

FOREWORD BY JOHN PIPER

*habits
of grace*

david
mathis

Enjoying Jesus through the Spiritual Disciplines

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David Mathis

Foreword by John Piper

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Habits of Grace: Enjoying Jesus through the Spiritual Disciplines

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To Carson and Coleman
May he give you a palate
for the ancient recipes

5. GOOD LISTENING PREPARES US TO SPEAK WELL

Sometimes good listening only listens, and ministers best by keeping quiet (for the moment), but typically good listening readies us to minister words of grace to precisely the place where the other is in need. As Bonhoeffer writes, “We should listen with the ears of God that we may speak the Word of God.”

While the fool “gives an answer before he hears” (Prov. 18:13), the wise person tries to resist defensiveness, and to listen from a nonjudgmental stance, training himself not to formulate opinions or responses until the full account is on the table and the whole story has been heard.

6. GOOD LISTENING REFLECTS OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

Our inability to listen well to others may be symptomatic of a chatty spirit that is drowning out the voice of God. Bonhoeffer warns,

He who can no longer listen to his brother will soon be no longer listening to God either; he will be doing nothing but prattle in the presence of God too. This is the beginning of the death of the spiritual life. . . . Anyone who thinks that his time is too valuable to spend keeping quiet will eventually have no time for God and his brother, but only for himself and for his own follies.

Good listening is a great means of grace in the dynamic of true Christian fellowship. Not only is it a channel through which God continues to pour his grace into our lives, but it's also his way of using us as his means of grace in the lives of others. Cultivating habits of good listening may be one of the hardest things we learn to do, but we will find it worth every ounce of grace-empowered effort.

Chapter 14

Kindle the Fire in Corporate Worship

We were made for more than private devotions. As nice as it can be to tuck ourselves away in some nook and cranny, all by our lonesome, and read the Scriptures we want to read, pray the prayers we prefer, play the songs we like, memorize the verses we pick, and fast from food when it's convenient—as important as it is to pursue a regular rhythm of “private worship” in these personal disciplines—this is not the pinnacle of our Christian lives.

We were made to worship Jesus *together*. Among the multitude. With the great horde. Swallowed up in the magnificent mass of the redeemed. God didn't fashion us to enjoy him finally as solitary individuals, but as happy members of a countless large family.

When the fog of everyday life clears and we catch a glimpse of heaven's bliss, we don't find ourselves sequestered at a study desk or hidden alone in a prayer closet in paradise, or even standing alone before the great Grand Canyon or mountain

peak of God's majesty, but joyfully part of the worshipping throng of Christ's people from every tongue and tribe and nation.

We were made for *corporate* worship.

Cheerfully Part of the Crowd

Heaven will be more spectacular than we can dream—and the new earth, even better than heaven—but it might be surprising to hear that perhaps the best foretaste we can get on this side is with the gathered church, worshipping Jesus together. This doesn't mean that eternity will amount to an unending church service, but that we will be wonderfully immersed in a joy-multiplying multitude of fellow worshipers.

And in heaven's adoration, we join not only "many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands" (Rev. 5:11; cf. Heb. 12:22), worshipping Jesus with "innumerable angels" (Heb. 12:22), but also the innumerable communion of the ransomed:

A great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb . . . and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Rev. 7:9–10)

While the corporate worship of Jesus by the church *universal* is an essential element in our great destiny, it is the corporate worship of Jesus by the church *local* that is a vital means of God's grace in getting us there.

The Most Important Means of Grace

Corporate worship is the single most important means of grace and our greatest weapon in the fight for joy, because like no

other means, corporate worship combines all three principles of God's ongoing grace: his word, prayer, and fellowship. It is corporate worship, with its preaching and sacraments and collective praises, confessions, petitions, and thanksgivings, which most acutely brings together the gifts of God's voice, his ear, and his body.

And so, according to Donald S. Whitney, "There's an element of worship and Christianity that cannot be experienced in private worship or by watching worship. There are some graces and blessings that God gives only in 'meeting together' with other believers."¹

Perhaps your own experience of corporate worship as a means of grace has, at times, echoed that of Martin Luther: "At home, in my own house, there is no warmth or vigor in me, but in the church when the multitude is gathered together, a fire is kindled in my heart and it breaks its way through."²

Worship Is No Means

But talking about worship as a means of grace is tricky, because, as John Piper cautions us, true worship is not a means to anything.

Worship is an end in itself. We do not eat the feast of worship as a means to anything else. Happiness in God [which is the heart of worship] is the end of all our seeking. Nothing beyond it can be sought as a higher goal. . . . True worship cannot be performed as a means to some other experience.³

¹ *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014), 111.

² Quoted in *Worship by the Book*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 159–60.

³ *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, rev. ed. (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2011), 90.

What, then, do we mean when we say that corporate worship is an essential *means of God's grace*? Can it really be such?

The Secret of Joy: Self-Forgetfulness

One important distinction to make is between the essence of worship as joy in God and the context of corporate worship as the gathered assembly. While praising Jesus together is its greatest specific expression, worship in general is bigger than just the gathered church—it is not just for Sunday mornings, but for everyday life (Rom. 12:1). And related to this is the distinction between how we think about corporate worship (and the various motivations for it and benefits from it) and how we experience it in the moment.

There is more to be said (and will be below) about the “graces and blessings that God gives only in ‘meeting together’ with other believers,” which can inspire our faithful engagement and help us appreciate the irreplaceable role corporate worship plays in our Christian health and growth. But first, the question is, where should we turn our hearts and minds collectively *in the moment* of corporate worship to experience this grace from God?

The answer is that we should not be self-consciously preoccupied with how we’re being strengthened or what grace we’re receiving. Rather, our focus together is the crucified and risen Christ and the incomparable excellencies of his person and work (which illumines all the means of grace and various spiritual disciplines, not only corporate worship—and is why the subtitle of this book begins with “enjoying Jesus”). Corporate worship is a means of grace not when we’re caught up with what we’re doing, but when we experience the secret of worship—the joy of self-forgetfulness—as we become preoccupied together with Jesus and his manifold perfections.

See, then, the pregnant application to corporate worship in this summary by Piper:

All genuine emotion is an end in itself. It is not consciously caused as a means to something else. This does not mean we cannot or should not seek to have certain feelings. We should and we can. We can put ourselves in situations [like corporate worship] where the feeling may more readily be kindled. . . . But *in the moment of authentic emotion, the calculation vanishes*. We are transported (perhaps only for seconds) above the reasoning work of the mind, and we experience feeling without reference to logical or practical implications.⁴

In this way, corporate worship, which in one sense is no means to anything else, is a powerful—even the most powerful—means of God’s grace for the Christian life.

So come to corporate worship for the many blessings, and then let the calculations vanish as you lose yourself in the Blessed. Get yourself there on a slow day with a reminder about how good it will be for you if you do, and as the gathering begins, go hard after the goodness of God and seek to forget yourself as you focus on his Son.

Five Benefits of Corporate Worship

I don’t want to leave you in the dark about what some of those “graces and blessings” of corporate worship might be. Surely many more could be given, but here are five such blessings that we experience uniquely in the context of corporate worship.

1. AWAKENING

Often we come into corporate worship feeling a sense of spiritual fog. During the rough-and-tumble of the week, the hard

⁴Ibid., 92. Emphasis added.

knocks of real life in the fallen world can disorient us to ultimate reality and what's truly important. We need to clear our heads, recalibrate our spirits, and jump-start our slow hearts. We mentioned above how Martin Luther found corporate worship powerful in awakening his spiritual fire: "At home, in my own house, there is no warmth or vigor in me, but in the church when the multitude is gathered together, a fire is kindled in my heart and it breaks its way through."

Better than Luther, though, is the experience of the inspired psalmist. In Psalm 73, he begins by despairing over the prosperity of his wicked peers (vv. 2–15). But the fog clears as he comes consciously into the presence of God: "When I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end" (Ps. 73:16–17).

He was embattled. The spiritual haze was thick. But the breakthrough came in the context of worship, which then led to this climactic expression of praise: "Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (Ps. 73:25–26).

I've found this to be true for me more times than I can count. Instead of staying away from corporate worship when we sense ourselves to be spiritually lethargic, precisely what we need more than ever is the awakening of worship. When our hearts feel it least is when we need most to remind our souls, "For me it is good to be near God" (Ps. 73:28).

2. ASSURANCE

A second benefit is the community dynamic—which means not only meeting our good desires for belonging and shared mission (fellowship), but also providing a catalyst for our assurance.

While we may admire figures like Athanasius and Luther who seemingly stood alone *contra mundum* ("against the

world"), we must remember God has said it is not good for us to be alone (Gen. 2:18). Such heroes were the product of dire days, and inevitably their stories have been thinned in the collective memory of distant history. Neither Athanasius nor Luther truly stood alone, but were part of faithful communities that fostered and strengthened their otherwise unpopular beliefs.

And so it is with us. We were not made to stand solo with no fellows. Even in times as troubling as Elijah's, God gave him seven thousand who hadn't abandoned the truth (1 Kings 19:18). God made us for community—and named her "the church"—and being part of this great local and global community plays an important role in assuring us not only that we are not deceiving ourselves in pretending our profession is credible, but also that we truly know whom we have believed (2 Tim. 1:12).

And worship in the local church points us to the worship of the universal church, and that Jesus has a people from many nations, and one day will include every nation (Rev. 7:9).

3. ADVANCE

Corporate worship also plays an indispensable part in our sanctification—our progressive growth in being conformed to the image of Jesus (Rom. 8:29). Corporate worship is for our general "upbuilding and encouragement and consolation" (1 Cor. 14:3), but also in beholding Jesus together, "we all . . . are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor. 3:18).

Christian growth is not just something that we take away as sermon application and then work into our lives that week. As Tim Keller says, sanctification can happen "on the spot" as we sit under gospel preaching and engage in corporate worship. There are times—may God make them many—when the Holy Spirit takes the Scripture read, the prayer spoken, the chorus

sung, or the truth preached and presses it right to the point of our need. Corporate worship does not merely inform our Christian walk, but heals us or transforms us in that moment.

When we join in corporate worship, God loves not only to change our minds, but to irrevocably change our hearts right then and there.

4. ACCEPTING ANOTHER'S LEADING

One important distinction between public worship and the "private worship" of personal Bible intake and prayer is the place of our initiative. Corporate worship reminds us that our faith is fundamentally receptive, not of our own initiative. In private devotions, we lead ourselves in some sense. In corporate worship, we're made to receive the leading of others.

In private worship, we're in the driver's seat, in some sense. We decide what passage to read, when to pray, what to pray, how long to linger in Bible reading and meditation, what songs to listen to or sing, what gospel truths to preach to ourselves, and what applications to consider. But in corporate worship, we respond. We follow. Others preach and pray and select the songs and choose how long to linger in each element. We're positioned to receive.

It is a wonderful thing in our personal devotions to make such choices, but it is also good for us to practice engaging with God when someone other than ourselves is making the calls. Corporate worship demands that we discipline ourselves to respond, and not only pursue God on our own terms. It is an opportunity to embrace being led, and not always taking the lead.

5. ACCENTUATED JOY

Last, but not least, is the heightened experience of worship in the corporate context. Our own awe is accentuated, our own

adoration increased, our own joy doubled when we worship Jesus *together*.

As the Swedish proverb says, *a shared joy is a double joy*. In corporate worship, the "graces and benefits" we uniquely enjoy are not only awakening, assurance, advance, and accepting others' leadership, but also the accentuated joy of deeper and richer and greater adoration and awe, since our delight in Jesus expands as we magnify him together with others.

The secret of joy in corporate worship is not only self-forgetfulness—or to put it positively, preoccupation with Jesus and his glory—but also the happy awareness that we are not alone in having our souls satisfied in him.