

“The Purpose of Praise”

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First Presbyterian Church Kingwood

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All through this year, you and I have been working at something. We've been working at learning how to carry on a conversation with God; how to listen to God speak to us, and how to reply to God with meaningful words. And truth be told, there's no more meaningful word we can speak to God than the word that occurs in every line of Psalm 150. The word is "praise."

But it's not just this Psalm you know. The word occurs more than 100 times in the Book of Psalms. That's more than the word "worship," and the word "glorify," and the word "bless" combined! So this summer as we're looking at the Psalms, we really need to try and figure out this word "praise." Because if we figure out what it really means to "praise" God, the Psalms promise us, praise will pull us closer to God.

But praise can also push us away! In his book on prayer, Phillip Yancey writes about how it used to happen to him. I used to "hear the word 'praise,'" he writes, and "reflexively flinch. For me praise once represented a troubling part of prayer. It seemed odd, if not offensive, to imagine God as someone like the Queen in *Snow White: 'Mirror, mirror, on the wall; who's the fairest one of all?'*"

And while most of us probably haven't had that same thought, all of us have probably wondered at one time or another; why? Why is praise something that matters so much to God? Why is praise part of so many Psalms and so many other prayers? What's the real purpose of praise?

And if you've ever asked those questions, or questions like them, then listen, because here's your answer. Praise matters so much to God because of its purpose. The real purpose of praise is to draw us into a deeper relationship with God. And a deeper relationship with God depends on praise; for two reasons. The first one is this. When we praise God it puts us in touch with the truth.

I love the way C.S. Lewis makes this point. He says when you or I go to a world class art museum, like the Louvre in Paris, or the British Museum in London. When you go there and buy your ticket and walk into the gallery and see a painting hanging there that simply takes your breath away ... when that happens to you, Lewis says, you'll notice something.

You can't walk away from that painting without wanting to praise it, because the truth is, it's beautiful. It's beautiful art.

And God's art, says Lewis, works the same way in our lives. It hangs in a gallery called the sky; night after night it's on exhibition. So let me check in with all of you. Did you do your homework last week? How many of you took time one night to turn off the TV, walk out of the house and walk into the gallery? How many of you took time to look at the stars?

Now let me tell you. I've already heard from a few of you who did. And it was interesting to me. Because as you told me about your experience, all of you all used the same word. "Beautiful," you said. "The stars were just beautiful."

And whether you know it or not as you said that, you were fulfilling the first purpose of praise in your life. For the first purpose God asks us to praise is to put us back in touch with the truth; the truth we often forget but God always remembers. The stars are beautiful. They are. And when we take the time to say it we take the time to get back in touch with the truth. And the truth orients us.

Just like that story I told you last week about the woman in the new Lexus who tried to turn on her windshield wipers and turned off her car's internal compass, you and I walk through life so much of the time distracted and disoriented. So God gives the opportunity through praise to get back in touch with the truth, to get oriented again. That's the first reason the Psalms are constantly inviting us to praise.

But there's a second reason why praise is important. And it's this. Praise not only puts us back in touch with beauty and truth. Praise also pulls us toward a deeper relationship with God! You see in the same moment that you looked at the stars last week and remembered again how beautiful they really are something else was also happening inside you. Maybe you noticed.

That little nudge inside your soul, that little push of the Spirit. Did you feel it? Did you feel the same urge David did; an urge to praise God, to say out it loud; "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth." I'm pretty sure you did, because I haven't found many people who look at beauty and don't feel the urge to praise the artist.

Rick Tatum knows. He's an artist. He a photographic artist for a national magazine. And recently, he writes, "My wife and I went on vacation. Of course, like we always do, we brought along a camera. And when we returned my wife began proudly showing off our latest set of vacation photos to her co-workers and bringing me home their comments.

After a few days of this I noticed a recurring theme in her friends' reactions. Invariably, people would say to her, "Wow, your husband must have a really nice camera!" And even though people liked my pictures, I was disappointed. I wanted them to acknowledge what a good photographer I am, not what a good camera I have.

After a week of this I ranted to my wife: "Why do people do this? Nobody looks at a painting and says, 'Wow, nice brushes!' Nobody looks at a sculpture and says, 'Nice chisel!' What's wrong with these people?" It felt good to get the words off my chest. Until my wife said to me, "So, how often do you look at creation and say, 'Nice work, God?'"

You see praise is meant to do more than put us in touch with the truth about beauty. Praise is also meant to push us a little deeper into a loving relationship with the One who brought the beauty into being. And when we let it, praise can do that. It can literally push us into a deeper relationship with God.

I don't know whether you've noticed how this works. But every time you praise God for something; something beautiful or some other blessing that's been brought into your life ... every time you turn and praise God for the beauty or the blessing, you find yourself feeling close to God. That's just how it works. Praise pushes us closer to God.

Actually, the same thing happens in human relationships all the time. Husbands, when you praise your wife, when she wears a new dress and you tell her she truly, truly looks beautiful, what happens? She smiles, doesn't she? And in that moment you both feel it. A word of praise has pushed you closer together.

And wives, if you praise your husband today; if you tell him on Father's Day that he's truly been a good father to his family, what's going to happen? The same thing, right? And that feeling we experience when we praise each other in human relationships is the same feeling we can learn to experience in our relationship with God.

That's why Psalm 150 encourages us over and over and over again to praise God. And as you do maybe you'll want to use the same Hebrew word the Psalm uses. For the fact is, you already know it! You already know one of the most meaningful words in biblical Hebrew! It's the word "Hallelujah!"

And believe it or not, with just that one Hebrew word, you are saying a complete sentence. For the first six letters of "Hallelujah" form the Hebrew word for "praise." The single letter "u" is a Hebrew preposition that means "to." And the last three letters "jah"

are a shortened version of the word in Hebrew for God or Lord. So "Hallelujah" means "Praise the Lord," or "Praise be to God!" "Praise the Lord," the Psalm says. "Praise be to the God who dwells in a heavenly sanctuary." "Praise Him," the Psalm says not only for the beauty of that sanctuary but "for his acts of power;" for the ways that His power has been demonstrated in your life.

"Praise Him," the Psalm says "for his surpassing greatness." For by demonstrating his love and power in your life and the lives of so many others you know God has shown you just how great He truly is. His love is greater than any other love and his power is greater than any other power.

So take any instrument you know and compose a song of praise. Call every creature that has breath, for after all the breath of life comes from God. When He gives it to us, we live. And when he takes it away from us, we die. So call every creature that has breath. And let them join their voices together in a Hallelujah chorus that echoes from the rising of the sun to its setting.

Or not! Because you see as human beings we have a choice that we make and we make it every day. We either choose to remember to praise God for who He is and what He does for us, or we choose not to. We turn our backs on God's beauty and goodness and simply walk away.

After all, that's what nine of out of ten lepers do. And the truth is that's probably what you and I do too, nine-tenths of the time. But we can change if we listen and respond to the invitation of Psalm 150. Praise, praise, praise! Did you know that over half of Jesus' recorded prayers in the gospel were prayers of praise. And none of them is more than three or four sentences long.

So as you go out of worship this morning and back into the world; remember this. If you want to deepen your relationship with God, learn how to praise. Look around you at the beauty you'll see and remember to praise Him for it. Look around you at the blessings in your life and remember to praise Him for them. And if one of those blessings in your life is a loving father who has guided and guarded you, protected and provided for you, remember to praise God for the providence that brought you that father.

Join the Hallelujah chorus this Father's Day and every day my friends. Learn how to praise God as a part of your daily life and the purpose of praise will be fulfilled in your life. Let's pray ...