

Delighting in the Law of God

by John Piper

John Piper's sermon emphasizes the importance of delighting in God's law as a reflection of true righteousness and the integration of intellect and emotion in faith.

Duration: 33:47

Scripture: Joshua 1:8, Psalm 1, Psalm 92:12-14, Psalm 119:18, Psalm 119:103, Matthew 6:33

Topics: "Law Of God"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of combining intellectual understanding with heartfelt emotion in our approach to the Word of God. He introduces the idea of 'head work' and 'heart work,' stating that many people separate these two aspects and believe that deep emotion and argumentation are opposites. However, the speaker argues that we should strive to keep them together, as the spirit and the mind are not at odds with each other. He encourages the congregation to be a people who see the value in every individual and who do not buy into the stereotypes of intellectualism or emotionalism.

Transcript

We're going to talk about Psalm 1 tonight, if I can ever get to it. I've got lots of introductory things to say, but if you want to be ready to jump on when we get there, you can open your Bibles to Psalm number 1. For some people, the word argument means haggling and wrangling and disputing, right? Getting an argument. Well, I want to use the word argument tonight in a very positive sense.

That doesn't mean any of those things. It means instead giving reasons for what you think and drawing inferences from facts. That's good.

Everybody does that from day to day, whether they think about it or not. I don't like haggling. I don't like disputing.

I don't like wrangling. But I love to ponder the arguments of Scripture. When Scripture gives reasons for its assertions and draws inferences from known facts, my heart gets all stirred up and chills run up and down my back when I hear a solid argument about sanctification.

For example, take you sanctify us by the truth, premise one. Your word is truth, premise two. Therefore, apply yourself to the word in order that you might be sanctified.

When I see little things like that in the Scripture, I get all excited. Now, last Sunday evening, I said that one of my goals for Bethlehem was that we be a kind of people for whom nothing is trivial. When we look in each other's faces, we don't regard any body as trivial.

Instead, we see things with the eyes of God and therefore see a reflection of eternity in everybody. See a glimmer of something infinite and startling. And I used a fish and a twig of grass as an example.

Well, I've got a second little goal to mention tonight, and it's this. I want us to be a kind of people who do not believe or feel that argumentation, as I just defined it, and deep emotion are opposites or contrary or intention. Many people think that the work of the head and the overflow of the heart are at odds with each other.

Like oil and water, they repulse each other. Whatever the reason for this intention, I don't think it has to exist. My own experience tells me it doesn't exist in my own experience.

My study of church history, and I'm going to read from a famous saint at the end tonight, and my study of scripture tell me it ought not and need not exist this tension between the work of the head and the overflow of the heart. My goal is to help us become a kind of people who have sound thinking and deep feeling. I think most of the opposition we sense between thinking and feeling, thought and emotion, is not due to anything in the nature of thinking or feeling itself, but due to some learned patterns of behavior that are traditional and not necessarily true.

How many times did my mother tell me, especially between my sophomore and junior year in college, watch out son, lest you become a cold intellectual. I used to get mad when she said that. Why is the intellect cold, I'd say? Why not hot? Why do we have to think, mom, that the use of the mind always throws water on fire? Why can't it light fires? I never understood that tension.

Although I think I appreciate now the concern, because I have seen a lot of cold intellectuals, I've seen a lot of cold non-intellectuals too, though, God has given us minds. He wants us to use them to understand his word and to live righteously. He's given us emotions, and he wants them to be vigorously engaged in worship and in love.

If we neglect the mind, we'll drift into all sorts of wrong doctrine and dishonor God, who wants to be known for who he is, not for who he's not. But on the other hand, if we neglect the heart, we will be dead while we yet live. You know, Jesus said, this people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.

They got head work, but their heart is dead. And so my goal is to put these together for us and to keep them together. So let's be clear in our heads and warm in our hearts.

Let's feel with all our might and think with all our might. And now you're probably, if you're alert, asking the question, what's all that got to do with Psalm one? Well, here's the way I hit on this. I never know quite when I start preparing for a sermon what the introduction is going to be like, because I never know what I'm going to say in advance and what ideas will need to be introduced.

Here's what my approach to the Psalms is going to be. We're going to start a series and we'll take us through the rest of the summer called Summer Psalms. I think that my approach to every psalm is going to be to ask this question.

It's not the only question I'm going to ask, but this is going to be one I ask every time. What is the argument of this psalm? Now, I knew when I said that if I hadn't given a preface, somebody would say, well, he is really stuck in a rut. All he thinks about is arguments.

Doesn't he know these are songs? You don't worry about arguments and reasons and syllogisms when you sing. You just sing from your heart, right? Well, I don't think so. I think the Psalms have arguments, so I needed to give a little defense here of my approach and I'm not done.

I have another way I want to make my case. I think that psalms, of course, are songs, are poetry and all good poetry. Well, maybe almost all good poetry, I better not be too absolute.

There might be an English teacher out there. Almost all good poetry has a good argument in it. And if it's a bad argument, the poetry or the song will diminish in value, even the emotional value.

Now, Sonny and Cher, anybody remember Sonny and Cher from the mid 60s when I was in college? 1966, they had a song and Sonny has this awful twangy voice, which he sings to Cher with. And they've got some lines in this song that go like this. I'd live for you, I'd die for you, I'd even climb the mountain high for you.

You remember that? That is a stupid argument. Think about it. Every time I heard that argument, I said, I'd live and I'd die and I'd even climb a mountain.

Every time I heard that, the song was nothing. It just was ruined because I was in love head over heels with Noel in 1966. And I listened to all kinds of love songs.

But when I heard that one, it didn't do anything for me because it was backwards. The logic was all wrong. The little word even implies that climbing a mountain is harder than dying, which it isn't.

The logic of the song is contradictory, and so it was useless for me. And now you're probably saying, well, you're the only person who ever listened to Sonny and Cher who thought that, probably. But now, that, I hope, is not true.

But if it's true, that's exactly why I want to say what I'm saying. Because the advertisers and the entertainers of our day, they know us better than we know ourselves. And they lock us into the noses of our emotions and pull us around while our minds are completely shut off.

Don't they? And they shouldn't be able to do that. But they've got us convinced that when the music starts, the mind is done for. Just let it all hang out and emote.

Bethlehem Baptist Church is going to be different. We're going to keep together what the world separates so often, the spirit and the mind. I will sing with my spirit, Paul said, and I will sing with my mind.

So let's be a whole people. Let's not buy into the stereotypes of intellectualism or emotionalism. Let's make a new mold fashioned after the spirit of God, who is the spirit of wisdom and truth.

And he is the spirit of love. One other illustration to drive my point home. You will find out sooner or later that just like some of you, I like to write poetry.

And I believe that every time I write a poem, I have an argument I want to make. I wrote a poem for Noel on Mother's Day, 1977 this was, so Abraham wasn't around yet. I wrote this poem.

I'm going to read it to you to make you see if you can catch the argument here, because if Noel in reading this poem on Mother's Day didn't catch my head work, she wouldn't get the full impact of my heart work to my son's mother. Were there a price that I could set upon my sons, it would surpass what I with goods and life could get or in a thousand years amass. They bear my image, flesh and bone, my language and my inner thought.

And in their soul, there is my own by God's design, inborn and taught. They've been my long day's sweet dessert. How can I ever once forget the father fan club in concert, the front porch daddy's here duet.

And they will be my old man's joys if by God's grace I live so long and they no longer little boys be men whose love for God is strong. And yet these lines I do not write to give my son's praise supreme. These I extol so that I might their mother's value more esteem.

The more I love these little men, the higher does my joy ascend that Carsten and his brother Ben have you for mother and for friend. Now, there's an argument and the whole argument, and I wouldn't analyze this when I read it to Noel, but I'm going to analyze it for you. The whole argument hangs on that little word, so that these I extol so that I might their mother's value more esteem.

If she didn't understand that those first four stanzas of praise to the boys were really praises to her, she'd blow it. And wouldn't feel what I was feeling. But there are a lot of people who think that you should pick up a poem and not try to do that kind of analysis to it and pick up a psalm and not try to do that analysis to it.

And I think that if you don't, you miss a lot and hopefully we won't do that. Let's look at Psalm one together. Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers.

But his delight is in the law of the Lord. And on his law, he meditates day and night. He will be like a tree planted by streams of water that brings forth its fruit in its season.

Its leaf will not wither. And in everything he does, he prospers. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff, which the wind drives away.

Therefore, the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous. For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the sinners will perish. Now, there's an argument in that psalm, and I want to sum it up for you and then look at the main point together with one other observation.

Lots of things in the psalm. One of the frustrating things about preaching, by the way, like on that text this morning, which was very long, is that there are so many things you have to skip in preaching. Because if you said everything in the text, you'd have to preach on just three or four words at a time, which, of course, everybody would get frustrated with.

Well, I'm going to leave out a lot and we'll come back to someone someday. So don't fret if I leave out your favorite part. Here's the argument, as I see it.

The psalmist places the reader at the outset of this collection before two alternatives. You can either be a wicked person or a righteous person. Verse six, two kinds of people are pictured.

Everybody belongs to one of those two classes. There are no others as far as the psalmist is concerned. Second, these two kinds of persons are accompanied by two kinds of destinies in this world and, I think, in the world to come.

The righteous will be like a tree. That's one kind of destiny. The wicked will be like chaff.

That's another kind of destiny. The wicked will not stand in the judgment. They're bound for destruction.

The righteous, on the other hand, the Lord knows their way. Now, I'd love to spend about 10 minutes talking about what that means. The Lord knows the way of the righteous because, of course, it raises the question, well, he knows everybody's way.

So what's the point in saying he knows the way of the righteous? But I'm not going to talk about that, except to say that the word no. In the Old Testament is richer than be aware of. It means have your eye upon, attend to, care, love, guard.

That's what it means. He's going to guard their way right on through the judgment to the end. Third, the two alternative types of persons and the two alternative destinies.

Are now supplemented by an explanation of one of the one of the essential differences between the righteous and the wicked, and the difference the psalmist chooses to focus on is this, the righteous man delights in the law of the Lord and meditates on it, the wicked man scoffs at the law of the Lord. I think that's what the scoffing refers to in verse one. One is a scoffer when he hears God speak.

The other delights when he hears God speak. Then fourth, the conclusion. The man is very, very blessed who is in the one category and not in the other.

Blessed is the man who belongs to the category of the righteous, the delighter, the tree. I think there's an implied fifth point here. It's an imperative.

This psalm was probably put at the beginning of this collection, not accidentally. It stands like a doorway through which we enter all the other psalms and what the collection, the people who put these psalms together were saying to us, I think is as you enter into this psalter and read the words of God communicated through the songwriters of Israel, make sure you delight in what you read rather than scoffing. So there's an imperative implied, a command, as well as all of these descriptions and indicative statements.

Now, two things I want to look at before we look at the main point, which I think is delighting in the law of God. There's another thing that I think troubles a lot of people about the term righteous in the psalms, the righteous man and the wicked man. And I want to talk about that briefly.

Probably if you are a good Protestant, you kind of squirmed in your seat a little bit when I said there are two categories of human beings. There are righteous human beings and there are wicked human beings. And everybody belongs to one.

And if you know your Bible well, you probably said one category of human beings. We. Because Paul said in Romans three, there is none righteous, no, not one Romans three, 10, right? See, that's a problem.

And I think that Pauline teaching makes it hard for us to read and understand psalms like this, which say very plainly, God looks on the righteous. He's going to bring them to glory. And we say, who's that? It's

very helpful, I think, to look at the psalm that Paul was quoting.

I was quoting from Romans three, 10, when Paul wrote Romans three, 10, he was quoting or paraphrasing Psalm 14. Flip over to Psalm 14. I say paraphrasing because where the psalmist says no one does good, no, not one.

Paul said no one is righteous, no, not one. But let's read the first three verses of Psalm 14. It's going to help us understand how the psalmists understand righteousness.

The fool says in his heart, there is no God. They are corrupt. They do abominable deeds.

There is none that does good. The Lord looks down from heaven upon the children of men to see if there are any that act wisely and seek after God. They've all gone astray.

They're all like corrupt. There is none that does good. No, not one.

Now, it sounds like we're in the same pickle with the psalmist that we were with Paul. No righteous, no doers of good at all. So who in the world can fit into the one category in Psalm one? That's the problem.

But if we read on, we get an insight. Look at verses four and five. Have they no knowledge all the evil doers who eat up my people as they eat bread and do not call upon the Lord? There they shall be in great terror, for God is with the generation of the righteous.

There they are again. Who are they? My suggestion is that what the psalmist means in verses one to three. Is that not every single solitary human being should be called unrighteous and a doer of evil, but rather everybody outside the sphere of God's special sanctifying work, which in that day was happening almost exclusively within Israel.

Within Israel, the psalmists many times called people righteous without batting an eye. Now, does that disagree with Paul or not? I think not, because in Romans three, when Paul said in verse 10, there is none righteous, no, not one. In verse 18, he climaxed this terrible indictment of the human race by saying there is no fear of God before their eyes.

Now, who is he talking about there? Himself? Does he really think there is no fear of God in his eyes? Does he think there are no Christians who fear God, no real believers, no people like it says in Luke one were righteous? No, I don't think so. I think Paul is thinking just like the psalmist when he indicts the human race, he indicts the human race apart from God's special sanctifying work. When God comes into the life of a human being and starts to transforming by the Holy Spirit, we no longer look at him and say he has no fear of God, nor do we say of him, if we're thinking like the psalmist, he is wicked and not righteous.

On the contrary, he then fits into the category of the righteous. Now, one other comment about this, what does it mean then to be righteous? Because I think the reason we kind of choke and hesitate to put ourselves in that category, I mean, when you're reading a psalm and it says the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, do you say that's me? Praise God. Or do you say I'm sure not in that category.

If you're a Christian, you ought to say, that's me. And here's the I think I can help you say that without making a perfectionist out of you. Righteousness in the Psalms does not mean perfection.

A righteous person in the Psalms is not a flawless or a sinless person. And we can see that when we look at Psalm 32, flip over a few more psalms to 32, I would choke and be unable to say it if I thought that

putting myself in the category of the righteous meant putting myself in the category of the sinless. We all would be in the other category if that's what it meant.

Look at Psalm 32, blessed. Paul, by the way, also quotes this in Romans four. He was he was a man of the Psalms, and I would like us to become people of the Psalms.

Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity and in whose spirit there is no deceit. Now, the first thing to notice in the psalm is there is justification by faith in the Old Testament.

This is exactly what Paul quoted this psalm to prove in Romans four. Justification means we are sinners, but God is going to hold it against us if we trust him and his forgiveness. So the psalmist, as David writes this psalm, he knows he's a sinner.

But now watch how the psalm develops. When I declared not my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night, my hand was heavy upon me.

My strength was dried up as the heat of summer, as in the heat of summer. I acknowledge my sin to thee and I did not hide my iniquity. I said I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.

Then thou just forgive the guilt of my sin. Therefore, let everyone who is godly. Offer prayer to thee, so there are godly people who are sinners, right? At a time of distress, in the rush of great waters, they shall not reach him.

Thou art a hiding place for me. Thou preservest me from trouble. Thou dost encompass me with deliverance.

I will instruct you. This is God speaking now. I will instruct you and teach you in the way that you should go.

I will counsel you with my eye upon you. Be not like the horse or the mule without understanding, which must be curbed with a bit and bridle, else it will not keep with you. Many are the pangs of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds him who trusts in the Lord.

Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O righteous. Now, who's that? That's David, who has just confessed all his sins, right? But notice in verse 10, the contrast between wicked and what? Who's the contrast? Those who trust in the Lord, that's the opposite of being wicked. Now, that shows us what it means to be godly and what it means to be righteous in the Old Testament, to be a person, not who's flawless and sinless, but to be a person whose hope, whose trust is in the Lord and his promise.

And if you have hope in the Lord, if you trust in the forgiveness of God, when you read Psalm one, you can put yourself in the category of a sinner. You can put yourself in the category of the righteous and not feel that you're proud or arrogant, but rather humble because it takes a humble person to trust in forgiveness. So I hope that helps a little bit in reading not only Psalm one, but many Psalms which contrast the wicked and the righteous, because if we are Christ's and have been forgiven and are repenting of our sin and walking by the Holy Spirit.

That category. And now someone adds one more one more essential characteristic to the righteous, the characteristic we just talked about was to trust in the Lord. And that characteristic, of course, is the

righteous man delights in the law of God.

He meditates on his instruction day and night. God wants us to be righteous, and I want this church to be righteous, and therefore I want to say to this church and to myself tonight, it seems that of paramount importance at the beginning of the Psalter is we have to be a people who delight in the law of God. If I had 10 minutes, I'd talk about the word law, too.

I'm going to talk about the word law a lot. It does not just mean demands. Literally, Torah means instruction, God's communication to his people how to live and what he's doing for them.

We want to be a people, in other words, then who delight in the instruction of the Lord in the Bible, to put it simply for our day. Oh, how I love thy law. It is my meditation all the day.

Psalms 119. How sweet are thy words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth. Never reduce Christianity to a system of demands and resolutions and willpower.

Christianity has to do with what we delight in, not just what we grit our teeth and will to accomplish. When Jesus came into the world, he split humanity in half and he did it by what they love, not just by what they will to do. The light has shown in the darkness and man what? What? Loved darkness rather than light.

The reason people don't come to Jesus is because they don't love the light. Doesn't have merely to do with the head, nor merely to do with kind of screwing up resolution. It has to do with what we delight in.

We must be a people who delight in the law of the Lord. And that raises a problem for us, doesn't it? Because you're all many of you now saying, well, how can I how can I when I don't feel very much delight, delight in the law of the Lord? Where can I get that kind of joy in the word of God? Then I have two suggestions to make. One, I get these from the Psalms, pray that God will give you new and holy taste buds on the tongue of your heart.

The only reason anybody relishes the law of God and loves its taste is because they've had a gift from God. The same psalmist who said, how sweet are thy words to my taste, prayed about 100 verses earlier in that psalm. Lord, open the eyes of my heart that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law.

He knew that if God left us to ourselves when we opened the Bible, we'd be dead as a doornail. We'd feel nothing. There would be no delight.

We must pray and bathe our Bible reading in prayer. That's the first thing. Secondly, when you pray, indeed, while you're praying, meditate on the word day and night.

Now, I think that it would be very hard for a person to really believe that reading a book would make him not like chaff, but like a cedar of Lebanon. Not like the dust bowls of Texas, but like the orchards of Hawaii. If he really believed that, he would delight in those words, wouldn't he? And so I call you with him to meditate on the promises of God, the benefits of Scripture.

I'm going to talk a lot in the future about the benefits of the Lord to his people, because there's a lot of screwy notions about selfishness in our day that are cockeyed because people think it's wrong for a Christian to dwell on the good that God is doing for him. Boy, if God weren't doing me any good, I'd fold up shop, go home right now and call it quits with Christianity. Nobody, I walk through Elliott Park and believe this more and more, nobody wants to be a person who's rootless, weightless, useless.

That's what chaff is, nothing. Nobody wants to be that. But there are so many men lolling around in Elliott Park just like that.

And the only way they can tolerate it is to souse themselves with alcohol, because when they're sober, they can't take it. God didn't make them to be that way. And I pray we can help them.

I've talked to a couple, it's very hard to get through. But on the contrary, all of us want to be people who draw strength from a deep river of life like that tree planted by the stream. We want to be fruitful, useful people.

And that river of reality is the word of God, and all the great saints have drawn from it.

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