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“Practicing Praise”

Sermon Series: *Jesus’ Healthy Habits*, No.4

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Luke 4:14-16

14 Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. 15 He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. 16 He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom.

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Luke chapter 4 is our text today, if you’d like to turn back there with me.

For three weeks, we’ve looked at some of the ... I’ve called them “healthy habits” ... that Jesus built into His life, and that we’d be wise to build into ours.

The first, we said, was to ***ditch the drama***, which means to know, with the Spirit’s help, when it’s time to walk away from situations that we can no longer meaningfully affect. We saw Jesus do this in verse 30 of this very chapter, and it kept a sense of order and peace in His life.

So...healthy habit number one: by the Spirit’s guidance, know when to ditch the drama.

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Healthy habit number two: ***fix our focus***...keep our focus fixed, come what may, on doing the will of God the Father. Again, the key to this is to live in close communication with God by His Spirit, so we’ll know whether it’s God leading us to do something, or it’s simply our preference or our will. He’ll let us know if we’ll remain open to His guidance, even in difficulty...even in confusion.

There’s much in our world that tries to distract us. We can’t give in to those things. We, like Jesus, have to ***fix our focus*** on God’s will and purposes.

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Third...last Sunday, the healthy habit was to ***remember to rest***...to push back at our “work all the time” culture and choose to follow both God the Father’s and Jesus’ example in setting aside time for Sabbath, rest, renewal.

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I saw this week that Adele, you know the singer? She got super popular a decade ago and she's been singing, performing, touring and writing, more or less, ever since. I read this week that she's taking a "big break" from music because, to quote her, she "has nothing left in the tank."

Now...certainly God provides for and inspires and renews His people. But we're not superhuman...we need periods of rest, and God knows this, and He showed us, by example...taking, *Himself*, one day in seven to rest. This is the cadence He wants us to adopt in our lives. He said to us in the Ten Commandments, "Hey do this! Do as I showed you. Do it for your own good. Do it because it honors me. Do it because it will keep you ordered and balanced and healthy. Remember to rest."

So...*ditch the drama, fix our focus, remember to rest*...and then...today's "healthy habit" of Jesus' is...*practice praise. Practice praise.* Give regular, consistent time to both our *individual*...and what I'm really focusing on today...the *corporate* worship of God...which we see Jesus do here at the synagogue. Verse 16 tells us that, "*Jesus went to the synagogue, as was His custom, on the Sabbath.*"

Jesus was known to be one who regularly, corporately practiced praise.

So what did that look like for Him?

The synagogues of Jesus' time functioned much like churches did for so long in our county here in that they were, really, the focal point of the community's life. There was a synagogue in most towns in Galilee and it served as the combination community center – gathering place – school and courthouse during the week, and on the Sabbath it was where the assembly met for worship.

And their worship gathering was, in many ways, a lot like ours; or rather, *ours* is much like *theirs*, since *we* grew out of *them*.

The service began in the morning with several blessings offered to God. The congregation recited the Shema – Deuteronomy 6:4: "*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the Lord is one.*"

Then the Scripture scrolls would be brought out and read...several prescribed portions from the Law...and then a section from the prophets...all read by different people each week.

There was singing, there was prayer, and there was a short sermon designed to explain the Scriptures and apply the lesson; and then either a blessing was given by the priest or a prayer was spoken by a layman.

And again, we're told that Jesus was very faithful in participating in this. Matthew tells us, more or less, exactly the same as Luke does, here.<sup>1</sup> In fact, all four gospels affirm that regular synagogue worship was part of Jesus' life.

Scripture tells us repeatedly that Jesus taught, healed and debated in the synagogues that He visited in other towns.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 4:23

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 13:54, Luke 4:33-35, Mark 3:1-5, John 6:28-59

And then, just a bit later in this passage...the fact that Jesus was asked to read by the synagogue leader there in Nazareth...His hometown...that lets us know that He belonged to the community.

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According to Acts 13, the early Christians continued to attend synagogue worship, though, of course, with a new understanding, since they'd received Jesus as Messiah.³

So...the local church worship was born out of the synagogue.

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So...what's all that mean?

One thing it means is that we should follow Jesus' example in coming together with the like-minded around us for the purpose of praising...worshipping God.

We are designed by God to do this.

Though we are saved individually, of course, since we choose to follow Jesus individually, it's always been God's plan for those who follow Him to become part of a greater assembly. We are not individual entities following and serving God by ourselves. When we come to Christ, like it or not, we become part of a body, and we are to function as a body.

First Corinthians chapter 12 describes Christ followers – the Church - as one body having many parts...the individuals being the parts.

We address God as “*our* Father” because we, together, are His people...His assembly.

Notice that nearly all the letters of the New Testament address *groups* of Christians...and that's God's model...God's plan for His people...to gather together regularly...for several reasons that we see practiced in the New Testament: to eat together, to pray together, to learn and study together, to hear God's word read and proclaimed together, sometimes to debate together...but chief among them...and really, the sum of all those is...worship...to worship God together.

That's how Church worship came to be.

Those earliest Christians, since they were mostly Jews, they just kept on meeting and doing what they did at synagogue on the Jewish Sabbath day...Saturday.

But...as more Gentiles became believers...not having the synagogue custom, by the end of the first century, since Jesus was raised from the dead on Sunday, Sunday gatherings for worship became the norm.

We actually get the hint that that shift probably caused some friction too. The Apostle Paul tells the Colossian Christians, who were mostly Gentiles, “*Don't let others judge you by...*” and he gives a list of things, but he includes the Sabbath day.<sup>4</sup>

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³ Acts 13:14

⁴ Colossians 2:16

Probably because they were facing persecution for doing so, the writer of Hebrews reminded his readers, “*do not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing.*” Even then, for some, it was easier to not gather.

But Hebrews tells us it’s not *good* to *not* gather.

That verse actually ends with another reason we’re called to meet together...the writer tells us, “*do not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing...but encourage one another.*”⁵

You see, in addition to all those other things I mentioned, encouraging other Christ-followers is another reason for weekly corporate worship. We need to join in with those around us who are walking the same road...following the same Jesus. We need that encouragement...that camaraderie – more than we think we do...and all the more as our culture moves farther and farther from God.

The gathering together of believers for worship keeps us *buoyant*...keeps us grounded in the reality of *community*...and it helps our faith stay alive and fresh.

When we stay *away* from corporate worship, sooner or later, we become self-centered and self-absorbed. Life increasingly becomes about us. *Our* issues...*our* needs...*our* troubles get bigger and bigger and bigger in our own eyes because we forget that there are people all around us who have problems too. Isolation makes us forget about them...because we don’t see them...we don’t interact with them...we don’t help bear their burdens, as we’re called, as Christ-followers, to do.

Now, that sounds like just human - relational prices we may pay for staying away from corporate worship, but all of that is *full* of *spiritual* meaning since, in isolation, as we inflate *ourselves*, we wind up *diminishing* God.

We don’t mean to, but I promise you, the longer you stay away from corporate worship (and let me say, I’m not talking about people who *want* to gather, but *can’t*. I’m talking about people who *could* gather, but *won’t*.)

The longer we stay away from corporate worship, the smaller God will get in our lives.

It’s precisely the practicing of praise that reminds us who God is...how *big* He is...how *powerful* He is...and how *small* and *powerless* we are in comparison.

It’s not that God is not present in the life of every *individual* Christ-follower...of course we know He is.

But He is more powerfully and pervasively present when *groups* of Christ-followers gather with the goal of honoring Him.

And that’s not because of some humanly manufactured crowd-dynamic. It’s because God inhabits the praise of His people. It’s because where His people gather together for worship, He is there in the midst.⁶ And you can tell the difference between human hype and the true presence of God.

⁵ Hebrews 10:25

⁶ Matthew 18:20

And the power of His presence...sensing His Spirit...that is the power He gives us to live victorious Christian lives. It comes directly from knowing...sensing...trusting...that our God is big and powerful and sovereign...in charge.

We get that from Him, and from those around us who assemble together to practice praise.

God does meet us individually, yes. But God meets in different ways with His people, gathered.

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So...why? Why does all this happen in the context of worship?

Here's why: because when we are engaged in worshipping God, like I told the kids...we are doing what we were ultimately created, as persons...as humans...to do.

King David wrote, ***"Give unto the Lord the glory due to His name; worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness."***<sup>7</sup>

The Apostle Paul told the Corinthian church, ***"Whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."***<sup>8</sup>

Jesus, in John's gospel, put it like this: ***"The true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him."***<sup>9</sup>

We were made, as humans, to worship.

And, of course, we do. Every human worships.

The problem comes when we worship the wrong things, which we're so prone to do.

Humanity's greatest rebellion against God is our choice to ***not*** worship Him.

That misplacement of human worship is what caused, and what still lies beneath, all of the corruption and brokenness of this world.

Paul describes this to the Roman Christians; he writes how we've ***"exchanged the glory of the immortal God"*** and ***"worshipped the creature rather than the Creator."***<sup>10</sup>

Misdirected worship makes a mess.

But...worship that is properly directed does the opposite, you see?

Misdirected worship brings harm and discord to us and to all around us.

But properly directed worship brings healing and harmony, and that is the purpose behind Jesus saying in Matthew 4, ***"Worship the Lord your God and serve Him only."***<sup>11</sup>

It's not out of ego or some deep need for self-aggrandizement that God calls us to worship Him.

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<sup>7</sup> Psalm 29:2

<sup>8</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:31

<sup>9</sup> John 4:23

<sup>10</sup> Romans 1:23-25

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 4:10

No...it's out of His love for us! It's out of His desire for the good and the healing of our world that He calls us to properly direct our worship, because God knows, and He wants us to realize, that only He is supreme...only He is worthy of worship.

He wants us to get our worship right, so that things in our world will find their created order again...including us.

You see, that's how it works in Heaven. There, God is recognized by everyone, all the time, as being the only one worthy of worship.

And that's what we're praying for here when we pray, in the Lord's prayer, ***"Your Kingdom come... Your will be done on earth as it is in Heaven."***

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You know, we don't give corporate worship enough credit. Practicing praise...worshipping God is an enormously powerful and purposeful thing.

Our rightly directed worship plays a huge role in God's restoration of our world. What we do here...what local churches...bodies of Christ do, together, is far more important than we tend to think.

We think it's about us and what we like and what we get out of it, when, in reality, worship is about nothing less than the re-ordering...the re-creating of the world through the praise of it's Maker and Savior.

And Jesus understood this.

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You know, there was plenty that Jesus didn't appreciate about synagogue worship. It was, at times, inconvenient to Him. There were people there who disagreed with Him...who didn't appreciate Him. There were hypocrites there...difficult personalities...difficult people.

Jesus could have said, more easily and accurately than anyone, "Well, I worship God in nature...I worship God at college chapel...I worship God in solitude...I worship God while cutting the grass or fishing or listening to my music," or whatever.

And all that should be true.

But Jesus went to the synagogue anyway, because He knew God was worthy, and He knew that as God's people worship together, they are doing something that is bigger than they even really know.

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Worshipping anything and anyone but God is like putting a pen into this sharpener. What happens if we do this? We break things and make a big mess, don't we?

We damage ourselves and those around us when we refuse to worship God as He's designed us to.

But...when we give ourselves to worshipping God...who alone is worthy...we do precisely what we're created to do, and that contributes to the restoration of our world.

Jesus did this. He realized the need and the call to gather regularly for corporate worship. His habit was to practice praise...with others...and He calls His followers to do the same...to practice a healthy habit that brings healing and harmony, not just to us, but to our world.

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Now earlier, I said the synagogue worship service included a *short* sermon, so in the spirit of synagogue worship, I'm going to close with this simple challenge: make corporate worship a priority in your life. Make it your custom, giving it the priority that Jesus did.

Choose to follow Him in this way.

And then come ready, not to get, but to give...to give to God the worship that only He's due...the worship that will bring healing and harmony to you, to those around you, and to our world.

**Closing Prayer:**

Father, help us, in all our gatherings as Your people, to always worship rightly...to worship You, and in so doing, help us to catch a glimpse of the greater picture...of how, through rightly directed worship, You are setting, not just our lives, but our world, in order again.

Show us the importance of the consequences of this that we do...all for your honor and glory. In Jesus' Name. Amen

**Son of Response:**

**Closing Word:**

The title of this is "Practicing Praise" because that is what we're doing ... we're practicing. All that we do on earth is real, but it is practice for when we are forever with the Lord. When we are in His presence with all those in glory, that is what we will do in the fullest sense. It's practice now for what we will do for eternity ... in the way we live our lives, in the way we gather, in the way we engage on another, and in the way we worship Him.

Thanks for coming today, and for practicing this this morning.

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