

Stretching Toward Sunday

Thoughts, readings and reflections based on this week's lectionary readings

February 23, 2014
Seventh Sunday after Epiphany, Year A

The readings this week:

- *Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18* ◦ *Psalm 119:33-40*
- *1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23* ◦ *Matthew 5:38-48*

[Click here to read this week's Scriptures](#)

Realist of Grace

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” Jesus commands. That’s nowhere near as rosy and naïve as the bumper sticker I once came across, in a boutique full of inspirational art and Buddhist tchotchkes, that read: “Love your enemies and you won’t have any.”

There once was a time that I, too, believed I could change the world and others by wishing or willing it so. I was fortunate to unlearn that nonsense before I caused too much harm.

Jesus is far more realistic than we give him credit. The only certainty in Jesus’ command is that we will have enemies. There’s no reassurance that our love will transform them, improve our earthly status, or end wars. We are simply told to love and pray for adversaries so that we “...may be children of (our) heavenly Father.”

Even if we interpret the preceding verses (5:38-42) as social historians of the Mediterranean world suggest (i.e. reframing insults and oppression in ways that assert our human dignity), the path of nonresistant love is rarely painless. It is, in point of fact, often lethal. Remember that Jesus is raised in triumph after we tortured and killed him.

But what’s realistic about a command like, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect?” (It’s no wonder many prefer Luke’s rendering (6:36): “Be merciful just as your Father is merciful.”)

But the Greek *teleioi* is far richer than the English “perfect.” The Greek word suggests wholeness, completion,



holiness. We should be prepared for this by today’s reading from Leviticus: God tells Moses, just before we are instructed to love neighbor as self, “Be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.”

We can’t wish ourselves into being holy, whole, or perfect, any more than we can wish our enemies into loving us. It’s not a matter of sentimental inspiration, mind over matter, or karma. We become *teleioi* not because we earn it, but because God is *teleios*. Jesus’ realism does not rely on power, will or mind. Jesus is the ultimate realist because he is the realist of God’s grace.

Brian Volk, *Ekklesia Project*



Praying Toward Sunday

God most holy, God most loving, God most faithful; teach us to fear you without being afraid, to serve you without being slavish, to worship you without being obsequious. For you are indeed holy: You are perfect in grace, perfect in mercy, and perfect in truth. Without you there are only shadows and broken images. With you there is always light and life and holy joy. Wonderful is your name today and for ever!

Through Christ Jesus our Redeemer,
Amen!

Reflecting on the Word



1st Reading: [Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18](#)

Psalm Reading: [Psalm 119:33-40](#)

God said, "Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy" (v. 2). What do the various laws that follow reveal about the holiness of God? Consider the laws in verses 9-10, and 14, and imagine a society observing these laws. How would life be better for disadvantaged people? Jesus quoted "love your neighbor as yourself" (v. 18) as one of the two greatest commandments, second only to loving God. Why is it a good summary of all the laws in this chapter (as well as all God's other laws)? What do these laws reveal about God's concern for his people? Which of the laws in this chapter particularly stir your heart with their "rightness" (that is, you're glad to find them in the Bible)? Which of the laws would you find hardest to obey? [Quiet Time Bible Study, InterVarsity Press](#)

Restate in your own words the requests the psalmist makes of God. What major needs and desires is the psalmist expressing in these requests? How do these needs/desires compare with your own at this time? How does the psalmist describe what he has done and what he desires to do in his pursuit of God? What benefits does the psalmist suggest might come from prayer and meditation? The psalmist describes himself as "laid low in the dust" and as "weary with sorrow." Describe a time when you experienced these feelings. In your experience, how can prayer and meditation improve our contact with God?

[Quiet Time Bible Study, InterVarsity Press](#)

3rd Reading: [1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23](#)

In 3:10-15 Paul changes the metaphor from farming to building. Describe the various ways the church is like a building under construction. In verse 3 Paul accused the Corinthians of being worldly. How can he say to the same people, "You are God's temple" and "God's Spirit lives in you" (v. 16) How does this chapter affect your view of your own ministry in the church and that of professional ministers? How does this way of evaluating our lives apply; not only to so-called Christian work but also to other aspects of our vocation in Christ: relationships, occupations, avocations, community involvement and so on? In what way are you challenged to "be careful" about how you build? [Quiet Time Bible Study, InterVarsity Press](#)

4th Reading: [Matthew 5:38-58](#)

Who is the most gracious and merciful person you know and how so? What do you feel when you read these verses? What characteristic is to distinguish a Christian from a pagan? What actions demonstrate this characteristic? Although these standards are not a law that we must attain before God will have mercy on us, what do they suggest about the direction in which God wants us to grow after we have received His mercy? Since turning your life over to God, what effect has this had on your ability to love others even those who hurt you? Which of these qualities do you most want to cultivate right now? How would your life be different as God helps you to put this quality into action? [Hope Presbyterian Church](#)

ABCs of Praise, Love, and Power

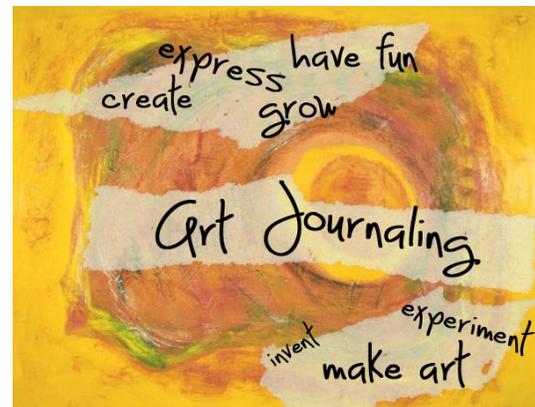
Psalm 119 is the longest psalm as well as the longest chapter in the Bible. It is referred to in Hebrew by its opening words, "*Ashrei temimei derech*" ("happy are those whose way is perfect"). It is the prayer of one who delights in and lives by the Torah, the sacred law.

Psalm 119 is an alphabetic acrostic. The first eight lines of the psalm all begin with the letter *aleph*, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The next eight lines begin with *beth*, the second letter. And so on for 176 verses until we reach the end of the matter at the last *tav*. No wonder the psalm is so long. Each of the letters must have its turn.

This Psalm has been called the Christians' golden ABC of the praise, love, power, and use of the Word of God. Spurgeon, in his Treasury of David said, "It deals all along with one subject only, but although it consists of a considerable number of verses, some of which are very similar to others, yet throughout its one hundred and seventy-six stanzas the self-same thought is not repeated."

How many different ways can you express your love for God? How many different ways can you express your love for God's Word? As you read through this amazing Psalm by David, you have to marvel at the incredible linguistic ability that God gave to him. Is it any wonder that this shepherd boy became one of the greatest kings of Israel?

[Wikipedia](#), [The Andreas Center](#), and Linda Croft, [Daily Devotions from the Bible](#)



Try It: Write your own acrostic poem of praise;

Share it with others at [Faith Connections and Conversations](#) or via email at faithformation@fccpuyallup.com

