

Southport Presbyterian Church

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Moral Beauty

Psalm 19:7-14

Eugene and Marie Scott, a bright and well educated young couple with a baby, moved in 1958 to a remote village in the Amazon jungle of Peru. They went to live among a people group who did not have the Bible in their language and in fact whose language had never been written down. The Scotts moved in and stayed. Three more children arrived, all of them born in Peru. It was a rich life, but not an easy life. There was malaria and hepatitis, stifling heat and humidity. Their home was a grass-roof structure built on stilts. Don't you wonder what HGTV would do with that? Once, a fire burned their home with all their translation work inside. Another time a flood nearly washed the village away.

Their job was to learn the language, set it down in writing, ascertain the grammar and vocabulary, translate the Bible into that language, and then teach the people to read. Why would a bright, young American couple choose this life? Our scripture today answers the question. Listen to the middle section of **Psalm 19**.

**The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul.
The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple.
The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart.
The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes.
The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever.
The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous.
They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold.
They are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb.
By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.**

The psalmist writes that the Bible is precious, even more valuable than much pure gold, that its teachings are sweeter than honey, and that they bring great reward to those who live by them. Do we believe that the Word of God is precious? Do you?

All creation began with the word of God. God spoke and creation began. **Hebrews 1:3** says: **“He upholds the universe by the Word of his power.”** Jesus said: **“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” (Matthew 4:4)** The gift of your life, of this world, of all that is, of everything you love – it was created by and is sustained by the word of God. Jesus is called the Word and he is the perfect revelation, the perfect expression of who God is. And God also has given us the Bible, the Word of God.

About 3400 years ago, Moses exhorted his people, **“Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day, so that you may command your children to obey carefully all the words of this law. They are not just idle words for you—they are your life.” (Deut 32: 46-47).** Paul said, **“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in**

righteousness.” (2 Timothy 3:16). Jesus himself said that “the Scripture cannot be broken.” (John 10:35)

Did you hear what Moses said: “They are not just idle words for you—they are your life.” Because the Scriptures are the Word of the Lord—the communication and revelation of the living God—they have power. Six times the writer uses the phrase “of the Lord.” In Hebrew, the word is *Yahweh*, God’s personal name, which means “I am who I am”. This is the Word of the God who created all that is, who knows all things that have been and will be, who is above medicine and physics and astronomy and history and political powers. This is the Sovereign Lord.

He knows us better than anyone else because he made us and loves us. He knows what has happened to us and all its effects on us. He understands the pressures on us, and the opportunities before us. He knows how society works, even the society of a high school or a work place or a home with problems or an oncology center. God knows and holds the future. He is perfect wisdom, perfect love, perfect goodness. As the Psalm says, “He knows our weaknesses; he knows we are but dust.”

And God has spoken *to us*. God has given us His Word and we must see its value – that it is more to be valued than gold, even much pure gold. We are told also that in keeping these commands of God there is great reward. The benefits of knowing and doing the Word of God are greater than anything money can buy. What are the great rewards?

The Word of God Gives Life

“The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul.”

The Word of God contains life-giving words, life-giving truth. The Word of God shows us how to live and restores us to fullness of life. We cannot have a vibrant life if we ignore the Word of God or fail to honor the commands of God. The Bible does more than merely offer uplifting thoughts or noble ideals. The Word of God has creative and sustaining power to renew life, to restore your soul. God’s commands protect and guide and anchor us. I know this in my own life.

The law of the Lord revives our souls; without it we perish. Moses said, **“See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you... Now choose life that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life...” (Deuteronomy 30:15-20)**

The Word of God Gives Wisdom

“The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.”
“The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.”

A wise person is in touch with reality. All day long unreality is being preached to you and me by the secular voices of the culture, by people who want you to give them your money, your agreement or even your conscience. They say, “Buy this. Believe this. Accept this. Agree with this.” All day long their voices speak and their messages pour in through all the media around us. But wise people are able to see clearly and maintain independent judgment because their eyes are enlightened and their reasoning is

sound. They can see what is false and unreal and what is true and lasting. That is wisdom. Jesus' model of self-denial and of obedience to the Father makes no sense to the culture out there where self-preservation and self-promotion are the highest ideals. But we see it differently. We see that Jesus was completely in touch with a deeper reality, a truer truth. Through God's Word we can learn wisdom.

Are the commands and precepts and statutes and laws of God just a big "no"? Is the law of the Lord simply a list of prohibitions? I know that some people see the Ten Commandments simply as a list of restrictions on personal freedom. But I see them as statements of dignity and blessing. They say: "You should not be lied to, you should not be stolen from, you should not be betrayed in your intimate relationships, you are allowed to rest. If you undertake the sacrificial loving of parenthood you should be honored. You should remember that you belong to a God whose very name is sacred." Every *no* is attached to a *yes*; just turn around and see it. Every *no* is a protection, preserving for us a *yes* that we want and need.

There is real darkness out there, Friends. But the Word of God enlightens the eyes. It brings light and wisdom.

The Word of God Gives Joy

"The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart."

"They are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb."

There is nothing so joy-sucking, so soul-destroying, so narrow and claustrophobic as narcissism. And narcissism is epidemic in our world. It's a sentence of solitary confinement – my self, my needs, my opinions, my thoughts, my values, my reality. It's a prison and so many are locked away in it. But the words of God take us out of that prison cell, out of our self-preoccupation and let us look up and see the heavens God has created, see the beauty God has made, receive the weight of glory that belongs to us just because we are created by God. The words of God let us receive our identity as beloved children of God and they set us free to see, really see others, and then to serve them out of love for God. The Word of God is the best source of deepest and lasting joy. Listen again: "The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart." And then these words: "They are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb." Imagine this writer, thousands of years ago, seeking to express what the Word of God is like: he compares it to eating the sweetest thing he has ever tasted—fresh honey straight from the comb.

Life, wisdom, joy... Philip Yancey describes an operation on his foot. Afterwards, the surgeon gave him some *yes*'s and some *no*'s. There were exercises he should do and some activities he should not do. He was warned against bicycling, mountain climbing, running, and golf. On one visit he tried to talk the doctor into allowing a golf game. He said, "These friends only get together once a year and it's important to me. I've been practicing my swing, and if I use only my upper body and keep my legs very still, could I join them?"

Without a flicker of hesitation, the doctor replied, "It would make me very unhappy if you played golf."

"I thought you were a golfer," Philip said, appealing to his sympathies.

“I am. That's how I know you can't swing without rolling that foot inward and putting weight on the parts that are trying to heal.” Philip saw that the doctor had his health and his best interests at heart in the *yes's* and *no's* he prescribed.

He adds: “The role of a doctor may be the most revealing image in thinking about God and sin. What a doctor does for me physically—guide me toward health—God does for me spiritually. I am learning to view sins not as an arbitrary list of rules drawn up by a cranky Judge, but rather as a list of dangers that must be avoided at all costs—for our own sakes.” (Philip Yancey, "Doctor's Orders," *Christianity Today*, December 6, 1999)

The Word of God is Valuable

“They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold.”

How valuable, how precious is God's Word? Ask the Scotts – those translators in Peru. After 25 years—25years!—there was next to no interest in Christian faith among the villagers and there was not even one book of the Bible completed yet. They returned to the States for a rest, very discouraged. Their supporters encouraged them, assured them of the value of their work, and promised to stand with them in prayer more earnestly. The family returned and set to work finishing the translation of Matthew and John. And then one man—the village chief—gave his life to Christ. Almost immediately nearly everyone in the village committed themselves to the Lord! The Scotts spent 40 years in Peru; offering the Bible to that group of villagers was their life work. God's mightiest missionary is His Word and when it goes forth, it will accomplish its purposes. In **Isaiah 55:11** God says **“My word that goes forth from my mouth, it will not return to me empty, but I accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”** The Word of the Lord has power.

Many popular and important books are translated into 10 or 20 languages. Shakespeare has been translated into more than 60 languages, and so has Harry Potter. Only two books have been translated into more than 100 languages. The Koran has been translated into 128 languages. The Bible has been translated in more than 2000 languages. And today, this very day, all around the world, Bible translators are at work. The Word of God is precious and so are all the people God made and loves.

What is the attitude of my heart?

***“May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.”***

Not everyone believes that the Bible is the word of the living God, of Yahweh, the Lord. Many people go to the Bible and say, “I have my own opinions, I have my own experiences, I know what people around me think. I will read the Bible and I will judge it.” But it's a very different attitude to go to the Bible and say, “The law of the LORD is perfect, and it will revive my soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, and they will give me wisdom. The precepts of the LORD are right, and they will bring me joy. The commands of the LORD are radiant, and they will enlighten me.” Hebrews 4:12 tells us, “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow. It judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”

Do you hear the difference in the attitude? One stands before the Word of God and says, “I will judge you.” The other stands humbly before the Bible and says, “May your Word judge me, O Lord. May your Word teach me.”

In the beautiful world about us and above us, we see the creative beauty of the Lord. In Jesus we see the perfectly loving beauty of God’s character. In Scripture we see the moral beauty of God, our creator, who made us, knows us, knows our world, knows our lives, knows what is true and good and beautiful and right. For our good, God has given us moral boundaries that protect and guide. For our good, the Lord has enacted a fully sufficient plan of redemption so that no sin, no sin at all, need stand between you and a Holy God. Through Jesus, his death and resurrection, all is made right and well and good and you are restored to perfect relationship with the God who made and loves you.

In Jesus, law and love meet and are perfected. The beauty of God’s moral perfection was met by the beauty of God’s redemptive love. That’s the story of the cross, of Christ, of the communion table. May we never forget always to hold law and love together.

(In writing this message, two resources were especially helpful: *Reflections on the Psalms* by C. S. Lewis and the *Desiring God* by John Piper.)