

In Praise of Praise

Ephesians 1:3-14

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I wish I could claim that this title came to me in an otherworldly vision or maybe as the result of fervent prayer over how to be a faithful steward of this opportunity to preach in a place that has given me many of the clearest glimpses I've ever experienced of God's mysterious will.

I did pray as I reflected on today's scripture and sermon. Alas, however, I found my inspiration in *Forbes* magazine in the waiting room at the dentist's office. It was March 8, 2020, one week before waiting rooms, shared magazines, and dentist appointments themselves became early casualties of COVID-19. The title of the piece, "In Praise of Praise," struck me as vocationally salient, and so I took a picture of each page and put the photos in the "sermon stuff" folder on my iPhone.

The piece, "In Praise of Praise,"¹ written by management guru (who comes up with these titles?) Victor Lipman, suggests that praise is "powerful and underutilized." That's a good start. Among its laudable features, Lipman includes the observation that praise "requires minimal effort and no cost" while making employees feel good and, critically, work harder. Conclusion: "It is in everyone's interest to make...praise a key component of the managerial mix."

Such a utilitarian argument for the *value* of praise is right at home in *Forbes*, the go-to resource for lists of billionaires and trenchant reviews of luxury cars. But what about here, in worship? What about us, people who insist that there is more to life than maintaining a managerial mix that minimizes effort and maximizes productivity? What is praise *worth* at Montreat? What is praise *worth* in the life of a disciple? What is praise *worth* in the rhythms of Christian community?

One of the most memorable experiences of my time at Columbia Seminary came when Professor Charlie Cousar invited me to assist with his *Introduction to the New Testament*. It's a beautifully written text that offers accessible overviews of all twenty-seven books. My job, in addition to a little work on the index and some fact finding on citations, was to have lunch with Charlie about twice a week. It was pure joy, a wellspring of wisdom. I listened as this saint of the church and academy reflected on forty years of teaching at Columbia and a lifetime of studying Scripture. You see, Charlie *loved* the New Testament, and he wanted to relay that love in this book. The chapter on Ephesians begins with a reference to Karl Barth's image of heaven.² Barth suggested that in heaven, whenever God's angels go about their official tasks and their assigned duties, they play only Bach. But, Barth said, when they gather as a family with the door closed, they play Mozart. Barth (a noted Mozart fan) wrote, "Our Lord listens with special pleasure."

Charlie beautifully extended Barth's image and wrote "In a similar way, whenever the church goes about its official task of crafting theology, it leans heavily on Romans and Galatians. But when the church wants to praise God with joy and delight, it reads aloud Ephesians, and our Lord listens with special pleasure."³

Charlie now knows for sure, but I'm guessing he was right. Ephesians is *not* an

epistle on productivity. It is more hymn of praise than systematic theology—more doxology than doctrine. The words want to be *sung*, not studied. This opening section, one lengthy lyrical sentence in Greek, sets the tone and establishes the theme: “*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing*” (Ephesians 1:3). That’s three blessings in one phrase—words of praise, words centered on God’s gracious generosity, God’s mighty deeds of salvation. From the outset, Ephesians lifts our vision beyond efficiency, beyond productivity, beyond earthly value to pure gratuitous praise for the boundless blessing of God.

In a 1930 letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury,⁴ the Christian mystic and author Evelyn Underhill urged church leaders to seek spiritual renewal of practices that had grown perfunctory and stale. For me, Underhill’s words have the ring of hard truth spoken in tough love nearly a century later. Of the clergy—that’s people like me—she wrote, “Their Christianity as a whole is humanitarian rather than theocentric....In public worship they often fail to evoke the spirit of adoration because they do not possess it themselves....God is the interesting thing about religion, and people are hungry for God.” Haven’t we felt that hunger? Haven’t we witnessed it in our communities through the journey of the last sixteen months? By necessity and force of circumstance, we’ve tended to tactical concerns and operational issues. We’ve shifted to new online platforms. We’ve fretted over our financials. We’ve navigated pernicious and toxic polarization. We’ve confronted our complicity and silence in the face of injustice. And all the while we’ve tried to hold it all together by force of human strength, by our creativity, our ambition, and our initiative. And yet that deep hunger persists, unabated and even intensified.

Here among friends, I’ll confess to a concern that we’ve sidelined the divine in our passionate pursuit of practical objectives and measurable aims. You see, praise after all does not seem to increase God’s productivity, and so we’ve turned our attention to more immediate fixes, things we can control. If anyone is going to clean this mess up, it’s got to be us.

The impulse to what Underhill called “humanitarian Christianity” is right at home in congregations like mine and, I’m guessing, yours as well. Ask most of us what people of faith are for, and you’ll likely hear the words of the prophet Micah: “Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with God” (Micah 6:8). Action verbs that put us in the driver’s seat. That’s our comfort zone, and it is also exceedingly important in a time of such crushing inequities, such pervasive mistrust and systemic sin. The world needs—and God requires—the Church to offer itself in sacrificial service to the reign of God not yet realized in the world. This *is* our work. And we will never sustain it or muster the courage to respond to such a call if we insist on relying solely on our own supply of strength. If our hope is centered on human endeavor and enterprise, we will find ourselves depleted, discouraged, and ultimately despondent.

The opening verses of Ephesians orient us toward God. They situate us in the presence of the holy. I will never forget how my friend Ben Campbell Johnson would begin our Thursday morning prayer breakfast with these words, “We are before you, God,” or how Ben would proceed to speak to God as to one who was sitting at the table with us *because Ben believed God was sitting at the table with us*. “We are before you, God.” What an extraordinary conviction. What a comforting assumption—that we are before God, in God’s presence, fully known and deeply loved. When we abide

in this truth, the spirit of adoration flows naturally through us.

As Ephesians opens, we are gathered before God in joy and with delight. The verses read like a catalogue of praise, a hymn of adoration and gratitude. God has blessed us in Christ; God has chosen us in Christ; God has destined us for adoption in Christ; God's glorious grace has been freely given to us; God has made known the mystery of God's will; God will gather up all things in Christ; God lavished grace on us in Christ; God accomplishes all things according to the divine counsel and will. The interesting thing about faith is God, and God takes centerstage in this run-on sentence of overflowing praise.

Embedded in the chorus is a purpose statement for people of Christian faith. By God's grace we have been blessed beyond measure. Yes, but why? Verse twelve tells us: *so that* we might live for the *praise* of God's glory. This, I think, is the truth that our souls ache to receive. This, I think, is the truth in which we long to find courage and our hope. This, I think, is the truth that might be the source of our joy and the beginning of our renewal. This is our purpose: to offer our lives in praise of God.

What sets Jesus followers apart is *not* the effectiveness of our management techniques—thanks be to God!—or the efficiency of our operations, or the measurable value we add to the projects we pursue and the movements we join. What sets us apart is the One who has called us, before whom we lay the work of our hands and the praise of our hearts. The call of the Church must be to bring a holy lens to human life, to witness to the presence of God that compels us and equips us when no human effort stands a chance, to pierce the pessimism that too often is accepted as inevitable, to name the presence of God, before whom we live and move, as the source of our blessing, our meaning, and our purpose.

I understand that such a pronouncement will be met with doubt, or even cynicism. Speaking in praise of praise can be a tough sell for folks who have learned to measure impact and track progress to chart the path forward. I get it. Much of the time I, too, am suspicious of praise without a plan for how to put it to productive use. But often enough I am blessed by the witness of those who see the touch of God in even the most ordinary moments, who pitch praise like loaves and fishes in a hungry world. Our four-year-old son Ben is a budding songwriter and often my best instructor in the practice of praise. So far, most of his compositions have the same tune as the lunch prayer they sing at preschool. But at dinnertime, Ben adlibs the words, often getting up from his seat and walking around the dining room in search of reasons for praise: "Thank you, God. Thank you, God. For our food. And our table. And my fork. And my socks. And the window. And the sun. And my family. And my Pokémon cards. And my art supplies. And my books. And..." You get the point.

Sometimes it's getting late, there's still a lot to get done, and I'm tempted to cut him off.

That's enough praise, Son. We're on a bedtime schedule here. We've got important things to do.

After all, praise of God has no measurable earthly value, no guaranteed return on investment. We're just here to say "Thank you."

Notes

1 Victor Lipman, "In Praise of Praise," *Forbes*, 2013, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/victorlipman/2013/02/09/in-praise-of-praise/?sh=4e5021902f59>.

2 "Religion: Witness to an Ancient Truth," *Time*, 1962, <http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/ar->

ticle/0,33009,873557-10,00.html.

3 Charles Cousar, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2006).

4 Evelyn Underhill, (1930). "Letter to Archbishop Lang of Canterbury," 1930, <http://www.anglicanlibrary.org/underhill/UnderhillLettertoArchbishopLangofCanterbury.pdf>.

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