

“The Fruit of Lips”

HEBREWS 13:15

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Over the past few weeks, we have been looking together at the acts of worship that we participate in on the first day of every week. We started by looking at the Lord’s Supper, we continued with a two-part series on prayer from the Sermon on the Mount, and then last week we looked together at the preaching of the word of God. This week I would like for us to continue by thinking for just a few moments about the songs that we sing together as a congregation.

As I was preparing for this morning’s lesson, I wondered how many songs of praise that I have sung in my lifetime. Have you ever thought about that? From the time I was born until I got married, I went to at least three worship assemblies every week – if you figure an average of maybe 5 songs at every service, that comes to nearly 16,000 songs. I can then add 3-½ years at a Christian university, that adds another 4,000 songs. And then over the past 20 years I can add an additional 8 songs every week (at least 6 every Sunday and 2 every Wednesday), and that adds more than 8,000, for a grand total of at least 28,000 songs in my lifetime – and that doesn’t even add the hundreds or thousands of additional songs while I’m out taking a walk, or mowing the grass, or driving, or taking a shower, or whatever. And I am assuming that many of you could also come up with some very similar figures. As Christians, we do a lot of singing, and most of us even enjoy singing. However, we need to ask: Has all of that singing been pleasing to God?

With that question in mind, I would like for us to turn to a single verse in the book of Hebrews, to a verse that seems to very directly address the singing that we do as a congregation – the passage is found in Hebrews 13:15 (p. 1886). By way of background, you might remember that the book of Hebrews was written by an anonymous author to a group of Christians from a Jewish background who were being tempted to go back to Judaism. They hit some obstacles, they hit some persecution, and they were getting pretty close to just giving in and going back to the way things were, to the Old Testament system. And so, in response to that temptation, the author lays out the case that Jesus is better – that is the theme of the book of Hebrews: Jesus is Better. He is better than the angels. He is better than the Old Testament prophets. He is better than Moses. He is better than the Law of Moses. Jesus is a better sacrifice. Jesus is a better High Priest. In fact, the author points out that the Old Testament system was merely a temporary expedient to get people to the point of Christ. And so it makes no sense to leave Jesus and go back; but instead, they need to hold on.

By the time we get to Hebrews 13, the author is wrapping it up, and he gives a series of miscellaneous little pieces of encouragement. And in that long list, he emphasizes once again that Jesus is better, and then he just barely touches on the singing that we do as Christians. Please notice what the inspired author has to say about the Lord in Hebrews 13:15, ***“Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name.”***

As we look very carefully at this verse, I would like to bring out just a few very basic and practical lessons concerning the songs that we sing.

I. **And one of the first things we notice in this passage is that our worship – under the New Covenant as opposed to the Old – OUR WORSHIP IS OFFERED TO GOD THROUGH JESUS CHRIST.**

Whatever we’re about to find in this verse, the verse starts by saying, ***“Through Him...”*** Through Jesus we go to God with our worship. And we need to approach God the Father through Jesus because we have sinned. As human beings, we have fallen short of God’s glory. We are not qualified to approach God directly, and so we need a mediator, we need a priest, we need someone to bridge the gap, and that someone is Jesus. I hope your Bibles are still open, because we see this starting in verse 12. In verse 12, we find that Jesus sanctified the people (that would be us) because He ***“suffered outside the gate.”*** Because of the Lord’s sacrifice on the cross, we have been sanctified, we have been made holy, we have been given access to God.

Peter addresses this issue in 1 Peter 3:18 where he says, ***“For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God....”*** The Lord’s death on the cross has brought us to God, and without that sacrifice, the path to God is impassable.

When we come to God in worship, therefore, we come with the understanding that the Lord’s death has made our worship possible. God does not accept our worship just because we are good singers, it’s not because of the order of our worship, it’s not because we are decent people, but He accepts our worship because His Son took our place on the cross. When we go to God in worship, then, we approach His throne with the awareness that we are coming into His presence only because His Son is serving as our High Priest. Jesus is the go-between. Jesus is the bridge. His blood paved the way. As we read in our Scripture reading this morning, we have confidence to enter the holy place ***“by the blood of Jesus.”*** His blood allows us to go ***“through the veil.”*** Because of His blood, we now have the ability to draw near to God ***“with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith”*** (Hebrews 10:19-22). Or, as the Lord Himself said in John 14:6, ***“I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.”*** When we approach God in worship, we need to be aware of this, and we need to thank God for the access we have because of His Son.

II. **There is a second basic idea in this little passage, and that is, OUR WORSHIP IS TO BE CONTINUAL.**

“Through Him then, let us continually...” offer up our songs of praise to God. The concept of continual worship starts early on in the Bible where we find that the lamp in the tabernacle was to never go out (Exodus 27:20). The same was said of the altar – that fire was to burn continually (Leviticus 6:13). In a sense, the people were to be constantly represented before God. Later on, we read about King David and what he wrote in Psalm 34, ***“I will bless the Lord at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul will make its boast in the Lord; the humble will hear it and rejoice. O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt His name together. I sought the Lord, and He answered me, and delivered me from all my fears.”***

In the New Testament, we think of the early disciples in the last two verses of the book of Luke. I hadn't really thought very much about the ending of Luke until I was getting ready for this morning's lesson. At the end of Luke, the Lord is raised from the dead, He ascends back into heaven, and then the book closes with these words (referring to the disciples), ***"And they, after worshiping Him, returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple praising God"*** (Luke 24:52-53). We think of what Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, ***"Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks...."*** We think of what Paul wrote to the church in Philippi in Philippians 4:4, ***"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!"*** In the book of Revelation, we learn that those four living creatures around the throne worship God continually – day and night they do not cease to cry out ***"Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come."*** We have quite a bit of evidence in the Bible, then, that we are to praise God continually, persistently, every day.

One author has compared it to Niagara Falls – our praise is to be a steady, never-ending stream. There are millions of gallons that go over those falls every day, but as soon as one drop of water goes over, there is another drop ready to take its place. But when it comes to our praise, it is not water going down, but it is our praises going up.

Unlike the sacrifices in the Old Testament that had to happen at certain times and only at certain places, our praise under the New Covenant can be delivered to God at any time in any place. And yes, it is fairly easy to praise God when we are feeling well, when our finances are just fine, and when our kids are being little angels, but we can praise God when we're in those low areas as well. We can praise God even when we might not really feel like it – when we're sick, when we're angry, when we're feeling down, when we face some kind of challenge or set-back. We can even praise God as we're stuck in traffic on the Beltline. Perhaps some of you have heard of Matthew Henry, the British scholar who is fairly well known for his commentary on the Bible. Many years ago, he was once held up by thieves who took his wallet, and at some point after that incident, this is what he wrote in his journal, "Let me be thankful first, because I have never been robbed before; second, because although they took my wallet, they did not take my life; third, because although they took everything I had, it was not much; and fourth, because it was I who was robbed, and not I who robbed." I don't know what you think about that, but he seems to have had a pretty good attitude. Here was a man who was robbed, and he found some way to praise God even in that very challenging situation. We are to praise God at all times.

III. There is something else in this passage – not only are we to offer our worship through Jesus, and not only is our worship to be continual – but we also find in this passage that our worship (our singing in particular), it is described as a SACRIFICE OF PRAISE.

If I understand the Law of Moses correctly, once the people had offered the various sacrifices to cover their own sins, if they were especially thankful to God for something, if they wanted to go above and beyond the minimum that was required, there was a provision for doing that. And it seems that this is what the author of Hebrews is referring to. The Lord Jesus is our sacrifice. He covered our sins. Our debt with God has been paid. However, like those who lived under the Law of Moses, if we are thankful to God for that sacrifice, we can also go above and beyond, and we can do that with this ***"sacrifice of praise."*** Our praise is a ***"sacrifice."*** Yes, then, we offer it willingly, but it costs us something – it is a sacrifice. We do not think of ourselves, but we focus on the Lord. We focus on what the Lord has done for us, and the natural result is a ***"sacrifice of praise."*** And this sacrifice is so much more pleasing to God than anything that was ever offered under the Law of Moses. As David sang in Psalm 69:30-31, ***"I will praise the name of God with song and magnify Him with thanksgiving. And it will please the Lord better than an ox or a young bull with horns and hoofs."*** You see, God does not

really want a dead bull, but what He really wants is our praise. And I would add: Our attitude makes a big difference here. As we sing, we do not come to God with some half-hearted attempt at singing, “Our God, He is Alive,” but we sing out with everything we have. We serve an amazing God, and people ought to know that based on how they see us worship!

IV. There is something else in this little passage as we also notice that OUR PRAISE IS TO BE AUDIBLE – and specifically, we are talking about the “FRUIT OF LIPS,” what I believe is a reference to our SINGING.

In other words, our hearts must be right, our thoughts must be right, but at some point worship needs to actually come from our lips – actual sound, real words! Fruit, of course, is the produce of a tree. If we plant a fruit tree, we want to see fruit at some point. I have an apple tree and a plum tree that have been in my yard for nearly 12 years now, and I have yet to see any fruit on those two trees – that is a problem! I have other apple trees, and I have other pear trees that have brought a lot of fruit, but I’ll tell you – these two trees without fruit are not long for this world! I had high hopes for this year, but then we had some strange weather this spring, so very reluctantly I think I will let these two trees live another year, but next spring, if I don’t see a bunch of blooms, there will be a tree massacre in our side yard! In the same way, God loves the fruit of our lips, and if God fails to hear that fruit, something really bad might happen. And again, I don’t see anything here about singing on tune, I don’t see anything here about singing at the proper speed, but I do see something here about praising God with our lips.

V. As we come to the end of this verse, there is something else we notice about our singing, and that is, OUR SINGING (OUR PRAISE) IS TO ACKNOWLEDGE GOD’S NAME.

In the NASB, the passage refers to the fruit of lips *“that give thanks to His name.”* And that is certainly part of it, but the word the writer uses here is actually the same word that we normally translate as “confess.” We’ve noticed this word quite a bit over the past few months. Literally, it means “to speak the same thing.” With reference to sin, God says that we have sinned, and when we “confess” we are saying back to God, “Yes, we have sinned.” With reference to the good confession, God says that Jesus is His Son, and when we make that confession, we are saying, “Yes, Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” So here, we find that when we sing, we are confessing God’s name. We are acknowledging His name. When we sing, we are agreeing with all that the Bible says about God. We are acknowledging God for who He is. God, therefore, is the object of our worship. When we come to worship, it’s all about God! When we come to worship, we are thinking about God and all that He has done for us. He is the focus of our worship. We certainly enjoy being with each other, and fellowship is a real benefit to being together, but our goal in coming together is to worship God and acknowledge Him with the fruit of our lips. We come together to meet God.

Conclusion:

How many songs of praise to God have you sung in your lifetime? Like me, maybe that number is close to 28,000. But the real question is: Have those songs been pleasing to God.

- According to this verse in Hebrews, our worship through song is only accepted in God’s throne room because of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, and we need to acknowledge that. We need to be thankful for that as we sing.
- Our singing is to be continual – that is, we are to sing willingly and in all circumstances.

- We've also learned this morning that our singing is described as a sacrifice of praise. It might not always be convenient, worship might cost us something, but we sing because we are thankful for the real sacrifice that was offered on our behalf.
- Our singing is to be audible – yes, our hearts must be in to it, but at some point we actually need to let it rip! We are to sing with our hearts.
- And then finally, our singing is one way that we acknowledge God's name. Our worship is focused on God – we might enjoy each other's company, but ultimately it is not about us, it is all about God.

Lord willing, we will be able to consider the fifth act of worship when we come together next Sunday morning! But for now, as our tradition is, we would like to at least briefly explain God's plan of salvation for those who have not yet accepted the offer. We sinned and deserved to be separated from holy God because of those sins; however, God stepped in and sent His only Son to die in our place on the cross. We accept His offer of salvation on His terms, not on our terms, and His terms are rather simple. We must first believe in Jesus – the evidence has been presented to us in the Scriptures. We must then acknowledge our sin and turn away from it – the Bible refers to this as repentance. We might describe it as making a U-turn – we turn away from sin and back towards God. At that point, we reenact the Lord's own death, burial, and resurrection by allowing ourselves to be buried in baptism and raised up to live a new life. At the point of baptism, our sins are forgiven, we are born into God's family, and we are added by God to His kingdom. If you have any questions or concerns, we would be glad to study with you either this afternoon or sometime this week. If you have anything we need to pray about as a congregation, we would invite you to write it down and bring it to the front – we would be glad to go to God on your behalf. However, if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com