

# A DISCIPLINED JOY

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## What to Bring to Worship (Part 4)

Text: Psalm 100

### I

A child was following her father out of church when she noticed a list of names printed on a series of plaques on the wall. When her turn to greet the pastor came, the child asked: "Excuse me, Reverend, but what are all those names on the plaques over there?" The Pastor replied: "*Oh, those are all the people of our church who died in service.*" The little girl responded: "*Was that at the 9:00 or the 10:45 service?*"

We laugh, I think, partly because we can understand the confusion of that child. We know there are times when our worship services must seem to the young or the young at heart as if they did have a certain "deadly" quality to them. Some of us can resonate with the observation of Leonard Sweet, who quips: "*To say that [some] church's worship has become as dull and lifeless as a museum would be an insult to museums.*"<sup>1</sup> These days, most museums are places of interactivity, adventure, and excitement that put many church services to shame. Even if you wouldn't go quite that far in your own critique of some church services, chances are that you could pray, along with Teresa of Avila: "*O Lord, from silly devotions and sour-faced saints, deliver us!*"

This is why there's great value in taking a very close look at what the 100th Psalm tells us about worship. This famous Psalm reminds us that God is looking for a quality of speaking and singing that is anything but deadly to Him or anyone else. The instructions we find here aren't just for Pentecostals or youth group members. They aren't for primitive tribesmen or those who -- by natural disposition -- like to "let it all hang out." This teaching isn't earmarked specially for the folks at that particular service over there.

It would be tempting to write off the instructions we read here as meant for someone else, except for the fact that they are obviously not so narrowly targeted. You can check it again for yourself. The text plainly says that these instructions are to apply to: "**ALL the earth**" (Psa 100:1). All the earth. That's you and me. So what is all the earth meant to do in worship? Well, I'm so pleased you asked. Let me today on just three things that this psalm tells us ought to characterize the worship of any biblically-faithful Christian or congregation.

### II

Well, for ONE thing, we're meant to express gladness when we worship. The psalm says, and I quote: **Worship the LORD with gladness (Psa 100:2a)**. Now, I am not a great scholar like Richard Allen Farmer. I wish I could unpack this verse with all the

passion and clarity of the black preaching tradition from which Dr. Farmer comes, but I'll try to pass on the gist of it. "Let me tell you what this [verse] means in Hebrew," says Farmer: "It means 'Worship the Lord with gladness.' Let me tell you what it means in some of the other ancient languages: It means 'Worship the Lord with gladness.' Let me tell you what it means in some of the other versions [of Scripture]: it means 'Worship the Lord with gladness'... It means just what it says in English... that worship ought to have a certain JOY to it, that it ought not to be drudgery. We ought not to drag ourselves up into the face of God... [as if] the more I look like I'm in pain... the uglier I can get, the more God will be pleased."<sup>2</sup>

The shepherd boy, David, once said: **I was glad when they said "Let us go up to the house of the Lord" (Psa 122:1)**. Are you glad when you come here? Or are you a little like that son whose mother woke him up one Sunday morning to go to church, and who said "Aw, mom, I don't want to go." "Give me two good reasons why you shouldn't go," his mother said. "That's easy," said the son. "I don't like the people there, and they don't like me. So give me two reasons why I should go." "That's even easier," said his mom: "You're 61 years old, and you're the preacher."

You know, none of us really have to be in worship. There's no law that compels it. There's no social requirement that you do it. Our kids won't get much long-term benefit from it if they see that OUR heart isn't in it. Admission through the Pearly Gates certainly can't be bought by it. There's only ONE reason for you or me to be here. It must be because we're glad to do it... because we know what an honor and a privilege it is to be invited to commune with the Creator of the Universe... because we want to hear what He has to say to us... because our hearts just swell at the thought that -- though He has the company of angels -- He still wants to be with you and me. This is what makes this preacher glad to get up, even without mom's prompting, and come to worship. I hope my gladness shows. Does it show on you?

### III

Worship the Lord with gladness. And **come before him with joyful songs (Psa 100:2b)** That's another thing that ought to characterize our worship: In authentic worship, we sing loud, joyful songs. You probably already knew this, but when genuine gladness fills somebody's heart, it makes a NOISE. When an 18-month old sees a popsicle coming towards his mouth, he squeals with delight. When Patrick Kane scores a goal at the end of a tight game, there's not a Blackhawk's fan with a heart-beat that doesn't roar with joy. And when ordinary people suddenly find themselves ushered into the presence of the most phenomenal Being in the Universe -- presuming they are sensible of the conditions -- then this I guarantee: their voices are going to show it.

Note well: Psalm 100 doesn't tell us that we'll sing on key. It doesn't say that we'll always sing organ songs or synthesizer songs. It just says that however we sing or whatever we sing it'll be done with joy and it'll be done with gusto. Verse 1 literally

reads: **SHOUT for joy to the Lord, all the earth (Psa 100:1)**. Now, that instruction isn't just given in the Psalms. The prophet Isaiah says: **Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion, for great is the Holy One of Israel among you (Isa 12:6)**.

We get the same message in the New Testament. We're told that when a leper was healed of his disease by our Lord, **[He] came back, praising God in a LOUD voice (Luke 17:15)**. The Book of Revelation pictures heaven as a place where, **In a LOUD voice they sing: "Worthy is the Lamb to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!" (Rev 5:12)**. And when the crowd of disciples on Palm Sunday were criticized by the pharisees because they **began joyfully to praise God in LOUD voices for all the miracles they had seen (Luke 19:37)**. Jesus pointedly does NOT turn to his disciples and say "Pipe down, friends, that sort of exuberance isn't dignified." No, rather, Jesus turns to the *pharisees* and says: **I tell you, if they keep quiet, the very stones will cry out in their place (Luke 19:40)**.

How many of you have ever seen or been in a gothic cathedral? Did you know that the design of such edifices were an attempt to fulfill that poetic statement of Jesus? The great catholic author, G.K. Chesterton, points out that worship in the middle ages had become far too much of a silent and sober act. So architects of deep Christian devotion began to design buildings that would inspire a more joyfully declarative worship. To walk into a cathedral was to enter a place where even the very stones of the massive pillars and noble arches would seem to cry out towards God in joyful song.<sup>3</sup>

How much better when we – whom the Apostle Peter calls God's **"living stones"** – shout out with them (1 Peter 2:5). Let me be very clear that you don't have to have a good voice to fulfill this calling. You don't have to think that the melody, the arrangement, or the instrumentation of the particular song or hymn perfectly suits your tastes. Yet if you are truly adoring God, your face will not be dour. You will not be silent or merely mumbling or whispering the words. Like me you may sound like a frog when you sing. But tell me: If frogs can sit on their lily pads, singing across the swamp the virtues of Bud-Weiser (as a famous Superbowl ad once pictured), then is there any of us who cannot find it in ourselves to stand and offer even a joyfully loud croak to the Lord of Life himself?

Like me, you may feel like it's a vulnerable, risky thing to sing. But consider this this: If God could leave the sublime comfort of heaven for a miserable stable... if He could lay open his very veins upon a cross in order to express his love for you and me... do you think it might be possible for you and me to risk ourselves just a little bit more to express our feelings for Him? What do you think?

#### IV

If I've put you to sleep up to this point, I regret it; but please tune back in now for this, because I'm going to summarize what we've covered: The EMOTIONAL character of authentic worship is gladness; the ACOUSTICAL character of genuine worship is, at least at times, joyful loudness; and, finally, the DEVOTIONAL character of true worship is gratitude and adoration. We give thanks and praise. Truly think about that for a moment. The Psalmist puts it this way: **Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise... Give thanks to him and praise his name (Psa 100:4)**. And then just in case some of us don't understand *why* we should give thanks or praise, the Psalmist adds this: **Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture (Psa 100:3)**.

Some of us know the truth of those words. In the deepest part of us, we recognize that as hard as we have worked along the way, we are not self-made people. We know -- as Martin Luther said in the ancient hymn -- that "*without our help, God did us make.*"<sup>4</sup> We understand that our life is the product of providential occurrences, a million gifts of grace, beyond our control. **For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations (Psa 100:5)**. We sense that, in spite of the hurts and hard passages of life, we have somehow been shepherded along a path in which there have been more blessings than banes. Thus, when we come to that part of each weekend service where thanksgiving is sung or spoken -- where adoration is given to God for his goodness, steadfast love, and faithfulness -- our hearts brim over with authentic worship.

But that isn't so for all of us. Some of us are still deluded into thinking we did it all for ourselves. Others are just too busy thinking of what we must do for ourselves next to connect with what's being done here. Others of us are just so blinded by the pains of the past or the agonies of the present that we struggle to give real thanks or praise. All too often, for many of us, the words of the prayers and songs here ring hollow for us. I'm not being critical; I'm just trying to state an honest fact. Yet what I want to communicate to you is that those of us who find worship hollow are the very ones who most need what we do here.

In his book, *THE GRAND ESSENTIALS*, Ben Patterson tells of a time when the great Jewish rabbi, Abraham Heschel, was confronted with a complaint from his congregation: "*Some of the members of the synagogue told him that the liturgy did not express what they felt. Would he please change it? Heschel wisely told them that it was not for the liturgy to express what they felt, it was for them to learn to feel what the liturgy expressed. As Jews they were to learn the drama and say it and 'play' it over and over again until it captured their imagination and they assimilated it into the deepest places in their hearts. Then, and only then, would it be possible for them to live their own individual dramas.*" Heschel said: "*Praise precedes faith. First we sing, then we believe.*" I love that.

I can't speak for you, but I know that's true for me. That's why a major part of what I try to bring to the process of worship is what I would call "a Disciplined Joy." I don't mean that I try to hold back the joyful feelings I have. No, very often I come to worship with feelings of anything but joy. What I mean is that I try to let the words and the act of singing or speaking *give rise to* the joyful feelings I don't always have but -- at my best moments -- know that I ought to, if I fully understood the miracle of God's grace. Along with the Psalmist, each week I ask God to use the liturgy of the service to **Create in me a clean heart and renew a right spirit within me (Psa 51:10)**. And almost every week, that's what happens.

If you'll try that for yourself -- if you'll bring to worship a commitment to practicing a more disciplined joy -- I'll virtually guarantee you two things. First, you'll find that your experience of worship becomes anything but dull and lifeless. You'll discover by the end of our time here your heart is filled with greater *gladness*; that you are able to make a more genuinely *joyful* noise; that *thanksgiving* and *praise* are for you more than pious words. And secondly, no one around you will ever leave worship wondering who died at 5:00, 9:00 or 10:45. On the contrary, the very witness of your worship will tell them that Someone lives -- Someone who is supremely good... whose steadfast love endures forever... and whose faithfulness still speaks to all generations. To that, I say for the last time until Easter: "Alleluia." And to that all God's faithful servants must say: "Amen."

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<sup>1</sup>Leonard Sweet, *Faithquakes*, p.45

<sup>2</sup>Richard Allen Farmer, "The What's and the Why's of Worship." *Preaching Today*, Tape 150.

<sup>3</sup>Thanks to the Rev. Adele Calhoun for this insight.

<sup>4</sup>Martin Luther, *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*.