

- I. Set Up
 - A. Welcome. Intro. Next to last week of TWF
 - B. Mike is going to talk about singing, which is better than if he sang about talking. And as you will see, singing is a lot more important than you might think. It shows up a lot and we are commanded to sing.
 - C. Right now...

- II. Worship Leader
 - A. At some point read Ps. 98:4-8 as part of the worship set
 - B. Also, at some point I would encourage you to say: Let's sing. Let's go all in. You are about to hear that singing is a command. We can do this.

- III. Introduction
 - A. A few years ago, when Lovie Smith was coach of the Bears and he, along with some other coaches and players were around Christ Church, I was invited to attend one of the Bears practices. I tried to convince my boys that they wanted to put me through the paces – see what my 40 time was, have me throw a few passes. My boys were young, but not young enough. They just rolled their eyes as in, "Dad, please try to be less of a dork."
 - B. As it turned out, hanging out at the practice was fun – going into the locker room, walking out on the field. Being right next to the players as they went through drills and ran plays. I was struck by two things:
 1. First: Their size, speed and strength. There is a reason I quit football. They are very big, very strong and very fast. I tried to imagine myself trying to stop any of them as they ran by. I tried to imagine what I'd do if I was the last guy between one of them and the end zone, and doing anything other than getting out of the way seemed unthinkable. What they are doing is being done at a very different level.
 2. However, and this is the second point, their practice was almost identical to the football practices I participated in forty years ago. They loosened up, did some calisthenics, practiced with tackle dummies, ran plays, did some sprints. It was just like what we used to do.
 3. I've been to NBA practices and the same thing applies: they dribble, practice free-throws, do lay-ups and set pics. It's like what we did in biddy basketball in 3rd grade.

4. I've been to PGA events and watched professional on their practice day. It turns out, they hit range balls, spend time on the putting green, knock a few out of the sand.

C. Here's the point: we do not graduate past the basics. We get them down and build on them. But we never graduate past them. You may have been a Christ-follower for forty years, but the basics of the Christian faith still apply: confession, prayer, Bible Study, worship, Scripture memory, service. This is what it looks like.

D. And, as it turns out, so does singing.

IV. In this series, called The Way Forward, we have been looking at the things we can do to cultivate greater intimacy with God and the corresponding personal transformation.

A. We want to get better. Grow in grace and truth and Christ-likeness. All of this is ultimately a work of the Spirit of God, but there are things we are expected to do.

B. The topics we have covered so far include: confession, prayer, rest, discipline and meditation. Last week, Mark Labberton focused on community. Today the topic is singing.

C. Not worship, though they are related. But singing. You heard Psalm 98 read. As a data point, there are four hundred references to singing in the Bible and fifty additional commands to sing. Once you start looking for them, you see them everywhere.

D. Of course, there are lots of calls to sing found in the Psalms:

1. Ps. 96:2 reads: Sing to the Lord, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day.

2. Psalm 105:2 Sing to him, sing praise to him, tell about his wonderful works

3. In Psalm 40 we are told that God "lifted me out of the slimy pit and put a new song in my mouth.

4. And there are a lot more references in the Psalms. In fact, in Tim Keller's new book on the Psalms, he refers to the Psalter as Jesus's Song Book.

E. But it's not just the Psalms. There is a lot of other passages that talk about music and singing.

1. The first song found in the Bible comes in Exodus 15. There we find Moses and the Israelites singing God's praise after they escaped through the Red Sea.

2. In the Book of Judges we find battle songs.
3. In I Chronicles we are told that David led the people in singing after they got the Ark of the Covenant back. And in II Chronicles we see that when the Israelites are preparing for battle, rather than send in the Marines, King Jehosaphat sends in the choir.
4. The prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah both tell us to sing.¹
5. In Zephaniah 3:17 we are told that God the Father sings over us.² Think of it like a lullaby. Isn't that a comforting image? Yeah, I'd like someone loving and all powerful to tuck me in and say, "just go to sleep. I love you and I've got this." That passage reads:
 - a) The Lord your God is with you; the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing."
6. In Matthew 26 we are told that after the last supper "they sang a hymn and then went out to the Mount of Olives."³
 - a) I do not know how many times I read that passage without seeing that. On the night that Jesus was betrayed. As he is preparing to walk across the street, get arrested and then be crucified, one of the last things he does with the disciples is sing.
7. Of course, later on in the Gospels we know that among the last words he says is the first line of Psalm 22 – which is like him repeating the first words of a song.
8. I can go on, in Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3 we are told to "sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs."⁴
9. And in Acts 16 we are told that when Paul and Silas are in prison after getting beaten up – they spend the night praying and singing.

F. Let's not miss this. Let's not miss the main point. We are commanded to sing. Do not lie, cheat, steal or commit adultery. Do: love, serve, give and sing! There are about 450 celebrations of singing in the Bible. This is a pretty big deal.

V. I've never been a big singer.

A. I admire those who can sing and lead worship. But: singing wasn't a big part of my family growing up; and I do not have a great voice. (Let's just say, I was never exactly encouraged to sing).

B. Curiously, I came to appreciate singing a lot more after three things happened:

C. First, after I lost the ability to sing for several months.

1. The stroke left one of my vocal chords paralyzed.
 - a) Which is why, if you call me and get my phone voice, you will think you just woke me up.
 - b) My preaching voice is fine because the one vocal chord grew out to meet the other one. Amazing, miraculous stuff. And we have pictures, because they put cameras down my throat.
 - c) So, though my normal voice is raspy and weak, my preaching voice is fine.
 2. All that to say, I couldn't sing. For about six months it just wasn't an option. And then one morning, during worship – I was drawn in and I forgot that I couldn't sing and the music and lyrics drew me in and I sang. Again, not that well. But I realized what a gift singing was – even singing poorly.
 3. And just to prove it, I am going to sing for you. I want to lower the bar. Sing: Jesus loves me. What just happened there?
 - a) I hope I persuaded you that you do not need to have a voice like Bono or Pavarotti or Whitney Houston or Adelle or whoever you think has a great voice in order to sing. Don't you take delight in the singing of a three-year-old. It's not great singing, but if it's sincere it wonderful.
 - b) Second, I just rehearsed some profound truth that I know because I know a song. Karl Barth.
 - c) And third, I was engaged in a pretty profound way.
 4. Men and women, we are commanded to sing. That doesn't mean we have to sing well. I came to appreciate singing when I lost the ability to sing.
- D. The second thing that changed my thinking here was that I read a book by Keith and Krystyn Getty called Sing!
1. The Getty's set out fifteen years ago to write modern hymns – which they see as having a different purpose than choruses. They are fans and advocates of all types of music - modern worship music, classic hymns, rap, Gospel, you name it.
 2. That said, Keith explains that his goal is to write songs that have theological depth and that are meant to last.⁵ We sing some of their music – such as In Christ Alone
 3. They argue that:

a) Most of what the Bible encourages is congregational singing. He is in favor of all kinds of music and all kinds of singing. He thinks families should sing – especially Dads.

b) He says that this is not about singing well. That just as parents take delight in the singing of a three-year-old no matter how good it is, that God delights in our singing – even if it's off key.

(1) Which he then notes, that it's actually really hard to sing off key. And I think, "no it's not."

(2) But I do agree. Your voice may not be of professional standard, but it is of a confessional standard.

4. All of this to say, the Getty's recently wrote a book on singing and it surprised me. And along with losing my voice and then getting it back, lead me to rethink singing.

E. Third, I went to Germany on a Reformation tour, and realized that one of the things Luther thinks he did right was get people singing. He realized the value of obedience and the power of music. As did others:

1. Augustine said: when we sing, we pray twice.

2. Andrew Fletcher, a Scottish writer and politicians, said, "Let me write the songs of a nation and I care not who writes the laws."

3. What I picked up on my recent tour was that among the things scholars think Luther did that really mattered was:

a) He translated the Bible into the language of the people;

b) And at a time when only clergy sang, he got people singing. Prior to Luther lay people were not allowed to sing. Jan Hus had been martyred years earlier for – among other things, encouraging the "heresy of congregational singing."⁶

4. Luther went after the music. He put theology to song.

VI. So, here's the question: why should you sing? Why is this important.

A. One: Because it is a command from God.

1. I am going to assume that that is enough. Psalm 149:1 says: "Sing to the Lord a new song; sing his praise in the assembly of the saints."

2. OK. The Bible instructs us to sing and to sing to God. It's a command. That settles it. should be enough. To not sing is to disobey.

3. I am going to further assume that you understand that this means, sing even if you do not like the song or the arrangement, or if you think the drums are too loud. Do not just lamely mouth the words. Do not show up late because it's just singing. Sing.⁷
- B. Two: We should sing because God sings and we were made in His image.
1. News alert: animals do not sing. They were not made in the image of God and they do not sing.
 - a) Growing up we had a dog that would howl when we sang, but there wasn't much melody there.
 2. Singing is unique to God and angels and you and me. And singing is one of the ways we mirror his image.
 3. Singing is something God created us to do. It is one of the primary ways we joining with the rest of creation in declaring God's glory.
- C. Third: Why should you sing – because singing is a gift from God that we are expected to embrace.
1. We are expected to use the gifts we are given. This is true of all gifts. The gifts you have are for the benefit of others.
 2. We can imagine a world without singing – just like you can imagine a world without color. But who wants to. Music is a gift.
- D. Four, singing is something that brings us together.
1. Psalm 149 instructs us to sing together. It reads: "Sing to the Lord a new song; sing his praise in the assembly of the saints." The Gettys and others argue that much of the singing we are commanded to do is congregational singing. Why? It is not only an expression of our unity, it unifies us.⁸
 2. Last month I was in Istanbul for a few days visiting our global partners there. And after church on Sunday three of us went to lunch. And as we were walking through the city we got lost in a soccer rally. Suddenly everyone was wearing red and orange, and they were chanting and they were singing.
 - a) It was a bit unnerving. I didn't really know what was going on; I didn't speak the language; there was a lot of energy in the crowd, and more than a little alcohol involved.
 - b) We sat out on a terrace overlooking the street three stories below, and the singing went on for two hours – this was still five hours before the soccer game started – and the singing eventually got so loud we said, "enough."

3. I was later reflecting on this and found a C.S. Lewis quote that helps explain it. In his commentary on the Psalms he writes:

a) We delight to praise what we enjoy, because the praise not only merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation.⁹

4. I would add, we like to do this with others, because it's a way we say we are in this together. It's a multiplier.

5. Let me be clear. It's not music that unifies us. Some churches unify around music. But that is not our goal or calling. We are to unite around the Gospel. But music can help us do that and express that.¹⁰

E. Fifth reason for singing: it is a great opportunity not just for something transcendent, but also for something transformative. Music engages us emotionally.¹¹

1. We see this when David is recruited to play the harp for Saul because it helps soothe his troubled mind.

2. We see it in our own lives when a certain song puts us in a certain mood – perhaps makes us patriotic or gets us riled up.

3. In light of this we need to be careful to not let our emotions rule.

a) Having been a pastor dating back to the mid-80s, I've been through several iterations of the worship wars. I know that people get very animated about music. And over the years – and lots of conversations – I have come to understand some of the things that musicians do or do not do that set people off. We get enculturated in something and it feels right. And if someone does something different than that, it feels wrong. I'm not just talking about style or volume, different generations have expectations on lots of secondary things, like:

(1) Do the musicians play the melody or not.

(2) Is the leader using a guitar or a piano.

(3) Are people clapping on 1st and 3rd beat or 2nd and 4th?

(4) Are the words about God or are they directed to God?

4. And we need to be aware that there is a difference between being emotionally moved and spiritually enlightened.

5. But we can leverage the energy and connection that comes from singing

6. I'm sure we've all had the experience of remembering the lyrics of a song from decades ago. I can't remember three things on a grocery list for the ten minutes it takes me to get the store, but I can tell you the lyrics from Led Zeppelin's Stairway to Heaven, which was written in 1971 and I probably last listened to in 1977.

7. I suspect most of us in this room have more lyrics to songs memorized than we do verses in the Bible.

8. So while we are here, let me say that I think it's prudent to give some thought to what we take in.

a) Shortly after I became a Christian I heard a talk about music. The speaker tried to convince us that secular music had Satanic lyrics put on it. And if you listened to records backwards you could hear it. We listened to some screeches that came from playing songs backwards. It was pretty bizarre.

b) He also claimed that Country and Western music was all part of a plot to break up marriages.

9. I am not saying that. But, I think it's worth asking, what am I putting in my heart and my mind?

10. We need to appreciate the power of music. It strikes me that it is a bit like sex. A big potential for good and joy, but it can be misused.

11. We are probably no better than our music. Some people say, "you are what you eat." Well, songs are food for your soul. What we sing and do not sing changes us.

12. Given this, I think we are wise if most of our singing is about God and to God. And beyond that, I'd say the principle thing we would sing about is God revealed in Christ and dying in our place, because that is what the Bible is mostly about.¹²

VII. There is more that probably should be said. It's worth noting that:

A. Though not all singing churches are healthy. All healthy churches sing.

B. We need to teach our children to sing.¹³

C. We need to avoid worship wars.

D. It's critical not to note that the New Testament has nothing to say about style.¹⁴

VIII. There is more to think about. But let's be sure we get the main point: we are commanded to sing. It is part of the way forward.

A. Singing doesn't save us, but it points us to the one who saves us.

- B. To not sing is disobedience
 - C. God doesn't need singing, but he created it and he created us to sing and he delights in it.
- IX. Closing prayer
- A. Immortal, invisible, God only wise; in light inaccessible hid from our eyes;
 - B. Most blessed, most glorious, The Ancient of Days, Almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.
- X. Wrap up.
- XI. Extra:
- A. It seems to me that the biggest difference between the Psalms and much of what we sing today is not: the repetition (there is a lot of repetition in the Psalms and if I have it right, the angels around Christ keep repeating one word); it's not the length (some modern songs are long, but none are as long as Psalm 119); its that there is a lot of teaching about the character of God in the Psalms; and more than a few of the Psalms are sad.
- XII. Questions:
- A. Is there a hymn or songs from your past that have been particularly powerful at certain times in your life?
 - B. What modern song has connected with you in the last few years? Why?

¹ Isaiah 52:9; Jeremiah 20:13

² In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Lewis has Aslan sing Narnia into existence.

³ Mt. 26:30

⁴ Which I think is Hebrew parallelism. I cannot find anyone who can tell me the difference between and hymn and a spiritual song.

⁵ According to Getty, worship songs are less interested in lasting. He likes them, but thinks that the goal of a worship song is to capture the moment, whereas the goal of a hymn is to last. He links this in part with Luther's connection to the printing press, which forced a longer-term horizon.

⁶ Getty, *Sing: How Worship Transforms Your Life, Family and Church*, B & H Publishing, 2017, p. xxiii.

⁷ I heard one pastor note that, he knows a new person is growing in Christ when he sees them start to sing. He notes that most non-Christians seldom sing. This is especially true of men. So when he sees a man sing, he is encouraged.

⁸ Scripture doesn't only speak about congregational singing--God can be honored when we sing alone or when soloists sing in the church. But it is clear that the dominant theme of Scripture is believers singing together. Jesus died to redeem a universal choir, and every individual voice matters. We are not called to listen to others sing or to sing by ourselves. We are called to sing together. The question is not, "Do you have a voice?" The question is, "Do you have a song?" If you're redeemed by Christ's cross then you do have a song.

⁹ C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 1958, p. 95

¹⁰ Getty says: We must be clear that it is the gospel and not music that unites us. We should guard against gathering together in churches based upon our musical preferences rather than according to our unity in the gospel. The gospel is what unites us. [Ephesians 2:14](#) - Jesus has united us, not our music. I don't connect with people at my church because they have the same song selection on their iPod. I love them because Christ has enabled me to love them.

¹¹ A while back I read someone make the case that the decline of the Church of England happened in England when they did away with children's choirs. The argument was that Sunday Schools began as singing schools for children, and when children's choirs ended in England the Church started its slide. The argument was being made by a children's choir director, so I am a bit suspect, but I see some merit there.

¹² Getty, p. 16.

¹³ Getty argues, and I am inclined to agree, that fathers need to teach their children to sing and that it all pivots around the fathers. His argument is that what we sing as a family shapes the family and that congregations need to simply be collections of families singing. I think this is right. However, I must confess that I failed on this front entirely. This was not on my radar.

¹⁴ I think it is important to note that the New Testament has nothing to say about style. The host of heaven is not united in their style of music but in the words of their song ([Revelation 5:9-10](#)). What kind of music do people from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation sing? We don't know! But the Bible tells us what the focus should be: Worthy is the Lamb who was slain. The Lamb must always be central to our corporate singing. Why? Because Jesus is the one who makes it possible. God doesn't hear us on account of our skill in singing. He hears it because it is in his Son. We shouldn't look for music to move us to sing. God has already done something worthy of moving us. How can we then keep from singing?