



## TEACH ME! Psalm 119:33-40

In Psalm 51:5, David confesses, *“Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.”* Every one of us shares David’s sad testimony. We are all sinners – by nature, birth, inclination, choice, and conduct. Romans 3:10-12 says: *“None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”* Consequently, we do not need anyone to teach us how to sin. If you don’t believe that, have some children. You don’t have to train a child to lie, cheat, or steal. At birth, they are automatically wired to do wrong. So is every one of us. WILLIAM BEVERIDGE expressed the ugly reality of his sinfulness when he wrote:

I CANNOT PRAY, EXCEPT I SIN;  
I CANNOT PREACH, BUT I SIN;  
I CANNOT ADMINISTER, NOR RECEIVE THE HOLY SACRAMENT, BUT I SIN.  
MY VERY REPENTANCE NEEDS TO BE REPENTED OF;  
AND THE TEARS I SHED NEED WASHING IN THE BLOOD OF CHRIST.

I repeat: You and I do not need anyone to teach us how to do wrong. But we definitely need someone to teach us how to do right. The freedom of the will permits us to do as we wish. But the bondage of the will does not permit us to do, as we ought. Jeremiah 13:23 ask: *“Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil.”* We need someone to teach us how to do what is right. But who? Only God can teach you how to live right. That’s the message of this section of Psalm 119. The psalmist is convinced that only God can teach him how to live right. So he passionately prays that God would be his teacher. This text is unique among the twenty-two sections of Psalm 119, in that it is the only stanza that contains a petition in every verse – nine in all. Over and over again, the writer pours out fervent prayers for participation, progress, and perseverance in God’s school for right living. I challenge you to join the psalmist in praying that God would teach you how to live right.

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### I. A PRAYER FOR PERSONAL ADMISSION INTO GOD’S SCHOOL

Verses 33-34 record the writer’s application for admission into the God’s school for right living. These verses give two reasons why you ought to pray for admission into God’s school.

#### A. YOU NEED SPIRITUAL INSTRUCTION

In verse 33, the psalmist prays: *“Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes, and I will keep it to the end.”* This verse tells us four things about God’s seminary for right living.

The *enrollment process: teach me.* The anonymous author of Psalm 119 was devoted to the word of God. The content of this psalm makes it obvious that he read, studied, meditated on, memorized, believed, delighted in, obeyed, proclaimed, and even suffered for it. His life was so shaped by the word that in verse 99 he says: *“I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your testimonies are my meditation.”* But the greatest evidence of this was not what he knew, but his acknowledgement of what he did not know. This is an essential qualification for admission into God’s school: you must recognize that you have a lot to learn. God never accepts foolish people, who do not know that they do not know. God only accepts those who recognize their need for instruction. The education is the process of going from unconscious ignorance to conscious ignorance. So the enrollment process into God’s school requires that you recognize your spiritual ignorance and cry out, *“Teach me.”*

The *Master Instructor: O Lord.* SAINT BENARD was right when he said, “He who is his own pupil has a fool for his master.” You cannot teach yourself how to live right. Other people cannot teach you how to live right. The world cannot teach you how to live right. God alone is the master teacher, tenured professor, and resident scholar in the divine school of right living. You must submit to God’s instruction to be a righteous person. If you are going to live right, you must trust and obey the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.

The *subject matter: “the way of your statutes.”* He did not want to merely know a body of truth. He wanted to know a way of life. There are many ways to live. But in Matthew 7:13-14 Jesus exhorts: *“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”* The psalmist had found the straight and narrow way that leads to life in the word of God. So he prayed that the Lord would teach him the way of his statutes.

The *teaching aim: “and I will keep it to the end.”* The psalmist added a pledge to his plea; that if God would teach him the way of his statutes, he would keep it to the end. D.L. MOODY was right: God did not give us the Scriptures to increase our knowledge, but to change our lives. The goal of spiritual instruction is an obedient life. James 1:22 says: *“But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.”* You are only fooling yourself if you think you are right with God by simply hearing the word. Faith must be expressed in obedience. In fact, not only must there be active obedience; there must also be persistent obedience. True obedience is not occasional, period, or sporadic. It must be *“to the end.”* You must keep at it until you receive your final reward. Philippians 2:12-13 says, *“work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”*

Verse 33 closely parallels verse 34. In verse 33, the psalmist prays for instruction: *“Teach me.”* In verse 34, he prays for insight: *“Give me understanding.”* Both are necessary to love God and follow Jesus. You need teaching and understanding. Acts 8:26-40 records Philip’s providential meeting with an Ethiopian eunuch. They met in the Gaza Strip, where this African dignitary was sitting in his chariot reading from the prophesy of Isaiah. Phillip asked him, *“Do you understand what you are reading?”* The eunuch answered, *“How can I, unless someone guides me?”* That’s the crisis point every one of us must come to. Our finite, sinful minds cannot comprehend biblical truth without the help of the perfect teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit. So we must pray, *“Give me understanding.”*

Why is it important that God give us understanding of his word? Verse 34 answers: *“that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart.”* JAMES MONTGOMERY BOICE comments: *“The writer is asking for two things that he lacks: understanding and the ability to do what he understands.”* We see here that revelation needs illumination that leads to application and results in transformation. If you want God to give you understanding, you must be willing to keep his law. God does not give understanding for entertainment purposes. He gives understanding to those who are willing to obey him. In John 7:16-17 Jesus says: *“My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me. If anyone’s will is to do God’s will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority.”* If God is going to give you understanding, you must be willing to keep his law and observe it with your whole heart. And that phrase, *“my whole heart.”* means to be committed to God without any reservations. It means that your mind, will, and emotions are all committed to obeying the word of God. It means that you obey Proverbs 3:5-6: *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.”*

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## II. A PRAYER FOR CONTINUAL PROGRESS IN GOD’S SCHOOL

There are many who enroll into God’s school who do not make much spiritual progress. They are deceived into thinking that enrolling into God’s school automatically produces a passing grade. But in John 8:31-32, Jesus says, *“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”* So you must pray for continual progress that comes as God helps you to discipline three areas of your life.

### A. YOUR FEET

In Psalm 23:3, testifies, *“He leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.”* In similar language, the psalmist prays in verse 35: *“Lead me in the path of your commandments.”* This request acknowledges the fact that the psalmist was prone to wander away from the path of God’s commandments. All of us are. Isaiah 53:6 says, *“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his*

*own way.*" So we should join the psalmist in asking God to make us walk in the path of his commandments. If you are going to share the psalmist's request for God's leadership, you must share his rejoicing in it. He says, *"Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it."* In Psalm 1:2, David says that this is one of the positive marks of a blessed life: *"but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night."* God's commandments are not burdensome. 1 Corinthians 15:19 says the only way God's way of life is miserable is if Jesus did not rise from the dead. But Jesus lives! And it is a delight to walk in the path of God's commandments that lead to eternal life by faith in Jesus Christ.

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## B. YOUR HEART

Verse 36 says, *"Incline my heart to your testimonies, and not to selfish gain."* This word *incline* means, "to bend toward." The psalmist uses it here to say that our hearts are bent toward one of two things. Either our hearts are inclined toward the word of God or toward greed, covetousness, and selfish gain. The psalmist prays that God would incline his heart toward the word. Or as the LIVING BIBLE paraphrases it: *"Help me to prefer obedience to making money."* This contrast reminds us the great warning of 1 Timothy 6:10: *"For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs."* The love of money is a root sin that will produce destructive fruit in your life. So you must keep your heart away from it. And the only way you can do that is to pray to God to incline your heart. WILLIAM MACDONALD rightly commented: It is a miracle of grace that takes the love of money from a man and replaces it with a love for the Bible. So join the psalmist in praying that God would incline your heart to his word, and not to selfish gain.

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## C. YOUR EYES

In verse 18, the psalmist prays: *"Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law."* But in verse 37, he prays, *"Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things."* There is an organic connection between the eyes and the soul, what we see and who we are, what we look at and how we live. Knowing this, the writer prays that God would keep his eyes from beholding worthless things. This request is about more than seeing these things. It's about gazing or focusing or concentrating on them. The psalmist is asking God to keep his eyes from paying undue attention to worthless things. Note that he does not pray, "Close my eyes," adopting a naïve ostrich approach to life, in which he foolishly puts his head in the sand. He prays that God would turn his eyes away from worthless things, so that he does not focus on the wrong things. JOHN PHILLIPS comments, "One law of spiritual victory we need to learn is to look the other way."

This verse is the Bible's commentary on much of the television and movies we watch. It is a commentary on the articles, magazines, and books that we read. It

is commentary on the people we celebrate, possessions we crave, and places we imagine. We must pray that God turn our eyes away from looking at worthless things. And we must ask that God would give us life, revive us, and give us his sustaining grace and sparing mercy to live in a way that is pleasing to him.

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### III. A PRAYER FOR STEADFAST PERSEVERANCE IN GOD'S SCHOOL

There are those who enroll God's school and make some progress, but they fail to persevere to final graduation. The psalmist did not want that to be his story. He did not want to be a dropout. He did not want any trials, hardships, or challenges to keep him from finishing what he started. In these closing verses of the stanza, he prays God would grant three things that would enable him to persevere.

#### A. ASSURANCE

In verse 38, the psalmist prays for assurance from God: *"Confirm to your servant your promise, that you may be feared."* Promise is another synonym for scripture. The promise of God is the word of God. The word of God is the promise of God. The psalmist prayed that God would confirm, establish, or affirm it. This is not an indictment against the wisdom, faithfulness, or sovereignty of God. It is not really a statement about God at all. It is a statement about the psalmist. He was in a difficult situation that caused him great distress. Yet he did not ask God to immediately fulfill the promises of his word. He asked God to confirm his word. The psalmist was carrying a heavy burden. And the only thing that could hold him up was the assurance that God's word is true, God's promises are sure, and God's wisdom is unfailing.

Note the intended result of this prayer for assurance: *"that you may be feared."* Some translations render this verse in a way that speaks of the psalmist as one who already fears God. Indeed, he did. But it is more accurate to read this reference to *fear* as the result of assurance. He is saying that if you give confirm your word in my heart, it will produce a great fear of you in my heart. Many who emphasize claiming the promises of God tend to think more of themselves than they do God. We make our desires sovereign and order God around to do our bidding. But this is evidence of false assurance. When God confirms his word, it produces fear. And the fear of God is simply the fear of God. It means that because you know that God is God, there are some things you are afraid to do. There are some things you are afraid to say. And there are some places you are afraid to go.

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#### B. VINDICATION

Verse 39 prays, *"Turn away the reproach that I dread."* Some read this prayer as a request that the psalmist would either be protected from disobedience that results in shameful treatment or that he would be delivered from present reproach

that was the consequence of past rebellion. But it is probably more accurate to understand this verse to be about reproach that is the result of obedience to God, not disobedience. In verses 23-24, the psalmist prayed: *“Take away from me scorn and contempt, for I have kept your testimonies. Even though princes sit plotting against me, your servant will meditate on your statutes.”* And in verse 42, the psalmist says: *“then shall I have an answer for him who taunts me, for I trust in your word.”* The psalmist had enemies who scorned, hated, and taunted him. Most likely, it is this reproach that he prays about in verse 39.

The psalmist should be commended for the fact that he did not take matters into his own hands. Instead, he fought on his knees. He told God about his situation. He prayed about it. He was not a wild-eyed cowboy looking for a fight. He was a servant of God that dreaded the reproach he experienced. This prayer request reminds us that devotion to God’s word will sometimes invoke the reproach of both hard-hearted unbelievers and worldly-minded believers. But it is wrong to have a martyr’s complex that goes out looking for hills to die on. A godly heart will dread the controversy that your devotion to God’s word inevitably brings. Romans 12:18 says, *“If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”* You ought not go looking for a fight. But if a fight finds you, don’t run from your biblical convictions. Instead, run to God in prayer and cry out to him to turn away the reproach. Why should we pray this way? Verse 39 says: *“Turn away the reproach that I dread, for your rules are good.”* The psalmist prayed for vindication because he was confident that God’s rules, judgments, and decrees are good.

- The source of scripture is good: GOD.
- The content of scripture is good: TRUTH.
- The standard of scripture is good: RIGHTEOUSNESS.
- The message of scripture is good: SALVATION.
- The theme of scriptures is good: JESUS CHRIST.
- The destination of scripture is good: HEAVEN.
- The purpose of scripture is good: THE GLORY OF GOD.

I repeat: the word of God is good. CHARLES SPURGEON wrote: *“When men rail at God’s government of the world it is our duty and privilege to stand up for him, and openly to declare before him, ‘thy judgments are good;’ and we should do the same when they assail the Bible, the gospel, the law, or the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*

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### C. REVIVAL

The final verse of this stanza is the only one that does not begin with a prayer request. It begins with a testimony: *“Behold, I long for your precepts.”* WARREN WIERSBE comments here: To have a deep longing for God’s truth is the mark of a maturing believer. And 1 Peter 2:1-3 says: *“So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation – if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.”* You show me a Christian who longs for the word of God; I’ll show you a Christian that is growing in the grace and in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. But what should you do if the longing for God’s fades, weakens, diminishes? Verse 40 tells us.

It doesn't begin with a prayer; but it ends with one: *"in your righteousness give me life."* If you find your longing for God's word is not what it ought to be, ask God to revive you. And he will do it through his righteousness. Mark that down: GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS GIVES LIFE!

1 John 2:1 says: *"My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous."* This verse tells us the two things every believer needs to know about sin: Don't do it; and if you do it, you have an advocate with the Father. The word *advocate* means a defense attorney. You have a lawyer who will stand in your defense. And he's a lawyer who has never lost a case. He doesn't lose because he has the sign power, authority, and jurisdiction as the judge. He doesn't lose a case because the judge is his Father. And he doesn't lose a case because he is Jesus Christ the righteous one. He was born righteous. He lived a righteous life. He died on the cross as our righteous substitute. And he rose as our justification. And he lives to make intercession as our righteous High Priest. God's righteousness gives life.

AMAZING GRACE SHALL ALWAYS BE MY SONG OF PRAISE  
FOR IT WAS GRACE THAT BOUGHT MY LIBERTY  
I DO NOT KNOW JUST WHY HE CAME TO LOVE ME SO  
HE LOOKED BEYOND MY FAULT AND SAW MY NEED

I SHALL FOREVER LIFT MY EYES TO CALVARY  
TO VIEW THE CROSS WHERE JESUS DIED FOR ME  
HOW WONDERFUL THE GRACE THAT CAUGHT MY FALLING SOUL  
HE LOOKED BEYOND MY FAULT AND SAW MY NEED