

Psalms and Psalm-Singing – Col 3:16

Introduction – This text will serve as a springboard into a series of sermons through the psalms. For many, the recovery of the Psalter could be likened to Josiah's recovery of the book of the Law (2 Chron 34). For Josiah, repentance led to reading, hearing, meditating, and obeying – it was as though he was born-again-again. For others, learning the psalms has felt awkward at best and, at worst, threatening to what we judge to be 'better' or 'preferred'. And what's with that jiggling anyway?

Text – *“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.”*

The Word of Christ – All of the scriptures speak of Jesus Christ (Luke 24:25-27, 44-45) and Paul has the OT in mind as he writes this. We are not only to know about the OT, nor a cursory set of facts and stories from the OT. We are to let that word dwell in us – it is to find its home in us. We are to look like it lives here. Bible reading, scripture memorization cards and other devotional habits are great, but the instruction here is to accomplish the goal of Christ's word dwelling in us by means of singing. We know that memory, meditation, and internalization are always easier with music. While this power of music exists universally, we are to use this means in a particular way as we apply it to our worship and to obeying this verse.

Richly – The word is to dwell in us richly, not in an impoverished way, not poorly, not tritely, not in some mantra-fashion. When it comes to determining the triteness/beauty of lyrics and music, the scriptures must fashion our understanding of objectivity in beauty and appropriateness. We must also be Trinitarian in our thinking, understanding that there is not one absolute perfect way to sing, chant, or recite a psalm.

In All Wisdom – The songs should not collapse under the lyrics, and this takes wisdom. Ethan and Heman (1 Kings 4:31) were chief musicians with Asaph (their names appear on the titles to Psalms 88 and 89) and they were men listed among the wisest. Their theology and their musicianship were both needed to carry the weight of glory found in the worship of God. This means that, with David, these men have given to us under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit a standard; a bar has been set, to which all of our hymn-writing should be measured. There is rich hymnody out there, but we must return to the 150 examples to teach us wisdom and constrain our composition.

Teaching and Admonishing – We are to teach the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27), and one of the experiences we have had in returning to the psalms is to see how broad our singing is to be with regard to topics, emotion, and purpose. As teachers, we must know where we are taking our students, we must be able to assess where we are and where we need to go, and we must follow Paul as well in making sure we do not exasperate our flock (Col 3:21). At the same time, as we sing, we should be drawn up short with God's holiness, our sinfulness, God's redemption of His people, and His work of our sanctification. As a body, we must understand the double-blessing of working hard to learn and love the psalms. You instruct yourselves and you instruct others, and God uses the music of His people to do so.

Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs – We use the term psalms to distinguish from what we call hymns, and that is fine. We just have to remember that that is not what Paul meant. Psalms (like psalm 3), hymns (like psalm 55), and odes (like psalm 122), are terms pointing to the 150 psalm Psalter. These were regularly chanted and sung in the Jewish OT synagogue and the Gentile, NT church.

With Grace in Your Hearts – Heart attitude matters. Musical literacy and cultural refinement are not alone sufficient. This singing comes from a filling of the Holy Spirit (Eph 5:17-19) – it is a work of God, not a work for God. And so the learning and the singing are to be rich with a heartfelt richness, full of thankfulness and grace (the context of Col 3:12-17).

The Treasury of David – This is the title of the Psalms given by Spurgeon in his devotional commentary, and that is what we should be looking for in this series – the treasure in the psalms for the people of God.

A Changed Mentality – The Psalms teach me to approach the singing of God's worship with a greater sense of militancy, and less of a nightclub, entertainment, mentality (Psalm 68, 110, 2). The Psalms teach me how to pour out my feelings (47, 42, and 63). They teach me how to sing covenantally (45), how to command my soul (103), and how to identify with Christ's crucifixion and resurrection (22). They teach me to be much more aware of the enemies of God and God's people (76) and to sing against them (137). They teach me how to view my approach to this Lord's Day worship (122 and all the psalms of ascent).

God's Mercy is from Generation to Generation – Let us carefully choose music and songs that emphasize the communal aspect of the Church universal and in all ages. Some churches try to have a “mild service” and a “wild service”. We want our generations together in the grace of God and connected to generations past and future.

The Aesthetic of Poetry and Music – Lady Wisdom is to be adorned with beautiful aesthetics, and she knows what looks good on her. Listen to her. And this means that we must also be careful to discipline our consumption of other kinds of music. Don't blunt your appreciation of what is going on here like a child who won't eat his dinner because he stuffed himself on candy. And good poetry and music always take some work to learn and appreciate. Do not grow weary in doing good.

Praying While We are Singing – Singing the psalms is a form of prayer (as is singing or chanting prayers like the Lord's Prayer). Learning to sing and to sing these psalms transforms your prayers as well. But this also requires work and training and practice. But Oh, the fruit.