you desire? What do you delight in? Do you delight in the path of God's commandments? – or do you delight in sin? The Christian who delights in God's commandments will be grieved by his sin. The sinner who delights in his sin, on the other hand will be grieved by his conscience that keeps reminding him that he's guilty when he sins.

What I would like to focus on this morning is the way the Christian can and should confront the resistance that he meets when it comes to his desires so that he can and does overcome that resistance in order to go in the path of God's commandments.

Overcoming Resistance to the Christian's Desires

That's my theme. And in order to instruct and encourage you to overcome that resistance and see your desires fulfilled I want to raise and answer 3 questions in our study today. The first question will be: What are those desires? The next question will be: What resistance confronts those desires? And the final question will be: How is that resistance overcome?

I. What Are Those Desires?

Or – if I can express this heading in a way that is true to the text – What do we, as Christians, delight in? It's interesting to note that the word *delight* occurs 9 times in this Psalm and most often you find it used in connection with God's commandments, or his statutes, or his law.

- Ps 119:16 *I will delight myself in thy statutes: I will not forget thy word.*
- Ps 119:24 *Thy testimonies also are my delight and my counsellors.*
- Ps 119:47 *And I will delight myself in thy commandments, which I have loved.*

There were a couple of verses, however, that caught my attention that are found later in the Psalm and they caught my attention because I think they give us a broader understanding of what the Psalmist has in my mind through the use of these various terms.

Ps 119:92 *Unless thy law had been my delights, I should then have perished in mine affliction.* When you think about it, this statement is somewhat unusual when you think of the law in the way we usually think of it. We usually think of the law as that which stands in our way when it comes to salvation. We know the law holds out to us a standard that we've failed to meet and that we've transgressed many times.

And yet now in v. 92 you see that the law in which the Psalmist delights stands out in contrast to that which would cause him to perish. Surely the term *law* in this verse encompasses more than simply rules to live by or the high standards of God's rules that we fail to measure up to. There is an aspect of salvation in the term for it is our salvation that keeps us from perishing.

And in v. 174 near the end of the Psalm we find this connection between salvation and the law made even plainer by the statement: *I have longed for thy salvation, O LORD; and thy law is my delight.*

Do we not recognize in these two verses, now, something that stands out in contrast to perishing as well as something that is closely linked to salvation? In other words the law that the Psalmist has in view may be viewed as the law of the gospel. The gospel, you see, may be viewed as a law. In the words of one commentator quoted by Spurgeon on this verse: *God's salvation and his law were discerned to be one.*

Paul certainly recognizes the gospel as a law when he writes in Rom. 8:2 that *the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death.* Earlier in Romans he identifies the law that eliminates boasting to be *the law of faith* (Rom. 3:27). Here, then, is the law that we love and a law that the Christian wants to live by, the law that the Christian delights in – it's the law of the gospel – the law of life – the law of salvation – the law that commands *Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved and thy house* (Acts 16:31).

I find it interesting that the word *law* back in Psalm 119:174 is defined in one Hebrew Lexicon as not only a code of legal directives but it may also be defined as the law of the burnt offering or the Deuteronomic law. The law of the burnt offering could certainly be viewed as the law of the gospel. The burnt offering, after all, pointed the offerer to Christ. The burnt offering was a demonstration of the truth of propitiation – Christ bearing the flames of God's wrath. It certainly conveyed the lesson of substitution and imputation.

Do you wonder where the gospel is found in the Old Testament? It's certainly found in the burnt offering and in all the other offerings which were occasioned by sin and that resulted in forgiveness and peace. Some time ago we did a study on the theme of forgiveness and I made the point that the term *forgive* is found most often in the Old Testament in the book of Leviticus, that book that goes into such minute detail about the various offerings or animal sacrifices. The common refrain is found in the words of Lev. 4:26 *and the priest shall make an atonement for him as concerning his sin, and it shall be forgiven him.* There's the law of the burnt offering and you would certainly have to call it the law of the gospel.

And when you think of the definition of *law* as that which is Deuteronomic then it certainly becomes valid to view it in terms of the covenant. The book of Deuteronomy is the book of the second covenant or the second law. Some commentators and theologians view the Mosaic law as a restatement of the covenant of works. And I think that's a valid

way to interpret it. The Mosaic law demanded strict obedience and it was such a demand that made that law a burden that was too heavy to bear.

But what must be kept in mind is that while there was much in the Mosaic law that pertained to the duty of the follower of Christ there was also provision in that covenant for sins and transgressions. The entire ceremonial law was designed to make that provision. All those animal sacrifices were designed to provide forgiveness.

So we may interpret the Psalmist's love for God's law as a love for God's provision for forgiveness or a love for the gospel and a love for the covenant of grace as well as a love for the things that pertain to our conduct that are pleasing to God. Viewed this way it makes sense to pray *Make me to go in the path of thy commandments; for therein do I delight*. Make me go in the way of faith in Christ. Make me go in the way that sees in him the One who kept the law of God for me and the One who shed his blood for me. Make me go in the ways that are pleasing to him for my soul delights in him. My soul rejoices in the provision he has made for me.

When we view the term *law* in this broader context which takes salvation into account then a number of other statements in the Psalm make perfect sense. Ps 119:16 *I will delight myself in thy statutes: I will not forget thy word*. God's word is certainly a word of promise and a word of salvation. The reason we love God's word and want to go in the way of God's word is because that word teaches us to read our titles to heaven clearly.

Ps 119:77 *Let thy tender mercies come unto me, that I may live: for thy law is my delight*. Here there is a connection to the law and God's tender mercies. Those tender mercies are made the sure mercies of David through the law of the gospel. What, then, do we desire as Christians? We desire and delight in the way of salvation. We desire and delight in Christ's provision for our souls. From hearts that are filled with love toward him our desire is to please him. Our desire is to walk with him. Our desire is to serve and worship him. These are the things the Christian desires.

The next question we must consider is this:

II. What Resistance Confronts These Desires?

The section we have read from the 119th Psalm reveals to us a number of things that confront the Christian's desires.

The first force of resistance is given to us in v. 36 *Incline my heart unto thy testimonies, and not to covetousness*. We can say based on this statement that the natural or the fleshly heart or the old nature has a strong inclination to covetousness and covetousness is a force of resistance against the things we, as Christians desire.

Paul addresses the sin of covetousness in Col. 3:5 and notice as I read the verse the connection that he makes between covetousness and idolatry. *Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry*.

Covetousness or idolatry is that practice that elevates something above God. The desire for more of the world's goods and the world's approval and the world's prestige and applause is idolatry. Now I know I have to be careful here because there are things in the world that we can and should genuinely desire. We desire our daily bread and are to pray for it. And as Christians we certainly desire to get ahead in our work. We seek to advance in our vocations and that's not a bad thing, on the contrary it's a good thing especially when our striving springs from our desire to glorify God in whatever we do.

The way that even legitimate things become things that we covet is when those things become exalted above God himself. And the way to tell whether or not you've crossed the line from legitimate desires into the sin of covetousness is to search your heart in the area of your contentment. So the author of Hebrews writes in Heb. 13:5 *Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.*

Do you see how the Christian's contentment is found in Christ? He is all I want. I love the way Charles Wesley expresses this in one of his hymns: *Thou, O Christ, art all I want; More than all in Thee I find.* When we fall from that standard we have caved in to covetousness. When we crave the things of the world so that we find ourselves to be generally discontented with life then you can mark it down as a sure thing that some idol has captured your heart.

Listen to the definition of covetousness given in Easton's Bible dictionary *A strong desire after the possession of worldly things. It assumes sometimes the more aggravated form of avarice, which is the mark of cold-hearted worldliness.*

So covetousness is one of the forces of resistance that keeps the Christian from realizing his desires. In a similar vein to covetousness you can add vanity to the list of resistance forces. Look at the words of v. 37 *Turn away mine eyes from beholding vanity; and quicken thou me in thy way.* I'm not among those Christians that oppose every form of entertainment in the world. There are some that don't believe a Christian should have a television in his home. I won't go that far but I will go so far as to say that control is the key.

And I've often thought upon this text in its connection to television or to movies. This would make a good text to mount in close proximity to a television or to the computer screen – *turn away mine eyes from beholding vanity.* Much that comes to us over the airwaves, as it were, that may not be categorized as positively sinful can, nevertheless, be categorized as vain or empty which makes it at best a colossal waste of time.

Of course it needs to be acknowledged as well that much that comes over the airwaves via the television or the computer is positively sinful. I don't remember the source from which I heard this but it makes sense to me that it's probably true – the two foremost uses for computers are 1 – religious uses – things like Bible-study aids or sermonaudio or things similar to that and 2 – pornography.

And if you find yourself drawn into that which is sinful through whatever means then your cry to God needs to be – *Turn away mine eyes from beholding vanity* or *turn away mine eyes from beholding sin*. We know, of course, that our culture is devoted to bombarding us and especially attacking us through the gate of our eyes with that which is designed to provoke lust and sin. You find such things on billboards when you're driving down the highway. You find such things in the line at the grocery store. You find it in printed media – newspapers and magazines and you find it over the airwaves.

It's a force of resistance to the Christian that would lure him away from the true desires of his heart. Another force of resistance is given to us in v. 39 *Turn away my reproach which I fear: for thy judgments are good*. My reproach which I fear – we could call this feared reproach the fear of man. It springs from the fear of what others think especially what others think of you being a Christian.

You can get away with calling yourself a Christian just be careful that you don't get too carried away with it – that's the world's tolerance. Don't identify too strongly with Christ and don't oppose sin with too vehement a zeal or you'll bring reproach upon yourself. This is a force of resistance to the Christian – the fear of man which bringeth a snare (Prov. 29:25).

I'll mention one more force of resistance – this one is perhaps the most common one that needs to be overcome. You'll notice that twice in this section of the Psalm the Psalmist prays for quickening. *Turn away mine eyes from beholding vanity; and quicken thou me in thy way* – v. 37; *Behold, I have longed after thy precepts: quicken me in thy righteousness* – v. 40. Quicken is what is needed to overcome spiritual dullness and apathy. To be quickened is to be made alive which means, then, that the condition overcome by quickening is the power of being very nearly spiritually dead.

And like I say – this is perhaps the most common force of resistance to the Christian realizing his desires. You're cold to spiritual things. You're dull in heart. I've said it often that the thing that concerns me more than anything when it comes to our young people and I should add when it comes to Christians of any age is that we allow ourselves to become hard of heart – so that seeing we see not and hearing we hear not. This is a force of resistance that is mentioned often in the Scriptures. It was this kind of dullness that characterized the Jews of Christ's day and it's this kind of dullness that has the potential for infecting those who are so accustomed to the truth of the gospel that the truth of the gospel becomes boring. What it amounts to is seeing and hearing the things of Christ without being affected by those things.

Such a condition should be identified at once by the Christian as an emergency that needs immediate attention. For it is an act of judgment on God's part to leave a people in such a condition who fail to deal with that condition.

So we see the Christian's desire – it's a desire for the gospel – it's a desire for Christ himself who is the way, the truth and the life. This desire meets with strong resistance from various forces – covetousness, vanity, the fear of man and spiritual dullness.

It remains for us to consider the question:

III. What is Needed to Overcome Such Resistance?

The first thing that's needed – and this comes out so plainly in this section of the Psalm – the first thing that's needed is a complete sense of your dependency on God. Look at the things that the Psalmist is seeking from the Lord and that will certainly show you this sense of dependency.

Make me to go in the path of thy commandments, our text says. Isn't this a plea for effectual power? Isn't there a recognition in this prayer that the Christian can do nothing in his own strength? He needs for God to so work in his heart that he'll gain the strength to overcome resistance and pursue the true desires of his heart.

He needs this effectual power and he also needs heart inclination. Verse 36: *Incline my heart unto thy testimonies, and not to covetousness*. Inbred sin covets the world. There is a natural desire in our hearts that wants the world's approval and applause. This inclination must be supplanted by a heart inclination toward God's testimonies. And again we see another manifestation of our dependence upon God. It must be the Lord himself who inclines our hearts we will not succeed in inclining our own hearts.

And it must be the Lord's power that compels us to turn away from vanity – v. 37. Left to ourselves we would run toward sin and embrace and indulge in all that is sinful and all that is vain. It takes the Lord himself to turn us away just as it takes the Lord himself to turn away the reproach that we fear – v. 39. It takes the Lord's power to establish his word in our hearts. *Stablish thy word unto thy servant, v. 38 who is devoted to thy fear*.

So we see our dependency upon God and we see the things we need from God – we need his effectual power – we need his strength – we need his mastery over our hearts. I'm sure you can see that in each of these things the Psalmist is praying. Lord make me go...Lord incline my heart...Lord turn away my eyes...Lord establish thy word to thy servant...turn away my reproach...quicken me in thy way and quicken me in thy righteousness.

Here is the part we play. I've been saying we're totally dependent upon God and that is true but there is something we can and should do. We must pray. This is where our sense of dependence should lead us – it should lead us to prayer. Show me a Christian who is not knowing much success in overcoming the resistance to his spiritual desires and I'll show you a Christian that probably doesn't pray very much. On the other hand – show me a Christian that overcomes the resistance to his desires and I'll show you a Christian who not only prays but who sees answers to his prayers.

There is one more thing that I'll mention here that really could call for a sermon in itself. The words of v. 38 *Stablish thy word unto thy servant, who is devoted to thy fear*. If we would overcome the resistance we face to our spiritual desires then we must be devoted to the fear of God which means simply that we must be devoted to worshipping God and striving in our worship to gain as exalted a view of God as we can get.

I wonder, then, as we bring this meeting to a close – what are your desires today? Can you truly say – I desire Christ – I desire a closer walk with Christ – I desire to be more conformed to Christ – I desire to serve Christ – I desire to know the love of Christ being shed abroad in my soul.

Those are the common desires of Christians. They delight in the ways of God's commandments. If those desires are foreign to your heart then you should be honest enough to acknowledge that you are foreign to Christ and you should seek Christ for a change of heart so that you don't perish forever in all your never-to-be fulfilled desires of the world.

If you know these positive spiritual desires after Christ then I'm sure you also know that your desires meet resistance and the only way your desires can be met is for that resistance to be overcome. Thank God this morning that resistance can be overcome. It's overcome in the power of Christ's love and it's overcome by the earnest praying and seeking of God's people.

May we make it our prayer this morning, then – that God will make us, by the power of his love, go in ways of his commandments because our souls genuinely delight in his ways.