

“Praise: Our Priority”

Psalm 150

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The Westminster Confession, a statement of faith used mainly by our Presbyterian friends, states that “the chief end of humans is to glorify God and to enjoy God for ever.” This statement puts praise at the top of a Christian’s list of priorities. As God’s people, praise is our priority.

Now from a Presbyterian source to a Pentecostal source ...It’s amazing, isn’t it, where United Methodist ministers find material for their sermons! It was probably over twenty years ago that I first came upon an insight about praise in a book written by a South-American, Spanish-speaking, Pentecostal minister names Juan Carols Ortiz. In his book entitled *Disciple*, Ortiz declared that God only knows and recognizes two languages – not English and Spanish, not French and Swahili – the only two languages in God’s sight, according to Ortiz, are:

1. The language of *praise*, which is the language of God’s people; and,
2. The language of *complaint*, which Ortiz called “the language of unbelievers.”

I was really quite shocked when I first read that. “Pentecostal exaggeration” was my first impression. But then I thought more deeply about it. I found myself having to ask an awkward question: Is there any one of us who does not indulge in a little complaining from time to time? I also could not help thinking about some of God’s people who seem to enjoy using this language of complaint more than they should. I imagine that God gets quite tired of hearing complaints!

It is logical to press the awkward question further: If our language is an indicator of our commitment to God, then let us ask: *Is our language primarily a language of praise or primarily a language of complaint? Which is it?* Praise recognizes virtue; complaint criticizes virtue. And every one of us speaks to God using one language or the other. Which is it? Praise or complaint; complaint or praise?

Back in the 80's Ortiz was proclaiming that God looks for a people who will make praise their priority. I knew one such person who died a few years ago. Her name was Mary Frances. She had mastered the language of praise. For example, she started each new day with the well-known words from Psalm 118:24: *This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.* It may sound simplistic to your ears, but it is also saintly ...After all, who knows what a day will bring? In spite of ups and downs, Mary Frances had learned to make praise her priority.

Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! The psalmist is saying that once we can breathe, it is our privilege, our responsibility, indeed, our priority to use ...to offer back ...the gift of breath to our Creator in the form of praise. We not only owe it to God, but God desires ...God even requires ...our praise.

Perhaps it strikes you as a bit strange that God would seek our adoration and affirmation. We all know how it feels when we come across a person who expects a lot of attention ...who always wants to be praised. We quickly judge such people as self-centered and egotistical. Their constant need for praise irritates and annoys us. Now why would God – who is all-sufficient and almighty – desire our praise? This is not a facetious or frivolous question; it is an important question that demands a thoughtful response.

C.S. Lewis, in my opinion, was one of the most brilliant Christian thinkers of the 20th century. In his book *Joyful Christian*, Lewis points us in the direction of a thoughtful answer when he writes: “I think we delight to praise what we enjoy.” (page 119). The more I think about it, the more this simple, short answer of C.S. Lewis makes sense to me. We praise what we enjoy. How true! Ask any passionate sportsman about their sport. They sing the praise of their sport because they enjoy their sport. Lewis is correct: we praise what we enjoy, and that is why God desires our praise. Remember the words of the Westminster Confession quoted at the beginning of this sermon: *our chief end is to glorify (to praise) God and to enjoy God*

for ever. God wants us to praise him and enjoy him. Praise, as our priority, is the sign of our enjoyment of God.

Hear again what the psalmist wrote: *Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!* Just as God releases breath in the new born baby and it cries out loud, so God's spirit breathes new life into all Christian believers, making praise possible. One may say that praise is the trademark of the Holy Spirit. Please don't misunderstand me ...I am not talking about anything superficial or frothy. On the contrary, I am talking about a praise that wells up from the very depths of our being ...deep places within us where there may even be pain and suffering, heartache and brokenness ...as well as deep wells of abundant life and abiding peace and joy.

It is possible to get sidetracked from the main path of praise: we think of the praise of God primarily in terms of gratitude for pleasures peacefully enjoyed and the number of days we've managed to live free of worry and in tranquility. Praise for this reason is right and proper, but the deepest reason for praise is not the gifts but the Giver – God himself. Praise God, not only if or because or when all blessings flow, but praise God because God is God. In spite of circumstances, in spite of difficulties, praise is a sign of our continued delight in the Lord. As a matter of priority, not choice, *let everything that breathes praise the Lord!*

What happens when we don't make praise a priority? When we don't praise God, we may find ourselves beginning to wonder why God feels distant, or remote, or even absent from us. Of course, God hasn't moved anywhere ...God is still all around us, before us, behind us, within us. A lack of praise distances us from God. But the opposite is just as true: when we make praise a priority then God's presence seems so real. We feel so much closer to God.

We have all known times when we have praised God, either privately or publicly, when we were feeling tired and worn out by too much activity. We have known times when we have come to worship feeling irritable, listless, and almost out-of-touch with

God. Then the organist has started to play and the choir has sung anthems of praise. As we listened we found ourselves realizing that we may not have much to offer God, but while we have breath we can praise God. At such times we have silently confessed, “God, you seem so far away today ...yet will I praise you, my Lord and my God!” What happens? Spiritual fatigue begins to dissipate as we praise God, and the presence of God becomes real to us. Afterwards we say we were “uplifted,” meaning we are lifted up to a higher awareness of God’s presence.

It is a good, healthy habit to make the praise of God our priority. Very simply, it is good for us – for our mind, for our body, for our emotions. Hope is revitalized through praise ...springs of living water begin to flow again ...depression may be pushed back just a few steps to give our mind and emotions some breathing space. Praise is good for the soul.

At the start of this sermon I quoted Ortiz who said that God knows two languages: the language of praise that God desires from us, and the language of complaint that God simply detests. I’m sure you can guess which language is easier to acquire. Yes, it is the language of complaint. It is so easy to complain – even after a worship service such as this. The more difficult language is the language of praise, but it is to be our priority as the people of God. So we must ask: How do we praise God?

Let me give just four hints for us to take home and ponder this week. I hope you will take these suggestions and see if you can put them into practice. I will, too. We will all try our best. First, let us make praise a discipline. Second, let us take the attention off ourselves ...let us rather focus on God and praise God for who God is. Third, let us use our mouths when we praise. The psalmist says, “Because your love is better than life, my mouth will praise you.” (Ps. 63:3). Use your mouth ... especially if you are more introvert than extrovert, open your mouth and speak your praises out loud. And a word for those of us who are more extrovert ...let us

remember we can praise God in silence. “Be still,” God says, “and know that I am God.” (Ps. 46:10a).

The fourth and final hint: Let us remember to keep praise and obedience together. It is no good praising God and remaining silent in the face of evil or injustice. Maxie Dunnam declares that there can be no real separation of praise and obedience. I quote: *Once we begin to live in the presence of God life becomes tremendously exciting ...The time spent in adoration and praise is the fountainhead of the stream of obedient service that flows singingly from our lives into the lives of others.* Dunnam is right ...worship and work belong together ...praise and service blend like two voices singing in harmony.

Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Let us make praise our priority ... Make it a discipline ...Put the focus on God rather than ourselves ...Use our mouths to praise God ...and ...Keep praise and obedience together.

God is looking for people who will praise him – all kinds of people, and preferably praising God together – saints and sinners, rich and poor, preachers and parishioners, urban and rural, intellectual and illiterate, young and old, black and white, introvert and extrovert. And God is looking for people whose praise will be matched with their obedience and service ...

Let us pray: God, make us a praising, obedient people. Help us all because we are struggling in this. God, make us a people who, as long as we have breath, will always regard praise as our priority.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.