

Singing in the Presence of God

Culture of Grace: Habits and Practices of GracePoint Church / Psalm 100

Introduction:

To start out the new year, we have been looking at core values that we want to build the culture of GracePoint church around. These values are means of grace; instruments God uses to pour out His grace in our lives. In the first week of our series, we saw how we want to be a people who know the power and value of God's Word, moving us to study it, and cling to it for the grace it provides. Last week, we looked at prayer, and how God blesses us as we confess our sin, answers our cries for help, and showers us with good through answered prayer. I have been praying that you have been experiencing more of God's grace through these things. Today we turn our attention to corporate worship, or congregational singing. Though worship is more than singing, as Romans 12:1-2 tells us, singing together is a particular means of grace we want to press into as God's people. Did you know there are fifty commands to sing, and over 400 references to singing in the bible? Consider these refrains from two of the psalms alone with me. Psalm 96:1-2, "Oh sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth! Sing to the Lord, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day." And Psalm 47:6, "Sing praises to God, sing praises! Sing praises to our King, sing praises!" In these 3 verses, we are commanded to sing 7 times. But why is singing so important to God? Psalm 100 helps us answer that, showing us not only why we are commanded to sing, but how we are called to sing together as a means of grace. This is a short but powerful psalm, with a pointed message. It is likely the climax of a series of psalms starting in Psalm 93 and building through Psalm 100 to call for praise of God as King. In his commentary, James Mays says, "Psalm 100 initiates worship and sets forth a theology of worship." It initiates worship by moving God's people from the gates of the temple, through it's courts, and into God's presence. It sets forth a theology of worship by laying out the fundamental characteristics of worship. The psalm is composed in 4 stanzas, each with 3 parallel lines. 2 of them, in verses 1-2 and 4, are filled with 6 imperatives, or commands, to worship and sing. The other 2, in verses 3 and 5, give reasons or grounds for the commands. Let's consider the stanzas in verses 1-2 and 4 together, where I see one main command from their 6 imperatives, calling us to

COME INTO THE PRESENCE OF GOD WITH JOYFUL SINGING

Look at verses 1-2, with the first 3 imperatives, and note how this stanza progressively builds. The psalm starts out, in verse 1, "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth!" Some translations say "Shout joyfully." This is a constant refrain throughout this series of psalms. Psalm 95:1 says, "Oh come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!" Psalm 98:4 & 6 says, "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises!... make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord!" The call is for exuberant praise. And notice all the earth is called to give this praise. Verse 2 builds with the second imperative, "Serve the Lord with gladness!" The Hebrew word for serve can refer to a work of service or to public worship. Exodus 3:12 uses the same word when God calls Moses to have the Israelites serve or worship Him on the mountain. The psalmist is likely using it that way in the progression of these lines. He is saying, worship, or serve the Lord through worship, "with gladness." This is not out of duty, but delight. Verse 3, then, is the finale of this progression. Look at what it says, "Come into his presence with singing!" The idea is coming before a King. The progression of these verses shows us the right and good way to approach God is by entering His presence with public worship full of joyful and glad hearted singing. See this church, our joyful singing is the right way to come into the presence of God. Notice next how verse 4, with 3 more imperatives, connects with verses 1-2. Look there with me. "Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise!"

The gates and the courts provide imagery connected to the Temple gates and courts, the place where God's presence resided for Israel. And the word for "enter" here is the same word used for "come" in verse 2. The call again is to come into the presence of God. This time with thanksgiving and praise. The end of verse 4 shows these are verbal proclamations, "Give thanks to him; bless his name!" These are songs of thanksgiving and praise. Do you see the call? Through 6 connected commands, we are called to come into the presence of God with voices filled with joyful, glad, and thankful songs. This is why we want to prioritize singing to the Lord when we gather together. Before we continue, see the gospel of Jesus Christ in these verses. In the Temple, there were outer courts open to everyone, but, because of sin, only the Levitical priests could enter the inner courts, into the presence of God. Yet, the psalmist calls for all the earth to enter His courts and come into His presence. As commentator Derek Kidner says, "The simplicity of this invitation may conceal the wonder of it, for the courts are truly his, not ours... , and his gates are shut to the unclean (Rev. 21:27). Yet not only his outer courts but the Holy of Holies itself are thrown open 'by the new and living way', and we are welcome." The new and living way is the shed blood of Jesus on the cross. This is what Hebrews 10:19-23 means, when saying, "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful." On the cross, Jesus Christ opened the way to enter into the presence of God by providing the atonement for our sin. What more do we need to call our hearts to joyfully sing? The veil has been torn and everyone trusting in Christ can enter into the presence of God with confidence. And the right and good thing to do in His presence is to sing joyful, and thankful songs of praise. Oh church, recognize that when we sing together, we are not doing so out of routine, but are engaging in something that is most fitting in the presence of God. To help us feel why this is fitting, the psalmist gives 2 powerful reasons, starting with a command to know that,

GOD IS OUR MAKER AND SHEPHERD

Pay attention to the way verse 3 begins, "Know that the Lord, he is God!" This is actually the 4th imperative out of 7, and it's placement in between the other 6 is no accident. Note how it is surrounded by the command to come, or enter into the presence of God, in verses 2 and 4. As we approach God in singing, we must know these truths. The first line is the overarching truth, the second and third are implications of it. Look at verse 3 again, "Know that the Lord, he is God! It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture." One main truth, the Lord, or Yahweh is God. He is the one and true God. 2 implications of this truth. First, He is our maker and therefore we are his. Humans were not created by chance, with atoms colliding, and evolution taking over. We were formed by the hand God. God is the designer, creator, and sustainer of everything in the world. And every created thing belongs to the one who intentionally, and intelligently, designed and created it for His purposes. Including you and I. The second implication goes a step further. We are His people, His sheep, and He is our shepherd. We are not just any kind of people; we are the sheep He watches over and cares for. Oh church, do you know that God is your maker and shepherd? The command here tells us to continually know or acknowledge this, which includes growing in our understanding of this. Never stop seeking to know your God. Immerse yourself in His Word to know Him more, and soak in everything He reveals about Himself. This is not simply intellectual knowledge but knowing Him intimately. Yet, to know Him intimately, you must know him intellectually. Otherwise, you only know a god of your imagination. "Know that the Lord, he is God!" Because, as Professor Mark Futato notes, "This knowledge is the spring from which all the actions of worship flow." This is plenty of motivation to sing, but the psalmist gives another reason, that,

GOD IS GOOD, ABOUNDING IN FAITHFUL, EVERLASTING LOVE

Verse 3 shows God is our shepherd, and verse 5 points to attributes of God that make this such a glorious truth. Look there with me, “For the Lord is good.” If you were to read from Psalm 93 through 99, you would see two things repeated over and over bringing you to this point. First, that God is full of power and majesty like no other, ruling justly over His adversaries. Second, that God is good to His people. The one true God, full of power and majesty, invites all nations to come into His presence through the blood of Christ, and is good to His sheep. Consider the descriptions of His goodness in verse 4, “his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.” This alludes to God’s declaration of Himself in Exodus 34:6-7, as He passes by Moses saying, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. We come into the presence of God with joyful singing because, in His goodness, His mercy and grace, He has forgiven our sin and abounds in faithful, everlasting love towards us as His redeemed people. These are reasons to sing! Now, let’s consider how this all relates to corporate worship, or congregational singing. Notice,

WE ARE CALLED TO SING TOGETHER

Pay attention to the corporate nature of this psalm. The central imperative is plural, not singular, “It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people.” And it begins with “all the earth” and ends with “all generations.” The command to sing is a command to sing together. Time won’t allow to walk through all of them, but if you look at the calls to sing throughout the psalms alone, you will see they are often corporate in nature. Here is a sprinkling. Psalm 21:13 says, “We will sing and praise your power.” Psalm 34:3 “let us exalt his name together!” Psalm 95:1 “let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!” And Psalm 149:1 “Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise in the assembly of the godly!” God’s people are consistently called to singing together. Why is it important to understand this? Let me give 3 reasons I see in scripture. First,

1) SINGING TOGETHER POINTS HEARTS TO THE MAJESTY OF GOD

Psalm 22:3 gives a powerful truth, saying, “Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel.” To be clear the praises of Israel don’t put God on His throne. He is already Holy and exalted, set apart as one of infinite value and worth. Yet, God’s people praise Him, He is seen by those who hear to be the Holy and majestic God He truly is. When we join in singing together, proclaiming with one voice the praise of God, it points all who hear to the majesty of God. Have you ever had a hard week and were struggling to see God in the midst of your difficulties? Yet, you pressed through and came to church. Then, when you heard the people of God sing of His glory and majesty, you were reminded of who He is and filled with faith again. I know this has been my experience time and time again. This is why my wife and I say, the best seat is right up front. Not because the music sounds the best, but hearing God’s people sing, almost at us, has often been exactly what we needed to see the majesty of God more clearly. Singing together puts our trust in God on display and points hearts to the majesty of God. The second reason I see is that,

2) SINGING TOGETHER UNITES HEARTS IN ONE THEME

Verse 3 of Psalm 100 actually speaks in confessional language. It starts by saying “Know,” or acknowledge, “that the Lord, he is God,” and follows with confessions to make. These are confessions we are commanded to make together when we come into God’s presence with singing. The songs we sing confess truths we want to be united around. And songs build our theology more than we think. That is why there is so much care and thought put into what we sing here at GracePoint. And when we join together in one song, our hearts are united around the truths we sing. When we sang, “Be Thou My Vision,” earlier, the goal was to unite our hearts around a common desire to have God be our everything and our delight.

And church, singing together can often help to plant truths in our hearts more than listening to them. This is why we mostly want to sing together in our gatherings, because singing together unites hearts in one theme. The final reason I see is that,

3) SINGING TOGETHER STRENGTHENS FAITH

Surprisingly, God speaks very little in the New Testament about what our worship in song should look like. This is why style is flexible across generations and cultures. There are only two places in the New Testament where we find particular directions for our singing. Ephesians 5:18-19 says, "... be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart." And Colossians 3:16, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God." In both passages, we see that our singing is both to God and others. We make melody to the Lord, singing with thankfulness in our hearts to God. But we also address one another with our singing, teaching and admonishing each other through psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. This is so important to understand about corporate worship. Church, you singing in our gatherings is not merely for your sake. Every time we gather together and sing, there is a vertical aspect and a horizontal aspect. As you sing, you are glorifying God and speaking to your heart, while also speaking truths to your neighbor's heart. And notice, this is what it looks like to be filled with the Spirit and have the word of Christ dwelling in you richly. Singing together is a powerful way to strengthen faith. And conversely, if we refuse to sing, or sing halfheartedly, we may be missing the way God intended to use us to strengthen the faith of those around us.

Conclusion:

Do you see how corporate worship is a channel of God's grace? God commands us to sing, receives glory as we sing, unites our hearts as we sing, and pours out His grace on others as we sing together. I will never forget how this was sealed into my heart during Covid. In Abu Dhabi, we didn't have the choice of whether we would meet together for worship. We weren't even allowed to gather in our homes for at least 6 months at the beginning. We did our best to provide things online, with Holly and I attempting to lead worship in our living room over live stream. When the government finally allowed churches to gather, we were limited in space, had to register for church, put a tracking app on our phone, wear masks & gloves, and sit individually 6 feet apart. Despite all of these difficulties, I could hardly hold my emotions in check the first time the church gathered and sang together. After over 6 months of going without corporate worship, my heart was overwhelmed by God's grace as I saw and heard His people sing of His glory together again. Oh church, don't fall into the temptation of thinking this is just something we do at church. It is so much more than that. And I can speak from experience that, as you press into corporate worship, you will find God's grace meeting you time and time again. Let me give some practical suggestions to build a priority of congregational singing in your hearts. First,

1) COME PREPARED TO SING FOR THE GLORY OF GOD

Press into the core values we have covered over the past two weeks during the week. Study the Word of God, looking for the glory of Christ. Pray for yourself and your community. Let those things prepare you to come ready to sing of His goodness. Listen to one of the playlists of the songs we will sing that Pastor David provides. Pray before the gathering, asking God to meet you through it. Come early and join the prayer gathering before the service. Encourage others on your way into church. Arrive a few minutes before to reflect on the morning meditation put on the screen before the gathering. Confess your sin to God before we begin. These things will help increase your sense of the glory of God and prepare your heart to sing for His glory. Church, seek to have these gatherings be something you are longing for each week, because you desire to come into His presence with joyful singing. Second,

2) COME DESIRING TO SING FOR YOUR OWN HEART

As we sing, we speak truth to our hearts. My former pastor and mentor use to say, there should one of two things happening when we worship. We should either be experiencing a sense of God's goodness and glory, or longing to experience it. This is modeled in the psalms. In Psalm 42, sons of Korah says twice "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God." In Psalm 63:1-3, David says, in the wilderness, "O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you." There may be times when the difficulties of life, unconfessed sin, or distractions we have let in hinder us from experiencing a sense of God's glory in worship, but we should never be ok with going through corporate worship without it. We shouldn't settle for less than joy-filled worship. God is the fountain of living water, and His desire is to satisfy our hearts with tastes of His glory. Singing with God's people may be how God plans to meet you with His grace, so come desiring to sing for your own heart. Finally,

3) COME INTENDING TO SING FOR THE GOOD OF OTHERS

Grow in your understanding of how God might use you to strengthen the faith of others through your singing. Not every song we sing will meet us personally. We long to have a multigenerational church, and songs often speak differently to generations. We want these gatherings be full meals, where every element points our hearts to the truths we see in God's Word, which means the words of a song take priority in planning. We do want to have our songs be a mixture of old and new content to speak to many hearts, but we also want everything flow in harmony together. This will mean there are preferences we will all need to lay down, at times, for the sake of others. Church, we have a wide range of feelings in this room about the songs we sing here. One song is often both loved by some and disliked by others. Our songs choices are simultaneously too modern, and too old for people here. The music is both too loud, and not loud enough for different people. Honestly, in one way, this is music to my ears, because it means we aren't only meeting the needs of one generation. At the same time, the expression of these feelings tells me we need to grow in coming with the intention of singing for the good of others. We need to grow in laying these preferences down and understanding that what we are doing is not only for our hearts but the hearts of those around us. Church, Christian love, as 1 Corinthians 13:4-5 tells us, is "patient and kind," "does not insist on its own way," and "rejoices with the truth." We should be able to joyfully sing any song that is full of truth, even if it isn't our cup of tea, because we know it may be meeting the hearts of the person next to us. Come each week intending to sing for the good of others.

Series wrap up:

In order to prioritize the core values of God's Word, Prayer, and Corporate Worship in our Sunday morning gatherings, as the central point of GracePoint Church, we are extending them to open more space to faithfully pursue these means of grace together. This will allow us to sing together more, especially on Sundays when other elements are added, like Missions emphasis, Communion, and Baptism Sundays. It will free up space to continue prioritizing the public reading of scripture and the sermon to go longer if needed. And most importantly, it will let us have an extended time of response to what God is saying to us in His Word each week, through prayer and worship. We will start this today, and I want to encourage you to lean into this time of response. During our time of singing, if God is leading you to pray through the entire first song, lean into that. You may want to come and kneel in prayer up front. We are also going to have a team of people ready to pray for you each week if that is what you need. You can find them at the corners up front and at the bottom of the stairs in the back with lanyards on. If God leads you to stand and sing joyfully, lean into that.

Let the grace of God from His Word, lead you to respond in prayer and song, receiving His abundant grace through all of these means of grace. Let's press into this time of response and see how He meets our needs.