

Connecting with God

Praising God

by Senior Pastor: Bill Couch
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This morning we conclude our series of messages entitled Connecting with God. As we live out our Impossible Dreams of making a difference in the world, it is imperative that we stay connected with God. We have looked at various ways to connect with God through worship. Psalm 67 shows us how worship and mission are inseparable.

Psalm 67:1-7

May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face shine upon us,
²that your ways may be known on earth,
your salvation among all nations.

³May the peoples praise you, O God;
may all the peoples praise you.

⁴May the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for you rule the peoples justly
and guide the nations of the earth.

⁵May the peoples praise you, O God;
may all the peoples praise you.

⁶Then the land will yield its harvest,
and God, our God, will bless us.

⁷God will bless us,
and all the ends of the earth will fear him.

The first two verses capture a theme that flows through the entire Bible. “May God bless us, that his ways may be known on earth, his salvation among all nations.” It is a theme that first showed up early in Genesis when God said to Abraham, “I will bless you so that you will be a blessing to all the nations.”

God never blesses us without the expectation that we will bless others. God never calls us to experience intimacy with him without sending us out to serve others. God does not bless us just to fill our joy tanks! God’s blessing is to be shared or it rots.

New York University did a study of adolescents from households with incomes between \$75,000 and \$160,000 annually. They discovered that in the last twenty years teen psychological problems have escalated dramatically. The suicide rate for teenagers doubled in the same period. Listen to the study's conclusion about what is going on with young persons from affluent families:

“Complete financial security, excessive freedom to learn and explore, and the provision of an extremely wide range of opportunities for entertainment, recreation and education have been discovered to often lead to apathy, laziness, an inability to commit to goals, and attitudes of entitlement, indecisiveness, moodiness, irritability without provocation, low self-confidence, and insecurity.”

In other words, when we pile blessing upon blessing on our children without teaching and expecting them to serve a cause infinitely more important than their own happiness, they rot. God did not design us to wallow in our blessings. He designed us to share our blessings with others. Freedom, joy and purpose characterize the lives of young persons who have been taught to give.

Our Impossible Dreams of reaching out to persons in need are ways that we share our blessings. “That God's ways may be known on earth.” What are his ways? His truth. His Word. Not just his truths in general, but his salvation among the nations. We share the general truth that there is a Creator God of the universe, and more importantly, our Creator desires a personal relationship with us. Non-Christians often complain about Christians. “Why can't you just keep your beliefs to yourself? Why do you feel like you have to share them with everyone else? Mind your own business and leave me alone.” Asking Christians not to share about Jesus is emotionally unhealthy. When we experience something wonderful, joyful or life changing, we feel compelled to tell people about it. We want others

to experience it too. If we have found a wonderful vacation spot, we want to tell people about it. If we have read a great book or seen a good movie, we want to tell people about it. This kind of sharing is the most natural thing in the world. To keep it to ourselves would be unhealthy. Good things are meant to be shared. When a person has experienced the joy and love of God, it is natural to want to share it so others can experience it. To tell them not to share it is unhealthy and unnatural. Why is it OK to let people share all kinds of joy except joy about God? Our sharing is a natural overflow from our experience of God.

The Psalmist goes on to say that worship (time with God) results in joining with God in his work of restoring justice. “For you rule the peoples justly.” We live in a fallen world that is full of injustice. How many times have we said, “Life is not fair? There is no justice.” In a world seeking to operate without God, there is plenty of injustice. God loves his creation. He has promised to create a new heaven and a new earth where justice will prevail. We call it the Kingdom of God. He has already begun to bring about that transformation. He calls us to let the world see a glimpse of that kingdom by joining with him in acts of justice. When we pour our lives into fighting disease, poverty, or abuse, we are bringing a little bit of God’s Kingdom on earth. We give people a tangible glimpse of who God is and what he is about.

The experience of Christian community is another way we demonstrate to the world who God is and what his kingdom is all about. In verse 7 the Psalmist says: “God will bless us, and all the ends of the earth will fear him.” When Christian people live together as “blessed people” where community is flourishing then all the ends of the earth will take notice. Jesus prayed to his father, “The world will know that you have sent me when the world sees my followers living in love and unity with one another.” Nothing propels the gospel outward more than people observing the quality of love and unity within the

Christian community. The world takes notice when it sees that within Christian community groups, people who don't ordinarily get along in the outside world live in unity and love together. In the world people of different genders, colors, cultures and economic levels don't typically get along. Unfortunately sometimes Christian community is no different and sometimes even worse. Eleven o'clock on Sunday morning is described as the most segregated hour of the week. When the church becomes a place where people of all kinds can come together in unity around a common experience of Jesus Christ, the world will take notice. In The Lord of the Rings, a band of very different individuals comes together around a common cause. Normally these groups were suspicious of each other and stayed away from each other. But in order to save the world, they knew they needed each other. Elves, humans, wizards, dwarves, hobbits, and a variety of other creatures joined together and the world paid attention and the world was saved. What if the world looked into the church and saw people of different genders, colors and economic levels listening respectfully to each other, caring for one another, forgiving one another and loving one another. The world would take notice—this is something different. This is what the kingdom of God will be like. People will come from east and west and north and south and sit down at a banquet together. Whenever the love of God overflows in our community, we join with God in bringing his Kingdom.

How do we experience that kind of community and mission in the world? Key is found in the middle of the Psalm vs 4: "May the peoples praise you, O God. May all the peoples praise you. May the nations be glad and sing for joy." God calls us to live out our lives in community and in the world filled with praise and joy. Our Impossible Dreams of making a difference in the world are not a duty when they overflow from grateful joy. In Luke 10, Jesus sends out his disciples and tells them to proclaim the good news, to heal

the sick and cast out demons. When they return, listen to what they say: “Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.” Notice they say “submit to us.” They are saying: “Wow! We have the power! Look at what we did.” They were not rejoicing that lives had been changed, but at what they could do. It was all about them. They are rejoicing in their performance and power. People look up to them because they can do amazing things.

Jesus replied: “Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.” Jesus points out that they are rejoicing in the wrong thing. It is not about them and what they can do. It is about God and what he has done. Their names are written in heaven. That is a phrase that does not mean much to us. Our names are written everywhere. Have you ever “Googled” your name? Think of all the documents on which your signature is found. If you have ever bought a house, it is on at least a thousand documents. In New Testament times there were not many documents. This period was way before the printing press and title companies. There was usually only one place where a person’s name was written: it was the town roll for tax purposes. It declared that you were a citizen of this particular town. When Jesus said, “Your name is written in heaven,” he was saying your name is on the roll of heaven. You are a citizen of heaven. Jesus was saying: “Don’t do what you do to impress people or to feel good about yourself.” Now certainly we feel good when we do something to express love and concern for someone. Jesus told us we would feel more blessed when we gave than when we received. But that good feeling is the by-product of doing something to care for another human being. Jesus made it clear that if we do good things in order to feel good about ourselves we are missing the blessing. There is a difference between feeling good about doing something to help another person and feeling good about myself (“Look at what a

good person I am”) because of all I do for others. When I do good to feel good about myself, I am doing it to impress others.

Jesus said, “Rejoice that you are a citizen of heaven.” Our citizenship in heaven is a gift. It is not based upon how good we are. We cannot earn heaven by doing good things or impressing people with our goodness. It is a gift. Therefore we do good for others out of gratitude for what God has done for us. Our works are an overflow of the joy of our relationship with God.

Living out our Impossible Dreams can get frustrating and overwhelming. We give and give and do and do and we don’t seem to make a dent in the enormous problems of our world. A real danger is that we can get bitter if we don’t think we are getting recognized or being appreciated for all we do. If I get offended or angry when people don’t respond the way I think they should, the reason is that it is probably all about me. If I get angry because other people are not joining with me in my dream, I need to check out my heart. Am I doing this for me? Or am I doing it for God and to care for others? If I am doing it for God and for others, then I am going to keep doing what I am doing whether anyone else joins me or not. I am not going to get angry at people or feel rejected if they don’t help me, because it is not about me. I’m doing this for God.

When we are connected with God’s heart, we do what we do as an overflow of the love that God is lavishing upon us. As we live out our dreams, we need to continuously do a little heart check. Am I doing this for me or am I doing this for God and others?