**Psalm 119:33-40** October 8, 2017

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*Psalm 119:33 Teach me, O Lord, to follow your decrees;*

*then I will keep them to the end.*

*34Give me understanding, and I will keep your law*

*and obey it with all my heart.*

*35Direct me in the path of your commands,*

*for there I find delight.*

*36Turn my heart toward your statutes*

*and not toward selfish gain.*

*37Turn my eyes away from worthless things;*

*preserve my life according to your word.*

*38Fulfill your promise to your servant,*

*so that you may be feared.*

*39Take away the disgrace I dread,*

*for your laws are good.*

*40How I long for your precepts!*

*Preserve my life in your righteousness.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Scripture Alone—*Sola Scriptura***

It is said that long, long ago in many parts of Europe, the official measure of length was a foot. But there were many different lengths of feet. This caused all sorts of arguments and disagreements. So, according to the internet, Charlemagne, the French king in about 800AD, declared that from that time forward the official length of a foot would be the length of his own royal foot. (Just remember, I found this on the internet.)

From that time on, fields were to be measured, cloth was to be cut and lumber was to be sawed according Charlemagne’s royal foot. Which was well and good if the king happened to be standing in your field or sawmill, but he probably wouldn’t be. And what if the king grew old and his feet shrank or swelled up. What about when he would die and we just didn’t have his foot around anymore? Dear me. It seems that Charlemagne solved nothing!

**A Question of Authority**

This is the question about many things in life: how do you really know? It is true in the marketplace, but also in matters of action and conscience. Who decides right and wrong, false and true. Is it the king, the president, my neighbor? Is it popular vote, electoral college? Who gets to decide? Can it change from day to day or generation to generation?

In three weeks, we will celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. In this and the next two weeks we look at three core truths of the Reformation. The three core truths are Scripture Alone, Grace Alone, Faith Alone. Today we look at the first, Scripture Alone, *Sola Scriptura*. Scripture Alone deals with the question, “Who decides what to believe and what not to believe; what is right, and what is not?”

Of course, you will say, “*God* tells us what is right and wrong.” But how do you know what God says? Is the first person to come along saying, “Last night God told me…”—is that the person we are to believe? What do you do when two people both claim to know what God thinks, but they tell you opposite things? Who has the authority to decide: Is the Bible true, or just partly? Is it about believing in Jesus or believing in whatever you want to believe in? What about gambling, adultery, homosexuality, greed? What about hurricanes and mass shootings?

Our reading is an answer to all these questions. How can these few words answer all those questions? More than any other psalm, more than any chapter of the entire Bible, Psalm 119 is about the Word of God. In Psalm 119 the believer meditates on how precious God’s Word is. One verse from this psalm that you probably know is *“Your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light for my path.”* That is the theme of this longest chapter: *“Your word is a light for my feet.”* Scripture Alone.

For your every problem, for your every question of life, the answer is this: ***“Teach me, O Lord, to follow your decrees… Give me understanding, and I will obey your law… Direct me in the path of your commands… Turn my heart toward your statutes…”*** In eight verses the author makes eight requests of God, “Crystallize your word in my heart. When I hear your word, make it stick. When I start to wander from your word, bring me back.” It all seems a little repetitive because it is. In this longest chapter of the Bible, God’s Word is referred to 176 times—in one chapter! It is a meditation on God’s Word. That means you think about it, contemplate it, not race on to the next thing.

We, as WELS Lutherans, fully appreciate this psalm. Think about how we worship. The core of our worship is the word of God. The readings and the sermon are clearly the focal point. I always have without exception, and will never do otherwise, and you would never expect me to do otherwise than preach a sermon from a Bible text. But maybe you don’t appreciate all the other times God’s Word appears in our worship. The Lord’s Prayer is a quotation from the Bible. Most of the liturgy songs, like “Create in Me” or “The Song of Simeon” are direct quotations of the Bible. In the Lord’s Supper, what do the elder and pastor speak? The Word of God. What is on the windows here? What is on the cover of every bulletin?

What does it mean when we say *Scripture Alone*? It means that Scripture is the answer to all the questions. Our use of God’s Word informs and decides every matter of life for us, every matter of faith. Even when God’s word doesn’t directly answer the question, it gives us the answer.

Let me give you an example: you will not find one word in the Bible about cell phones or social media. And yet it does. *“Love your neighbor as yourself.” “Speak the truth in love.”*—Those two short Bible passages teach quite a bit about cell phones and social media. God gave us our minds, our intellect, to use God’s Word for every bit of life, even in this 21st century.

**Challenges to the Bible’s Authority**

Now, why make such a big deal about Scripture Alone? Let’s go back 500 years to the time of Martin Luther.

There were abuses in the church of the 16th century. That was the problem. But the solution was found in turning to God’s Word. Martin Luther was, by God’s grace, the spark that lit the Reformation. Luther turned religion on its head not by praying to the saints, not by studying the Church fathers, not by out-arguing the other side, not by meditating in some sort of Zen trance, but by reading the words of the Bible. He himself said that the turning point of his faith, his career, and by God’s grace, the entire church in Europe came when he read Romans 1:17: *“The righteous will live by faith.”* The Word of God caused the Reformation.

But let us realize how significant it was that Luther should have encountered the actual Word of God at all. He lived when the printing press was just getting up and running. Before that time all printing was done by hand. You can imagine how long it took to copy the three-quarters of a million words of the Bible. Bibles were extremely difficult to come by. In fact, Martin Luther never saw a full Bible until he was 19 years of age. But copying wasn’t the real problem. Jews had always had copies of their Old Testament in every one of their synagogues. While the copying process was problematic, it wasn’t prohibitive.

The real problem came in that the Catholic Church tried to keep people away from the Bible. It had forbidden translation of the Bible into local languages. It prohibited private ownership of Bibles and strongly discouraged people from reading what Bibles there were. Additionally, the church was not shy about inventing teachings without a shred of Biblical support. They wholesale made up things like indulgences, prayers to Mary and the saints, purgatory, celibacy of priests and so much else. So the church had a vested interest keeping people and Bibles separate.

Which is exactly why Martin Luther and other reformers so treasured *Scripture Alone.* With Scripture, they found God. Without it, they had only little bits of God. They like the psalmist, couldn’t get over how wonderful it was to hear and read God’s Word freely, to let God speak instead of people with man-made rules.

In Luther’s day it was a huge institution which set itself up in the place of God’s truth. In our day it is equally insidious. But instead of an over-arching institution crushing all under its weight, it is the freedom of the individual which says that Scripture must bow to the individual.

We are told that every viewpoint is equally valid. Which is one thing when you are talking about football teams and lipstick, but quite another when you are talking about things that matter. In our day every person feels the right to declare what God should or shouldn’t do.

It is one of the striking things I find in visiting people. In general, the less often people actually open or hear a Bible, the more often they say about religious issues, “Well, I think.” They seldom or never come into contact with the word of God, and are left only with the “I think” option because they have no connection to God’s Word. But if your answer when coming up against the word of God is “I think,” that is no less of a challenge to God’s authority than those who prohibited reading of the Bible.

But look, we are all tempted to count worldly things as more worthwhile than God’s Word. When it comes to work, would our attendance at God’s house be more important than a $30,000 salary? $45,000? $60,000? $200,000? What’s your price?

Our human nature wants what we want, rather than what God wants. Sure, if our morality and God’s coincide, we are fine with God’s Word. But as soon as there is a difference, we ignore God’s word, or we look for excuses. And so the author, every bit as human as us prayed, ***“Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain.”***

He also prayed, ***“Turn my eyes away from worthless things.”*** Could these words ever be more relevant and timely than in our own visual age, an age where personal devices often turn our eyes toward things that gratify and please for the moment, but which work sin and distance us from God and his Word. Please God, ***“Turn my eyes away from worthless things; preserve my life according to your word.”***

**Scripture Alone Has Authority to Save**

Remember what Jesus said about the rich man and Lazarus in the parable? The rich man, in hell’s torment, didn’t want his brothers to end up in hell so he said, *“I beg you, father [Abraham], send Lazarus to my father’s house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets [that is, the Bible]; let them listen to them.’ ‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead’”* (Lk 16:28-31).

Jesus says that all we need for eternal life, to escape the fires of hell, is in God’s Word, the Bible. Religious opinions aren’t worth more than a king’s foot. The written word of God is the only measure God uses. And the central message of that written word is: Jesus is our Savior from all our sins. Yes, also our sins against God’s Word. Oh how beautiful that is. We have a never changing standard of measure written down for us.

Back in France, not in 800AD, but about 1875, realizing a need for a standard more exact than a king’s foot, scientists designed an official kilogram made of a platinum-iridium alloy. It is *the* standard for all kilograms in the world. It is kept in a triple vacuum container, with three locks, held by three different people. Guards guard it. It is only removed from its container once every fifty years for measuring. The last time this official weight for all the weights and measures on this planet was weighed, it had lost about the weight of a grain of sand, and no one knows why. This was a tiny bit concerning to scientists.[[1]](#footnote-1) But so it is, that no matter what we people do… well, let me quote the Bible on this one: *“‘All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever.’ And this is the word that was preached to you”* (1 Peter 1:24-25).

Scripture Alone. Like a refreshing spring breeze, the Reformation truth of Scripture Alone breathes life, eternal life, into God’s people. Amen.

1. http://www.colorsmagazine.com/stories/magazine/85/story/the-original-kilogram [↑](#footnote-ref-1)