

DEVELOPING GOOD STROKES

Psalm 134

At the beginning of 2011 columnist George Will published a collection of items from the news that he had noticed during 2010. One of them was astounding. This was a news tidbit about a youth soccer league in Ottawa. At the beginning of the season the league announced a new rule. Any team that attained a 5 goal lead in a game would be immediately declared...the loser! The reasoning was that we must protect the fragile egos of the children on the team that were, um, how can I put this sensitively? I suppose we could say they were coming in second in the game. We wouldn't want to hurt anyone's feelings, would we?

I'm all for encouragement. And I must say I think that kids' sports are awfully skewed these days. I can't help but think kids would be better off in fewer things organized and run by adults and a lot more created out of their own imagination. But honestly, I doubt if kids are going to be destroyed by surviving a beat down. In his young days Toby played on a hockey team that once had to play a team of older, bigger kids and lost 20-0. He survived it and his ego seems intact to this day.

Are we really so fragile that discovering there are other people way better at a sport than we are is going to pose a threat to our tenuous sense of our identity? Frankly, most of us are going to face some defeats in this world, and in some instances we're going to be downright drubbed. Is that going to destroy us? I occasionally wonder if we shouldn't arrange for every child to be on a team at least for one season that gets consistently massacred in order to prepare them for the reality of life to come. Maybe that's a bit pessimistic. But life does have a way of kicking us in the teeth from time to time. Is it possible to take on the beat downs that may come our way and still be strong, at peace and even joyful? I believe it is possible, and today we are going to look at one powerful resource that can aid us in that endeavor. We'll catch a glimpse of it in Psalm 134 as we conclude our journey through the songs of ascent today.

THIS PSALM ADDRESSES US

Verse 1 says, "**Praise the Lord, all you servants of the Lord who minister by night in the house of the Lord.**" We know this is the last of the songs of ascent, which were songs sung by the ancient Jewish pilgrims as they made their way to Jerusalem to meet with God. They serve as an analogy for us today as we make our way through this world on our way to meet God. They instruct us about our journey and what we should be.

In this last song the people have arrived at Jerusalem. Now they sing that those who serve in the house of the Lord at night should praise him. This seems to refer to the priests and Levites who served at the temple. Some people might think since this is aimed at priests they don't need to pay attention because they aren't priests or clergy of any kind. But this is not the case for believers in Jesus.

1 Peter 2:9 is addressed to ordinary followers of Jesus. It says, “**But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.**” We who once had no special role in this world have been chosen by God. We are a royal priesthood. If you are a believer in Jesus, you are a priest. There is no such thing as a believer in Jesus who is not a priest.

Priests are to represent the people to God, and represent God to the people. That is precisely what you and I are called to do every day of our lives. We are to pray on behalf of people to God, and we are to represent God to people, to tell them and show them about him. So we are the servants who minister before the Lord.

In the past history of the church this truth got lost for a time. In the Catholic Church priests became specially designated people who are somehow holier than other people. When the Reformation came along and people actually started reading the Bible they saw 1 Peter 2:9 and realized that the priestly system of the church was not biblical. Every believer is a priest. Unfortunately there are some ideas that seem to be stubbornly entrenched in our minds. This idea that pastors are different, more holy, somehow between God and the common man, is still with us. Hundreds of years after the Reformation many still see pastors as priests and everyone else as somehow spiritually below them.

You are a priest, a servant of God if you are a believer in Jesus. You have a special role and a special calling in this world. You may appear to be like everyone else, but you are not. You have a special role to play in this world as a priest of Jesus Christ, and it is that role that forms how you see yourself and guides your actions.

THIS PSALM TELLS US TO PRAISE

Literally the text says to bless the Lord. The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* says (vol. I, p. 132) that blessing is “verbally enduing with good things.” We are used to the idea that God blesses us. I hear it all the time. “The Lord has really blessed our business this year.” We understand that God blesses us with

good things. We can see that in the last verse of this Psalm where there is a prayer for the Lord to bless us from Zion. We understand how God can bless us by giving us good things, but how are puny human beings supposed to bless God? How can we give him anything good?

Remember that the word means to “verbally endue with good.” The key to understanding this is to grasp that *when God speaks something it happens*. In Genesis 1 it says, “God said let there be light, and there was light.” God speaks and something happens. So the heart of the idea of blessing is to speak good. God speaks good to us and the good happens.

For us to bless God means to speak good to him. When I say, “God you are majestic. You are wise and good, and all that you do is right,” I am blessing God. When I say to another person, “God is loving, full of grace, and all-powerful,” I am blessing God. When I say to someone, “Let me tell you how good God is and how he has answered a prayer I prayed,” I am blessing God.

But notice the phrase “by night.” Isn’t it interesting that the Psalmist would particularly mention night? Why did he specifically refer to night? The ancient temple was a 24/7 operation. There were lamps in it that were to burn continually so someone had to make sure those lamps had oil all night. There was special bread that would be baked during the night so that it would be ready in the morning. Someone had to tend those lamps and bake that bread. That means that there were some priests and Levites doing the night shift.

Have you ever done a night shift? I think I’ve only done it a couple of times. I did it once when I was in seminary and worked as a janitor. A friend offered me the opportunity to make a little extra money. He was hired to strip and then wax the floors of a grocery store, but he had to do it when the store was closed. That meant starting at midnight and working until 6 in the morning 2 nights in a row. I agreed because I needed the money. I can tell you that along about 4 in the morning it’s really tough to keep working. You just aren’t hitting on all cylinders, you’re tired, you feel lousy and everything takes a lot more effort. And it’s just a little strange to be up and working at that time of night when no one is around and the overwhelming majority of people are asleep.

You can imagine some ancient Levite working in the temple in the wee hours of the morning with his eyelids getting heavy and his body telling him to just lie down and go to sleep. There are no crowds of worshipers there to see what he’s

doing and to know if he blesses the Lord. Even in that situation the Psalmist calls on him to praise God.

What this suggests to me is that praise is always appropriate and is always a priority. No matter what we are doing or when we do it, we are to praise God as we go. Praise is always our priority. Even in the middle of the night when no one is there to hear it, we are to bless God. Psalm 34:1 says, “**I will extol the Lord at all times; he praise will always be on my lips.**” Psalm 71:6 says “**I will ever praise you.**” Note the words used in those verses. They speak of praising God, “at all times,” “always” and “ever.” Praise him when we wake up and when we go to bed, when we are at work and when we are home, when we win and when we lose. Praise the Lord at all times!

When you wake up early in the morning and you are groggy, praise the Lord. When it is very late at night and you’re exhausted but awake because one of the kids is sick and needs you to stay with him or her, praise the Lord. When you get a big raise at work, praise the Lord. When you’re stuck in traffic on a gridlocked freeway, praise the Lord, when you’re paying bills and there are more bills than dollars to pay them, praise the Lord. When you are washing the dishes or mowing the lawn, praise the Lord.

Though this is hard for us to accept, blessing God is why we exist. Just a couple of weeks ago I quoted Romans 11:36. It says of God, “**For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.**” In other words, everything is made by God and is for him. It is all created for his glory and praise.

Psalm 148:7-13 says, “**Praise the Lord from the earth, you great sea creatures and all ocean depths, lightning and hail, snow and clouds, stormy winds that do his bidding, you mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars, wild animals and all cattle, small creatures and flying birds, kings of the earth and all nations, you princes and all rulers on earth, young men and maidens, old men and children. Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted.**” That was the Psalmist’s poetic way of saying everything on earth was created to praise God, so we ought to as well.

Psalm 150:6 closes out the Psalms by saying, “**Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.**” So here is a little quiz: do you have breath? If you don’t you’re dead. So if you are alive the reason you exist is to praise God. Let me say that again because

it is crucial for us to hear. The reason we exist is to praise God. This is true every moment of every day of your life.

We resist that because we want to be what life is all about. One of my best friends in college was a terrific baseball player. When we graduated he was drafted and signed by the Cincinnati Reds. They thought he had the potential to play in the Major Leagues and featured him as a Reds “star of the future” in a World Series program. They were wrong because he never did reach the majors, but his minor league experience was enlightening. He learned that out of the hundreds of players signed by major league teams to play in the minor leagues, only about 10% are viewed as ever having a chance to eventually make it to the majors. They draft the other 90% to provide competition for those few who actually have a chance. Baseball Reference.com lists 165,000 people who have played in the minor leagues, but only 17,498 who have played in the majors. Do the math. Just as my friend said 10.6% of minor leaguers make it to the big leagues. Obviously the guys who get picked in the first few rounds and get big signing bonuses know their teams think they have a chance to be major leaguers. But the rest of them think they have a chance. The clubs don’t tell them they view them as mere cannon fodder. Who wants to hear that your only reason for being in the system is to help someone else who actually has a chance? No one. No human wants to hear that. And it is hard for us to hear that life is not about us. Nevertheless it is the truth in the minor leagues, and it is the truth in our lives as well. Life isn’t about us, it is about God’s glory. We can close our eyes in an effort to not see that, but when we do we are living contrary to reality, and that’s always bad.

WE ARE TO WORSHIP FROM THE HEART

Note that verse 2 says “**lift up your hands in the sanctuary.**” There are some people today who want to make a big deal out of literally lifting their hands when they worship. They believe it is somehow more godly or more real when you sing if you lift your hands. After all, it’s there in the passage in black and white. Hey, it commands us to lift up hands and praise the Lord, doesn’t it? So if you don’t raise your hands you’re disobeying God, right?

I don’t think it’s quite right. I believe there is a somewhat more nuanced understanding of this passage that we need to grasp. Unfortunately people often have a tendency to grab onto externals and rules and miss the intent. We have a classic example of emphasizing the literal external rather than the meaning at our airports. The TSA majors in it. You may have seen the story a couple of years ago about the Army soldiers that had to go through TSA screening while carrying their

equipment. The classic moment came when a soldier carrying his M-16 rifle was told the TSA was going to confiscate the nail clippers he had in his pocket. He asked why and was told it was because they could be used as a weapon. This man was carrying an assault rifle. Apparently that wasn't a problem but those nail clippers were cause for great concern. After all, the rules say no nail clippers on the plane. Wouldn't it be nice if the TSA agents could use some common sense to get at the point of the rules rather than just being wooden headed and insisting on searching octogenarian women in wheel chairs? We need to avoid their mistake.

In 1 Samuel 16:7 we read, “**Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.**” We often seem to think about what's going on outside, but God looks inside. We saw in Galatians that the whole old covenant approach was about doing outward things, while the New Covenant, the gospel, is about the heart. When Christians start putting their emphasis on externals, on forms, they inevitably err. What does God care about? Does the Creator of the Universe really care whether you put your hands up when you sing or not? Talk about adventures in missing the point.

Lifting hands was simply a typical gesture in that culture. Sometimes it was done in praise, more often it was done as a part of a plea for help much as we might do. It was a cultural gesture indicative of an emotion, usually of a desperate plea, but sometimes of joy and reverence. Lifting hands is no more holy than not lifting hands, it was just typical in that culture. In our culture you might think of it being like putting your hand over your heart when you recite the pledge of allegiance. In many cultures that gesture would mean little. The point isn't the gesture, it is the intent. One can be deeply loyal to the United States even if he doesn't put his hand over his heart.

Rather than getting hung up on external traditions, customs and rituals, isn't it better to think about what they mean? In that culture a person typically raised hands as an expression of his emotion. I take it that the raising of the hands is suggestive of involving the whole person in praise. To get physically involved in the act means that we are doing more than just vocalizing words that may be empty. It is a way of calling us to have our hearts involved in praise of God and not just worship with words.

In Isaiah 1:13-14 God said to Israel, “**I cannot bear your evil assemblies. Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them.**” God was saying he hated their

worship, even though they were doing the rituals he commanded. In Isaiah 29:13 you see why God hated their “worship.” It says, “**The Lord says, ‘These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.’**” In other words, don’t just give me your praise in words, show me by your passionate obedience!

If you want to know how you’re supposed to worship God quit worrying about whether you raise your hands or not. Raise them or don’t raise them, it doesn’t matter. Instead look at Psalm 100:2, “**Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs.**” God wants you to worship with joy and gladness! As a kid I remember church as a mostly solemn and often dead thing. Maybe for kids today it still is. But that’s not what God wants. He wants us to rejoice and celebrate in worshiping him.

That’s not hard to understand. We’ve recently had a wedding in our family as you all know. Would you have thought it a good thing if Toby and Anna had gone through the ceremony of a wedding as though it was just something they were supposed to do? What I loved about that ceremony was the joy. Anna had me a little concerned when she came down the aisle. She had a sort of deer in the headlights look on her face. But as soon as she got up on the platform she came alive. There was joy on both her face and Toby’s. They went through that ceremony with gladness. They did so because they were happy about what was going on. Doesn’t it make sense that God would want the same from us when we praise him?

What we enjoy we praise. People instinctively praise what they enjoy. Carissa went to Hawaii a year ago and when she came back she enthusiastically praised the bed in the hotel room where she stayed. She said it was the most comfortable bed she’d ever slept in. Then recently Toby and Anna stayed in that same hotel on their honeymoon. They said they called their bed the black hole because it was so comfortable they’d fall into it and immediately go to sleep and stay asleep for 10 or 11 hours. They loved the bed so they all praised it. We praise what we enjoy.

If we are really glad that we know God, if we have experienced his goodness, his unfailing love and his mercy, if he is a magnificent loving Father to us, we will want to praise him. In fact the enjoyment of something is actually increased by praising it. So that is why he wants gladness in our worship. If there’s no gladness then something is wrong and the whole thing is empty.

IMPLICATIONS

So the obvious application of this little Psalm is that we should live with praising God as the focus and organizing principle, the driving force of our lives. But an obvious question is why should I care? Why should I make my life all about praise to God?

Because it is right

You and I are going to worship. We can no more choose not to worship than we could choose to no longer be human beings. You will worship something every moment of your life until the day you die. Something will determine what choices we make. They will be made in the service of something. That something is what you worship. If you worship anything other than God your worship is evil. You are saying the ultimate good is something other than God. You are putting something in God's place. To do that is to introduce evil into creation and into your life specifically.

You might make it your goal in life to have other people notice you. It might be that you live for the approval of others or to have as much money as you possibly can. You might pursue power or simply feeling good or being happy. None of these goals is about praising God and they are therefore evil as an ultimate end.

Let's suppose you are playing tennis. What is the goal, the purpose of swinging your racquet? The ultimate good is to hit the ball as hard as you can over the net into the area inside the lines on the other side of the court. But imagine that you decide the ultimate good is something else. Suppose you decide it is to hit the ball into the net as hard as you can. Or suppose that you decide the ultimate good is to hit the ball as far as you can or as high as you can. What happens when you do any of those things? In tennis terms, you worship the wrong thing, and in so doing you introduce evil into your game. Now, instead of actually being able to play the game well you are knocking the ball into the net or powering it over the fence surrounding the court. You end up failing and wasting your time. In a tennis sense all you will produce is evil.

When you make anything other than the worship of God the very reason for your existence, your purpose in everything you do, you bring evil into your life and the lives of others around you. You will find that your own life seems to crash into dead ends, and in the process you hurt the people around you. Praising God is the right thing to do because he deserves praise and because it is why you and I exist.

Because it is how we find ourselves

Go to the Florida Keys or to Hawaii and I guarantee you that you will encounter people in either location who have moved there in an effort to “find themselves.” I don’t know why it is that people seem to think if they’ve lost themselves that they need to go to an island to fix the problem, but that seems to be very common. They’ll never find themselves there. They’ll try to escape but will discover they have brought their lostness and loneliness with them.

Augustine said that we are not what we do, but what we love. In other words, what defines us, what gives us identity and meaning, is that which we treasure and pursue in our lives. You are going to serve someone or something. That’s just an inevitable fact. I was talking to David Drake recently. David and Melissa’s son, Brenton is in his senior year of high school so college is on the horizon for him. A significant factor in his thinking about college is that he wants to play football. They figure he likely will be able to play at the Division II or Division III level, and right now they are in contact with literally dozens of schools. Suppose for a moment that he gets two calls from coaches one day. One is an assistant coach representing Nick Saban, head coach of the defending national champion Alabama. The other is an assistant coach representing Jamie Zorbo, head coach of the Division III Kalamazoo College Hornets. Which of those coaches do you think will have the greater importance in his mind? Obviously it will be the guy from Alabama because of who he represents.

Where does your sense of dignity and identity come from? I’m here to praise the God of the universe. My role in life is no matter what happens to me, no matter what events occur be they good or ill, to declare his praise. That’s who I am. I am not first and foremost the pastor of a small church. I am first and foremost a priest of the most high God here to declare his praise. That’s a calling of the greatest importance and eternal significance. Any other purpose that I choose to serve will only lessen my sense of identity and dignity.

Because it makes truth come alive

Psalm 29:1-2 says, “**Ascribe to the Lord, O mighty ones, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness.**” To ascribe means to write out. In other words, spell out the glory and strength of the Lord. What happens when we ascribe a quality to someone or something?

Many people, at one point, ascribed to Bernard Lawrence the term financial wizard for his ability to produce impressive returns on investments made with his firm. Once he had that label many people flocked to entrust their money to him. They entrusted a lot of money to him. Of course, his full name is Bernard Lawrence Madoff and as we all know, people erred in ascribing that term to him.

The point is that when we ascribe to God the glory due his name, when we praise him as powerful, good, wise, loving, merciful, faithful and just, it has an effect on us. Believing some truth is important, but it is quite possible for it to be academic and have little effect on our heart and our actions. What starts out as intellectual awareness of truth becomes living truth that changes into real convictions, impacting our spirit and our actions through praising God and blessing his name.

God calls on us to praise at all times, to declare the greatness of his work and to extol him as good, merciful, full of grace, almighty, kind, wise and just because as we do so that truth becomes real for us. It comes alive, moving from our heads into our hearts. We need to do that continually because there will be a time when our faith in those truths will be severely tested. While playing tennis recently I noticed a man all alone out on a court. On the other side of the net was a ball machine that kept firing balls across the net to him. He kept hitting one stroke after another. He was working on making his stroke automatic. He wanted to practice it so often he didn't have to think about it. That way when in a game a ball was hit to him he did not have to think about the mechanics of his swing, he would do that automatically. So he could just concentrate on the ball. That's what God wants us to do. Practice praising him continually so that it becomes automatic for us.

When that happens it has a big effect on us. As we have seen it reminds us of who we are. But it also gives us hope. It gives us conviction. It puts peace in our hearts and steel in our souls so that we can keep doing right, keep moving forward with confidence and optimism and joy in this world no matter what may happen to us.

In Psalm 28:7 David did what he had just commanded himself to do. In verse 6 he commanded "Praise the Lord." In verse 7 he did. He said, "**The Lord is my strength and my shield.**" He is praising God for his strength and protection. Look at the effect. "**My heart trusts in him and I am helped. My heart leaps for joy.**" That's how it works. We praise God, our hearts trust in him and we are helped. We are strengthened and our hearts leap for joy.

Matthew Fry is a Presbyterian pastor in Georgia. I recently read a story he told from his personal ministry experience. Chris was a 12-year-old boy from his church. One day he was walking his bike across a street. Tragically, a woman had been drinking and got into a fight with her husband. She ran away, got in a car and drove off with her husband chasing her in another car. Under the influence of alcohol she drove her car into Chris as he was crossing the street. Chris hung on for 2 weeks before he died. At his funeral they sang songs he liked best and ended with his favorite, the simple children's song, *Jesus Loves Me*. After the service and the reception before he left the now exhausted and grief stricken family Matthew asked Chris' mom, "What are you going to do now?" She said, "We're going to sing *Jesus Loves Me* tonight, tomorrow, and whenever we need to." That woman knows that praising God is critical for her to not just stay strong, but to stay sane.