

Come and Listen!

Psalm 66:16-20

A man stopped at a little general store for a jar of mustard and saw the shelves loaded with salt - bags and bags of salt. The owner said that he had some mustard, but that he would have to go down to the cellar to find it. The customer followed the owner down to the cellar and there to his surprise were still more bags of salt. Everywhere he looked he could see salt.

"Say," said the man, "you must sell a lot of salt in this store!"

"Nah," said the owner sourly. "I can't sell no salt. But that feller who sells me salt - boy, can he sell salt!"

Jesus called us "the salt of the earth," but, it seems that sometimes we also have a way of warehousing that which God desires to be a preserving and life-enhancing influence in the world. Something now burns within the psalmist to tell others what he has learned about the faithfulness of God. We do not know precisely what trial the author and his nation have just endured, but whatever it was, God had profited them both, and he cannot refrain from telling the story.

¹⁶Come and listen, all you who fear God;
let me tell you what he has done for me.
¹⁷I cried out to him with my mouth;
his praise was on my tongue.
¹⁸If I had cherished sin in my heart,
the Lord would not have listened;
¹⁹but God has surely listened
and heard my voice in prayer.
²⁰Praise be to God,
who has not rejected my prayer
or withheld his love from me! - Psalm 66:16-20

We draw our study of this psalm to a close by considering the author's summary testimony of all that he has learned about worship and intimacy with God. "Come and listen" if you will listen to his words, just as he invites you to do, you should recognize three heart-attitudes that will enhance your worship.

I. A Beneficial Fear of God Is Crucial to True Worship (16)

¹⁶Come and listen, all you who fear God;
let me tell you what he has done for me.

A. What Is Meant by the Fear of God?

"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,
and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding." - Proverbs 9:10

In the church today, we think and hear of God so much in terms of His love that holy fear is difficult to process. The word translated "fear" in the text is an awe of knowing that we are in the presence of one who is superior to us. The same word is used of the animals in the presence of Noah and his offspring. It is used of the nations in the presence of Israel, that nation that God conspicuously protected and empowered. There is something unnerving about anything that is mysterious, powerful and different.

When this sense of awe is applied to God, I think of it as “a sense of the holy.” The fact that a loving Father provided redemption in Jesus does not mean that we are now entitled to march into His presence and say, “Put ‘er there, Pal!” We are free, in fact, urged to enter His presence in our time of need, but never without a proper sense of both His holiness and of our ongoing struggle with sin. God is righteous now. We are “reckoned as righteous” because Christ’s righteousness covers us, but perfect righteousness in practice is still a destiny that awaits us some time off. And, even when we are made perfect, there will still be an “otherliness” to God by virtue of the fact that He is Creator and we are creatures.

B. The Fear of God Must Envelope Those Who Lead Others in Worship

“Come and listen ...” Does the psalmist sound a bit full of himself? In the recent aftermath of some great national trial, he has reflected upon God’s deliverance. He has learned of God and now, he speaks. He has the security, not within himself, but within the truth of God to demand an audience.

Paul told the Corinthians: “Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1). That can be hard to grasp for anyone whose Momma taught him not to “toot his own horn” or to use too many first-person pronouns. But, only false modesty fails to speak about what the Lord has done for us, because others benefit from news of God’s good activity in our lives. Grateful hearts must not be constrained. Testimony, authentically uttered, is not about how dramatic or poignant one’s life story has been. It is about how faithful God has been. Ultimately, if my testimony is about my life, no one is going to benefit into eternity. But, if my testimony is about God’s goodness, God’s provision, God’s deliverance or God’s guidance of my life, I must not keep it in. I am compelled to share it.

In holy fear, a teacher must share what he learns in his study of God’s Word. It is not enough to be entertaining or even bearable if he has not taken adequate time to be accurate. Many well-received messages these days are little more than fanciful notions of pop-psychology strung together to affirm people. The fear of God compels a man to rightly divide God’s Word and to hold out its demands and warnings as readily as he holds out its blessings and promises. Why do choirs, worship teams and soloists rehearse? Ideally, they are committed to excellence - not the excellence that reflects a desire for human praise, but that excellence which accompanies a proper sacrifice to a holy God Who is deeply revered.

C. The Fear of God Must Enfold the Worshipping Community

The psalmist has something to say to a God-fearing community. He is anxious to speak to those who, because they fear God, will benefit from what he has to say. “Come and listen ...” “Listen” means to give attention and learn. Worship leaders have a burden, but so does the audience. One’s fear of God determines in advance the value of every worship service he will ever attend. The benefit we derive from a public worship setting is more up to us than it is to anyone involved in planning the service, because fear of God will determine how we ready ourselves to meet Him and to receive His truth.

II. A Balanced Prayer to God Is Crucial to True Worship (17)

¹⁷I cried out to him with my mouth;
his praise was on my tongue ...

Literally, “praise was under my tongue.” The idea is that the author’s cry for help and his song of praise coexisted. It may mean that he was so sure that God would answer his prayer that his song of praise was already in his mouth, but that does not mean that his praise was contingent upon God answering him just as he prayed. I suspect that he trusted that God would remain praiseworthy, no matter what.

A. An Imbalance of Praise and Petition Distorts Our View of God

Have you ever noticed how praise seems to be a learned discipline while asking for things comes instinctively? Could maturity in this matter of worship intimacy be as simple as reversing the trend, or, at least in bringing a degree of parity to our petitions and praise? Petitions come easily, for we are always up to our ears in need. But, as sinners, we are self-absorbed, which makes praise seem unnatural even though we are also always up to our ears in blessings, in a beautiful creation and in God's promises. Someone once observed:

"The Lord created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. On the eighth day, He started answering complaints."

Why do some people question God's goodness when things go badly for them, but they never even consider the issue when things go badly for someone else? Trials happen. Man was created for God's fellowship. He didn't create us so that He would have someone to wait on hand and foot. If we only approach God when we need something, we belittle His deity much like the Israelites did in the days of Moses. Reflecting on the wilderness experiences of his ancestors, one prophet wrote:

⁵I cared for you in the desert,
in the land of burning heat.
⁶When I fed them, they were satisfied;
when they were satisfied, they became proud;
then they forgot me. – Hosea 13:5, 6

You can find a basis for gratitude with even the most cursory glance at your life. One old woman stood before her church and shared her gratitude. She only had two teeth left in her mouth - one top, one bottom - and she was "rejoicing" because "they hit." No matter what storm you are weathering, count your blessings as that old hymn advises, and "it will surprise you what the Lord has done". Far from a cliché, reflecting on our blessings is a path to mental calm and spiritual rest. The influences that undermine our peace always scream louder than God's quiet voice. Heed the voice that will direct your thoughts to God's countless kindnesses. It can rescue your perspective in troubled times.

B. An Imbalance of Praise and Petition Distorts Our View of Ourselves

The practice of praise keeps faith communities humble in times of trial, and especially, after trials. When we are not deliberate creatures of praise, we misinterpret the past. "Look what we weathered." "Hear what we overcame." "See what we accomplished." The story of God devolves into the story of our "glory days." If you think we cannot so easily forget God, heed Moses' warning to the Israelites:

¹⁰When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the LORD your God for the good land he has given you. ¹¹Be careful that you do not forget the LORD your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. ¹²Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, ¹³and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, ¹⁴then your heart will become proud and you will forget the LORD your God ...

And, after listing another litany of blessings, provisions and rescues, Moses continues:

... ¹⁷You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me."
– Deuteronomy 8: 11-14, 17

The following observation is nearly three centuries old, but it is in no way outdated:

"... it is our duty to be publicly thankful. It is for the glory of our Healer to speak of the miserable wounds that once pained us ... It is for the glory of our Pilot to tell of the rocks and of the sands; the many dangers and threatening calamities that he, by his wise conduct; made us to escape." - Timothy Rogers (1660-1729)

III. A Bona Fide Repentance before God Is Crucial to Worship (18-20)

¹⁸If I had cherished sin in my heart,
the Lord would not have listened;
¹⁹but God has surely listened
and heard my voice in prayer.
²⁰Praise be to God,
who has not rejected my prayer
or withheld his love from me! - Psalm 66:19, 20

A. How Is Sin Cherished in the Heart?

This word for "sin" is quite broad. It is not "missing a mark" or a specific misdeed. It is the presence of that which diminishes us. A holy heart can never be a sanctuary for any wrongdoing, scheming, deceptiveness, lurid fascination or sordid amusement. "Cherished" does not necessarily mean that one celebrates sin. Rather, a heart that cherishes sin simply accommodates it as a harmless thing. How can any worshipper fool himself into thinking that such unresolved baggage does not matter to God?

To cherish sin can mean that we delight in it. We are content with our vices. Schemes and bitterness keep us warm at night. We can cherish sin by gazing upon it and allowing our imaginations to dwell upon it. We reason that one little realm of fantasy should not nullify all our other virtues? We cherish sin by putting it out of our minds rather than confessing it before God even as we attempt to cry out to Him to deliver us from whatever is ailing us at the moment. We cherish sin by admiring it or being amused by it in others. We cherish sin by making excuses for our behavior. We might downplay its significance in the grand scheme of things. We may explain it away as gray and not technically sin.

Someone has said: "It is much easier to repent of sins that we have already committed than to repent of those we intend to commit." Still, we cannot expect the help of the Holy Spirit and we cannot expect God to listen to a word we say if we are content to allow the sin in our lives to remain unaddressed.

Of course, in spite of these warnings, many people try to carry on a normal relationship with God. They try to pray and they try to hear God's voice through His Word. These disciplines never bear the fruit that they should, but stubbornly, such people keep trying to pursue growth without ever surrendering cherished sin. Perhaps, it would be helpful to consider precisely why sin undermines intimacy with God.

B. How Does Cherished Sin Sabotage Prayer and Worship?

For prayer in the Spirit to really happen at all, we need the help of the Holy Spirit:

²⁶In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. ²⁷And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.
- Romans 8:26, 27

The Holy Spirit cannot assist the mutterings of a heart that cherishes that which grieves Him. Your prayers will be no more effective than the superstitious ramblings of a common pagan.

Secondly, a man who cherishes his sin cannot pray in faith, expecting God to keep His promises. You see, there is a rational dimension to faith that always pops up. It recalls that God's promises are for those who pursue Him. It's difficult to harmonize the two notions of pursuing God and cherishing sin.

Finally, love of sin is never static. Eventually, the illicit passion will take over more of a person's life. Two of the factors that govern prayer are fervency and persistence. As the love of anything that lessens a Christian grows the ability to pray fervently and persistently fades. As love of sin takes over more of our heart, our love of all things spiritual can only become duller. Eventually, we reach an impasse. We either surrender completely to the sin we cherish or we war against it silently and in our own strength. In either event, meaningful prayer ceases. But, if by grace we finally reach a point of brokenness and surrender to the penetrating and cleansing work of the Holy Spirit, we can be restored to a meaningful prayer life and a vibrant fellowship with God, but only as we learn to despise the sin we once cherished.

C. How Is Sin Properly Addressed?

Confession is not merely good for the soul - it is essential. Confession acknowledges sin. James 3:14 says: "But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth." Pride and denial are classic ways to cherish heart-sin. To confess is to agree with God about your sin. "Yes, Lord, my sin does exist, and it is sin, because You say so. It doesn't belong there. Help me to be free of it." Confession cuts through all of our "sin-cherishing" mechanisms.

⁸If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. - 1 John 1:8, 9

Unless your Christian experience has been truly remarkable, we have all had our moments away from God that resulted in some experience of deliverance. Some stories are so provocative that Hollywood may come knocking any moment. Most of our stories are not. Still, we need to tell these stories, for they are not merely the stories of our lives, but the stories of our faithful God. This is precisely how this psalmist brings his song to a close. He had been tested and he has emerged through it all with a song of gratitude on his lips that he is compelled to share with others.

We now must also draw our study of worship according to Psalm 66 to a close:

A circus parade was moving gaily through the streets of Milan, Italy. Suddenly one of the elephants veered from the line and marched into a church. In Milan, the large church doors are left wide open in the summer. She wandered up the aisle, trumpeted a bit, swung her trunk and then headed back to the parade. Sadly, we often imitate this pious pachyderm. On Sunday morning, we lurch into church, make a few noises, look around and simply step out to resume our place in the parade. The great drama of worship is played out, but it is lost on us. God has longed to connect with us, and we have missed it. We are elephants in church!

May we all learn to better prepare our hearts and our minds for the worship of God as we reflect often upon His holiness, upon our deliverance, upon our status as God's covenant nation, upon the promises we made when we first came to Him and upon His faithfulness to us in all things.