

## **“The Virtuous Circle of Christian Learning”**

**Rev. Richard Spencer**

**West Valley Presbyterian Church**

(THE SERMON BEGINS WITH COMMENTS ON THE OLD TESTAMENT TEXT AND CONTINUES THROUGH BOTH NEW TESTAMENT READINGS AND FURTHER COMMENTS—WITHOUT A BREAK.)

**\*\*OLD TESTAMENT Psalm 119:1-8**

“Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who **walk** in the law of the LORD!  
Blessed are those who **keep** his testimonies, who **seek** him with their whole heart, who also do no wrong, but **walk** in his ways!

You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently.

**Oh that my ways may be steadfast** in keeping your statutes! Then I shall not be put to shame, having my eyes fixed on all your commandments.

I will praise you with an upright heart when I learn your righteous rules.

I will keep your statutes, do not utterly forsake me!”

**My comment:**

The Psalmist longs for the heart to walk faithfully according to God’s design and will. His final words show his awareness that he has not yet found the heart to do so, and he fears God’s judgment for his sin. We know from Jeremiah 31:31-34 that the LORD will give true believers such a heart by the gift of the Holy Spirit once Jesus Christ has completed his saving work. The Spirit will bring new birth through faith in the Savior.

**\*\*EPISTLE [I John 5:1-5](#)**

**My comment:**

In John’s First Letter this truth is declared, and the promise is further clarified that those who are “born of God” through the Holy Spirit have within them a

power to know, to heed, to follow, to trust, to affirm God's Word--with one's lips and hands and feet in faithful living that becomes liberated from the bondage to the unfaithful and chaotic influences of a deeply compromised world, a world of men and women whose hearts are not right with God and whose lives reflect their estranged hearts.

**"Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. For **everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world.** And this is the victory that overcomes the world—our faith. **Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?"****

**My comment:** ("Into My Heart") Those who are "born of God" have the Holy Spirit within them—and among those who are a fellowship of the re-born. As the reborn in Christ move on in life, they can neglect or stifle that work of the Spirit, or they can co-operate with the Spirit alone and together to learn his truth and his ways and grow in informed and empowered Christian living.

We can learn what it truly means to love Jesus Christ, through him and by the Holy Spirit to love the Father, and truly to love one another. This love is not a matter of human affection but rather a life-defining covenantal loyalty and steadfastness. (Like a covenant of marriage, in which affection is extremely important, but in which a fundamental re-ordering of life is a greater embodiment of true love.) It's in this sense that Jesus speaks of our love for him. I sometimes feel deep emotion when I sing a Christian song (e.g. "Breathe..." "I'm desperate for You..." or "Day by Day").

**\*\*GOSPEL [John 14:15-26](#)**

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another **Helper to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth,** whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You

know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans. I will come to you. Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. In that day you will know that **I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you**. Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.' Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, 'Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?' Jesus answered him, 'If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me.'

“These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. **But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.**”

**My comment: Our discipline of study is assisted by the work of the Holy Spirit that confirms the truth in our hearts, convicts us of persistent sin, and encourages us forward in understanding, believing and living.**

**[Look at the TWO DEFINITIONS AT THIS POINT?]**

[BusinessDictionary.com](http://BusinessDictionary.com)

**Vicious circle:** *“Self-propagating disadvantageous situation in which a solution (specially the one that does not address the root cause) leads to another problem whose solution, in turn, leads back to the first problem in a more severe form.”*

**Virtuous circle:** *“A condition in which a favorable circumstance or result gives rise to another that subsequently supports the first.”*

Anthony Doerr's best-selling novel *All the Light We Cannot See* -- a title with a clever double meaning.

Set in the small, very old city of Saint-Malo, on the coast of France during World War II. Father cares for teenage daughter Marie-Laure, who lost her eyesight at six years of age. He cares for her partly by making a very accurate small exact

scale model of essential parts of the small coastal city that she can touch and learn in detail so that when she ventures out of doors she will know her way around. Each time she does go out she keeps the model clearly in mind and is able to find her way. She feels the streets, touches the buildings and the light poles and she hears the sounds. The model is accurate, so she does not get lost. And when she returns to the model at home, she can touch a model street and remember how it felt to her feet, remember not only the location of a house but the feel of its stucco walls and the sounds of its surroundings and occupants. **She experiences a circle of learning that enables her to live and move in the real world...a world that is full of the hazards of war in a world of inhumane violence. Her rhythm of learning and living. It is a kind of virtuous circle.**

**The study of Scripture can be just such a virtuous circle.** Begin with the basics, the essential locations, how to find texts and themes—and persist in the rhythm of learning and living and growing and sharing.

**HERE IS THE VIRTUOUS CIRCLE:** We hear the gospel message and find a growing inner conviction that it is true. We believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and seek to follow him. The Holy Spirit confirms this in our hearts and encourages us forward in faith: in learning and seeking to obey Christ's words. Our growing faithful living is encouraged and empowered by the Spirit...we obey Christ's call to godly love. and wholesome living...God makes his home in our hearts and in our fellowship. We encourage each other in worship, study, prayer, friendship, service. As we follow and share, we grow and become more mature in our faith, in our fellowship, and in our service and mission. The more faithful we are, the weaker is the grip of the world's sinful ways on us.

\*\*N.T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God*, p.116

“...the authority of Scripture is most truly put into operation as the church goes to work in the world on behalf of the gospel, the good news that in Jesus Christ the living God has defeated the powers of evil and begun the work of new creation. It is with the Bible in its hand, its head, and its heart...that the church can go to work in the world, confident that Jesus Christ is Lord and Caesar is not. The wisdom commended in Scripture itself...suggests that we will not go about this work simply by telling people what the Bible says. In the power and wisdom of the Spirit, we must so understand the priorities of the gospel and the way in which

they work to pull down strongholds (1i Corinthians 10:3-6) that we can articulate for ourselves, addressing particular contexts and settings, the challenge of the God who loves the world so much that he longs to rescue it from folly, oppression, and wickedness. Scripture's authority is thus seen to best advantage in its formation of the mind of the church, in its stiffening of our resolve, as we work to implement the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and so anticipate the day when God will make all things new, and justice, joy and peace will triumph."